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A curious thing happened on Wednesday, a day that many internet companies and public policy groups had christened a "Day of Action" aimed at protesting the Federal Communications Commission's plan to overturn so-called net neutrality rules. The curiosity was that several broadband

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companies — the very same companies that pushed to rewrite the rules that undergird net neutrality — put out statements suggesting that they, too, supported the aims of the protesters.

"We support permanent, strong, legally enforceable net neutrality rules," [said Comcast](#), the nation's largest cable company, which [once successfully sued the F.C.C.](#) to overturn net neutrality policies. Verizon, the nation's largest wireless company, [said](#): "Like those participating in the Day of Action, Verizon supports the open internet." And AT&T said that it was "joining with hundreds of other internet companies on July 12th to show our support for an open internet." [The company even created a form](#) for people to send an automated message to the F.C.C. The text of the letter actually supports the new F.C.C. policy, but hey, it's the thought that counts, I suppose.

So what's going on here? Net neutrality — rules meant to ensure that broadband companies treat all internet traffic equally and don't, for instance, block certain services or charge them to get priority access — has been at the center of a heated tech-

policy battle for more than a decade. It's a fight between internet companies — the Googles, Facebooks and Netflixes of the world — and broadband companies that control the pipes coming into your home. The battle is abstruse, but the stakes are high: Both sides say the future of the internet depends on getting these rules right.

So why, now, are broadband companies suggesting that they support the aims of the other side? There are two possibilities: A cynic might argue that it's just puffery, that the broadband industry is simply trying to present a friendly image to an outraged online horde. Or you might take them at their word.

When I asked them for comment, representatives for AT&T, Comcast and Verizon pointed to their statements. In those statements, they argue that there is a reasonable middle ground in the neutrality

warns, Pa. might have to stop spending

debate — that if given a chance, both sides could arrive at a set of rules that would make the internet better off. And they say the proper venue for that compromise is Congress, not the F.C.C. Legislation rather than regulation, they said, would create a permanent new legal grounding for network neutrality rules, ending the fight once and for all.

So which is it, cynicism or an earnest attempt to move the debate forward? Well, maybe their motivation doesn't matter. Here's one idea for longtime proponents of network neutrality: Call the broadband companies' bluff, if that's what it is. Maybe it is time to push Congress, rather than the F.C.C., to take up the neutrality fight — and maybe, finally, end the debate for good.

The reasoning here is pretty straightforward. Under Ajit Pai, President Trump's pick for F.C.C. chairman, the pro-neutrality side is unlikely to get much of what it wants from the commission anyway. In Congress, **some key Republicans** have signaled a willingness to draft neutrality rules. The new rules from Congress are almost certain to fall short of the ideal outcome from neutrality advocates; they will also probably be weaker than the sweeping regulatory system drafted by Tom Wheeler, the F.C.C. chairman under President Obama. But that is to be expected; there is a Republican Congress, a Republican president and a deregulatory mood ascendant in Washington.

But broadband companies also face enormous consumer pressure to keep their networks functioning well. On the Day of Action, many internet companies showed worst-case scenarios that could come out of the death of net neutrality rules — trickle-slow load times and an internet marked by paid bundles, like the return of cable TV on your computer.

Broadband companies, which are already quite hated by their customers, aren't likely to be keen on seeing those scenarios come to pass — and would therefore willingly support legislation that prevents such horrors, said Michael Powell, a former F.C.C. chairman who is now the president of the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, a broadband trade association. "There's a premise out there that we are itching to block, itching to create slow lanes, but we're not," Mr. Powell said. "I've had this conversation with every C.E.O., and it's not because they're good people or are philanthropists. They're as self-interested as Google or anybody else, but they believe they've found a good business selling internet access on open, unobstructed pipes. They don't see how one could create a profitable business model by degrading the experience of their consumers."

He added: "I guess you could think we just constantly lie, but I'm trying to convince you it's as sincere as it comes. It's in their greedy monetary self-interest not to block anyone." So if broadband companies are itching for a law, why not get on that bandwagon? Yes, a law would be hard to get; legislation under this Congress has a habit of dying on the launchpad. But it's not implausible: Internet giants control the world's most important channels for information, from your Facebook feed to Google results to your phone's home screen. They are more than capable of applying enormous pressure to members of Congress to push for what they want.

