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The Federal Communications Commission will vote later this month on changes that would eliminate the need for pay-TV consumers to rent set-top boxes, potentially saving millions of American households about $230 a year each, agency officials said.

An FCC proposal that was circulated Thursday to top agency officials would force pay-TV operators to make available free apps that grant consumers access to their entertainment offerings and channels. The apps would be loaded onto Roku boxes, Amazon Fire TV Sticks, Apple Inc. devices, or other platforms, including gaming consoles and smartphones, FCC officials said Thursday. The changes also would enable integrated searches for content on traditional pay-TV services and internet-based streamers such as Netflix. FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler has said the changes will make the set-top box market competitive and more innovative. He has scheduled the vote for Sept. 29.

Big telecom companies such as Comcast have lobbied in Washington against the changes, viewing them as a threat to a profitable part of their business. Set-top boxes are the devices through which Comcast, DirecTV, Verizon, and other providers deliver television services to homes. Comcast also has spent heavily on developing and deploying its X1 set-top box, saying the device lowers customer churn and leads to higher sales of premium services. Wheeler's plan would undercut the X1.

Comcast spokeswoman Sena Fitzmaurice said that Wheeler backed away from an earlier proposal that could have broken apart cable- and satellite-TV services, but that the company still believed his proposal was flawed. "[Wheeler] claims that his new proposal builds on the marketplace success of apps, but in reality it would stop the apps revolution dead in its tracks by imposing an overly complicated government licensing regime and heavy-handed regulation in a fast-moving technological space," Fitzmaurice said.

FCC officials say that nearly all pay-TV subscribers lease boxes from their pay-TV providers. The agency is under a congressional mandate in the 1996 Telecom Act to foster competition in the $20 billion cable-box industry. Its last attempt at change, with so-called CableCard technology, was a disappointment and cost consumers about $1 billion over the last eight years, according to industry statistics. Regulators forced box makers to engineer all devices to take the CableCard technology whether it was used or not. – ***Philadelphia Inquirer*; more from *Reuters* and *Cablefax***

Netflix is calling for the government to crack down on broadband providers that impose data caps on their subscribers.

Data caps "discourage a consumer's consumption of broadband, and may impede the ability of some households to watch Internet television in a manner and amount that they would like," Netflix says in a new **filing** with the Federal Communications Commission. Netflix is urging the FCC to rule that all data caps on wireline networks, as well as "low" data caps on mobile networks, may "unreasonably limit Internet television viewing."

The online video company adds that data caps (as well as pay-per-byte billing) don't seem to have any purpose other than to make online video more expensive for consumers. Consumer advocates have made the same point, **arguing that** data caps don't help manage congestion on wireline networks, given that the caps aren't pegged to current network conditions.

The company's filing comes as broadband providers are increasing their use of data caps. Comcast, for instance, recently brought its data caps to several new markets, including Chicago. Comcast's broadband customers subject to caps now face overages ranging from $10 to $200, if they consume more than 1 Terabyte of data per month. Until this April, the maximum amount that people could consume before getting slammed with overages was just 300 GB a month.

AT&T also recently **stepped up enforcement** of its wireline data caps, which start at 150 GB a month for DSL users, and range from 300 GB to 1 TB a month for U-Verse subscribers, depending on the speed of service. Netflix says in its filing that watching 3.4 hours of its streams in high definition can use 10 GB of data, while watching the same amount in Ultra HD quality would consume almost 24 GB. "A data cap or allotment of 300 GB of data per month or higher is required just to meet the Internet television needs of an average American," the company writes. "An above average television watcher, a multi-occupant household, or a consumer wishing to watch in 4K requires a much higher cap."

Coincidentally, the same day that Netflix called for FCC action, AT&T said it would exempt DirecTV streams from mobile users' data caps. That move obviously gives AT&T's users an incentive to watch streams from DirecTV, which AT&T acquired last year, as opposed to Netflix, Hulu, Amazon or other providers.

Advocacy group Free Press, which **previously criticized** broadband providers for exempting their own material from data caps, was quick to condemn AT&T's move. "AT&T seems intent on favoring its own video content under the DirecTV brand," Free Press policy director Matt Wood said in a statement. "That harms both diverse content creators and internet users who already pay so much for their wireless service." – ***MediaPost***

Cheddar, the digital financial-news network aiming at youth audiences founded by ex-BuzzFeed exec Jon Steinberg, has raised $10 million in funding led by previous investor Lightspeed Venture Partners, with participation from new investors Comcast Ventures and Ribbit Capital.

New York-based Cheddar, which launched its $6.99-per-month subscription service in May, previously raised $3.1 million from Lightspeed in January. "We'll use this capital to become a full-fledged live, linear cable network -- except not on cable, but rather leading social and OTT services," said Steinberg, Cheddar's CEO. He added that Comcast Ventures "brings deep expertise in distribution to Cheddar," while Ribbit Capital is a leading investor in financial tech.

Cheddar's executive team includes chief content officer Peter Gorenstein, previously a senior executive producer for Yahoo video; COO Eric Harris, formerly BuzzFeed chief business operations officer; and Melissa Rosenthal, senior VP of creative development and partnerships (previously BuzzFeed VP of creative services).

"Cheddar is bringing rapid innovation to the linear video market. In an incredibly short period of time, their lean team of 30 has built an exceptional guest booking, technology and talent operation," Sam Landman, managing director of Comcast Ventures, said in a statement. "Their focus on content at the intersection of technology, culture and business is clearly resonating with millennial viewers and distribution partners."

Cheddar broadcasts daily from the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange, Nasdaq Marketsite and the Sprint store in the Flatiron Building. Guests who have appeared on Cheddar's show include CBS CEO Leslie Moonves, Zillow CEO Spencer Rascoff and Sprint chief Marcelo Claure. – ***Variety***