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Internet providers know a lot about what their customers do on the web, including the news sites they read, health ailments they research and entertainment services they use. They often know where those customers shop and manage their finances, too. Now, they are deciding whether to use that information to sell ads. Some industry titans are being more aggressive than others, even as regulators are pressuring Silicon Valley companies and broadband providers to explain how they use customer data. AT&T Inc. mines customers' web-surfing habits as part of a broader advertising operation that taps into viewing data from television set-top boxes and location data from mobile phones, according to its privacy policy. Google Fiber gathers broadband-usage data on its customers.

Comcast Corp. and Charter Communications Inc. say they have so far shied away from the practice, out of fear of alienating customers. Verizon Communications Inc. doesn't use Fios internet-usage or cable-viewing data for targeted advertising, a spokeswoman said. Cable operator Altice USA Inc. says it has also stopped short of doing so, but retains flexibility to pursue the strategy if it chooses to later.

Cable and telecommunications companies are leaning on their broadband businesses for growth as cable-TV cord-cutting squeezes them financially. Similar to Facebook Inc. and Alphabet Inc.'s Google, broadband providers have reams of data on consumers' internet use and likes. Yet broadband providers have been slower to harness that data to better target ads on TV, the web and mobile devices.

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The Federal Trade Commission in March asked internet-service providers to detail which types of personal information they collect about customers and their devices, how they use it and what consent they obtain from consumers. The inquiry is continuing, according to the FTC. Congress made it easier for broadband providers to exploit web-browsing data commercially in 2017 when it [overturned an Obama-era regulation](#) that would have required telecom companies to obtain customers' permission to market their app and web-browsing history to third parties. Some states, including Maine, are now crafting their own rules limiting how broadband-customer data can be used.

Broadband providers can track how long people streamed music on Spotify, played Fortnite or accessed Instagram. In some cases, web traffic associated with those activities throws off hints about the type of device a consumer likely used, such as an Xbox or Alexa speaker. "You can escape Facebook if you really worked at it. You can't escape your ISP," said Ernesto Falcon, legislative counsel at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "In a real, concrete way, it's more powerful than what Google or Facebook can do."

Internet providers could learn that someone in a household is using online dating services, or deduce that a person is engaged by the number of visits to wedding-planning websites. By combining web activity with voter-registration data, a provider could theoretically identify households with a 25-year-old on the cusp of needing health insurance, and show those households ads for coverage, say ad executives and privacy advocates. In general, marketers are willing to pay a premium for such hypertargeted ads. David Choffnes, a Northeastern University professor who studies privacy and cybersecurity, said internet-service providers get a unique glimpse at consumer preferences, including whether they favor pricey or less-expensive goods or read more liberal- or conservative-leaning news.

Cable operators for years have been selling localized TV ads: Networks give them a small portion of time to sell commercials targeted at their regions. They match ads to households with certain billing ZIP Codes and refine the targeting further with data from third parties, such as household-income estimates. Now, the data funneling into those initiatives is getting more sophisticated. [AT&T, whose advertising efforts](#) are still in the early stages, collects information such as users' wireless-device location and internet protocol address, as well as the webpages those users visit, the search terms they enter and how long they spend using apps, according to its privacy policy. Any customer data shared with advertisers is anonymized and doesn't bear the user's name.

AT&T's terms of use say it has the right to use customer data for advertising. Its privacy policy lists several ways for consumers to limit how their data is used for marketing purposes, though consumers might find the process of opting out complex and confusing. AT&T's Xandr advertising operation is starting to blend its own data with outside information in areas such as car ownership and purchasing habits, grouping consumers based on their behavior. Earlier this year, Xandr began using AT&T set-top-box viewing data [to sell targeted ads](#) on the telecom company's Turner stations, such as TBS.

