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So ... what did you do while you were holed up in your home during the recent snowstorm? Apparently, many of you used video on-demand services to catch up on TV shows or watch a flick from the comfort of your living room. Not that you had many other options, with Mother Nature pounding the Lehigh Valley with nearly 32 inches of snow.



Jeff Kelly, engineering director at Service Electric Cable TV & Communications, said a record of more than 20,000 customers in its Lehigh Valley and Wilkes-Barre markets viewed content on demand on Saturday, up from 5,000 the previous Saturday. Similarly, RCN on Saturday saw a 60 percent increase in video on-demand usage in

the Lehigh Valley when compared with average usage, according to Joanne Guerriero, senior regional director of marketing and sales for RCN's Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., markets.

Philadelphia's Comcast Corp., one of the largest pay-TV providers in the country that serves all of Montgomery County and most of Bucks County, said nearly 1.3 million people used its Xfinity On Demand at the same time on Saturday, a record for concurrent views. Overall, Comcast said, on-demand views were up 23 percent from the previous Saturday, driven "in part by significant spikes in Jonas-impacted regions." Among those regions, views in Philadelphia and New Jersey were up 50 percent, while views in

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Pittsburgh and Harrisburg jumped 38 percent, Comcast said. While Netflix said it does not release streaming data, it's a fair bet the streaming media company, which hit 75 million subscribers earlier this month and expects to add another 6 million members in the first quarter, picked up extra views from snowed-in East Coast residents.

At Service Electric, even with the increased use, no noticeable issues arose with the company's on-demand service, Kelly said. Guerriero said no issues were reported at RCN. On Saturday, Kelly said, it took Service Electric customers 800 milliseconds, or 0.8 seconds, to get a program set up and the completion rate — measuring how many stream requests were able to fully play without issue — was 95 percent. Those numbers are only slightly different from the normal 727 milliseconds, or 0.727 seconds, and 97 percent completion rate.

What did people watch Saturday? For Service Electric, the top-watched free on-demand TV shows were the "Mickey Mouse Clubhouse" episode "Happy Birthday, Toodles" on Disney Junior, followed by "General Hospital" on ABC and "Shades of Blue" on NBC. Showtime's new show, "Billions," was the most popular among the pay channels. And, Kelly added, the No. 1 movie was "The Intern," followed by "The Martian."

"We were happy to provide all these services to our customers throughout the storm," said Jack Capparell, general manager of Service Electric. At RCN, the top-three free on-demand TV shows in the Lehigh Valley on Saturday were all from NBC: "Shades of Blue," "Chicago Fire" and "Chicago Med." And the top-three RCN on-demand movie rentals were "The Intern," "The Martian" and "Everest." But the surge in on-demand viewership was short-lived. By Sunday, Guerriero said, RCN's on-demand usage dropped into the average monthly range. And Kelly said about 9,000 Service Electric customers viewed content on demand Sunday, about half of Saturday's peak. After all, there was almost 3 feet of snow to be shoveled. — *Allentown Morning Call*

Federal regulators soon are expected to propose overhauling rules for television set-top boxes, a move aimed at lowering bills for cable viewers and providing more access to Internet-based programming. The proposal by Tom Wheeler, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, likely would involve giving cable and satellite customers more choice in whether to use their service provider's set-top box and cable app, or instead choose competing devices and apps, according to consumer advocates pushing for the change.

That could open more of the market to alternative set-top-box providers, such as TiVo Inc. and Alphabet Inc.'s Google unit. Pay-TV customers now generally rent devices from their service providers, often at prices that consumer advocates regard as inflated. Critics also say those set-top boxes tend to favor content from the cable company that provides them. The service providers are planning to resist the initiative, warning of government overreach. More than 40 telecommunications, media and other groups are expected to announce a coalition as soon as Wednesday to oppose Mr. Wheeler's anticipated plan.

Cable and media companies, which face a potential loss of billions of dollars in rental fees for set-top boxes, are concerned that a plan to open up that market could disrupt their business. At a minimum, they say, it could upend the way the channel positioning they have carefully negotiated, providing certain programmers premium spots in their lineup in exchange for higher payments. They also warn that tech companies could gain unfair access to valuable consumer data—such as which channels they watch and when—and sell their own ads against the programming. Cable companies say they operate under stricter privacy standards.

