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Comcast Corp. this week expanded its efforts to make it easier for people with disabilities to watch its television programming. It launched new technology that allows people with physical disabilities that impede hand control and voice, such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), to control their television with eye movement.

The company is linking its web-based remote with consumers' own eye gaze or sip-and-puff assistive technology. Customers will be able to change the channel, and record and search for shows with their eyes. There's also the potential to use it for Comcast products that can control home temperature, lighting, and security.

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**Philadelphia Daily News**

[Tis the season I \(sorta\) feel sorry for many Philly lawmakers](#)

Eye gaze control is free, but customers must have their own equipment. Typically insurers provide that technology only to people who are not able to use their hands or voices. It can cost up to \$15,000, although it is possible to create a system for \$5,000 to \$6,000, said Alisa Brownlee, a clinical manager with the ALS Association Greater Philadelphia Chapter. When she has asked people with ALS what is most important to them, television tops the list. Many are stuck in front of televisions all day, and it can be frustrating to be unable to change the channel. "We have a number of people in nursing homes that desperately want to use a remote," she said.

Comcast's new program, she said, "is a small thing, but it opens up so much independence for people." Gina Cooke, an occupational therapist at Magee Rehab who works with assistive devices, said only a few of her patients would use the new interface because they can use their voices. Paralyzed patients are often frustrated that they can't use Comcast's voice-activated remote because you have to be able to press a button on the remote and talk at the same time. She said the new program might be helpful for people who need to use breathing machines that make it impossible to talk.

Eve Hyppolite, a showcase delivery engineer, demonstrated eye-gaze control last week at a Comcast office in Center City. A small bar beneath her computer had been calibrated to her eye movements, on which she focused for a few seconds on a mouse icon, then switched to the button she want to activate. The system can do anything most people can do with their hands, like choosing a list of action movies or the channels they watch most often.

She made it look easy. A reporter found it easy to focus on the mouse, but not so easy to move to other buttons. Still, the new system is for people who are skilled users of eye-gaze technology. Hyppolite said it took her about an hour to feel comfortable with the technology. Brownlee said ALS patients typically understand the systems within two to five visits with a trainer. Tom Wlodkowski, vice president of accessibility at Comcast, said the potential market for the eye-gaze remote is likely small. The ALS Association estimates that about 16,000 Americans have the progressive disease at any given time. "We're not doing this for a market," he said. "We're doing this because we're committed to customer service."

Wlodkowski, who is blind, is charged overall with expanding service to millions of people with disabilities. Comcast announced the new technology Monday, but a handful of people have been testing it since January. One early user is Jimmy Curran, 30, a Center City resident with [spinal muscular atrophy](#) who is the focus of a video Comcast made about the new product.

A market research analyst for Independence Blue Cross, Curran can type on a computer and talk, although his imperfect enunciation would likely confuse voice-activated devices. He can use a phone, but said he can't keep both a phone and a remote in his lap. When a caregiver leaves, he is often stuck with a TV channel he'd rather not watch. He said Comcast supplied him with eye-gaze technology and he learned it easily. (Comcast did not say how much it paid for Curran's system.) Curran said the technology was easy to learn, and he's enjoying his new power over the TV. "I think it's great," he said. Customers can link to Xfinity X1 eye control at [xfin.tv/access](#).

Comcast has yet to solve a problem that vexes many families: [How to make it easier for older people to use remotes](#). The company ships about 800 large-button remotes made by a third party each month. It has been

developing its own simpler, large-button remote, Wlodkowski said. The company thought it had one last year, but decided it wasn't good enough. Maybe next year, he said. — *Philadelphia Inquirer*

At 13, kids are still more than a decade from having a fully developed prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain involved in decision-making and impulse control. And yet parents and educators unleash them on the internet at that age—if not before—because they're told children in the U.S. must be at least 13 to download certain apps, create email accounts and sign up for social media.

Parents might think of the age-13 requirement as a PG-13 movie rating: Kids might encounter a bit more violence and foul language but nothing that will scar them for life. But this isn't an age restriction based on content. Tech companies are just abiding by a 1998 law called the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which was intended to protect the privacy of children ages 12 or under. It's meant to keep companies from collecting and disseminating children's personal information. But it has inadvertently caused 13 to become imprinted on many parents' psyches as an acceptable age of internet adulthood.

Researchers at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society interviewed families around the country over five years and found that they believed that websites' age requirement was a safety warning. "Across the board, parents and youth misinterpret the age requirements that emerged from the implementation of COPPA," the researchers wrote. "Except for the most educated and technologically savvy, they are completely unaware that these restrictions have anything to do with privacy."

