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Republican lawmakers moved Thursday to dismantle [landmark internet privacy protections](#) for consumers in the first decisive strike against telecommunications and technology regulations created during the Obama administration and a harbinger of further deregulation.

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In a 50-48 vote largely along party lines, the Senate Republican majority voted Thursday to overturn the privacy rules, which had been created in October by the Federal Communications Commission. The House is expected to mirror the Senate's action next week, followed by a signature from President Donald Trump.

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The move means Verizon, Comcast or AT&T can continue tracking and sharing people's browsing and app activity without permission. The Senate's vote alarmed consumer advocates and Democratic lawmakers, who warned that broadband providers have the widest view into the online habits of Americans. Without the rules, they said, such companies would have more power to collect data on people and sell sensitive information. "These were the strongest online privacy rules to date, and this vote is a huge step backwards in consumer protection writ large," said Dallas Harris, a policy fellow for the consumer group Public Knowledge. "The rules asked that when things were sensitive, an internet service provider asked permission first before collecting. That's not a lot to ask."

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The brisk and determined action of Congressional Republicans, just two months into Trump's administration, foreshadowed a broader rollback of tech and telecom policies that have [drawn the ire of conservative lawmakers and companies](#) such as AT&T, Verizon and Charter. Republican lawmakers and [the new chairman of the FCC, Ajit Pai](#), have said the privacy rules were onerous and unfairly strapped regulations on telecom carriers, but not on web companies such as Facebook and Google that also provide access to online content. "It is unnecessary, confusing and adds another innovation-stifling regulation," Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said this month when he introduced the resolution to overturn the rules using the Congressional Review Act procedure that lets Congress overrule new agency regulations.

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[Washington Post The CIA may have hacked iPhones and Macs before they even got to customers, but probably not yours](#)

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The Senate's vote was a victory for giant telecommunications and cable companies. The FCC chairman under the Obama administration, Tom Wheeler, had declared that broadband would be regulated more heavily, by categorizing the service in the same regulatory bucket as telephone services, which are viewed as utilities. That move acknowledged the importance of the internet for communications, education, work and commerce and the need to protect online users, Wheeler had said.

Under the internet privacy rules that Wheeler passed, apart from broadband providers having to ask permission to track browsing and other online activities of a user, the companies were also required to use **"reasonable measures" to secure consumer data against hackers.** The privacy rules were set to go into effect at the end of this year.

Broadband providers had balked and ramped up lobbying against the rules. Comcast and other broadband providers created the lobbying group 21st Century Privacy Coalition, led by a former Federal Trade Commission chairman, Jon Leibowitz, to defeat the broadband privacy rules. "We appreciate today's Senate action to repeal unwarranted FCC rules that deny consumers consistent privacy

protection online and violate competitive neutrality," the cable industry lobby group, NCTA-The Internet & Television Association, said in a statement Thursday.

With Republicans in charge across the government, AT&T and Comcast are also poised to benefit from further deregulation. Since the presidential election, the companies have pushed the new Republican-led FCC, lawmakers and the White House to **roll back net neutrality,** the requirement that broadband providers give equal access to all content on the internet, saying the rules hamper their ability to invest in new networks and jobs.

The FCC chairman, Pai, has also talked with Republican allies in Congress about privacy and broadband classification. Pai has chipped away at more than a dozen regulations, including aspects of net neutrality and the program, known as Lifeline, that provides subsidies for broadband users in low-income households. Consumer groups warned that internet users would suffer from the changes. The Federal Trade Commission, the consumer protection agency, is barred from overseeing broadband providers, so without the FCC privacy rules, the federal government will be a weaker watchdog over internet privacy, supporters of the regulations said. "Senate Republicans just made it easier for Americans' sensitive information about their health, finances and families to be used, shared and sold to the highest bidder without their permission," said Sen. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass.

Democrats had taken to the Senate floor Wednesday and Thursday to warn that without the rules, broadband providers will have free range to peer into their customers' lives. A company like AT&T or Sprint can tell the time people wake up by when they check the clock on their phone, or see where users

go to lunch or whom they visit. By tracking a user's browsing of medical websites, a carrier can also determine if that person might have an illness.

The Senate's action also signaled a philosophical shift on tech regulation. Lawmakers and Pai have said regulations should be created only when there is proof of harmful activity. They also argue that the telecom industry competes with internet firms such as Facebook and Google for access to online content, so any rules should also include those companies. Republicans have said the FTC should be the watchdog for all online privacy.

But Democratic regulators have said the key difference is that consumers do not have many choices for broadband access, which makes them vulnerable to data collection by internet service providers. "Subscribers have little or no competitive choice as to which provider to use," said Terrell McSweeney, a Democratic commissioner of the FTC. Yet broadband providers "know our identities, and their position gives them the technical capacity to surveil users in ways that others cannot." – ***New York Times***

Google's commitment to better police the millions of websites and videos across its advertising networks is complicated by the very scale and diversity that has made the network so attractive to marketers.

