



Your impact.

Your wins.

2019 Annual Report

Image by Brooke Anderson Photography / Free Press via Flickr

2019 was a tumultuous year.

We saw major ups and downs for our democracy.

From fighting to protect Net Neutrality to tackling online hate and transforming local journalism, Free Press used your donations to fight for your rights to connect and communicate all year long.

Thank you so much for your ongoing support and generosity. Together we're creating a world where media and technology are used for liberation, freedom and justice.

The following pages explore what YOU helped make happen in 2019.



Original Image: Tim Karr / Free Press via Flickr



Free Press Action Government Relations Director Sandra Fulton (in black) stands with House and Senate leaders to announce the introduction of the Save the Internet Act.

Victory in the U.S. House: The Save the Internet Act moves forward

In April, the House passed the Save the Internet Act, which would reinstate the Obama-era Net Neutrality rules. Every single Democratic lawmaker voted in favor — marking the first time that this many members of Congress have gone on the record in support of Title II Net Neutrality protections.

We played a decisive role in this win by meeting with lawmakers and mobilizing our members to speak out.

The bill's passage was a huge victory for the millions of people — including thousands of Free Press Action members — who called and visited their lawmakers, wrote letters to the editor, and took to social media to urge the House to fight for a free and open internet.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has sent virtually every House bill to his self-described “legislative graveyard.”

And yet we're leading the fight to move the Save the Internet Act forward — and making progress:

Every Senate Democrat but one is already on board as a co-sponsor, and several Republicans have voted for Net Neutrality before when it came to the floor. If we can get a vote, we believe we can win.

In June we helped organize a sign-on letter to McConnell from a diverse coalition of 103 groups. We're highlighting Net Neutrality's popularity among voters of all stripes to push lawmakers to make a vote happen.



Free Press Action and other members of the Voices for Internet Freedom coalition organized a congressional briefing on digital civil rights hosted by Rep. Nanette Barragán (D-California).



Leading the way on privacy

Free Press Action Senior Policy Counsel Gaurav Laroia (third from left) and fellow advocates briefed lawmakers on privacy.

Tech companies collect our most personal information — and some have used it to enable discrimination against people of color, women and other marginalized groups. Facebook, for example, is facing a federal lawsuit for allowing advertisers to target housing ads to whites only.

Our proposed legislation has already made a big impact.

In the spring, we drafted a model privacy bill with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. The bill would update the law to prohibit powerful interests from exploiting our data and violating our civil rights online.

In April, Sen. Ed Markey (D–Massachusetts) introduced a comprehensive privacy bill of rights that would give internet users greater control over how companies can obtain their personal information. And in November, Reps. Anna Eshoo and Zoe Lofgren (D–California) released a bill that would create a dedicated privacy agency to protect internet users. That same month, Sen. Maria Cantwell (D–Washington) introduced her own privacy bill, which would penalize online platforms and others that abuse people's personal data.

All three pieces of legislation draw on many of the core principles in our bill — particularly the emphasis on civil-rights protections.



Testifying Before Congress ... A Lot

In 2019, our in-house experts did a lot of testifying before Congress — more than any year before.



In February, Free Press Action Co-CEO Jessica J. González called on lawmakers to restore the Net Neutrality rules and showed how companies like Comcast have abused their power in the absence of open-internet protections.



In March, VP Matt Wood testified in support of the Save the Internet Act and debunked ISP talking points.



That same day, Senior Policy Counsel Carmen Scurato testified against the T-Mobile/Sprint merger, showing how it would disproportionately harm low-income communities and people of color.



In June, Co-CEO Craig Aaron testified about the ways in which cable companies and broadcasters gouge the public and made the case for competition, community media, diversity and lower prices.



In September, Policy Manager Dana Floberg testified that the FCC needs to examine how racial discrimination and the steep cost of access make it harder for people to get online.



All of this testimony is crucial because lawmakers tend to stack hearings with industry heavyweights and their allies. We provide an essential counterpoint to those who prioritize profits over people.



Watch video of all of this testimony at youtube.com/freepress



Members of the Free Press team after oral arguments in the Net Neutrality case. / Original Image: Free Press

Another defeat for Big Media

In 2017, the Trump FCC gutted longstanding media-ownership protections — threatening local journalism at a time when news outlets were already suffering from years of runaway consolidation.

This gift to mammoth media conglomerates was designed to pave the way for even more consolidation — which in turn would make it even harder for women and people of color to own a slice of our media.

That's why we sued the FCC in 2018, joining with a core group of public-interest groups to restore these essential rules.

In September, a federal appeals court sided with us and delivered a stinging rebuke to the FCC.

The judges agreed with our assessment that the agency had failed to consider the impact of its changes on ownership opportunities for women and people of color — and slammed the FCC's analysis as "so insubstantial that it would receive a failing grade in any introductory statistics class."