Altice USA doesn't use browsing history to target ads, because it "requires a lot of intrusion to be able to do it and it doesn't help," said Paul Haddad, president of Altice's a4 advertising unit. Still, the cable company has reserved the right to do so "for marketing or analytics purposes," according to its privacy policy. Currently, Altice maps the devices in a household and combines that information with external data on the likely health-care status, financial situation, political views and purchasing habits of the household to serve targeted ads when phones or tablets are at home and away.

Comcast and Charter each lobbied against a recently passed Maine law requiring cable providers to get customers' explicit consent to use or sell their web-browsing history and other details, according to advocates of the legislation and state lobbying records. The law takes effect July 1. A spokeswoman for Comcast said it has never tracked information on customers' use of the internet or sold such data to anyone for marketing. A Charter spokeswoman referred The Wall Street Journal to a 2017 statement in which the company said it doesn't engage in the practice. She said Charter opposed the Maine bill because it didn't apply to all types of businesses and because the company would prefer national legislation on the issue. – *Wall Street Journal*

The Federal Communications Commission is investigating whether Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc. misled the government agency during its unsuccessful attempt to buy Tribune Media Co. last year. In a June 25 letter to Sinclair viewed by The Wall Street Journal, the FCC said it is investigating whether the nation's biggest owner of local television stations "engaged in misrepresentation and/or lack of candor" with the agency when it was seeking approval for the \$3.9 billion deal.

The FCC's concerns about the deal last spring led [**Tribune to pull the plug on the agreement**](#). Nexstar Media Group Inc. then stepped in last December and [**bought Tribune in a deal valued at \\$4.1 billion**](#) that is still pending FCC approval. If the FCC determines that Sinclair did deceive the agency, it can order a hearing on the matter. An FCC hearing could lead to significant fines or even the possible loss of broadcast licenses, although such extreme actions are infrequent. "This is not new," a Sinclair spokesman said Wednesday, adding the investigation is part of "an ongoing discussion with the FCC" regarding certain allegations raised last year. An FCC spokesman was unavailable for comment.

"This is a big deal. The worst thing you can do to the FCC is lie," said Andrew Schwartzman, a professor at Georgetown Law. "This is the only way to lose a license for a broadcaster. Sinclair needs to prove they didn't lie, or that they didn't mean to and won't again." The government probe into Sinclair comes as the company is in the midst of [**acquiring 21 regional sports channels from Walt Disney Co.**](#) for more than \$10 billion. That deal requires the approval of the Justice Department.

In the letter, the FCC said it is investigating whether Sinclair's proposed plans to spin off stations to comply with FCC regulations and receive approval of the Tribune deal would have in fact left the broadcaster in de facto control of the stations. A spokesman for Sinclair didn't immediately respond to requests for comment Wednesday. Sinclair previously said its spinoff plans were "consistent with structures that Sinclair and many other broadcasters have utilized for many years with the full approval of the FCC." A hearing regarding

the allegations could affect Sinclair's future broadcast license renewals, as well as its ability to acquire stations in the future. "This may be the bureau beginning to look at these allegations and determine what to be done with them before the license renewals that come up next year," said Washington, D.C., attorney Jack Goodman, who represents broadcast stations but not Sinclair.

In the letter, the FCC said Sinclair has until July 9 to respond, warned that "to knowingly and willfully make any false statement or conceal any material fact in responses" to its inquiry is "punishable by fine or imprisonment as well as a violation of the Communications Act." One such transaction involved Tribune's WGN-TV Chicago, which Sinclair said it would sell to car-dealership operator Steven Fader for \$60 million. Not only was that price considered far below the station's value by industry analysts, but Sinclair Chairman David Smith sits on the board of a car-dealership concern where Mr. Fader is chief executive.