Google has built a massive advertising business in part by automatically placing brands' ads on an unparalleled group of third-party websites and YouTube videos to target specific audiences. Yet some of those ads have appeared on videos supporting terrorism, prompting brands such as AT&T Inc. and Johnson & Johnson to cancel some of their advertising on Google or its YouTube video platform.

Google says it will increase its use of technology—in addition to thousands of reviewers—to screen content, part of changes it announced this week to strengthen its policies and enforcement to pull ads from controversial sites and videos. But its software can be a blunt instrument. Technology it has used in the past has allowed ads on many controversial videos, removed them from innocuous ones, and mistakenly censored other videos—errors that could multiply as Google more aggressively polices content.

Google, a unit of Alphabet Inc., apologized Monday after the software improperly blocked some popular videos, such as a music video by pop stars Tegan and Sara, from a restricted version of YouTube designed for schools. "Our system sometimes make mistakes in understanding context and nuances when it assesses which videos to" restrict, the company said in a post about the incident.

The incident sparked an outcry among YouTube video creators who speculated Google was blocking gay and lesbian content in the restricted version of the site. Google responded that gay and lesbian content is available in the restricted version, "but videos that discuss more sensitive issues may not be." Google added in a statement that while no system for catching inappropriate content "will be 100% perfect," measures it announced this week "will further safeguard our advertisers' brands and we are committed to being vigilant and continuing to improve over time."

Google and Facebook Inc. have been reluctant policemen of the internet, preferring to portray themselves as neutral platforms for connecting users and advertisers to content created by others. But as users spend more time and advertisers spend more money on their platforms, pressure is mounting on the tech giants to confront their gatekeeping role and decide what kind of content is permissible.

Google is mostly facing pressure to remove ads from objectionable websites and videos, which can cut off their funding, but it also examines whether controversial videos can remain on its YouTube site at all. "The problem is thorny because not only is there such a long tail [of sites and videos], but there's so much subjectivity to what is or is not appropriate," said Adam Kleinberg, head of San Francisco ad agency Traction Corp.

For years, advertisers have increased spending with Google, which helped pioneer the automated ad-buying system, called programmatic advertising, that gives marketers the reach and accuracy to target specific audiences on far corners of the internet. But ad and tech executives say the nature of that system make it hard to police. "The advantage is you have access to a million publishers and a billion articles. The disadvantage is you have access to a million publishers and a billion articles," said David Rodnitzky, chief executive of ad agency 3Q Digital. "It is very challenging to truly control where an ad shows up."

Google sells ad space on more than 2 million third-party websites and millions more YouTube videos. Each day, that inventory grows by thousands of websites and nearly 600,000 hours of videos. Google software automatically scans YouTube videos' titles, descriptions, images and dozens of other signals for signs that it shouldn't include ads, such as nudity or references to terrorist attacks. In many cases, the software can block advertising without human review.

Even enforcing its existing policies can prove challenging for Google. The company has placed ads on many sites peddling fabricated news stories, including a promotion for one of its own products—the new Pixel smartphone—next to a story that falsely claimed Yoko Ono had an affair with Hillary Clinton . As Google ramps up its policing of sites and videos, it could end up upsetting website owners and video creators—the people it relies on to produce the wide variety of content against which it can sell ads. For instance, Google’s plan to expand its ad ban on any content that advocates harm to certain groups of people—based on a specific characteristic, such as their religion, gender or race—is likely to force Google to confront fringe sites and videos.

Separately, the new policy could also ensnare some high-profile voices. Google removed ads from several videos by YouTube’s top star, Felix Kjellberg, who goes by PewDiePie, that included anti-Semitic jokes or Nazi imagery. Mr. Kjellberg said reports on those videos by The Wall Street Journal and others took his humor out of context.

But Google also faces criticism for being too strict. It recently pulled advertising for a YouTube channel called “Real Women, Real Stories” that features black-and-white videos of women telling their stories of sexual harassment and abuse. The channel’s creator, Matan Uziel, said the decision cut off the project’s funding.

Mr. Uziel said his appeals of Google’s decision were denied. Google officials told him that it doesn’t place ads on videos that discuss sexual abuse and rape, according to emails reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. After Mr. Uziel flagged similar videos that still had ads, the officials said its software system to screen such content isn’t perfect.

Google officials then provided tips on tricking the system. “One recommendation is to soften the title descriptions of your videos going forward since some of the wording could be an automatic trigger for our system which is primarily text driven,” an official said in one email, which was seen by the Journal. “We also recommend that you use caution when describing assault situations in your videos.” In response to a question about its interaction with Mr. Uziel, Google said that it aims to keep educational videos on YouTube, but “we do have strict advertising guidelines that prohibit ads against sensitive subjects, including abuse.” – *Wall Street Journal*

