IS THE INTERNET A SAFE HAVEN FOR CORPORATE POLITICAL SPEECH? AUSTIN V. MICHIGAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN THE SHADOW OF RENO V. ACLU

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The millennium's first elections will be marked by an electronic grassroots revolution. Use of the internet as a medium for political expression has exploded, with more and more of the electorate engaged in interactive democracy. For voters, grassroots organizers, candidates and political consultants, today's internet has become the architectural embodiment of First Amendment free speech values—the World Wide Web, a virtual town square.

It is indeed the architecture of the internet that guarantees accessibility to and equality within the new media's democratic forum. Equally important to internet activists, however, is the absence of government regulation. Though the realization of political action is as close as one's home computer, some fear that the promise of the new media could be smothered by government regulation. In November 1999, the Federal Election Commission ("FEC") published a Notice of Inquiry that posed questions and solicited public comments regarding future regulation of internet political activity. The public's response was overwhelming. More than 1,200 comments from individuals, internet service providers ("ISPs"),

The opinions in this article are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Federal Election Commission.

1 See National Political Index (visited Feb. 7, 2000) <www.politicalindex.com> (listing 594 "Political Activist" sites; 123 "Political Party" sites; and 976 "Political Newsgroup" sites); Martha T. Moore, Beginning Today, Clinton and Dole Clash on Internet, USA Today, July 10, 1996, at 7A (reporting that more than 2000 political websites were active during that election year).


5 See id. at 844, 863, 870, 885.

6 See e.g., Kathleen Sullivan, First Amendment Intermediaries in the Age of Cyberspace, 45 UCLA L. REV. 1653, 1671 (1998) (arguing, inter alia, that the central tenets behind Brandenburg v. Ohio and New York Times v. Sullivan are undermined by the effects of the internet's architecture: "The instantaneous and decentralized global transmission of information arguably weakens a key premise of Brandenburg's imminence requirement."). See also Lawrence Lessig, Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace 170 (1999). Lessig describes Floyd
This article explores the impact of the \textit{Reno} analysis on an earlier Supreme Court opinion regarding corporate political speech. Specifically, we argue that the Court's reasoning in \textit{Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce} loses its currency when applied to corporate political communications exchanged over the internet.

We begin with a brief overview of the Court's decision in \textit{Reno}, focusing on the "medium-specific" analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the Court's opinion in \textit{Austin} upholding restrictions on political speech by corporations. The final section describes the inherent conflict between the analyses employed in these two cases initiated by \textit{Reno}'s focus on the internet's architectural characteristics. Specifically, these characteristics include accessibility, interactivity (the necessity of "affirmative steps" by the user), and the ability to achieve "relative parity among speakers." Considered individually or taken together, the new media's characteristics must reshape our understanding of the Court's First Amendment jurisprudence. We explore the effect of \textit{Reno} on \textit{Austin}, and argue that the analytical framework used in \textit{Austin} to justify restrictions on corporate political speech loses its power when applied to speech transmitted over the internet.

I. \textit{RENO V. ACLU: ANALYSIS DRIVEN BY ARCHITECTURE}\footnote{Abrams' argument that the internet's architecture under-mines the relevance of the \textit{Pentagon Papers} case:}

In \textit{Reno},\footnote{\textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 859–62.} the plaintiffs brought a First Amendment facial challenge to certain provisions of the Communications Decency Act ("CDA"), a federal statute prohibiting the transmission of obscene or indecent internet communications to individuals younger than eighteen years old.\footnote{\textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 849–50.} Many commentators feared that the Court would impose a less scrutinizing standard of review for the internet, similar to that applied to "scarce" broadcast media; "invasive" radio communications; or time, place and manner zoning restrictions.\footnote{See \textit{Austin}, 494 U.S. at 652.} Fueled these fears, the government argued that cases such as \textit{FCC v. Pacifica}\footnote{\textit{FCC v. Pacifica}, 438 U.S. 726 (1978) (upholding an FCC order that radio stations could be fined for broadcasting George Carlin's monologue of "Filthy Words").} and \textit{Renton v. Playtime Theatres}\footnote{\textit{Renton v. Playtime Theatres}, 475 U.S. 41 (1986) (upholding a zoning ordinance to keep adult movie theaters out of residential neighborhoods).} were particularly relevant in evaluating the CDA.\footnote{\textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 844 (citing Brief for the Appellants at 20–22).} The Court disagreed.

