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Philadelphia Inquirer
[Nearly a million Pa. utility customers are past due on their bills because of COVID-19. Who will pick up the cost?]

Next TV
[Ajit Pai Says He Is Leaving FCC Better Than He Found It]

CNN
[Analysis: TV providers should not escape scrutiny for distributing disinformation]

Poltiico
[GOP prepares for battle with new archvillain]

New York Times
[He Created the Web. Now He's Out to Remake the Digital World.]

Washington Post
[Trump was a center of gravity on Twitter. What's it like without him?]

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[Tech Under Attack After Parler Goes Dark, Twitter Drops]

Pennlive
[Doctor warns House members, including Rep. Scott Perry, could have been exposed to COVID-19 amid riot]

Blue Ridge Communications recently completed its "Spread the Warmth" initiative aimed at providing new winter hats and gloves to children throughout the communities we serve. For every customer who added high-speed internet in November, Blue Ridge donated a new hat and pair of gloves to children in need.

Working in conjunction with the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, one of our many community partners supporting this program, hats and gloves were distributed just in time for the holidays. "As a lifelong resident of Carbon County, I am honored to be able to be part of an organization such as the United Way that has built such strong partnerships in the community which affords me the opportunity to help those in need in our County. We are especially grateful to Blue Ridge, and their generosity, that supported the kids' hat/glove distribution to local nonprofits," said Marsha Macalush, project manager of CarbonCorps, United Way of the Great Lehigh Valley.

"I am very proud of how our organization supports the communities we serve throughout the year, and our "Spread the Warmth" campaign is a great way to end 2020," said Mark Masenheimer, vice president of operations for Blue Ridge. "This is a 'win-win' scenario; our customers get great internet service with us, and by partnering with the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, we delivered new hats and gloves for hundreds of children just in time for winter. Knowing that we helped our communities in this way is pretty special."

As the nation's 18th largest cable company, Blue Ridge Communications is on the cutting edge of home entertainment and information services, providing high-speed Internet, TV and phone services to northeastern and southeastern Pennsylvania. Blue Ridge Communications is also very active in the communities it serves by sponsoring and participating in numerous local events every year and is committed to many charitable organizations. To learn more about Blue Ridge Communications, clearly the better choice in home entertainment and information services, visit www.brctv.com. – ***Lehighton Times News***

Connected TV is the fair-haired child of the TV business. From the "war horses" Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime Video to already-recognized brands such as Disney and Peacock, to new kids like Discovery, Connected TV ("CTV") is lavished with the attention and investment dollars of its corporate parents, investors and consumers weary of the long-lasting constraints and perceived arrogance of the traditional multichannel video - aka "cable" - world.

But even as it disrupts linear TV, the early development of CTV is already beginning to resemble the traditional media marketplace that it seeks to replace. As the great philosopher Mel Brooks once said, in his guise as the 2000-year-old-man, "We mock the things we are to be." Will that be the path for CTV? The signs are there.

The great promise of the streaming world was for content producer/owners to go directly to consumers with their services without relying on cable or satellite gatekeepers. Websites and CTV apps do provide the technological ability for consumers to directly access streaming services on mobile phones and internet-connected TVs. But you still have to have broadband and you can't launch or sustain a CTV service without being carried on all of the major CTV device outlets including Roku, Amazon Fire TV, Apple TV, and smart TVs such as Samsung and LG.

The battle for carriage has been an underlying characteristic of multichannel video for decades. Early on, you couldn't launch a new channel without carriage on TCI, Time Warner Cable or the "Killer Cs": Comcast, Cablevision, Cox Cable and Continental Cablevision. Satellite could compete with cable only because Congress guaranteed them the right to acquire programming owned by cable operators. Rupert Murdoch transformed the cable news landscape by paying huge sums to cable operators if they carried the new Fox

News Channel. We still have knock-down retransmission consent battles between broadcasters and cable and satellite providers.

We already see CTV carriage skirmishes as new, more powerful players enter the market. HBO Max and Peacock, despite (or perhaps because of?) ownership by Warner Media and Comcast are still not carried on all of the most popular CTV devices. The smaller independent CTV services have relatively little problem getting “on” these devices, but what happens when those distribution platforms, looking for CTV growth under the pressure from their own corporate ownership, start squeezing the little guys for equity investments, more ad revenue or direct payments for “distribution cost recovery” or “marketing preferences”? Will we be hearing a cry for “CTV Neutrality”? Sound a little familiar?

