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I will remember the Telecommunications Act of 1996<sup>1</sup> foremost as the first instance of broad, robust and impactful public interest stakeholder engagement in communications and Internet policy. Even though the Cable Act of 1992<sup>2</sup> was a pro-consumer and competitive triumph with its provisions, among others, on program access,<sup>3</sup> program carriage,<sup>4</sup> vertical and horizontal ownership limits<sup>5</sup> and other consumer protections, public interest engagement was limited mostly to a handful of public interest and consumer organizations with expertise in communications law and policy. By contrast, from the earliest days of debate over the 1996 Act, nonprofit organizations from the education, children's, library, arts, disability, civil rights, civil liberties, religious and other fields joined with communications policy public interest organizations to make their mark on the last significant rewrite of our communications laws.

As early as 1993, it became clear that Congress had both the motivation and the support to pass a major revision of the Communications Act of 1934. At the time, I was a young lawyer at the Media Access Project (MAP), one of the very few communications policy advocacy organizations in existence at the time. The "field" largely consisted of MAP, Consumer Federation of America, the Center for Media Education, Action for Children's Television and the Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ. But as it became clear that Congress was looking to tackle privacy, disability rights, media ownership deregulation, indecent speech online and the deployment of "advanced telecommunications services," the larger public interest community became engaged. To better organize the different interests, the Center for Media Education formed the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable, where representatives of nonprofit stakeholders met monthly to discuss the draft bill *du jour* and develop strategies to ensure the protection of competition, consumer rights and democratic values.<sup>6</sup> Among the notable participants in the almost 200 member "TPR" were the American Library Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, the National Education Association and American Council of the Blind.

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\* In 1996, GiGi Sohn was Deputy Director of the Media Access Project. She currently serves as Counselor to Chairman Tom Wheeler. This article was written in her personal capacity. The views expressed therein are hers and not those of the FCC or Chairman Wheeler.

1. Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (codified as amended in scattered sections of 47 U.S.C.).

2. Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, Pub. L. No. 102-385, 106 Stat. 1460 (codified as amended at 47 U.S.C. §§ 521-555).

3. See 47 U.S.C. § 548 (2012).

4. See 47 U.S.C. § 536 (2012).

5. See 47 U.S.C. § 533 (2012).

6. See PATRICIA AUFDERHEIDE, COMMUNICATIONS POLICY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST: THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACT OF 1996, 45-46 (1999).

While the members of the TPR didn't get everything they wanted from the Telecommunications Act of 1996, their impact was unquestionable. Among other things, the '96 Act placed into law consumer privacy protections for telecommunications services;<sup>7</sup> universal service mandates for schools, libraries, health care facilities, rural residents and the poor;<sup>8</sup> requirements that equipment, telecommunications services and video programming be accessible to the disabled;<sup>9</sup> a requirement that the Commission examine and eliminate market entry barriers for small businesses;<sup>10</sup> a requirement that the FCC promote competition in "competitive navigation devices";<sup>11</sup> and a mandate that the FCC examine the state of advanced telecommunications services and take whatever steps necessary to ensure that they are deployed "on a reasonable and timely basis."<sup>12</sup> Not a bad public interest result for a law that was portrayed at the time as largely a wish list for communications industry interests.

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7. See 47 U.S.C. § 221 (2012).

8. See 47 U.S.C. § 254 (2012).

9. See 47 U.S.C. § 255 (2012).

10. See 47 U.S.C. § 257 (2012).

11. See 47 U.S.C. § 548 (2012).

12. See 47 U.S.C. § 1302 (2012).