‘Today Is THE Day’ as FCC Readies Historic Vote on Net Neutrality

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by Jon Queally, staff writer
Updated (11:55 AM EST):

The Federal Communications Commission on Thursday, in a 3-2 vote, approved the reclassification of the Internet under Title II of the Communications Act.

“Fast lanes will not divide the internet into haves and have-nots,” announced FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler during remarks that followed the approval which passed along party with Democrats voting for the change and the two Republican-appointed members dissenting.

“Consumers will be able to go where they want, when they want,” Wheeler continued. “Today is a red letter day for internet freedom.”

Though expected, the vote was greeted with cheers—applauded as “the biggest win for the public interest in the FCC’s history”— from supporters of net neutrality, the concept that says online traffic should not be relegated to fast or slow lanes determined by the large telecom companies who control much of the nation’s digital networks.

“We applaud Chairman Wheeler, Commissioner Rosenworcel and Commissioner Clyburn for voting for real Net Neutrality today,” said Free Press executive director Craig Aaron following the vote. “They were willing to listen to the facts in the face of a fiercely dishonest industry lobbying effort. But this is really a victory for the millions and millions of people who expect the Internet to be an open engine for free

speech and innovation."

Tiffiniy Cheng, co-founder of Fight for the Future called the fight for net neutrality and the Open Internet as the " free speech struggle in the digital age" as she welcomed the FCC decision and celebrated the coalition of groups that made it possible. "Institutions of power should know by now: Internet users will not stand idly by while anyone tries to take their freedom away. And when Internet users come together to fight for something they believe in, nothing can stop them."

Following vote, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) released the following statement:

> *The FCC has ensured that the Internet remains a place for the open exchange of ideas and information free of discrimination and corporate control. This is a victory for consumers and entrepreneurs.*

> *Millions of Americans, including tens of thousands through my website, told the FCC loudly and clearly that Internet service providers should be a neutral gateway to everything on the Internet. Today's vote shows that ordinary Americans can make a difference when they stand up to powerful corporate interests and Washington lobbyists.*

And the ACLU's Gabe Rottman called the move by the FCC a "plain and simple victory" for free speech rights.

"Americans use the internet not just to work and play, but to discuss politics and learn about the world around them," said Rottman. "The FCC has a critical role to play in protecting citizens' ability to see what they want and say what they want online, without interference. Title II provides the firmest possible foundation for such protections. We are still sifting through the full details of the new rules, but the main point

is that the internet, the primary place where Americans exercise their right to free expression, remains open to all voices and points of view."

Users were using the #netneutrality hashtag on Twitter to offer reactions to the day's historic vote:

This post will be updated as developments warrant…

Champions of the concept known as net neutrality—who have literally been counting the hours—are preparing celebrations on Thursday as the FCC is expected to officially enshrine the policy by reclassifying the Internet as a public utility – a decision which follows intense lobbying over recent months by grassroots organizations and web users who say the vote represents the most important ruling by the commission in a generation.

As Free Press, one of the groups that have led the charge to defend net neutrality by having the FCC place the Internet under what is known as Title II protection, tweeted early Thursday morning: "Today is THE day."

According to Craig Aaron, the executive director of Free Press, "After years of cronyism, corruption and cowardice, Thursday's vote for strong Net Neutrality rules at the FCC is unexpected if not unprecedented."

The FCC's meeting is scheduled for 10:30 AM EST, with the three Democratic members of the panel expected to approve the reclassification rules, overcoming the opposition of the two Republicans on the panel who have voiced their opposition.

What now appears like a victory, however, was not always assured. Digital activists, civil rights advocates, and others formed a large national (and international) coalition to force the FCC away from previous rules changes that would have betrayed the foundation on which the Internet was built, which is that all digital traffic should be treated equally by the

Internet Service Providers (ISPs), which include the well-known cable giants such as Comcast, Time Warner, and AT&T.

As Evan Greer, a campaign manager for advocacy group Fight for the Future, told the *Guardian* on Thursday while he stood among other activists outside FCC headquarters in Washington, D.C.: "We need to send another signal that you can't mess with the internet."

According to Aaron, the real story behind the historic U-turns by both the Obama administration and the FCC on net neutrality is the "dozens of public interest groups, new civil rights leaders and netroots organizers coordinating actions online and off, inside and outside Washington."

In a post written just ahead of the FCC vote, Aaron credits "artists, musicians, faith leaders and legal scholars" who bolstered the efforts of grassroots voices and "about a dozen mostly unsung advocates in D.C." who helped the broader coalition as it "broke the FCC's website, jammed switchboards on Capitol Hill, and forged new alliances that are transforming how telecom and technology policy is made."

In an op-ed published on Thursday, Malkia Cyril, the founder and executive director of the Center for Media Justice, also praised the work of the diverse coalition which fought so hard to make reclassification a political possibility, and now, a reality.

"If the rumors are true," Cyril writes, "it looks like these activists, and the over 4 million people who advocated for strong net neutrality rules, might just get the protections they've been waiting for."