Instead, the Court focused on the internet's unique architecture, distinguishing this "new media" from traditional channels of mass communication.\footnote{See, e.g., Jerry Berman & Daniel Weitzner, \textit{Abundance and User Control: Renewing the Democratic Heart of the First Amendment in the Age of Interactive Media, 104 YALE L.J. 1619 (1995); Donald E. Lively, \textit{The Information Superhighway: A First Amendment Roadmap}, 35 B.C.L. REV. 1067, 1075–82 (1994).} The opinion immediately identified "four related characteristics of internet communication [that] have a transcendent importance," including (1) its "low barriers to entry," (2) identical barriers for both speakers and listeners, (3) "astoundingly diverse content," and (4) accessibility to "all who wish to speak... creat[ing] a relative parity among speakers."\footnote{\textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 859–62.} As the "most participatory form of mass speech yet developed," the Court granted the internet the "highest protection from governmental intrusion."\footnote{\textit{Renton v. Playtime Theatres}, 475 U.S. 41 (1986) (upholding a zoning ordinance to keep adult movie theaters out of residential neighborhoods).}

By highlighting these architectural factors, the Court anticipated its "medium-specific" analysis of the CDA's regulation of the internet—a mode of analysis that begins with an examination of why this medium's architecture should dictate the constitutional standard of review, rather than ini-

\textit{Id.} at 849–50.

\textit{Id.} at 863.

\textit{Id.}
tating an inquiry into the category of speech that the government seeks to restrict.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, the Court first decided that its obscenity and indecency cases "provide no basis for qualifying the level of First Amendment scrutiny that should be applied to this medium,"\textsuperscript{22} thereby inviting intense constitutional scrutiny to restrictions on the medium itself.\textsuperscript{23}

Looking to the architecture of the internet, the Court factually distinguished the "new media" from the "old" in three different ways. First, the Court noted that the "long history of extensive regulation" of broadcast media does not exist with the internet.\textsuperscript{24} It therefore, rejected the government's claim that the Court's analysis should reflect that used in broadcast cases like \textit{FCC v. Pacifica}.\textsuperscript{25} Relying on the self-fulfilling argument that broadcast media has historically received "the most limited First Amendment protection" and that the Federal Communications Commission "had been regulating radio stations for decades," the Court easily distinguished the CDA. "Neither before nor after enactment of the CDA have the vast democratic fora of the internet been subject" to such heavy regulation.\textsuperscript{26}

The second distinguishing factor was broadcast media's reliance on spectrum scarcity.\textsuperscript{27} The scarcity argument loses its relevance in the internet context, the Court noted, because "the internet can hardly be considered a 'scarce' expressive commodity."\textsuperscript{28} It provides "relatively unlimited, low-cost capacity for communication of all kinds."\textsuperscript{29}

Finally, the Court distinguished the invasive character of other media.\textsuperscript{30} In \textit{Pacifica}, for example, government regulation was justified in part because of the government's compelling interest in protecting children, particularly those children who might turn on the radio in the afternoon and "be taken by surprise" by George Carlin's monologue of "Filthy Words."\textsuperscript{31} Conversely, "communications over the internet do not 'invade' an individual's home or appear on one's computer screen unbidden . . . Moreover, the risk of encountering indecent material by accident is remote because a series of affirmative steps is required to access specific material."\textsuperscript{32} Unlike radio and television, the internet allows users to select the material they want to see and to ignore the images they seek to avoid.\textsuperscript{33}