In its letter to Sinclair, the FCC said it wants all the details on how Sinclair came up with the \$60 million valuation as well as all discussions the company had with Mr. Fader regarding who would control the programming, personnel and finances of the station. Mr. Fader couldn't be reached for comment. The FCC wants similar details about Sinclair's proposed plans to transfer TV stations in Dallas and Houston to Cunningham Broadcasting, which is run by the estate of Mr. Smith's mother, Carolyn Smith. This isn't the first time Sinclair's actions have made it a government target. In 2016, the FCC fined Sinclair \$9.5 million for allegedly failing to negotiate in good faith during a dispute with satellite broadcaster Dish Network Corp. In 2017, the FCC fined Sinclair \$13.4 million for allegedly failing to label programming it aired as sponsored content.

The failed Sinclair-Tribune deal also triggered a larger investigation by the Justice Department into whether TV station owners violated antitrust law by sharing ad sales information that potentially could lead to higher advertising rates. [**Sinclair settled with the Justice Department**](#) last November. Although most local broadcasters have low profiles, Sinclair has a strong national presence not only because of its size but also because [**its news programming is known for having a conservative editorial voice.**](#)

In the 2016 presidential race, the Sinclair stations were seen as a safe haven for President Trump's campaign. Last year, Sinclair was criticized for requiring its news anchors to read a segment critical of the national news media and accusing outlets of airing "fake stories without checking the facts first." Earlier this week, three Democratic candidates for president—Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.), Cory Booker (D., N.J.) and Bernie Sanders (D., Vt.)—sent a letter to the FCC and Justice Department [**raising concerns about the proposed regional sports deal,**](#) since it could reduce competition in the industry and lead to higher prices for consumers. — *Wall Street Journal*

Anyone who watches TV with an antenna, no cable or satellite, must rescan their televisions over the next couple of months. Six Hazleton-area TV stations are switching frequencies to make room in the airwaves for nascent 5G network upgrades and other mobile broadband services, the Federal Communications Commission announced Wednesday. "We have to get ready, basically," said Jean Kiddoo, chair of the FCC's Incentive Auction Task Force. "We are always looking to make sure we're using airwaves as efficiently and as

effectively as we can. We know 5G is coming. We also know that even without 5G, consumers are demanding more and more capacity — more and more speed .These local channels are changing their frequencies through Aug. 2:• WQPX-TV, Channel 32• WYLN-TV, Channel 35• W47AO-D, Channel 36• WNEP-TV, ABC16• WSWB-TV, CW38• WOLF-TV, Fox56Mobile carriers, for example Verizon, AT&T and Sprint, have been slowly rolling out 5G, or fifth generation, networks in major markets, think New York City, Houston and Los Angeles.

Just this week, T-Mobile announced it would start selling high-priced the Samsung Galaxy S10 5G (starts at \$1,300), which is one of a few phones on the market now that can tap into the network. As more tools, for example equipment used in health care, shipping and manufacturing, move toward automation and rely on wireless broadband to communicate, they'll be sending significantly more data over the airwaves. 5G delivers speeds that can handle the da-ta load — carriers promise they're 10 to 50 times faster than current 4G LTE networks. While 5G speeds are unlikely to appear in Northeast Pennsylvania any time soon, one thing seems certain — when one carrier brings 5G to the region, others won't be far behind, said Greg Ko-pa, co-founder and chief executive at SWG, a Jessup firm that sells and serv-ices wireless broadband equipment to a global client portfolio.

Customers want faster speeds when using mobile devices, and the companies first to the table with 5G have a better chance at keeping current clients and luring more, he said. "More people are using mobile devices than ever before," he said. "So the carrier that can get you that connection quicker than somebody else is going to retain their customer base more than the next player. "Contact the writer:joconnell@timesshamrock.com;570-348-9131; @jonocSet up TV when frequency changes. To rescan, viewers must use their re-motes or TV converter boxes to first access the "setup" or "channel" menu. Choose the option "channel scan," "channel tuning" or "auto search." Frequency changes won't hap-pen all at once, so viewers likely will have to do it a few times. For more in-formation, visit www.fcc.gov/tvrescan, or call the consumer help line at 888-225-5322, then press "6." – ***Hazleton Standard-Speaker***



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