And, she continued:

> *The open internet is the first and only mass communications platform to allow under-served communities to bring injustices once in the shadows to light, and speak truth to*

power.

That's why if the FCC protects internet users with strong network neutrality rules this week, I will be among those clapping and crying for joy. Though the struggle for equal communication rights and access is far from done, an open internet gives those without traditional power the tools to plead our own cause – and that is something worth fighting for.

As Matt Wood and Candace Clement of Free Press explained earlier this month, there's a reason that Thursday's vote by the FCC is, colloquially-speaking, "the biggest deal ever." They explained:

Title II doesn't just restore the principles of nondiscrimination that have served as the bedrock of two-way telecommunications policy in the U.S. It also gives the FCC the authority it needs to preserve universal and affordable access, competition and consumer protections for broadband users. Like Net Neutrality, these foundational principles are at the core of our communications needs for the next century and beyond.

With Title II we have the legal authority we need to win the battles that are coming around the bend. Folks in Congress who are in the pocket of ISPs will try to tear this victory down. ISPs will search for ways to skirt the law – and they'll sue to overturn it. But we'll stand on the strongest legal footing possible to win in Congress and in the courts.

If the FCC votes to reclassify under Title II, it will be one of the greatest public policy victories in decades – because it's not a defensive move. Title II is the law the FCC should have applied all along, and reclassification is a proactive push to protect the rights of Internet users at a time when companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon are trying to control the market and strengthen their monopoly status.

> *A Title II win will prove that organized people can trump organized dollars – and that industry's half-assed attempts to co-opt grassroots language are no match for the innovative tactics of true Net Neutrality activists.*

Follow the #netneutrality hashtag on Twitter for ongoing updates and commentary:

#NetNeutrality Tweets

Snowden Document Reveals Huge Scope of Canada's Domestic Surveillance

Published on Wednesday, February 25, 2015 by Common Dreams
by Lauren McCauley, staff writer

Canada's electronic spy agency, the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), collects millions of emails and other information from its citizens and stores them for "days to months," according to a document leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden and revealed by *CBC News* in collaboration with *The Intercept* on Wednesday.

According to the top-secret CSE document, analysts "watched visits to government websites and collected about 400,000 emails to the government every day, storing some of the data for years," *CBC* reports.

Such online activity includes Canadians filing taxes, writing to members of Parliament and applying for passports. The

sweeping data collection is being carried out in an alleged effort to protect government computers.

Using a tool called PonyExpress, the surveillance agency scans the documents for "suspicious links or attachments." The 2010 document reveals that the system detects about 400 potentially suspect emails each day, or roughly 146,000 each year, though only about four emails a day warrant CSE analysts contacting government departments directly.

The document indicates that the scale of the data collection has likely increased since that time. Under a heading marked "future," the document notes: "metadata continues to increase linearly with new access points."

"It's pretty clear that's there's a very wide catchment of information coming into [CSE]," Micheal Vonn, policy director at the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, told the *CBC.*

The document reveals that CSE is storing large amounts of "passively tapped network traffic" for "days to months," including email content, attachments and other online activity, *The Intercept* reports, while some forms of metadata is kept for "months to years."

"When we collect huge volumes, it's not just used to track bad guys," Chris Parsons, an internet security expert with internet think tank Citizen Lab, who viewed the document, told the *CBC.* "It goes into data stores for years or months at a time and then it can be used at any point in the future."

A previously leaked document revealed in 2013 that CSE intercepts citizens' private messages without judicial warrants. After that, CSE acknowledged it collected some private communications but did not divulge the amount being stored or say for how long. Now, *The Intercept* reports, "the Snowden documents shine a light for the first time on the huge scope of the operation—exposing the controversial details the

government withheld from the public."

The Intercept report continues: "Under Canada's criminal code, CSE is not allowed to eavesdrop on Canadians' communications. But the agency can be granted special ministerial exemptions if its efforts are linked to protecting government infrastructure—a loophole that the Snowden documents show is being used to monitor the emails."

Get Used to It: DOT Predicts Oil Train Derailments Will Be Commonplace Over Next Two Decades

Published on Monday, February 23, 2015 by Common Dreams
by Sarah Lazare, staff writer

According to federal authorities' own predictions, potentially deadly oil train accidents are likely to be commonplace in the United States over the next two decades, with derailments expected to occur an average of 10 times a year, costing billions of dollars in damage, and putting a large number of lives at risk.

The grim projection was revealed exclusively by the Associated Press, which cites a previously unreported analysis by the Department of Transportation from last July.

The disclosure comes in the wake of two explosive crude-by-rail disasters in the U.S. and Canada this month alone,

including wrecks and explosions in West Virginia and Ontario.

"Based on past accident trends, anticipated shipping volumes and known ethanol and crude rail routes, the analysis predicted about 15 derailments in 2015, declining to about five a year by 2034," *AP* journalists Matthew Brown and Josh Funk write.

Any one of the 207 expected derailments, if it occurs near a population center, could kill 200 people and cause $6 billion in damage, according to the reporting. DOT researchers say that they expect crashes to cause at least $4.5 billion in damages over the next twenty years.