**Our arguments won the day
in court — again.**



The Net Neutrality decision was a huge blow — but there are some silver linings:

We sued within days of the FCC's 2017 decision to repeal the Net Neutrality rules. In October 2019, a federal appeals court largely sided with the FCC and powerful industry lobbyists. But the good news is that there are several important silver linings to the court's ruling.



The court ruled the way it did because it deferred to the so-called "expert agency."

Depending on what happens with the presidential election, we might have a new FCC in 2021 — one that could reverse course and put the Obama-era Net Neutrality rules back in place.



The court rejected a handful of especially terrible FCC claims connected to public safety and the Lifeline program.

The FCC was sent back to the drawing board on these issues.



The court rejected the FCC's claims that it can outright ban state legislation on Net Neutrality.

Four states have already passed pro-Net Neutrality laws, and five more have issued executive orders saying they won't do business with any ISPs that violate Net Neutrality. Another 28 states have introduced or considered legislation.



Congress can fix this mess by passing the Save the Internet Act — which the House already passed in a landslide.

And we're pushing presidential candidates to prioritize this legislation: With the 2020 election in view, we'll be fighting to build support all the way to November.

Net Neutrality is at the heart of every single social-justice movement happening today. The fights for immigrant rights, racial justice, reproductive freedom, environmental protections and so much more are all being organized online. That's just one reason this fight is crucial — and we can't lose momentum now.

As the organization that made Net Neutrality a household term, we've beaten the odds many times before. We're going to keep fighting until we bring back Net Neutrality for good.

Bottom line: Together, we will win.



Image of protest outside Twitter by Brooke Anderson Photography

Solutions

Disrupting online hate

Tech platforms are in the hot seat right now, with Facebook allowing politicians to outright lie in political ads — and Twitter banning political ads but not white supremacists.

All of the big platforms have long ignored how their services are used to stoke hate and real-world violence targeting Black and Brown people, women, LGBTQIA+ people, religious minorities and immigrants. That's why we co-founded the Change the Terms coalition in 2018: to pressure these companies to adopt policies that we developed to combat hate online.

Since the launch of our campaign, more than 50 leading civil-rights, human-rights and digital-rights groups have joined our coalition. And in the past year, we've met frequently with some of the world's biggest tech companies — including Facebook, Google, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, Twitter and YouTube — to educate them about how our policies can save lives.

In September, we participated in a civil-rights town hall that our Change the Terms partner Color Of Change organized. Coalition representatives directly addressed Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and other company leaders who were in attendance. "People in our communities are dying at the hands of white supremacy — the stakes are that high," Free Press Co-CEO Jessica J. González told the gathering.

In our September report Facebook vs. Hate, we examine the company's efforts to adopt certain Change the Terms policies — and document its failures to fully protect its users. Our November report Toxic Twitter: The State of Hateful Activities on the Platform shows how the company has done even less than Facebook to stand up to white supremacy. We're using our findings to pressure these companies to step up their efforts to reject hate — and delivered 100,000 petitions to Twitter urging the company to ban white supremacists.



These meetings are yielding important victories that the companies and allies credit to #ChangeTheTerms:

- Facebook banned prominent white supremacists.
- YouTube broadened its hate-speech policy.
- Web-infrastructure company Cloudflare dropped the extremist platform 8chan.
- Twitter came back to the table after we ran a #StopRacistTwitter campaign.
- PayPal and Patreon now regularly drop identified white-supremacist accounts.



Solutions

Reviving local journalism

In 2018, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy signed the Civic Info Bill into law. The legislation, which we conceived, established the Civic Info Consortium, which is designed to strengthen and transform local journalism throughout the state. Unfortunately, the funding to launch the consortium didn't materialize that year.

In 2019, we kicked our organizing and advocacy into overdrive. In July, the legislature and the governor approved up to \$2 million to fund the project, which will allow the consortium to begin supporting local projects in partnership with universities across the state. And in January 2020, the state released the money.

Our progress in New Jersey is getting attention and having a ripple effect across the United States:

Colorado

We're advising the newly launched Colorado Media Project, which is exploring ways that public policy can strengthen local journalism in the state. In October, we teamed up with the group to organize an event in the city of Longmont. During the gathering, 70 residents, journalists, elected officials, community leaders and students brainstormed about the kinds of local journalism that would help the region thrive.

Ohio

Policy Matters Ohio released a report in July that looks at how declining local news has hurt communities throughout the state. The report cites the Civic Info Bill campaign, saying "state legislators should follow the lead of their counterparts in New Jersey."

Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, we joined the Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism and other local allies to testify before a legislative committee about a proposal to study the impacts of local media consolidation and craft solutions for underserved communities.

