

Before the Economic Matters Committee
Maryland House of Delegates Written

Written Testimony of Brandon Forester, National Organizer for Internet Rights and Platform
Accountability at Media Justice and Maryland Resident

In Support of
House Bill 957, Maryland Net Neutrality Act of 2020
February 26, 2020

Chairman Davis, Vice Chair Dumais, members of the Committee, my name is Brandon Forester and I am an Organizer for Internet Rights at Media Justice and I am also resident of Prince George's County. MediaJustice is a national organization that centers the voices and lived experience of communities of color and other marginalized communities. We represent a network of over one hundred grassroots local and national organizations and tens of thousands of activists and advocates, most of which are led and driven by Black and Brown folks and other communities that are failed by our media and technology systems.

In 2015 and through the present day, our network members and MediaJustice advocates have been deeply engaged in the fight for an equitable, accessible and affordable internet. While Net Neutrality does not alone reach our vision of ubiquitous affordable and accessible internet, it is the absolute cornerstone of visionary future of the internet that creates opportunity and community for everyone.

While the internet is necessary for everyone, every day and for almost everything in modern life, it's even more necessary for those folks and communities that are economically, racially and politically oppressed. We know that these communities are least likely to have access to any and especially affordable Internet. Without Net Neutrality, the megacorporations like Verizon and Comcast will *and have* created more barriers to access of affordable and resilient Internet for these folks who are already too often denied basic rights, access to power and access economic opportunity. The future of the Internet without Net Neutrality is a dystopian nightmare where giant corporations become gatekeepers, surveillers and editors of what their customers have access to. This cannot be the future of the Internet, which has always held the promise of more equitable access to opportunities and communities that help us to thrive. A failure to enforce a neutral net is a failure to keep that promise.

I also live in Prince George's County, which as you are all aware is one of the wealthiest majority Black counties in the United States. Prince George's county is a thriving community of Black folks and a beautiful example of Black entrepreneurship. All of these communities, small businesses and families use and depend upon the internet just like every other community in the United States. Unlike other communities, even in Prince George's county entrepreneurs and small business owners face the same heightened challenges that Black and Brown folk across Maryland and the United States face. The lack of access to resources, public goods and especially capital acutely strikes our communities. Having an internet that is controlled by a few companies who don't look like us, don't think about us and clearly don't have our interest in mind would be a disaster and would have deepen and raise up the multitude of barriers that already exist. I live in one of the many communities of Maryland that live under monopoly or duopoly for internet service providers. Our options are already limited to bad or worse and not acting swiftly to fill the regulatory hole that the FCC and Congress have left wide open will only further to deepen how awful these so-called options already are. If we don't like or aren't being served by the ISP or ISPs we have access to, we don't have any other choices. There is no market solution for this issue and that's why I ask you to please help Maryland become a national leader in providing a regulatory solution.

Even though I'm testifying about my experience and my community, this isn't an issue that is just about not further oppressing communities that are already oppressed. This is about the future for all of our communities, all of our children and all of our future. In 2015 and 2016 tens of millions of Americans submitted official comments to the FCC and made clear that they understand the urgent and real need for Net Neutrality. This included tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Marylanders like myself who understand why this isn't some kind of tech policy that is distantly separated from our everyday lives. In fact, there was such passionate and overwhelming support for the FCC's Open Internet orders precisely because we understand exactly how integral and intersectional this issue is within our everyday lives. While that may be especially true of Prince George's County and Maryland, it's also true for our entire nation. Your committee, this legislature and this state have another opportunity to stand up and stand out as leaders on the most important issues that face our society today.

I hope this committee and the greater body will respond to this opportunity and I trust you that will. Please don't disappoint us. We're counting on you all.