Driven by the shale oil boom in Canada and the U.S., transport of oil by train is drastically increasing, and experts say millions of people are in danger of derailments and explosions. According to a study published last week by the Center for Biological Diversity, "an estimated 25 million Americans live within the one-mile evacuation zone that DOT recommends in the event of an oil train derailment." Oil trains, further, cut through 34 national wildlife refuges and fall within a quarter mile of 3,600 miles of rivers and streams, the CBD report notes.

Last week's Fayette County, West Virgina fiery derailment, which displaced at least 2,400 people, prompted renewed calls for safety regulations and reforms. The disaster raised alarm especially because the tank cars on the train were CPC 1232 models, which were supposed be a more modern and resilient model, yet did not prevent the explosion.

Many insist that, over the long term, society must move away from fossil fuel extraction and the health and environmental hazards it poses—from climate change to transport by rail and pipeline.

"The reality is that there's no way to safely transport highly volatile crude from the Bakken oil field in North Dakota or

heavy crudes from the Alberta tar sands," said Jared Margolis of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Instead these fossil fuels should be left in the ground, both for our safety now and to avoid the impending climate catastrophe."

In 'Tragic' Decision, Top Ohio Court Takes Away Local Power to Ban Fracking

Published on Wednesday, February 18, 2015 by Common Dreams
by Deirdre Fulton, staff writer

In a blow to anti-fracking campaigners across the state, the Ohio Supreme Court said this week that the authority to regulate oil and gas drilling activities—and therefore, to ban fracking within municipal borders—lies with the state as opposed to cities, towns, or counties.

As the *Akron Beacon Journal* put it: "The decision takes local control of drilling away from communities and supports the state as the continued main overseer of drilling."

> **"The oil and gas industry has gotten its way, and local control of drilling-location decisions has been unceremoniously taken away from the citizens of Ohio."**
> **—Justice William O'Neill, Ohio Supreme Court**

Several Ohio cities, including Athens, Oberlin, and Mansfield, have passed similar ordinances to ban fracking—some as recently as November 2014—that may now be rendered moot by the court's decision.

By a 4-3 vote, the justices ruled (pdf) that the state has "exclusive authority" over shale-extraction activities and that cities and counties can neither ban nor regulate fracking through zoning laws or other restrictions.

The decision came in a case brought by an Akron suburb against Beck Energy Corp., which received a state-required permit from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in 2011 to drill a traditional well on private property in the northeast city of Munroe Falls. The city sued, saying the company illegally evaded local ordinances.

The state's top court rejected Munroe Falls' assertion that it was validly exercising 'home rule,' which lets communities enact local rules and regulations as long as they don't conflict with general state law. The court found Munroe Falls' ordinances amounted to an exercise of 'police power,' not self-government, and conflicted with state regulations first enacted in 2004.

According to the *Columbus Dispatch*:

> *Local governments' home-rule powers stop short of the wellhead—overridden by the authority that lawmakers gave to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to license and regulate the location of wells, the court's majority ruled.*
>
> *The ruling was a victory for oil and gas producers, who no longer face local regulations, and a defeat for local governments that sought to protect residents from what they see as potential dangers from fracking.*

At least one of the dissenting judges agreed that the victor in the court's decision was the fossil fuels industry.

"Let's be clear here," Justice William O'Neill wrote in his dissenting opinion. "The Ohio General Assembly has created a zookeeper to feed the elephant in the living room. What the

drilling industry has bought and paid for in campaign contributions they shall receive. The oil and gas industry has gotten its way, and local control of drilling-location decisions has been unceremoniously taken away from the citizens of Ohio."

Environmentalists and local government officials both expressed dismay at the decision.

"I guess that means the voice of the people doesn't matter. We said 'we want local control,' and then they take it away."
—Paul Wiehl, mayor of Athens, Ohio

"It's really sad and tragic for the citizens of Ohio," Vanessa Presak, president of the Network for Oil and Gas Accountability and Protection, told the *Beacon Journal*. "The fact that communities cannot stop harmful industrial activities is tragic."

Athens mayor Paul Wiehl echoed those concerns,telling *The Post* that it was unfair for the state to void Athens' ban. "I guess that means the voice of the people doesn't matter," Wiehl told the independent, student-run newspaper. "We said 'We want local control,' and then they take it away."

However, the court's decision "was very close," notes local activist Roxanne Groff, a member of the Athens County Fracking Action Network, in an email to *Common Dreams*.

"Justice [Terrence] O'Donnell in his decision does give thought to the constitutional rights of local governance," she added. "Hopefully this decision will ignite local governments to fight back by demanding that our lawmakers restore those rights."

In Ohio, fracking has been directly linked to an uptick in earthquakes. A spill and fire at a fracking well in mid-2014 forced evacuations and befouled a creek, resulting in dead crayfish, minnows, and smallmouth bass. And at the end of

2014, about 25 families in the eastern part of the state were unable to live in their homes for three days because of an out-of-control natural-gas leak at a nearby fracking well.