Philadelphia

In Philadelphia we participated in a six-month collaborative project called Organizing for Neighborhood News: We trained and mentored community members and student journalists to work with fellow residents, develop stories, and shift away from coverage that stigmatizes people of color and others. And in early 2020 we announced the launch of a groundbreaking three-year project designed to transform coverage of crime, criminal justice, safety and trauma in the city.



We also continued to do important work on the ground in North Carolina and New Jersey.

North Carolina

We're continuing to do transformative work with the Charlotte Observer. We've held regular meetings with the paper since 2018 and this year hosted a range of public forums on topics including housing, displacement, immigration and the transgender community. These gatherings are fostering relationships between Observer reporters and local residents and changing the way the outlet covers these vital issues.

New Jersey

In Newark, we teamed up with public-radio station WBGO to create the News Voices Engagement Fellowship, a year-long pilot project that has embedded a local organizer in the newsroom, with the goal of elevating underreported stories and strengthening the outlet's relationships with community members.

The work we've done in Atlantic City since 2015 culminated this year in Stories of Atlantic City, a collaboration with local partners that yielded 10 powerful stories and videos on the themes of strength and resiliency.

Our collaboration with New Brunswick-based coLAB Arts and other local partners produced 37 Voices, a multimedia project showcasing stories of economic insecurity in the region.



News Voices Director Mike Rispoli and organizer James Thompson lead a community discussion in Camden, New Jersey. Image by Tim Karr / Free Press

Solutions

Seeking justice for Puerto Rico



Free Press is working with local advocates in Puerto Rico to push the FCC to uncover the roots of the communications crisis.

In May, Free Press released *Connecting the Dots: The Telecommunications Crisis in Puerto Rico*, a report on how the destruction of communications networks following Hurricanes Irma and Maria contributed to the historic death toll there. Our study condemns the FCC for failing to adequately respond to the devastation.

We also filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the agency, which — after months of stonewalling — released a batch of consumer complaints from people in Puerto Rico who had experienced prolonged outages following the 2017 storms.

Both our report and the FOIA response exposed a shocking double standard at the FCC, where the agency has failed to investigate and hold carriers accountable for the widespread outages. By contrast, the agency conducted a far more rigorous investigation into the communications failures that followed Hurricane Michael, which struck Florida in 2018.

For the last two years, we've urged the agency to create an independent commission to investigate the roots of the communications crisis to prevent this kind of catastrophe from happening again.



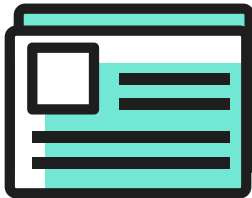
Our research is already making an impact on Capitol Hill:

In September, Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (D-New Jersey) called on the Government Accountability Office to formally investigate the communications collapse in Puerto Rico, citing and linking to Free Press' report in his request.



Co-CEO Jessica J. González being interviewed at our protest outside Twitter
Photo by Brooke Anderson Photography

- **23 op-eds**
- **1,700 press hits**



In 2019, we placed 23 Op-Eds in outlets including The Hill, The Los Angeles Times, Ms., the New York Daily News, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and The Seattle Times. These pieces explored topics ranging from online political ads to FBI surveillance to how tech firms have enabled the Trump administration's family-separation policy.

We earned 1,700 press hits from outlets including the Associated Press, CBS, The Guardian, Motherboard, The Nation, Newsweek, Politico, Reuters, The Washington Post and Wired.

One of our most powerful media moments came when Free Press Co-CEO Jessica J. González appeared on MSNBC to discuss the Change the Terms campaign and urge Twitter to ban white supremacists.

Fund the Fight

bit.ly/supportfreepress2020

None of this work would be possible without you. Your generosity has kept us going strong and your continued support is essential to our future success.

We don't take money from business, government or political parties and rely on charitable foundations and individual donors like you to power our work.

Please consider giving monthly: Sustaining donors give us the most flexibility to be responsive and flexible — using resources where we need them most for the most urgent fights ahead.

Our Mission

We seek to change the media to transform democracy to realize a just society.

Since Free Press was founded in 2003, the media landscape has changed dramatically. Media and technology are now intertwined in our daily lives, vital to the health of our communities, and essential to a functioning democracy. We believe the fight for racial justice must be at the center of transforming our media and our democracy.

Media and technology can be used to oppress people — or to liberate them. We focus on these powerful platforms and tools because they have an outsized influence not just on our political system but on the kind of society we will have and the lives we will lead.

We focus on saving Net Neutrality, achieving affordable internet access for all, uplifting the voices of people of color in the media, challenging old and new media gatekeepers to serve the public interest, ending unwarranted surveillance, defending press freedom and reimagining local journalism.

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As of February 2020

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Please note: We will post financial information for 2019 when it becomes available in spring 2020.

Thank You

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