Individual CTV services are often portrayed as the antidote to the “cable bundle.” Certainly the multichannel video business helped turn that term into a poisonous one with too many new and increasingly obscure channels that no longer justified increasing monthly rates. But the consolidation already taking place at such an early stage of TV streaming makes one wonder how many true “a la carte” CTV offerings will be big players in this world.

Initially cable channels came from a variety of independent media players such as the Providence Journal Company (Food Network), MCA/Universal, Scripps (HGTV), Discovery, Hearst (A&E, ESPN and Lifetime), and of course Turner Broadcasting (CNN and more). But eventually almost every major cable network came to be owned by one of just a handful of major media companies such as Disney, Fox, Comcast, Viacom and Sony.

You’ll find upwards of 14,000 different CTV services on Roku, but the presence of a handful of major media players is coming to dominate CTV content in much the same way as in multichannel video. Netflix and Amazon are of course digital giants that never existed in the early cable era. They are joined by Disney, Comcast, ViacomCBS and Fox that not only have their own CTV services but have quickly gobbled up formerly independent ad-supported CTV services such as Pluto TV (ViacomCBS), Xumo (Comcast), and Tubi (Fox). The move away from pure a la carte is reinforced in Disney’s own “mini bundle” of Disney+, ESPN+ and Hulu for little more than you’d spend on Hulu alone. The just-launched Discovery+ will contain the content not only of the recently merged Discovery and Scripps companies, but that of A+E Networks (which in turn purchased Lifetime and Vice in recent years).

Even with corporate consolidation you still have to buy a lot of separate CTV services if you have a diverse set of entertainment preferences. Have you ever tried to explain to someone not in the media business why you now need to buy so many different services? Rather than rely on a la carte marketing and consumer choice, how soon will it be before it makes so much more sense to buy an attractively priced bundle of these services through Roku or Amazon Fire TV? Sounds like…hmm…cable?

Generations of Americans probably can’t remember when cable was a dirt-cheap way of getting clear broadcast pictures into your home. But it was expensive to wire the country, and cable kept raising prices to satisfy its capital lenders, investors and ever-needy programming suppliers. Many cable services had no advertising in the early days, either for brand image (commercials on IFC?) or simple cost-benefit analysis (not enough viewers to justify the cost of ad insertion). But ultimately the combination of rising consumer rates and expanding advertising proved an intoxicating business mix.

We’ve got a split today between no-commercials services such as Disney+ and HBO Max and a slew of free, ad-supported services, including those such as Pluto TV now owned by major media companies. Netflix has insisted it isn’t going into advertising and doesn’t need to. But how long will it be before CTV is playing the same game here as cable? The digital world is hardly immune from the familiar quarterly profit and loss pressures.

Digital subscription services such as SiriusXM Satellite Radio and Spotify have already regularly raised reasonably-priced sub fees since launch. Netflix has made its price increases a regular part of the landscape. Peacock launched just last year trumpeting how nothing beats “free” TV but just announced that if you want more than the first two seasons of “The Office*”* you’re going to have to subscribe to Peacock Premium. I would hardly be shocked to see different tiers of service and bundles of subscription services plus “free” programming from each of the major CTV players.

When it comes to more advertising, Netflix eschews this publicly, but has made behind-the-scenes moves that suggest otherwise, and they are still losing money even with 195 million subscribers worldwide. The CTV ad market is estimated to top $5 billion in 2020, but linear TV brings in nearly $70 billion. At some point you have to think investors take a look at potential advertising riches for Netflix and elsewhere and say…well, maybe just a *little* advertising, OK? Didn’t cable TV do that? – ***Forbes***

With Democrats projected to take back the majority in the Senate, tech bills that have languished in the Republican-controlled chamber during Donald Trump's presidency could see renewed momentum. While pandemic relief is likely to take center stage for much of the legislative session, the shift in power could still give Democrats the chance to advance their tech policy agenda. Groups that have long pushed for tech policy reform are hoping to see their efforts bear fruit in the new Congress.

“Democrats have no excuse," Evan Greer, director of nonpartisan digital rights group Fight for the Future, said in a statement on Wednesday. "They need to get to work right away protecting people's basic rights in the digital age. This means quickly confirming a new chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who will restore net neutrality and ensure everyone has affordable Internet access in the midst of a pandemic.” Greer added that protecting Section 230, banning facial recognition and passing strong national privacy laws should be among the actions Democrats take with their newfound control. Here are the key ways Democratic control could impact tech policy in the Senate:

One of the more immediate ways this could happen is by quickly confirming President-elect Joe Biden's nominations to important cabinet positions like Attorney General and the Secretary of Labor, as well as new appointments to the Federal Trade Commission and Federal Communications Commission. The Biden administration will be tasked with handling the federal lawsuits against Facebook and Google filed by the Trump administration. It will also likely continue ongoing research into other tech industry players through work at the Justice Department and FTC.

