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It's easier for Chris Hacken to give his high-speed internet customers unfettered access. In fact, he says, the Federal Communication Commission's recent decision to roll back open internet rules has little bearing on his business at all. "It's more work for us to throttle people. It's a lot easier for us to just open up everything," said the founder of NEPA Fiber, a small Wilkes-Barre-based broadband provider. As head of a young company, he's mostly concerned with growing his client base. "We're not going to change anything that we've done. Going forward it doesn't really affect us," he said.

The FCC's December vote reversed the 2015 Obama era order establishing guidelines for an open internet, or net neutrality rules. As part of the decision, the FCC reclassified the internet as an "information service" under communications law instead of a Title II utility with the same restrictions as, for example, telephone and electricity utilities. Net neutrality advocates say the absence of rules creates a Wild West environment among powerful ISPs who sell a service that's become essential to daily life.

But increasingly, the lines are blurred between companies that create content and those that deliver it. Neutrality advocates say ISPs have a great incentive to prioritize content made by their affiliates. One example: Comcast, which acquired television network NBC in 2009, could deliver the network's online

Pennsylvania's most gerrymandered Land of Make Believe

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Editorial: No role model – Rep. Patrick Meehan betrayed a boss' responsibility

content faster to customers and throttle competitors. Net neutrality opponents say heavy restrictions limit innovation and investment.

Like Hacken at NEPA Fiber, even the largest internet service providers, or ISPs, say customers won't see their service affected because of the rule change. Comcast will not "block, throttle, or discriminate against lawful content on the Internet; we will be fully transparent with respect to our practices; and we have not entered into any paid prioritization arrangements, and we have no plans to do so," David Cohen, senior executive vice president at Comcast, wrote in a blog post the day the FCC rescinded the rules.

On Jan. 16, as the rollback went into effect, 22 attorneys general from around the country, including Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, sued the FCC to block it. The FCC's action undermines free speech and is bad for consumers and business — especially startups and small businesses," he said in a statement. The idea that service providers would divide up the internet, similar to what cable companies do with TV channel packages, seems preposterous to Hacken.

The notion made its rounds on social media websites, but limited plans that deliver only, for example, social media, shopping or news websites would never fly with consumers, he said. "I don't think that's very likely at all to happen. There would be ridiculous outrage," he said. Like Cohen, major ISPs came out strong in their commitment to maintain a free-flowing information highway, despite the absence of guide rails. "Let us be clear: The internet was free and open before the FCC imposed more onerous, one-size-fits-all rules in 2015, and it will be free and open when we return to a lighter-touch regulatory framework," said Chuck Hogg, chairman of the Wireless Internet Service Provider Association, in a statement following the FCC's Dec. 14 vote.

He pledged that the organization's members do not accept payments to prioritize content, nor do they block or throttle internet traffic. "That's great that that's what they're saying now, but they're not bound to that," said Frank Suraci, co-founder of Bedrock Technology in Jessup, an information technology and business solutions company. He went on to say the executives making promises today won't be in power forever. "What happens when the people in those seats change?" he said. "I think you're just putting a lot of trust in people that are, at the end of the day, trying to make a profit." – ***Wilkes-Barre Citizens' Voice***

Generally speaking, technology gets a lot cheaper as it ages. Apple Inc. is counting on precisely the opposite.

The iPhone X, which made its debut in November, essentially ushers in the second decade of the touch-screen smartphone revolution that Apple kicked off with its original iPhone in 2007. Despite the fanfare christening the device as "the future of smartphones," the iPhone X differs little in basic function from its recent predecessors. But an expanded display and other bells and whistles encouraged Apple to give the device a premium price tag. The iPhone X starts at $1,000—making it the most expensive base model smartphone ever in the U.S.

For Apple, that represents a gamble that customers won't bolt for cheaper-but-still-premium Android options. In developed markets like the U.S., the company's market share has stayed largely consistent. Switching is easier than ever in an age of cloud storage and streaming apps, but most smartphone customers by now have picked their platform and seem to stay on it.

That doesn't mean the so-called supercycle many investors are expecting this year will be a sure thing. Several analysts have cited data from Apple's supply chain pointing to a mixed picture for the new iPhones. Toni Sacconaghi of Bernstein said his analysis suggests total iPhone unit sales for the March quarter could come in at a range of 51 million to 57 million units—well below the 61 million units Wall Street is currently targeting.

Apple's fiscal second quarter ending in March is particularly important this time around because the company needs iPhone sales to remain strong in order to hit Wall Street's current prediction of overall revenue growing 19% this fiscal year compared with 6% last year. That means Apple's forecast for the March quarter will likely overshadow results for the December period that the company will report on Thursday. Analysts currently expect March-quarter revenue to surge 28% year over year to nearly $68 billion—a high mark to hit. And Apple's stock price, which is up 40% over the last 12 months and near a record 15 times forward earnings, is likely to take a tumble if the company's outlook disappoints.

Much depends on Apple finding enough customers willing to pay up. And higher prices can help the company meet revenue growth targets even if unit sales are weaker. Analysts currently expect the average selling price for the iPhone segment to hit $757 for both the December and March quarters—

more than $100 above the average for the last four periods. A thousand bucks will seem ludicrous to many smartphone buyers, and Apple had better hope it has enough devoted fans to help the iPhone X make the connection. – ***Wall Street Journal***

Comcast this week stated that the company's Xfinity wireless phone service added 187,000 subscribers during the fourth quarter, ending 2017 with more than 380,000 users in total. Comcast Cable CEO Dave Watson said the company is "really pleased" with the early results from the service, which launched last May. Bundle customers can sign up for Xfinity Mobile for $45 per line for "unlimited" (users get throttled to 1.5 Mbps after 20 GB) data, text and voice, though the service is $65 per month if users only subscribe to Comcast broadband service.

Comcast also provides an option where users can pay $12 per GB of cellular data across all lines on an account. The company also recently added a BYOD (bring your own device) option, though it's limited to very specific phone models. At launch, analysts criticized Comcast for not trying very hard with the service, using predominately as an opportunity to upsell existing customers more service, as opposed to directly challenging incumbent wireless providers. And while 380,000 users is nothing to sneeze at, it's almost irrelevant in context of wireless competitors AT&T, Verizon, Sprint and T-Mobile.

But Comcast executives said they remain happy with the early modest progress from the effort (as if they'd publicly say anything else), even though analysts remain somewhat skeptical that the service will gain serious traction. "We're really pleased with the early stage results" Watson said on an earnings call with analysts and the media. "We like our game plan. We like the fact that it's connected to our existing business lines. It's a really simple approach that can scale." – ***DSL Reports***

The head of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission on Monday said he would oppose a federal government move to build and run a national, super-fast 5G wireless network, calling any such effort "costly and counterproductive." "Any federal effort to construct a nationalized 5G network would be a costly and counterproductive distraction from the policies we need to help the United States win the 5G future," FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said in a statement. – ***Reuters***