

Internet Law and the Independent Hip-Hop Scene

Written by Davey D ID2793
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Internet law would hurt independent hip-hop scene by *Davey D

In my June 15 column on Tupac Shakur's (2Pac) legacy, I mentioned sweeping changes that soon could transform the Internet. That's because of congressional action on the disingenuously named Communications Opportunity, Promotion and Enhancement Act, or COPE, which is backed by large telecommunications companies such as Verizon, AT&T and Comcast.

This bill, which passed in the House and is awaiting action in the Senate, would end what is known as "Net neutrality," by which all sites are equally accessible to users.

Broadband operators have been prevented from charging a fee to prioritize content and services, and the little guy with something to say on a blog has been able to compete with a giant news outlet because he is just as accessible. COPE would replace Net neutrality with a two- or three-tier system in which broadband operators could charge to prioritize content and services for willing customers. Those who don't pay for the service would become less accessible over their systems. Earlier this month, the House approved COPE by a 321-101 vote.

If the legislation becomes law, the multitiered system could have a devastating effect on the independent hip-hop scene that has emerged over the past few years, with the Bay Area and Houston leading the way. To the chagrin of major record labels, the Internet has been a boon to independent artists who publicize and distribute their songs and videos with little cost while retaining the revenue previously siphoned by the record labels for distribution services. The Internet largely leveled the playing field and eliminated the middle men.

Bay Area acts such as Hieroglyphics and Living Legends have done extremely well selling music and merchandise on the Internet, and they have used it to launch 40- and 50-city tours. Keak Da Sneak, Mistah FAB and others have garnered large international fan bases through innovative use of Web sites such as Myspace.com.

Local filmmakers and TV producers such as Sean Kennedy of Ill Trendz Productions have made names for themselves on the Net. Adisa Banjoko and other Bay Area authors have

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self-published and distributed their work via the Internet, while organizations like the Hip Hop Congress, led by San Jose's Shamako Noble, established a national presence using the Web.

On the horizon is technology for increasing Web speeds up to a thousand times over today's and allowing wide delivery of rich media.

Telecom companies have spent millions of dollars trying to persuade Congress that COPE is necessary so they can do the R&D needed to improve the Internet. Many others, however, argue the technology for super-fast Internet speeds already exists.

According to Scott Goodstein of SavetheInternet.com and Punkvoter.com, 15 countries are far ahead of the United States. In France, Web access priced at \$6 per month is currently 25 times faster than top download speeds in this country, where prices average \$30 a month. Some Asian countries are reportedly on the verge of introducing speeds hundreds of times faster.

Goodstein reminds us that telecom giants, which did not develop the Internet, nonetheless have received millions of taxpayer dollars to provide universal broadband access, but have yet to deliver. He describes the recent lobbying efforts to stir up support for COPE as a money grab on their behalf, plain and simple.

If the legislation goes into effect, independent artists, bloggers, activists and journalists may find themselves priced out of the kind of Internet service they have enjoyed so far.

Sen. Barbara Boxer has come out in favor of Net neutrality, while Sen. Dianne Feinstein has not announced a position, saying she wants to hear more from constituents.

I encourage everyone to call their offices, because COPE supporters are pulling out all stops to usher in their corporatist version of the Net. Both artists and hip-hop fans stand to lose the freedom they now enjoy.

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An easy way to reach your senator is by going to

http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

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