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Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler has a message for cable chiefs: Just because regulators leaned against the Comcast Corp. - Time Warner Cable Inc. merger doesn't mean all future cable deals are doomed.

In recent days, Mr. Wheeler individually called Time Warner Cable Chief Executive Rob Marcus and Charter Communications Inc. CEO Tom Rutledge, as well as other cable executives, to convey that they shouldn't assume the agency is against any and all future cable deals just because the FCC's staff wasn't convinced the Comcast deal was in the public interest, according to people familiar with the calls. In the conversations, Mr. Wheeler didn't raise any particular potential deal, and neither did the cable CEOs. Mr. Wheeler told them that any deal would be assessed on its own merits, the people said.



With rumors of potential tie-ups and deal talks swirling through the cable industry since Comcast abandoned its \$45 billion takeover of Time Warner Cable in April, executives and investors have been wondering how much consolidation the government will actually allow. Mr. Wheeler's calls were intended to clear the air in response to recent public statements from cable executives, including from Time Warner Cable's Mr. Marcus who recently expressed uncertainty about the regulatory climate for future cable deals. At last week's MoffettNathanson investor conference, Mr. Marcus said he didn't know whether other deals could get

done "because I don't understand the rationale that informed the decision with respect to Time Warner Cable-Comcast. It's hard to make a calculus as to where the line ought to be drawn."

Mr. Wheeler saw some of the industry executives' statements as a significant over-reading of the FCC staff's stance on the Comcast-Time Warner Cable deal, one person familiar with the matter said. But in the calls, Mr. Wheeler did signal that he would like to see more competition among cable companies, which historically haven't competed with each other in the same geographic areas. Mr. Wheeler indicated that it would help competition if cable companies step outside of their exclusive territories and "overbuild" into each other's service areas and directly

compete for customers. Time Warner Cable, in particular, has been the subject of much deal speculation of late.

Since the Comcast merger fell apart, Charter has been in talks with Time Warner Cable about a deal, people familiar with the matter have said. And this week, a new player entered the U.S. cable consolidation game: European telecommunications group Altice SA. Altice bought a controlling stake in U.S. cable operator Suddenlink Communications and is in talks with Time Warner Cable, other people familiar with the matter said. None of this is even to mention the smaller, closely held Bright House Networks, which has held talks with Charter and Time Warner Cable. Plus, Cablevision has hinted that it may be interested in a combination with another New York cable company. — *Wall Street Journal*

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Don't misuse your customers' personal information.

That's the warning federal regulators are sending to Internet providers such as Comcast and Verizon, in a reminder that they and other broadband companies are now bound by some of the strictest privacy regulations on the books. The notice stems from the Federal Communications Commission's new net neutrality policy. Drawing from the same law that regulates legacy phone service, net neutrality prohibits the sharing of your subscriber records with third parties unless you give explicit permission to your carrier.

At a time when customer data has become *the* way many Internet businesses make a living, these rules represent a significant check on Internet providers — many of which also dream of selling content online. "The Commission has found that absent privacy protections, a broadband provider's use of personal and proprietary information could be at odds with its customers' interests," said the FCC in its advisory Wednesday.

Although the FCC hasn't revealed many specifics on how the privacy rule will be enforced on Internet providers, it's encouraging them to come forward with any questions they might have — a move that will be viewed as a sign of good faith, according to the agency. One question that immediately jumps to mind is this: How will the FCC view a program such as AT&T's GigaPower Internet Preferences? The service offers you a discount on the company's fastest Internet plans so that AT&T can monitor your browsing activity and, in turn, serve you targeted advertising.

If you're signing up for Internet Preferences, you're opting-in to this tracking. Perhaps in doing so, you've given AT&T your permission to share your customer data. But many consumers may unknowingly sign up for Internet Preferences simply because it reflects, as AT&T puts it, the "best pricing." In which case, can you really say permission was granted? It's enforcement questions like these that will ultimately determine how strong the government's net neutrality rules really are. — *Washington Post*

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A young security researcher says he's uncovered a vulnerability in a Charter Communications customer service site that could expose sensitive customer information. Speaking to *Fast Company*, Eric Taylor, 18, said a simple header modification performed with a browser plug-in could reveal details about Charter broadband customers.

Taylor said he discovered a similar vulnerability in Verizon's online customer service system, which allowed outsiders to access phone numbers and device names. However, the Charter vulnerability exposed "way, way, way more," he added. "In theory, anyone with minor programming skills could code an automated program that scans every Charter IP and returns the customers billing info," Taylor said.

Responding to *Fast Company's* story, a Charter rep said "the vast majority" of the company's millions of broadband customers across 26 states were not impacted. In fact, the rep pegged the number of potentially affected customers at less than 1 million. The MSO is currently auditing its systems, the rep added, and has found no evidence of any hacks. The exposed data did not include credit card numbers,

but does include payment details, modem serial numbers, device names, account numbers and home addresses, *Fast Company* said. – **Fierce Cable**



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