Prophets in the digital public square

By Matt Gaventa
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This month, the Federal Communications Commission voted to open debate on new rules regarding net neutrality, the idea that Internet service providers (Verizon, Comcast, etc.) should treat all data equally, regardless of its source or destination. Net neutrality advocates argue that the Internet is best when it operates on a simple first-come, first-served basis.

The FCC's proposal, however, includes provisions for ISPs to allow "paid prioritization," otherwise known as an Internet "fast lane," when such service meets a threshold of "commercial reasonableness." This means that ISPs can negotiate massive payments from large-scale purveyors of online bandwidth—Netflix, for example, which recently negotiated billion-dollar deals with Comcast and Time Warner to bolster its content-delivery infrastructure. On the other hand, it also inevitably means that those content purveyors without paid prioritization face diminishing bandwidth, slower load times, and potentially blocked or disconnected access.

If you don't follow tech news, this ruling might seem indecipherable or simply irrelevant. But add it to the last year's news in digital surveillance, privacy, cyber-security, and even issues as seemingly benign as patent and copyright reform, and it becomes clear that we can no longer afford to treat tech news like a niche category.

Church bodies have longstanding commitments to social justice causes, and increasingly such causes hinge on access to the open Internet. But this openness—the Internet's ability to serve as public square—exists only as a principle. At a literal level, the Internet is a conglomeration of interconnected data streams—and their operating principles, regulatory frameworks, and monetization strategies are being adjudicated right now.

It's easy to argue that "Internet issues" are less important than issues of violence or inequality. But what if engaging these issues requires some basic fluency in the

politics of being online? What if our prophetic calling requires churches—who, if we're honest, aren't always in the technological vanguard—to make some uncomfortable demands upon our limited technological vocabulary? What if the causes of justice and mercy compel us to know what we're talking about when we talk about data?

The prophet Jeremiah offers some help here. Jeremiah is heir to a long and disreputable history of court prophesy. Take the 400 in 1 Kings 22 who foresee Ahab's great victory over the Aramites, telling the king exactly what he wants to hear and leading him to his death. Miciah, the lone dissenting voice—whom Ahab never wanted to consult in the first place ("He never prophesies anything favorable!")—lands himself in prison for his prophet work. The pattern repeats over and over: the gift of political access is accompanied by the expectation that the prophet will speak words comfortable to the ruling elite.

Jeremiah begins his Jerusalem prophesy as a member of the professional guild. But once he begins to prophesy against Israel's disobedience and to foretell the destruction of the city, he is quickly marginalized. Eventually, Jeremiah's political enemies literally dig a pit and throw him inside, hoping that they can silence his witness. While post-exilic history remembers Jeremiah fondly, surely we can hope for a better political landscape than one in which prophesy in the public square is available only with the consent of the privileged and the elite.

Jeremiah's story offers a simple allegory for the nightmare scenario feared by open Internet activists. The court of the electronic public square would include court prophets willing to pay—in cash, credit, or obedience—a toll for privileged access. But there would also be Jeremiahs, those whose witness is so objectionable as to get them thrown into an online pit: a YouTube channel subject to unauthorized [DMCA takedown](), a Twitter feed gone uncomfortably silent, a grassroots network with a webpage that never seems to load anymore and nobody can figure out why.

You don't have to believe this nightmare scenario to understand that access to the public square matters at least as much as what we say once we get there. If the church wants to be a voice for peace, justice, mercy, and righteousness; if the church truly seeks to speak God's word into a changing and challenging world; then we're going to have to get fluent in the rules of the conversation.

Issues like Internet access, data rights, network neutrality, and digital privacy are about the conditions of possibility for prophecy. That's language the church should understand.

The FCC is accepting comments about its current proposal at openinternet@fcc.gov. The first period of public comment runs through July 27.