Associated Press reports that the Ohio case "has been closely watched nationally, raising a question in cities and towns where lucrative oil and gas is trapped in underground shale: Can regulations put in place by states eager for the jobs and tax revenues that come with drilling trump local restrictions on hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, that communities are enacting to protect against haphazard development."

Across the United States, attempts to stymie the fracking boom on the local level have met with mixed results.

In July, New York's highest court ruled that local governments can outlaw fracking, but in 2013, a Pennsylvania court said towns can regulate it but not outright ban it. Towns in Texas and California also banned fracking in last year's election, but Texas officials haverefused to allow it to be enforced.

In Deadly Industry, US Oil Workers' Historic Strike for Safety Spreads to More Plants

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by Sarah Lazare, staff writer

The biggest U.S. oil workers' strike in more than three decades just grew even larger, with two mid-western BP plants joining in the work stoppage to demand basic health and safety

protections from some of the world's most powerful fossil fuel corporations.

The United Steelworkers announced Saturday that over 1,400 employees at two BP refineries—in Whiting, Indiana and Toledo, Ohio—have joined the 3,800 oil workers on strike at nine refineries in California, Kentucky, Texas and Washington.

The workers at the new sites officially began their work action at 12:01 Sunday morning, according to the union.

The strike, now entering its second week, is aimed at winning protections in an industry where safety is a matter of "life-or-death" for workers and surrounding communities, as Samantha Winslow points out in *Labor Notes*.

The Texas City, Texas plant on strike is the site of a BP refinery explosion in 2005 that killed 15 workers (the refinery was later sold to Marathon).

"We have a lot of forced overtime," Dave Martin, vice president of the union striking at the Marathon refinery in Catlettsburg, Kentucky, told *Labor Notes*. "That was one of the main issues in the Texas explosion: people working overtime and not making the right decisions."

"Our local union has lost 14 members in 16 years. Quite frankly, we're tired of our coworkers being killed and being subjected to this risk," said Steve Garey, president of the USW local in Anacortes, Washington.

Shell Oil, which sits at the head of the negotiating table for the industry side, is refusing to budge on safety issues, say workers.

"After long days of discussions with the industry's lead company, Shell Oil, little progress has been made on our members' central issues concerning health and safety, fatigue, inadequate staffing levels that differ from what is shown on

paper, contracting out of daily maintenance jobs, high out-of-pocket and health care costs," said USW International Vice President Gary Beevers in a press statement.

In an industry known for health and safety violations, as well as large-scale environmental disasters like BP's 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the workers have garnered support from green groups.

"As we move towards a clean energy economy, there should be no throw-away communities and no throw-away workers," said environmental organization 350.org in astatement supporting the strikers.

Joe Uehlein from the Labor Network for Sustainability told *Common Dreams*, "All of this support from environmental groups being expressed is great and important and there should be more of it."

"Will it alter the long-term landscape of labor and environmental cooperation?" he asked. "I don't know. We need a common vision and strategy."

Brooke Anderson, organizer with Climate Workers and Movement Generation, told*Common Dreams* that she took part in a strike picket line at the Tesoro refinery in Martinez, California and found that, at a rank-and-file level, "a lot of those workers get the problem with refineries and pipelines. They know better than anyone how dangerous this stuff is and how dirty the industry is."

"The oil refinery workers there were so clear that they were on strike because they don't have the power to call out problems on the inside of the refinery," Anderson continued. "If they can't blow the whistle on health and safety issues, they know the consequences will come back on everyone."

Faulting EPA, Green Leaders Warn Obama: Bees Running Out of Time

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by Jon Queally, staff writer
They speak for the bees.

In a letter destined for President Obama on Thursday, eleven of the nation's top environmental and public health advocacy groups, representing millions of Americans, are demanding the administration take much stronger and swifter action to end the perilous situation of the nation's most prolific pollinators, most prominently the honey bee, caused by the widespread use of neonicotinoids, a dangerous class of pesticide.

The letter (pdf) calls on Obama to instruct the Environmental Protection Agency to immediately suspend neonicotinoid use and take retroactive and proactive steps to curb their adverse impacts.

"Bees and other pollinators are essential to our nation's food supply, farming system, economy, and environment," the letter states, "but they are in great peril and populations are dwindling worldwide. A growing body of scientif ic evidence points to the widespread and indiscriminate use of a class of neurotoxic pesticides called neonicotinoids ('neonics') as a key factor in bee die – offs ."

Specifically, the groups charge that although Obama appointed a special inter-agency panel, called the Pollinator Health Task Force, to study pollinator health last year, that effort

is simply moving too slowly and time is running out. Mandated to assess the crisis of bee die-offse and offer recommendations after 180 days, the Task Force missed their deadline and have now indicated their report may not arrive until 2016.

“If current rates of bee die-offs continue,” the letter says, “it is unlikely that the beekeeping industry will survive EPA’s delayed timeline, putting our agricultural industry and our food supply at serious risk.”