To the Court, not only did the internet lack the regulatory history or inherent character that might justify regulation, but it also exhibited an architecture that argued against it.\textsuperscript{34} The internet's speech-enabling character shifted the Court's focus from merely striking down an overly broad statute to liberating a new medium.\textsuperscript{35} What easily could have been a narrow decision became an occasion for the Court to embrace a new technology by identifying distinct architectural features. Specifically, these include (1) accessibility; (2) interactivity and the need for users to take "affirmative steps" to receive communications, and (3) parity.\textsuperscript{36} Each of these features guided the Court in its struggle to analyze and differentiate one medium from another, to determine how to regulate actors' behavior within this new medium, and to ascertain whether government regulations either promote or discourage free speech.\textsuperscript{37}

The identification and differentiation of the internet's speech-enabling character during an afternoon time slot because the government had a strong interest in protecting children from hearing the broadcast. See id.

\textsuperscript{21} See \textit{id.} at 849–53.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{id.} at 870.
\textsuperscript{23} See Volokh, supra note 6, at 144 ("If the CDA could have been seen as limited to 'low-value' speech, the Court could have let the government prevail while theoretically imposing little sacrifice of free speech, because the burdened speech would be (by hypothesis) not very valuable."). For the court's current obscenity standard, see \textit{Miller v. California}, 413 U.S. 15, 24 (1973), which defines the modern obscenity test as follows: (a) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interests; (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. \textit{See id.}
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 866–68.
\textsuperscript{25} 438 U.S. at 749. In \textit{Pacifica}, the Court upheld an administrative order that would have penalized a radio station for broadcasting comedian George Carlin's "Filthy Words" monologue during an afternoon time slot because the government had a strong interest in protecting children from hearing the broadcast. See \textit{id.}
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 869.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{See id.} at 855.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{See id.} at 849–52.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{See id.} at 869–72.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Id.} at 844, 849–53.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Reno}, 521 U.S. at 869.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{See id.} at 855.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{See id.} at 849–52.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{See id.} at 869–72.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Id.} at 844, 849–53.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{See Lessig, supra note 6, at 183 ("[A]rchitectures could differ both in the values they embrace and in the regulability of behavior within their space. [Additionally], as the example of broadcasting shows, architectures differ in the justifica-
ternet’s unique architecture persuaded the Court to construct a new legal regime that imposes a new obstacle for government restrictions on speech. By designing an analytical framework from the internet’s architectural blueprint, Reno erected two constitutional hurdles that the government must overcome in order to prove that restrictions on internet speech are justified. The first hurdle is the medium-specific internet analysis, which guarantees the “highest protection from governmental intrusion.” 88 Second, the government faces the Court’s traditional First Amendment analysis, where the level of scrutiny is determined by the category of speech at issue. Just as Reno held that different communications media receive varying degrees of constitutional protection, certain forms of speech are entitled to more constitutional protection from government regulation than others. Obscenity receives no protection; indecency and commercial speech receive limited protection, while political expression is granted the strongest protection. 39

While Reno does not directly alter the basic First Amendment analysis—where the category of speech dictates the level of scrutiny a government regulation receives—it constructs an almost bulletproof constitutional “shield” surrounding internet speech. The Court’s delineation of the internet’s unique architectural features was not merely “fact finding,” but an articulation and illustration of how the new media should be considered the perfect purveyor of core First Amendment values. 40

This is why the sweep of Reno’s protection appears to be so broad. The Court’s analysis is premised on the notion that the internet’s architecture is a model of constitutional values and First Amendment aspirations. Only as a secondary matter does it consider the category of speech at issue. The government’s defense of the CDA was not problematic merely because of the statute’s infringement on “valueless” speech, but some “fully protected speech based on its content, [within] a fully protected medium.” 41 Thus, “the conflict that might require hard trade-offs between a precious constitutional right and a compelling government interest was . . . in fact absent.” 42

These “hard trade-offs” certainly arise in the application of Reno to internet political speech. The right to engage in and exchange political dialogue in the conduct of a political campaign is entitled to the “fullest and most urgent application” of the constitution. 43 The most difficult case, therefore, is one in which political speech—the most highly protected category of speech recognized under the First Amendment—is exchanged within the most highly protected medium. This is precisely the point where Reno meets Austin.