The Labor Department will face questions about how gig workers should be classified under federal law, which will affect companies like Uber, Lyft, DoorDash and Instacart. And the FCC will be charged with taking a stance on net neutrality and regulating programs that provide broadband access, which has become even more important during remote work and distance learning due to the pandemic.

Net Neutrality – Discussions about broadband access could be among the first tech policy topics to see the light of day in the new Congress given American's increasing reliance on internet services to deal with stay-at-home orders. Those could naturally lead to a renewed focus on net neutrality, an Obama-era reform that sought to prevent internet service providers from favoring some internet traffic over other. That means users and businesses can't pay for a "fast lane" or to slow down another website's traffic. The FCC achieved this under Obama by reclassifying ISPs as common carrier services under Title II of the Communications Act of 1934, which made them subject to greater regulation than under Title I. Trump's FCC Chairman Ajit Pai undid that rule, though ISPs have not really taken advantage of the rollback. Some analysts say the real fear ISPs have with the FCC imposing net neutrality is that the agency could potentially use the same statute to impose price regulation. That concern could actually be avoided by writing a more narrow law that enshrines the concept of net neutrality without reclassification. With Democrats in control and net neutrality serving as a popular Democratic issue, the topic could see more discussion this term.

Antitrust reform – In a deeply divided Senate, an overhaul of antitrust laws is still a tall order. But some more modest proposals could have the chance to advance with Democrats in control. The House Judiciary subcommittee on antitrust is already working on bills to reform antitrust laws after completing their investigation into Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google that found that each holds monopoly power. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., who has served as the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on antitrust, has introduced several bills aiming to reform the more than century-old antitrust laws. The bills range in their boldness, from updating the filing fee for merger proposals to shifting the burden of proof onto companies with majority market share to prove their mergers will not be anticompetitive.

Digital political advertising – Like antitrust reform, regulating digital political ads could be limited to the least controversial proposals. But one bill that could quickly make a significant impact with a small reform is the Honest Ads Act. First introduced by Klobuchar with Sens. Mark Warner, D-Va., and the late John McCain, R-Ariz., it was reintroduced in 2019 with the support of Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. The bill would make digital platforms subject to similar disclosure requirements as traditional forms of media when it comes to digital ads. In an interview last year, Warner told CNBC he'd thought the bill would be "the lowest hanging fruit, the biggest no-brainer just to kind of put points on the board." With majority Democratic control, such reforms may again have the chance to advance to the floor.

Digital privacy – Lawmakers have made significant progress in crafting digital privacy legislation but those bills have remained locked up by disagreements over how those bills should be enforced. Both Democrats and Republicans want strong protections for consumers' digital privacy rights on the national level. But Democrats think states should be able to build on those protections, while Republicans have advocated for the national standard to preempt state law to provide consistency for businesses. Democrats also want consumers to be able to sue companies they believe violated their rights, but Republicans fear that would lead to frivolous lawsuits. Both sides believe the issue is fairly urgent to protect consumers. Without an election immediately on the horizon, there's a chance lawmakers will be more willing to come to an agreement.

Facial recognition and surveillance – Concerns over facial recognition technology came to the forefront this summer in the wake of concerns over whether and how it might be used to observe the protests for police reform. Democrats in both chambers of Congress backed a push for a moratorium on facial recognition technology for use by law enforcement. The technology has a spotty track record and has been shown to disproportionately misidentify people of color. In June, Amazon, IBM and Microsoft all voluntarily said they would abstain from selling the technology to varying degrees. But lasting rules would have to come from Congress.

Section 230 – Talks about reforming Section 230 will undoubtedly continue, but bills claiming to crack down on alleged censorship of conservative viewpoints (which social media platforms have denied) will have a harder time breaking through . Democrats and Republicans largely agree that the decades-old statute protecting tech platforms from being held liable for their users' posts needs to be tweaked. But they still are far apart on possible solutions. Trump tried to get Congress to repeal the law at the end of 2020, but that action seems to have limited support in Congress. – ***CNBC***

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