

## Big cable deal: Service go from bad to worse?

March 20 2014, by Frazier Moore

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This June 11, 2013 file photo shows Comcast Corp. CEO Brian Roberts during The Cable Show 2013 convention in Washington. Comcast, the nation's biggest cable colossus, plans to swallow runner-up titan Time Warner Cable. This \$45 billion deal would give Comcast 30 million subscribers in 43 of the nation's top 50 markets and about 30 percent of pay TV customers. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

The herky-jerkiness of my Netflix video stream is nothing compared with my jittery nerves.

I've been fretting since news broke last month that Comcast, the nation's reigning cable colossus, plans to swallow titanic runner-up Time Warner Cable.

This, of course, is the \$45 billion deal that would give Comcast 30 million subscribers in 43 of the nation's top 50 markets and about 30 percent of pay TV customers. As a customer potentially affected by this buyout, I feel even more Lilliputian than before.

I'm not alone in my misgivings. News of the buyout has sparked hand-wringing from consumer activists and media analysts who worry that the pairing of these companies would lead to higher prices, worse service and stifled competition.

The news also breathed life into the broader concern of Net neutrality, which holds that Internet providers should treat all content on the digital superhighway equally, regardless of originating website, rather than direct some of that traffic to express lanes—in exchange for a toll.

In January, a federal appeals court overturned Federal Communications Commission regulations enforcing Net neutrality, which raised fears this would embolden Internet providers to routinely impose a surcharge for guarantees that websites run at optimal speed—or, in the words of one critic, give a green light to "payola Internet."

Not gonna happen at Comcast, according to its CEO, Brian Roberts, who said it will continue to uphold Net neutrality, at least through 2018, under government conditions tied to its purchase of NBCUniversal in 2011.

The combined Comcast and Time Warner Cable would be "pro-consumer and pro-competitive," Roberts declared.

Is it crazy to be skeptical? Are opponents of the merger just a bunch of nervous Nellies?

I must admit, I'm not reassured by Comcast's promises of a future with "a superior video experience, higher broadband speeds and the fastest in-home Wi-Fi."

Still, why should I expect this merger to make the situation worse?

I'm a long-suffering captive of Time Warner Cable for both my cable and broadband service.

Watching Netflix and Amazon programming, I notice how, too often, my so-called streaming video has all the smoothness of oatmeal left on the stove. With my hobbled "House of Cards" experiences, plus my Internet service going dark without notice, my cable box crashing and other complaints, why shouldn't I assume that anything would be an improvement once my account was taken under the wing of the bigger, better Comcast that Roberts is promising?

Fellow detractors cite lots of reasons why.

As a souped-up cable gatekeeper, the new Comcast would have even greater bargaining power over channels it includes in its lineup, potentially favoring its own networks (which include USA, Bravo, MSNBC, E! and, of course, NBC), as well as its own content (the TV shows and movies produced by NBCUniversal studios), while independent programmers and rival cable networks might face an even greater squeeze getting distribution on Comcast, whose market dominance could determine which programs and networks live or die.

Meanwhile, Comcast would command one-third of the broadband pipes delivering the nation's information and culture.

Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.), a leading defender of Net neutrality, blasted the proposed deal last week on "CBS This Morning," saying, "Consumers will end up paying more, there will be less competition, there will be less innovation and even worse service."

"At the end of the day, this merger is probably going to go through?" anchor Norah O'Donnell posed.

"I think there's a too-cozy relationship between Comcast and the regulators," Franken responded.

Count Bob Garfield as another outspoken resister.

A media commentator and a co-host of public radio's "On the Media," Garfield several years ago launched a Web forum called Comcast Must Die for aggrieved Comcast customers like himself.

"It was an experiment in the crowdsourcing of rage," he says, adding that it helped prod Comcast into modest improvements.

Garfield has since moved on from that initiative. But he got exercised anew by the current Comcast proposal.

"They will have enormous clout in production, distribution and infrastructure," Garfield says. "It's the sort of vertical integration we haven't seen since Standard Oil was broken up."

And he predicts regulators will block the deal.

But until they rule, either late this year or in early 2015, I remain unsettled.

Will they do the right thing? I weigh the arguments pro and con. Then I

recall what I've seen year after year as a disgruntled cable customer, and a new twist on an old joke echoes in my head: What am I gonna believe? Comcast's lofty promises? Or my own lying eyes?

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Citation: Big cable deal: Service go from bad to worse? (2014, March 20) retrieved 4 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-big-cable-bad-worse.html>

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