As discussed below, the Reno-Austin conflict is exacerbated by the Court’s underlying rationale in both cases, invalidating speech restrictions in Reno, but upholding restrictions on corporations’ core political speech in Austin. We now turn to a discussion of how Reno’s analysis subverts the rationale used in Austin in the context of a corporation’s use of the internet to engage in political speech.

II. CORPORATE POLITICAL SPEECH IN THE SHADOW OF RENO: AUSTIN UNRAVELED

In its landmark decision Buckley v. Valeo, 44 the Supreme Court upheld the Federal Election Campaign Act’s 45 contribution limits, but invalidated limits on independent and candidate expenditures. 46 Drawing a “line between expenditures and contributions, [the Court] treat[ed] expendi-

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88 Reno, 521 U.S. at 863.
39 See Kenneth L. Karst, Equality as a Central Principle in the First Amendment, 43 U. Chi. L. Rev. 20 (1976); Tribe, supra note 37, at 940 n.80 (noting that the court has “treated differently the several media of expression” and “has at times tolerated differential treatment of entire classes or categories of protected expression such as the political and the commercial” (internal citations omitted)).
40 For a critique of the court’s sweeping analysis, see Timothy Wu, Application-Centered Internet Analysis, 85 VA. L.

Rev. 1163 (1999). Wu argues that the court should refine its analysis in future internet communications cases by focusing discretely on the application. See id.
41 Volokh, supra note 6, at 146.
42 Id. at 148.
45 2 U.S.C. § 431 et. seq.
46 See Buckley, 424 U.S. at 13. The 1974 FECA amendments included an aggregate limit on candidate expenditures, a ceiling of $1000 on independent expenditures (payments made by individuals or organizations on behalf of a clearly identified candidate), and capped expenditures made
ture restrictions as direct restraints on speech," but viewed contributions as a general expression of support for the candidate's views:

A limitation on the amount of money a person may give to a candidate or campaign organization thus involves little direct restraint on his political communication, for it permits the symbolic expression of support evidenced by a contribution but does not in any way infringe the contributor's freedom to discuss candidates and issues.57

In short, while expenditure limits are subject to strict scrutiny, contribution limits require a "less compelling justification,"48 and the only justification for upholding contribution limits in Buckley included preventing corruption or the appearance of corruption of elected officials.49

The analytical distinction between contributions and expenditures arises from the notion that expenditure limits directly suppress not only the quantity of speech, but also the diversity of speakers' viewpoints.50 Because talk is not cheap within the electoral marketplace, the Court noted:

[The expenditure restriction] necessarily reduces the quantity of expression by restricting the number of issues discussed, the depth of their exploration, and the size of the audience reached... [C]ommunicating in today's mass society requires the expenditure of money... The electorate's increasing dependence on television, radio, and other mass media for news and information has made these expensive modes of communication indispensable instruments of effective political speech.51

Importantly, Buckley recognized that in 1976, the only effective modes of mass communication—specifically, broadcast—are expensive means of reaching viewers and listeners within the political marketplace.52 Fourteen years later, the Court took a major step away from the "quid pro quo corruption" ratio-

by candidates from his or her personal funds. See former 18 U.S.C. § 608 et. seq. Buckley invalidated these expenditure limits, leaving only the expenditure limits for publicly funded presidential candidates in tact. See Buckley, 424 U.S. at 13-15; see also 26 U.S.C. § 9035(a).