So how did COPPA come about? In the mid-1990s, when Massachusetts Democrat Edward Markey was serving in the House of Representatives, he helped craft the Telecommunications Act of 1996. As part of it, he wanted to include a privacy bill of rights, something to protect consumers' personal information. When opponents shot that down, then-Rep. Markey focused on data privacy for children. "I was very disappointed when the privacy provision was removed," Mr. Markey, now a U.S. senator, told me. "What I was looking for subsequently was an opportunity to at least put a privacy bill of rights on the books for children. That became my goal."

In 1998, after surveying more than 200 child-oriented websites, the Federal Trade Commission reported that very few posted privacy policies or required parental consent before collecting or disclosing children's personal information. The FTC recommended that Congress enact legislation requiring children's websites to obtain parental consent before collecting, using or disclosing a child's personal information. For this, Congress had to define "child." In his initial bill, then-Rep. Markey said a child was someone under 16. But there was pushback from e-commerce companies about cutting off their access to this lucrative market. Those companies found an unlikely ally in civil liberties groups.

The fear: Requiring teens to obtain parental permission might curtail their ability to access information about birth control and abortion, or resources for getting help in abusive situations, according to Kathryn Montgomery, who ran the Center for Media Education, the group that had nudged the FTC to investigate kids' sites in the first place. "I agreed that those were concerns," she said. "It was one of those rare situations where the interests of industry and the concerns of civil liberties groups aligned," said Dr.

Montgomery, professor emeritus at American University and senior strategist at the Center for Digital Democracy.

“Under 12” had been widely used as a rule of thumb since the 1970s, when regulators in the U.S. and other countries crafted laws about marketing to children, said Lee Peeler, a former associate FTC director who helped craft COPPA. This was supported by research that showed kids ages 8 to 12 could distinguish advertising from other content, he said. The widespread bipartisan support for a children’s privacy bill outweighed the age debate, said Mr. Peeler, now executive vice president for policy and development at the BBB National Programs Inc.

COPPA passed by a wide margin in 1998 and went into effect in April 2000—four years before Facebook and seven years before the iPhone. To this day, rather than go through the laborious process of seeking parental consent, most websites, apps and social media platforms simply state that users must be at least 13. Companies that collect or disclose data from kids can face civil penalties of more than \$42,000 per violation, but they’re liable only if they have actual knowledge that the person is younger than 13, the FTC says. If a 13-year-old—or a younger child who lies about his age—uses general-audience apps and websites, his data can legally be collected and shared. “It was too young and I knew it was too young then,” Sen. Markey said. “It was the best I could do.”

Because 13 has become the internet’s age of adulthood, experts believe there’s a generation of kids growing up too fast. “When we talk about teens in the early stages of adolescence, we’re talking about a brain that’s under construction,” said David Anderson, a child psychologist and senior director at the Child Mind Institute. “It’s not so much about how they’ll behave online, but whether they are ready for what they’re going to encounter. Social media opens up a very adult world.”

To go on a field trip, a 13-year-old still needs a parent’s signature, but once kids turn 13, they’re eligible to create Facebook, Instagram and other social media accounts without any parental oversight. They can also create and manage their own Google account, although the company recently gave parents the ability to supervise their teenagers’ accounts – with their teens’ permission.

Facebook says that for minor accounts it provides stricter default settings and warning screens for certain content and restricts features such as dating. Facebook also doesn’t allow advertisers of products and services such as supplements, gambling and cigarettes to be advertised to people under 18, a spokeswoman said. And age limits often tend to bend. If the law says 21 to drink, parents might let their 19-year-old have a beer. If you have to be 13 to join Snapchat, some parents might feel OK about letting their 11-year-old sign on. “It’s led to millions of kids lying about their age online,” said Jim Steyer, founder and chief executive of Common Sense Media, who says COPPA is “hopelessly outdated.”

Mr. Steyer was involved in getting COPPA updated in 2013, to widen the scope of protected data beyond just names, addresses and phone numbers. It now extends those protections to photos, videos, precise geolocation information and activity-tracking web cookies. He pushed unsuccessfully to raise the age limit. “Today it’s so much clearer that we need to raise the age to under 16,” said Sen. Markey, who along with Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, introduced a bill in March dubbed “COPPA 2.0” to extend the law’s privacy protections to 13-, 14- and 15-year-olds.

Even if the COPPA age is raised, many parents would say the genie already escaped the bottle. And other problems could arise. "Can you imagine getting a 14-year-old to come off social media until a parent provides verifiable permission?" says Stephen Balkam, founder and CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute. Plus, verifying a minor's age would require even more data collection. "And then what happens to all of that data?"

We're left in a world where kids who are too young to drive or vote can say and do things online that could haunt them forever. What's the solution? Parents can educate children about the consequences of posting before thinking. But first, they can limit kids' access to social media until they're socially and emotionally ready. Parents can hold out from giving their children phones as long as possible, said Mr. Steyer. And monitor them once they do. "Delay, delay, delay," he said. – **Wall Street Journal**