Neonicotinoids, which are often applied to seeds before planting, are particularly harmful to bees because they poison the entire plant, including the nectar and pollen which bees eat. At elevated doses, neonics can kill bees directly, but scientists have found that at lower, more common levels of exposure the pesticides are negatively affecting bees’ ability to breed, forage, fight disease and survive winter months. What’s additionally troubling, according to neonic opponents, is how a recent EPA analysis found that neonicotinoid treatment on soybean seeds, one of the world’s premiere monocrops, offers little or no economic benefit to soy farmers.

In a letter to the Task Force sent in Novemeber of last year, over 100 scientists and urged immediate action on the bee-harming pesticides. “The President’s Task Force should listen to the body of science that links pesticides to bee harm and bee declines,” stated Jim Frazier, PhD, an emeritus entomology professor at Pennsylvania State University and commercial beekeeper advisor who specializes in chemical ecology, who signed a joint letter from the scientists.

In addition to action on neonics, Thursday’s letter also urges the Obama administration to close a legal loophole which allow further sale of other insecticides before they are adequately assessed for safety.

According to the groups—which include Friends of the Earth, NRDC, Greenpeace USA, Green for All, Earthjustice, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and five others—the science is in agreement and the stakes could not be higher:

> *Various stakeholders are taking steps to restrict the use of neonicotinoids , because the science is clear that pesticides are a leading driver of bee declines and are harming many other important and beneficial organisms, including birds, bats, butterflies, dragonflies, lacewings, ladybugs, earthworms, small mammals, amphibians, aquatic insects and soil microbes – putting food production and the environment in jeopardy. 4 Earlier this year, a global body of twenty – nine independent scientists – the Task Force on Systemic Pesticides – reviewed more than 800 peer-reviewed studies published in the last five years, including industry-sponsored studies, and called for immediate regulatory action to restrict neonicotinoids.*

The letter comes three weeks after over 100 businesses, many of which are members of the American Sustainable Business Council and the Green America Business Network, sent a similar plea (pdf) to the president urging action on pesticide use and pollinator protections.

Representing companies from a variety of sectors and industries, the business leaders said they were "gravely concerned that if neonicotinoids continue to be allowed into our environment at current rates, this practice will have devastating impacts on our food, ecosystems, and economic wellbeing."

As Jordan and ISIS Exchange Executions, Folly of US "War on Terror" Looms

Published on Wednesday, February 04, 2015 by Common Dreams
by Jon Queally, staff writer

The Jordanian government has confirmed the execution of two jailed Iraqis, both accused of being jihadist militants who planned or participated in attacks within Jordan, in retaliation for the execution by the Islamic State of a captured Jordanian pilot whose death was shown in a video released Tuesday.

"What killed Kassasbeh was not Islam. What killed him are the new dynamics of globalisation and transnational violence that have consumed the Middle East and the Islamic world, unleashed by the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Syrian civil war." —Asst. Prof. Ibrahim al-Marashi

According to *McClatchy*:

> *Jordanian state television said one of the executed prisoners was Sajida al Rishawi, the 44-year-old Iraqi woman whose release the Islamic State had demanded in return for the life of a Japanese hostage killed last week. The other was Ziad al-Karbouli, a jihadist who once worked with Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the Jordanian who founded al Qaida in Iraq, the organization that was the precursor to the Islamic State.*
>
> *Government spokesman Mohammed al Momani announced in Amman that the two prisoners had been executed at dawn. Both Karbouli and Rishawi had been in prison for nearly a decade.*
>
> *Jordan had announced that it would move quickly to avenge the murder of Lt. Moaz al Kasasbeh whose horrific execution was made public Tuesday by an Islamic State video that showed him*

> *being led to a cage in the desert, doused with gasoline and set alight.*

The Guardian adds:

> *The fate of Kasasbeh – a member of a large tribe that forms the backbone of support for the country's Hashemite monarchy – has gripped Jordan for weeks and some Jordanians have criticised King Abdullah for embroiling them in the US-led alliance that they say will provoke a militant backlash.*
>
> *Some analysts believe Amman could now escalate its involvement in the campaign against Islamic State, which has seized large areas of Iraq and Syria, Jordan's neighbours to the north and east. US officials told Reuters on Tuesday the killing of Kasasbeh would likely harden Jordan's position as a member of the coalition against Islamic State.*

Though many Jordanians have expressed criticism against the nation's monarchy government for participating in the U.S.-led war on the Islamic State (aka ISIS or ISIL), analysts vary on their assessment about how the execution of the pilot, who was burned alive, will shift public sentiment and impact the overall war which has ensnared the Middle East.

Several observers have taken the opportunity of these latest developments to reflect on how the mindset and tactics employed in what has become known as the "global war on terror" or (GWOT)—spearhead by the U.S. military—are inextricably linked to what is commonly referred to as the "barbarism" and "savagery" of non-state militant actors like ISIS.