And then, if nothing else, we'll be able to see where the broadband companies really stand. — ***New York Times***; also in the ***Times***: **"See How Tech Companies Got Together for a Day of Online Protest"**

Liberal comedian John Oliver and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg received a boost this week in their fight to keep net neutrality as thousands of comments poured in to the Federal Communications Commission — from Russia. Many of the Russian posts filed on the FCC website were substantially alike and overwhelmingly in favor of retaining the Obama-era internet regulations, indicating that the impassioned net neutrality campaign backed by liberal billionaire George Soros has managed to spill overseas.

"The Open Internet rules (net neutrality) are extremely important to me," Kondrat Yevdokimov of Cheylabinsk Oblast, Russia, said in a Wednesday comment. "Don't allow the Trump administration [to] control the media streaming and then make only his NEWS," he added. The Russian connection comes with the public comment process already under scrutiny after several analyses turned up hundreds of thousands of posts from fake email addresses — or real people whose identities were stolen — advocating on both sides of the issue. — ***Washington Times***

Rank-and-file state lawmakers on Thursday morning remained in the dark about the status of negotiations between party leaders and Gov. Tom Wolf's administration over a deal to complete the 2017-18 state budget. Legislators were sent home to their districts earlier this week and put on a 6-hour call until a deal is reached.

State Rep. Ryan Bizzarro, of Millcreek Township, D-3rd Dist., said a party leader told him he did not expect lawmakers to be back in the state Capitol until Monday. “Nothing,” Bizzarro said Thursday morning when asked if he had heard any news of the negotiations.

Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf said Wednesday he was optimistic about getting a good budget agreement. Wolf let a nearly \$32 billion budget bill become law without his signature at midnight Monday, but lawmakers still need to come up with a way to pay for it. Among the issues holding up negotiations are Wolf’s tax-increase proposals, which House Republican leaders have rejected, and the extent to which gambling should be expanded across Pennsylvania. Without a revenue agreement, Wolf will need to put money in reserve, Democratic lawmakers have said. – **Erie Times-News**

We find it unacceptable that Gov. Tom Wolf has again refused to sign a state budget proposal, choosing to wash his hands of the governing process rather than seek ways to work with members of the General Assembly to reduce expenses and produce a balanced spending plan. Wolf is 0-for-3 on state budgets, including a nine-month battle with the House and Senate over school funding in 2015-16.

We don’t disagree with the governor’s premise that a budget should have matching revenues and expenses – be balanced. And we note that the legislators share in the blame for a \$2 billion budget gap. But a governor who continually refuses to compromise is doing a disservice to the residents who elected him or her to office.

The governor did say that the 2017-18 budget process has been more constructive than in years past, and he hopes that state leaders can still finalize a way to pay for the \$32 billion spending plan. Our local state representatives, in talking with Harrisburg reporter John Finnerty, echoed our dual concerns: neither the governor nor the Legislature worked hard enough to find answers before Monday’s deadline, and the answers will likely include cuts that Wolf has been unwilling to consider.

“If the votes aren’t there to raise the necessary revenue to pay for the budget, then maybe significant cuts need to happen,” said **Frank Burns**, D-East Taylor. “Leaders are floating bad ideas such as raising taxes on cable TV, electricity and telephone service. “I’ve even heard they want to tax the drink you buy at the bar. Another bad idea is borrowing money to balance the budget.”

State Rep. Bryan Barbin, D-Johnstown, said the budget plan has been “negotiated in the dark,” rather than in the open where constituents can understand and voice concerns. The GOP-led House and Senate were unwilling to consider Wolf’s pitch to raise taxes to close the budget gap.

Meanwhile, the state’s four state-related universities – Pitt, Penn State, Temple and Lincoln – are seeing their funding held up until the Legislature finalizes a balanced revenue plan. Lycoming County GOP lawmaker **Garth Everett** told Finnerty: “We’re going to be doing things to get it balanced in the next couple days,” which would allow the state to release funding for those colleges. And Allegheny County Democrat **Frank Dermody**, the House Minority Leader, noted that whether or not the budget has Wolf’s signature, it’s the Legislature’s job to pay the bills.

That process would have been true had Wolf signed the budget as well. Only then, the governor would have shown a willingness to involve himself fully in the negotiating process, and would have proven himself committed to finding these important revenue answers. Instead, he sidestepped his responsibility – yet again – and sent a loud and clear message to the people of Pennsylvania: If the budget game isn’t played by his rules, then he will take his ball and go home. – **Johnstown Tribune-Democrat** editorial