47 Buckley, 424 U.S. at 19, 20-21.
48 Id. at 22.
49 See Buckley, 424 U.S. at 26-27 ("To the extent that large contributions are given to secure political quid pro quo's from current and potential office holders, the integrity of our system of representative democracy is undermined.").
50 See id. at 19.
51 Id. (emphasis added).
52 See id.
53 Austin, 494 U.S. at 666-67.
55 Michigan's campaign finance statutes allow corporations to establish separate political committees that may solicit contributions from a restricted class of corporate employees. Mich. Comp. Laws § 169.255(1), (2) (1976). In this way, individual employees who wished to speak "through" the corporation could do so by making a contribution to the corporation's political committee, which could in turn make independent expenditures.
56 Austin, 494 U.S. at 658-59 (citing MCFL, 479 U.S. at 257).
57 In MCFL the court invalidated a rule prohibiting non-profit corporations from making political expenditures from treasury funds. See MCFL, 479 U.S. at 255-56. See also Cass Sunstein, DEMOCRACY AND THE PROBLEM OF FREE SPEECH 238 (1995) ("The tax system is filled with special benefits and incentives for various groups.").
direct expenditures in support of or in opposition to ballot measures and explicitly stated that "the inherent worth of the speech in terms of its capacity for informing the public does not depend upon the identity of its source, whether corporation, association, union or individual." The Court has also distinguished ideological, nonprofit corporations (that may receive the benefit of tax exemptions) from business corporations, invalidating rules that prohibit direct treasury independent expenditures by the former and upholding the same restrictions against the latter.

In short, while business corporations may be prohibited from making direct independent expenditures from treasury funds, the state cannot constitutionally place the same restriction on certain types of ideological, nonprofit corporations.

Austin focused on state-sponsored economic benefits that promote and encourage a corporation's aggregation of wealth, in conjunction with the potential for wealth transfers from the economic marketplace to the political marketplace. Some scholars refer to this as the "market structuring theory," whereby the Court views "the use of a corporate treasury to make political expenditures [as] a form of tying—an anticompetitive practice by which a corporation used leverage acquired from expectations of its profitability in the financial markets to gain unearned leverage in the entirely separate market for political influence."

Second, the Court implied that when a corporation wants to engage in independent express advocacy of a candidate, the value of that speech is not as significant as the speech of individuals.

On this highly individualist view, government may be justified in regulating speech intermediaries when they depart from the function of reflecting and transmitting norms ultimately chosen by individuals. If the Michigan Chamber of Commerce takes money for investment purposes and spends it for political purposes, there is no guarantee that each dollar spent will accurately reflect the normative preferences of its donor.

Thus, when the Court engaged in its practice of constitutional balancing, it determined that the individual owners "are the ultimate repositories of speech interests," while corporations are simply speech intermediaries "with limited delegations or representational authority."

It is important to note that the majority did not go so far as Justice Brennan, whose concurring opinion explicitly protected the rights of corporate shareholders or other individual "owners" by preventing the corporation from "stealing" their money to pay for political advocacy. Brennan would have held that a corporation is merely a state-created structure composed of beneficial financial interests held by shareholders who have the right to control (or object to) corporate political advocacy. "[T]he State surely has a compelling interest in preventing a corporation it has chartered from exploiting those who do not wish to contribute to the Chamber's political message."

Third, the Court's holding in Austin did not require evidentiary findings that the Chamber (or its corporate members) did, in fact, amass great wealth that it planned to use to pay for independent expenditures. Nor did it burden the State court's rationale for restrictions on speech intermediaries: the "expressive versus nonexpressive" approach; the "content-based versus content-neutral" view; and the "norm-reflecting versus norm-creating" view. While we do not necessarily adopt her theory, her approach is constructive and relevant to this analysis.

Austin, 494 U.S. at 658 (finding that the Chamber did not re- quire evidentiary findings that the Chamber (or its corporate members) did, in fact, amass great wealth that it planned to use to pay for independent expenditures). Nor did it burden the State
to prove that the expenditure in question—a newspaper advertisement—would or could “distort” the political dialogue in this particular election by drowning out the advocacy of other political players.\textsuperscript{70}

As we discuss in detail below, the \textit{Austin} Court’s refusal to require any supporting evidence will likely be subsumed by the rule in \textit{Reno}, which at a minimum, requires the State to prove that the underlying rationale for restrictions on corporate political speech remains constitutionally sound when applied to the internet.\textsuperscript{71}

III. APPLICATION OF RENO TO AUSTIN

In our discussion of \textit{Reno}, we noted that the Court’s internet communications analysis begins with the recognition that free speech rights are contextual. Regulations permissibly imposed on individuals speaking through old media cannot be applied \textit{ipso facto} to identical speech exchanged within new media.\textsuperscript{72} In the context of print or broadcast, a state may be justified in banning a corporation’s right to make independent expenditures to prevent its voice from flooding the political marketplace, but that rationale is seriously questioned in the context of the internet, where the “volume” or power of political speech does not depend on gross rating points or the readership of a full page newspaper ad in the New York Times.