In a post published on *The Intercept* on Wednesday, journalist and columnist Glenn Greenwald explores how the ritualistic condemnation of ISIS—who he acknowledges is a group "indescribably nihilistic and morally grotesque"—also serves

the purpose of obfuscating the inherent violence and depravity of the military campaign that the U.S. has waged in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere over the last twelve or more years. After documenting numerous incidents in which the U.S. military's use of drones, hellfire missiles, white phosphorous, and other weaponry that have resulted in the maiming and death of countless civilians, including many who were "burned alive," Greenwald writes:

> *Unlike ISIS, the U.S. usually (though not always) tries to suppress (rather than gleefully publish) evidence showing the victims of its violence. Indeed, concealing stories about the victims of American militarism is a critical part of the U.S. government's strategy for maintaining support for its sustained aggression. That is why, in general, the U.S. media has a policy of systematically excluding and ignoring such victims (although disappearing them this way does not actually render them nonexistent).*
>
> *One could plausibly maintain that there is a different moral calculus involved in (a) burning a helpless captive to death as opposed to (b) recklessly or even deliberately burning civilians to death in areas that one is bombing with weapons purposely designed to incinerate human beings, often with the maximum possible pain. That's the moral principle that makes torture specially heinous: sadistically inflicting pain and suffering on a helpless detainee is a unique form of barbarity.*
>
> *But there is nonetheless something quite obfuscating about this beloved ritual of denouncing the unique barbarism of ISIS. It is true that ISIS seems to have embraced a goal – a strategy – of being incomparably savage, inhumane and morally repugnant. That the group is indescribably nihilistic and morally grotesque is beyond debate.*
>
> *That's exactly what makes the intensity of these repeated*

denunciation rituals somewhat confounding. Everyone decent, by definition, fully understands that ISIS is repellent and savage. While it's understandable that being forced to watch the savagery on video prompts strong emotions (although, again, hiding savagery does not in fact make it less savage), it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the ritualistic expressed revulsion has a definitive utility.

And writing for *Al-Jazeera English*, Ibrahim al-Marashi, an assistant history professor at California State University, puts the latest tit-for-tat violence between Jordan and ISIS within a historical context—rooted in the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003—that speaks to the growing and worrying way in which the cycle of violence and acts of terrorism and aggression (including by states, aspiring states, and non-state actors) have created and fostered the current situation:

To recap, a Jordanian, [Abu Musab] al-Zarqawi moved from Jordan to Afghanistan to Iraq in 2001, set up a terrorist group that killed thousands of Iraqis, and dispatched Iraqis to Jordan in 2005 to kill Jordanians and a prominent Syrian director. A Jordanian pilot, sent to combat a transnational terrorist group in Syria and Iraq is killed in 2015 by that very group established by a fellow Jordanian.

What killed Kassasbeh was not Islam. What killed him are the new dynamics of globalisation and transnational violence that have consumed the Middle East and the Islamic world, unleashed by the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Syrian civil war.

While sympathies to ISIL might have existed among elements in Jordan's society, this execution will most likely strengthen Jordanian resolve in combating this group. In the impoverished Jordanian town of Maan, support for ISIL has been vocal and explicit, with inhabitants of the town flying ISIL's flag.

Kassasbeh's death will most likely harden Jordanian resolve

and eliminate any public sympathy for ISIL. However, Jordan is now at a critical juncture. A heavy handed response by the Jordanian state against Maan in light of Kassasbeh's execution might have the inverse effect of dissipating any sympathy for the pilot's death, and spur some of its citizens to join ISIL.

How the Jordanian security forces and the state will react after the death of its pilot will have ramifications for its long-term security. Jordan has announced it has executed Rishawi in response to Kassasbeh's death. As I wrote in response toObama's State of the Union speech, state-sanctioned violence in response to non-state actor violence will continue to produce an endless cycle of violence if not coupled with addressing the conditions – unemployment, humiliation, lack in governance – that produce terrorism in the first place.

Google Draws Wikileaks' Ire for Secretly Providing Private Email Data to DOJ

Published on Monday, January 26, 2015 by Common Dreams
by Jon Queally, staff writer

In what non-profit media organization Wikileaks is calling a "horrifying precedent for press freedoms," internet giant Google has confirmed it complied with a request by the U.S. government to hand over the complete content and data attached to email accounts belonging to three Wikileaks staffers under

a secret search warrant issued by a federal judge in 2012.

On Sunday, attorneys representing Wikileaks sent a letter (web) to executives at Google demanding answers related to what they termed the "serious violation of the privacy and journalistic rights" of their three employees—Investigations editor Sarah Harrison, Section Editor Joseph Farrell and senior journalist and spokesperson Kristinn Hrafnsson.

"The broadly tailored search warrants are evidence of the fact that the government refuses to recognize that WikiLeaks is staffed by journalists and editors. It refuses to recognize that the organization's act of publishing US government documents is an act of journalism." —Kevin Gosztola, FireDogLake

Wikileaks was notified on Christmas Eve of 2014 by Google that the order had been fulfilled, citing a gag order the company said prevented it from informing the three individuals, or their employer, earlier. Wikileaks is only making the details of the situation public now.

The letter from Wikileak's legal team to Google's chairman Eric Schmidt states, "We are astonished and disturbed that Google waited over two and a half years to notify its subscribers that a search warrant was issued for their records."