Given the opposition, Mr. Wheeler's plan faces a tight timetable if it is to be enacted by the end of the year, before an expected change of leadership at the FCC as a new president takes office. For years, consumer advocates have complained that the market for set-top devices has been effectively controlled by the cable companies, despite

congressional efforts to boost competition.

Customers could be overpaying for these devices by \$6 billion to \$14 billion a year, according to the Consumer Federation of America. Critics say that other technologies have plummeted in price while cable-box rental fees have soared. They say the current system, in some cases, has limited customers' access to emerging Internet media, stifling alternative programming.

Some minority-oriented companies have been particularly outspoken. In a recent opinion piece in the Hill newspaper, Black Entertainment Television founder Robert L. Johnson urged the FCC to make changes that would give viewers more access to alternatives. "If you have a good program idea, some financing, and access to the Internet, you can find your audience," wrote Mr. Johnson, chairman of RLJ Entertainment Inc. "But your audience can find you only if they have a modem or a set-top box or software that lets them know you are there and gives them access to your programs unconstrained by the network gatekeeper."

Access now varies considerably, depending on the pay-TV provider, experts say. And some cable companies say they are eager to get out of the set-top-box business. Still, "the fact remains that you're in a walled garden controlled by the cable company," said John Bergmayer, a senior attorney at Public Knowledge, a consumer group.

Those pushing for the change are getting support from some big names in the technology sector. Google, in a recent FCC filing, said the agency "should commence a rule making quickly to unleash competition in the retail navigation-device market." "We see great consumer benefits in choice, including lower cost [and] increasing desirability of cable service," said Matt Zinn, TiVo's senior vice president and general counsel, in an interview Tuesday.

But foes of the FCC plan have drawn support from more than two dozen members of the Congressional Black Caucus, who argue that the overhaul could raise costs and complexity, requiring some customers to acquire another device. Unlike RLJ's Mr. Johnson, they worry that with a more wide-open system, minority programming could be relegated to "the bottom of the pile," as they wrote in December to the FCC.

Pay-TV industry officials said the plan would be more far-reaching than it seemed. "They say it's just a box, [but] it's allowing another company to build an entirely different offering" in addition to the traditional cable service, said Michael Powell, a former FCC chairman and now president of the National Cable & Telecommunications Association. He said that the FCC's approach also might focus too much on devices in an age when apps are increasingly important. The issue could be one of the most significant policy debates of Mr. Wheeler's final year in office. – *Wall Street Journal*

Lehigh Valley Congressman Charlie Dent hasn't been a fan of Donald Trump, but he sees the real-estate mogul as having at least one advantage over fellow presidential candidate and U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. [Speaking with the New York Times](#), Dent described Cruz, a Republican from Texas, as "a rigid ideologue." "Donald Trump is ideologically scattered and malleable. In my view, a more rigid ideology would have a much harder time assembling a winning general election coalition than the less doctrinaire candidate," Dent told the newspaper, which noted he is not supporting Trump and has not yet endorsed anyone in the GOP presidential primary.

His comments come as Trump and Cruz continue to dominate the Republican presidential field with a week to go before the Iowa caucuses. Dent was among those who criticized Trump leading up to his appearance at a December fundraiser for the Pennsylvania Republican Party. The congressman said then that Trump's recent comments about barring Muslims from the U.S. were "damaging" and "must be condemned."

At that time and again in talking with the Times, Dent emphasized his view that

Republicans will need to appeal to an audience beyond their core base of supporters in order to win the presidency. "The Republicans' presidential nominee must build a winning coalition that extends beyond the Republican base," Dent said. "Running a campaign and expanding the coalition is an exercise in addition, not subtraction." – **Allentown Morning Call**

A big step in Pennsylvania's 2016 election is beginning as hundreds of candidates for federal and state offices can start gathering signatures to qualify for the April 26 primary ballot. Tuesday is the first day to circulate the petitions and among those who say they're swinging into action are campaign organizers for GOP presidential candidates Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio. The deadline to submit the petitions is Feb. 16. Pennsylvanians can expect contested primaries for president, as well as among Democrats seeking to challenge Republican U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey and to replace the embattled Attorney General Kathleen Kane, a fellow Democrat. Meanwhile, the state Legislature's hopefuls include former NFL player Jon Ritchie. He's expected to be part of a crowded Republican primary field to succeed retiring Sen. Pat Vance in Cumberland County. – **Associated Press**



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