\textit{Austin}’s greatest weakness is its reliance on the hypothetical effect of corporate wealth, which, when deployed, has the power to overwhelm the electorate.\textsuperscript{73} Without requiring proof, the Court presumed that corporate spending on candidate advocacy could make it a “formidable political presence” with an “unfair advantage” in election contests.\textsuperscript{74} Even in the era of \textit{Austin}, when print and broadcast were practically the only modes of political communication, the factual evidence required to prove a direct correlation between increased expenditures and effective electoral influence “[w]as a question whose answer turns upon formidable empirical problems and troubling conceptual questions about what constitutes real communication.”\textsuperscript{75} Proving that correlation becomes even more difficult in the new media context.

The \textit{Reno} Court acknowledged that the practical realities of the internet would force it to adapt First Amendment doctrine to identical speech made over the internet.\textsuperscript{76} Accordingly, the central question becomes can the \textit{Austin} prohibition on corporate independent expenditures survive \textit{Reno}? Arguably, \textit{Reno}’s recognition of the three architectural features of accessibility, interactivity and parity undermine \textit{Austin}’s basic tenet that corporate investments in candidate advocacy promise overwhelming electoral returns.

A. Access

We begin by assessing how access to the internet undermines the Court’s reasoning in \textit{Austin}. The Court’s identification of this internet feature gives constitutional significance to the medium’s architecture. In the context of corporate political speech over the internet, the significance is readily apparent.

The internet’s unregulated, open access has driven down the cost of political speech through the process of disintermediation, the elimination of speech intermediaries such as broadcast licensees.\textsuperscript{77} In the political marketplace, effective advocacy has historically depended on a speaker’s ability to pay distribution costs, such as paper and postage for targeted persuasive mail or “buying time” for television and radio spots. Communicating through broadcast or mail means “hitting” un-

\textsuperscript{70} See id. at 660.

\textsuperscript{71} The question of evidentiary proof required by the State to justify its interest in limiting contributions and expenditures has long been in question, but was somewhat refined in Shrink PAC. See Shrink PAC, 120 S. Ct. at 906–07 (rejecting the notion that Buckley required “governments enacting contribution limits [to] demonstrate that the recited harms are real, not merely conjectural,” but distinguishing without enunciating the quantum of evidence required to justify expenditure limits). In Shrink PAC, the court accepted newspaper articles as evidence to support the state’s claim.

\textsuperscript{72} See, e.g., Lawrence Lessig, \textit{The Path of Cyberlaw}, 104 \textit{Yale L.J}. 1743, 1753 (1995) (“What any review of the history of First Amendment law should suggest is the contingency of present First Amendment doctrine.”).

\textsuperscript{73} It is important to note that the authors believe an alternative rationale, for example, Justice Brennan’s concurring opinion in \textit{Austin}, could withstand \textit{Reno} because it avoids the majority’s reliance on the effect of wealth spent on behalf of candidates in the political marketplace. See \textit{Austin}, 494 U.S. at 669–78 (Brennan, J., concurring).

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Austin}, 494 U.S. at 659 (quoting Shrink PAC, 479 U.S. at 257–58).

\textsuperscript{75} Tribe, supra note 37, at 1135 n.8.

\textsuperscript{76} See Reno at 866–70.

\textsuperscript{77} See Sullivan, supra note 6.
decided voters over and over again, until the message has saturated the targeted voter universe.