According to Wikileaks, the warrants reveal for the first time a clear list of the alleged offenses the US government is trying to apply in its attempts to build a prosecution against Julian Assange and his staff for their role in revealing secrets that have proved damaging to the nation's reputation. The possible criminal offenses cited by the order, according to the group's analysis, could total 45 years of imprisonment.

Assange, in a statement, aimed his ire at the White House for seeking out access to the private communications. "WikiLeaks has out endured everything the Obama administration has thrown

at us," Assange said, "and we will out endure these latest 'offenses' too."

Though Wikileaks has said that its staffers do not use their gmail accounts for communications related to their work, the group argues the search warrants represent a clear violation of their personal privacy and an assault on press freedoms.

For her part, Sarah Harrison told the *Guardian*, "Knowing that the FBI read the words I wrote to console my mother over a death in the family makes me feel sick."

The Guardian reports:

> *When it notified the WikiLeaks employees last month, Google said it had been unable to say anything about the warrants earlier as a gag order had been imposed. Google said the non-disclosure orders had subsequently been lifted, though it did not specify when.*
>
> *Harrison, who also heads the Courage Foundation, told the Guardian she was distressed by the thought of government officials gaining access to her private emails. […]*
>
> *She accused Google of helping the US government conceal "the invasion of privacy into a British journalist's personal email address. Neither Google nor the US government are living up to their own laws or rhetoric in privacy or press protections".*
>
> *The court orders cast a data net so wide as to ensnare virtually all digital communications originating from or sent to the three. Google was told to hand over the contents of all their emails, including those sent and received, all draft correspondence and deleted emails. The source and destination addresses of each email, its date and time, and size and length were also included in the dragnet.*

According to the statement from Wikileaks:

> *WikiLeaks' legal team has written to Google expressing its dismay that Google failed to notify the warrants' targets immediately. The failure to notify has prevented the three journalists from "protect[ing] their interests including their rights to privacy, association and freedom from illegal searches". The "take everything" warrants are unconstitutionally broad and appear to violate the Privacy Protection Act so would have a good chance of being opposed; however, Google handed everything over before that was possible.*
>
> *Although Google claims that it was at some stage under a gag order from the US government, there is no indication that Google fought the gag and it is unlikely that the gag just happened to expire the day before Christmas. Similar gags for warrants against WikiLeaks journalists have been successfully fought by Twitter in much shorter time-frames.*
>
> *While WikiLeaks journalists, perhaps uniquely, do not use Google services for internal communications or for communicating with sources, the search warrants nonetheless represent a substantial invasion of their personal privacy and freedom. The information handed over to the US government included all email content, metadata, contacts, draft emails, deleted emails and IP addresses connected to the accounts. Google redacted the search warrants before sending them to WikiLeaks staff.*

Speaking with the *Guardian*, Alexander Abdo, a staff attorney and privacy expert at the American Civil Liberties Union, said the warrants were "shockingly broad" and deeply troubling.

"This is basically 'Hand over anything you've got on this person'," Abdo told the Guardian. "That's troubling as it's hard to distinguish what WikiLeaks did in its disclosures from what major newspapers do every single day in speaking to government officials and publishing still-secret information."

Journalist Kevin Gosztola, writing at *FireDogLake*, expanded on this point. "The broadly tailored search warrants are evidence of the fact that the government refuses to recognize that WikiLeaks is staffed by journalists and editors. It refuses to recognize that the organization's act of publishing US government documents is an act of journalism."

The implications of this, according to Gosztola, are profound. He explained:

> *Imagine the US government had served search warrants on the editors of The New York Times. Imagine Google received these warrants, and they were as broad as the ones issued against WikiLeaks editors—and Google did not fight back. The entire US press corps would be livid, as they rightfully were when it became known that the Justice Department had seized the Associated Press' phone records for a leak investigation.*
>
> *In fact, the government recently concluded their relentless pursuit of Times reporter James Risen. They spent years arguing in court that he had no reporter's privilege and had to reveal his confidential sources so the government could prosecute former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling for a leak. They seized many of records of his personal communications and even some detailing financial transactions.*
>
> *While comparatively there may be more of a political cost to the Justice Department if they were to go after The New York Times, one never knows when there might be a presidential administration that does not buckle to public pressure, as was the case with Risen. The legal precedents created as the government pursues WikiLeaks are the same legal precedents that can always be used to go after other journalists in the future. American journalists maintain their collective silence at their profession's own peril.*

In his statement released on Sunday, Assange said, "I call on president Obama to do the right thing and call off his

dogs—for his own sake. President Obama is set to go down in history as the president who brought more bogus "espionage" cases against the press than all previous presidents combined."

Oregon Tax System Does Better Job Than Most in Not Worsening Income Inequality

Published by Oregon Center for Public Policy

Every state tax system in the country makes income inequality worse, but Oregon's tax system does so less than most, according to a report released today by the Washington, D.C.-based Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP).

Oregon's tax system is one of the nation's least regressive, due to the absence of a sales tax and the inclusion of a refundable state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), said Chuck Sheketoff, executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy, who examined the ITEP report. Only two states, Delaware and California, and the District of Columbia have tax systems that are less regressive.

The state tax system that most exacerbates income inequality belongs to Washington state, according to ITEP. Washington has a sales tax but no personal income tax – the opposite of Oregon's system.

"This report should give pause to those who point to

Washington in urging Oregon to adopt a sales tax and scale back our income tax," said Sheketoff. "With income inequality at record highs, making our tax system even more unfair would be the wrong way to go."

Though Oregon's tax system compares favorably to that of most states, state and local taxes still take a bigger bite out of the pocketbooks of poor and middle-class families than those of wealthy families.

Adding up all state and local taxes, Oregon's low-income families have the highest effective tax rate (8.1 percent) of any income group. Meanwhile, the wealthiest 1 percent of families have the lowest effective tax rate (6.5 percent).

Middle-income families in Oregon also pay a larger share of their income than the wealthiest families. Families in the middle have an effective tax rate of 7.6 percent.

The ITEP study, Who Pays?, takes into account all major state and local taxes, including personal income taxes, corporate income taxes, sales taxes, property taxes and excise taxes such as gasoline and cigarette taxes. It also factors in federal income tax rules that allow taxpayers to deduct state and local property and income taxes.

"While Oregon's tax system is one of the best, lawmakers should still look for ways to make it more in tune with people's ability to pay," said Sheketoff. "A progressive tax system reflects our values of fairness and opportunity."

Sheketoff said that lawmakers can improve the system by eliminating tax subsidies that mainly benefit the wealthy, raising the top marginal tax rate, strengthening the EITC and providing a property tax circuit breaker.

"Income inequality is the defining challenge of our time," Sheketoff said. "We certainly shouldn't pass tax laws that make matters worse. On the contrary, our tax system needs to

evolve to meet that challenge posed by inequality."

The Oregon Center for Public Policy is a non-partisan, non-profit institute that does in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax and economic issues. The Center's goal is to improve decision making and generate more opportunities for all Oregonians.

'Seedy Business': New Report Digs Beneath Agrichemical Industry's High-Cost PR Machine

Published on Wednesday, January 21, 2015 by Common Dreams
by Sarah Lazare, staff writer
What exactly is the agrichemical industry hiding with its high-cost public relations and lobbying efforts to convince the U.S. public that genetically modified organisms and pesticides are safe?

According to a just-released study by the newly-formed nonprofit organization U.S. Right to Know, the answer is: A great deal.

Entitled ***Seedy Business: What Big Food is hiding with its slick PR campaign on GMOs***, and authored by Gary Ruskin, the study aims to expose the "sleazy tactics" of corporations like Monsanto and Dow Chemical.

"Since 2012, the agrichemical and food industries have mounted a complex, multifaceted public relations, advertising, lobbying and political campaign in the United States, costing

more than $100 million, to defend genetically engineered food and crops and the pesticides that accompany them," states the report. "The purpose of this campaign is to deceive the public, to deflect efforts to win the right to know what is in our food via labeling that is already required in 64 countries, and ultimately, to extend their profit stream for as long as possible."

In fact, according to Ruskin's calculations, the industry spent more than $103 million since 2012 on defeating state initiatives to mandate GMO labeling in California, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, with Monsanto alone spending over $22 million.

"The tremendous amount of money spent speaks to depth of public unease about GMOs," Ruskin told *Common Dreams*.

The biotechnology industry—whose tactics include attacking scientists and journalists—switches its message depending on the regulatory environment, notes the report. For example, St. Louis-based Monsanto backs GMO labeling in the UK, where such labeling is mandatory, but strongly opposes it in the U.S. "Half of the Big Six agrichemical firms can't even grow their GMOs in their own home countries," states the report, due to health and environmental concerns in European countries.

Industry PR firms such as Ketchum—whose clients include tobacco corporations and the Russian government—have had considerable success in manipulating public opinion about GMOs. However, beneath the spin are a number of red flags about the environmental and human health impacts of agrichemical products.

According to the report, "big agrichemical companies have a well-documented record of hiding the truth about the health risks of their products and operations," from the cancer-causing danger of polychlorinated biphenyls produced by Monsanto to the tragic human impacts of the chemical weapon

Agent Orange, which was primarily manufactured by Dow Chemical and Monsanto.

Despite this track record, U.S. oversight of the industry is inadequate, according to the study, thanks largely to the anti-regulatory structures put in place by former Vice President Dan Quayle. The Food and Drug Administration, in fact, does not directly test whether GMOs are safe.

“This report presents a new argument for why the FDA regulatory process doesn’t work,” Ruskin told *Common Dreams*. “The FDA trusts agrichemical companies and the science they pay for, but the industry has repeatedly hidden health risks from the public so there is no reason to trust them.”

According to Ruskin, this is analogous to the pharmaceutical industry, where positive results get published over negative ones. “What we know is that agrichemical companies have repeatedly hidden health risks, repeatedly suppressed scientific results adverse to the industry,” Ruskin continued. “There is no registry of studies, no way to know. There are are no epidemiological studies on the health impacts of GMOs.”