Disintermediation within the new media has broadened the universe of individuals and organizations that can afford to distribute political messages directly to the intended audience. Persuasion mail no longer requires postage; the transmission of audio and visual images does not require the purchase of “time.” Today’s internet enables political speakers to engage voters through interactive, real-time communication strategies like e-mail “action alerts” or “on-line petitions,” which are virtually cost-free.78 “The cost of transmitting 2000 bytes (about a page of uncompressed text), even using today’s relatively primitive internet technology, is about one-sixth of a cent; and local phone calls are already free. As newer, faster delivery methods come online, the cost of transmission should fall even below that of the internet.”79

The dramatic reduction of distribution costs attributable to disintermediation has a direct impact on Austin’s assumptions about the cost of political advocacy and the ability of any single entity to inundate this particular political marketplace of ideas.80 The justification for Austin’s restrictions on corporate independent expenditures was built on the Buckley framework.81 Buckley held that money (in the form of contributions and expenditures) should be viewed as a proxy for political speech; the more money spent, the more speech that may be purchased and distributed, with the “reach” and volume of speech amplified by increased political spending.82 Moreover, because a corporation potentially has the ability to amplify its political voice to a volume that threatens to drown out other speakers, Austin held that the State could justifiably ban corporate treasury expenditures that promote the election or defeat of a particular candidate.83

Austin was correct in so far as it acknowledged that wealthy corporations could obtain an “unfair advantage” through traditional mass media because they can afford to produce and distribute political messages. That conclusion is questioned, however, in the context of new media, where broad access for all speakers has leveled the cost of distributing political speech, thereby reducing the ability of corporations to realize an “unfair advantage.” If access to the internet denies corporations the “unfair advantage” present in the use of other media, the constitutional justification for a ban on speech is directly called into question.

Our focus on decreased distribution costs due to broad access is only the first strike against the Austin rationale. Traditional political advocacy communicated through broadcast or direct mail has only the unilateral ability to “push” voters with a persuasive political message. In contrast, influencing the “virtual” electorate is much more difficult because of an architecture that vests in the user the ability to “pull” political messages by searching and selecting issues and sites of interest. Distinguishing traditional media’s “push” capabilities addresses only one side of political communication in today’s world. Reno gives constitutional significance to another feature of the internet: its “interactivity,” that is, the “pull” function that enables user discrimination and control.

B. “Affirmative Steps” and Interactivity

In the eyes of the Austin Court, the population of the traditional political marketplace is bifurcated. On one side there are political speakers who distribute information, including candidates, political parties, political committees, ideological groups and media organizations. The other is composed of “receivers,” or individual voters who collectively make up the electorate.84 When a corporation engages in political advocacy, it is acting as a distributor of information, targeting and influencing the electorate, a passive recipient of its political views. The specter of a dominating corporate political presence would manifest itself, it was believed, in the form of corporate-sponsored priority listings . . . the impact of the stereotypical little person’s site will likely continue to decrease. Add to this the increase in competition stemming from the great financial incentives of owning a high-traffic site, and the results look troubling for high-impact web-based cheap speech.”

80 See id.; cf. Wu, supra note 40, at 1179–80 (“[T]he idea that speech is cheap and that all speakers are equally heard increasingly depends on what application you are talking about . . . [A]s search engines inevitably begin to charge for
candidate advocacy advertisements continuously repeated before glassy-eyed Americans watching the nightly news and "Must See TV."

*Reno* aptly recognized that a new medium has revolutionized the political marketplace, blurring the line between active political messengers and passive voters. The internet's architecture requires the user to take affirmative steps to access and receive information. A second related characteristic is interactivity, allowing users to participate in "real-time dialogue."

It is easy to see how the concepts of "affirmative steps" and interactivity diffuse *Austin's* rationale. *Austin* conceptualized a corporation's domination of the political marketplace by its ability to transmit a substantial volume of invasive political messages that could communicate directly to the recipient without interference, effectively silencing other speakers' views. But as the *Reno* Court stated, internet communications cannot be characterized generally as intrusive communications like radio or television; thus, the ability of a corporation (or any other single speaker) to overwhelm the electorate is almost impossible. Where internet applications can be intrusive, such as junk and spam e-mail, interactive applications empower the user to block those incoming messages. As for political speech in the shadow of *Reno*, the Court will likely recognize that the internet's interactive applications empower citizens by vesting in the electorate the tools to meaningfully participate in political discourse. The "passive" voter has become an active participant in finding and receiving political and candidate information by downloading polling results from media websites, taking part in opinion surveys hosted by a variety of political and nonprofit ideological organizations, contributing money to political candidates and developing home-spun websites.

C. Parity

In conflict with some of *Austin's* implicit tenets, *Reno* recognized that the internet's open access and user control enhances the relative parity among speakers and listeners. If the internet's architecture can truly achieve relative parity, then in what sense, from the *Austin* perspective is the corporation's electoral marketplace advantage "unfair"?

Parity is an egalitarian construct, cast in constitutional terms as viewpoint or speaker diversity. Professor Eule points out the tension between the values of diversity—the "critical demand that the public be exposed to the widest possible diversity of views"—and equality—the "percept that speech may not be suppressed because of the identity of the speaker," as elucidated in *Buckley.* A steady balance of these two constitutional values does not necessitate exact government allocation of free speech rights to particular speakers; it does not mean "one-person, one-minute" of speech within the political marketplace. Instead, the goal is "equalization of 'relative voices,' 'relative influence,' or the 'relative ability of all citizens to affect the outcome of elections.'"

The *Reno* Court seemed to elevate parity to a constitutional value that strikes a careful equilibrium between diversity and equality. In short, *Reno* recognized that today's new media achieve naturally what the Court and legislatures have artificially attempted through legislation and interpretation. Although websites are hardly equal in terms of production quality, electronic distribution capabilities or the potential to influence visitors, today's internet architecture and its related applications prevent market domination by any
one individual host. Generally, internet users reach other users only if they seek out a particular host or take other "affirmative steps."

As a political marketplace where "relative parity" naturally exists by virtue of its architecture, the new media's balance of viewpoints is upset not by the potential for excessive corporate treasury expenditures for candidate advocacy, but by government rules that absolutely foreclose any person's opportunity to speak or to hear another person's views. Moreover, the evil that the Michigan prohibition proposes to eradicate, "distorting the political process and undermining its integrity," constitutionally requires at least a modicum of evidence. The medium notwithstanding, Cass Sunstein recognizes that "it is doubtful whether restrictions on speech often should be justifiable [on the marketplace domination theory], at least in light of the extreme difficulties posed by [the fact that] no government institution is well-suited to embark on this sort of inquiry." Although its rationale differed from Austin, Bellotti similarly contemplated that "Congress might well be able to demonstrate the existence of a danger of real or apparent corruption in independent expenditures by corporations to influence candidate elections." But the Austin Court required absolutely no evidentiary showing of corporate domination or viewpoint distortion within the political marketplace. In light of Reno's strong presumption that the internet achieves "relative parity among speakers," the Court's "new media" analysis might force the government to shoulder a more significant evidentiary burden.

IV. CONCLUSION

Attempting to apply traditional First Amendment legal standards to internet speech is, as one scholar has stated, like trying to fit the "stepsister's foot into Cinderella's glass slipper." Nowhere is this more evident than in the regulation of political speech.

The internet challenges us to see the First Amendment not as an impediment to government, but as the embodiment of a particular vision of participatory democracy. Central to that vision is the engaged citizen. The current architecture of the internet frees individuals from historic, economic and social restraints on participation. It is that principle the Court appears to be endorsing in Reno. In so doing, the Court leaves little room for a robust reading of Austin.

The architecture of the internet is rapidly changing, so it is with some caution that we argue that corporate political speech over the internet will be fully protected, even in light of Reno. From the merging of the internet with traditional broadcasting, cable and telephone technologies, a new architecture will emerge. This new media will merit the extraordinary constitutional protection promised by Reno, but only to the degree it realizes its democratic promise.

96 See generally Wu, supra note 40.
97 Austin, 424 U.S. at 668.
98 Sunstein, supra note 57, at 239.
100 Reno, 521 U.S. 863 n.30.
101 Selnow, supra note 90, at xxvi.