

Q&A: Dissecting criticisms of T-Mobile's free video streams

December 23 2015, by Tali Arbel



This Oct. 14, 2015, file photo, shows people passing a T-Mobile store, in New York. T-Mobile last month switched its customers on bigger data plans to what it's calling "Binge On," which lets them watch video without using up their data. The service has caused consternation among advocates of net neutrality, the concept that Internet service providers shouldn't discriminate in favor or some content versus other content. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

T-Mobile has introduced a program that lets most customers watch video

without using up their data allotment.

The free program, called Binge On, is available to those who have data plans of at least 3 gigabytes. T-Mobile also reduces video quality—even for customers who don't qualify for free video streaming—saying that phone screens are too small for viewers to discern the higher resolution, which uses more cellular data. Customers can choose the full resolution, but they would then pay for the data. Those on Wi-Fi networks automatically get the highest quality available.

Because the program works with only two dozen leading video services—Facebook and YouTube are excluded—it has drawn complaints from advocates of net neutrality, the concept that Internet service providers shouldn't discriminate in favor of some content over others. The Federal Communications Commission is taking a look.

Some video providers are upset, too. YouTube says that "reducing data charges can be good for users, but it doesn't justify throttling all video services, especially without explicit user consent."

Here's a look at what's going on at T-Mobile:

WHAT'S THE POINT OF BINGE ON?

Streaming video eats up a lot of data on a phone. An hour of high-definition video can use nearly 1 gigabyte.

With Binge On, video streams from 24 services, including Netflix, Hulu and ESPN, don't count toward T-Mobile's data caps. The company also degrades all video—even from providers that aren't part of Binge On. T-Mobile offers DVD-level quality, which is less than high definition. T-

Mobile says that allows customers to watch up to three times as much YouTube, Facebook and Amazon video, even though they aren't part of Binge On.

THE CRITICISM: Customers don't have the option to watch in HD quality unless they turn off Binge On.

THE ASSESSMENT: Being able to stretch your data further is a plus, but customers may be unaware or unhappy that a higher-quality video option was taken away—unless they take steps to disable Binge On.

ARE T-MOBILE CUSTOMERS FORCED TO USE BINGE ON?

It's the default for customers. T-Mobile notified them through email and text messages. Customers can choose the full resolution by calling T-Mobile or changing settings through the company's websites or account apps on the phone.

THE CRITICISM: Critics say the company should leave video at higher quality until customers choose otherwise.

THE ASSESSMENT: When something takes an extra step to change, many people won't, so customers are effectively forced on Binge On. That's not necessarily bad, as it means savings on phone bills from less data use.

WILL SOME VIDEO PROVIDERS SUFFER?

T-Mobile says it's not charging companies to participate. As for

YouTube and Facebook, T-Mobile says it can't identify in all instances in which they're delivering video rather than some other kind of content. The company says it's working to add more companies to Binge On.

THE CRITICISM: This still discriminates. Customers might be more likely to watch video from a Binge On service rather than one whose viewing counts toward the data caps.

THE ASSESSMENT: It's true customers might gravitate to the 24 Binge On services. However, T-Mobile is inviting all other video services to participate by meeting certain technical requirements, which allow video to be identified as video.

IS DEGRADING ALL VIDEO BY DEFAULT BAD FOR CONSUMERS?

T-Mobile says you can turn it off, and that on a phone, the difference in quality between Binge On and HD is negligible. And T-Mobile spokesman Clint Patterson says whether or not a customer chooses to keep Binge On, video is being delivered at the same speed.

THE CRITICISM: Critics point out the FCC's net neutrality rules prohibit throttling, which it defines as "impairing or degrading lawful Internet traffic." The FCC has banned that to stop broadband providers from behavior "that negatively impacts consumers' use of content, applications, services and devices."

THE ASSESSEMENT: It's unclear whether this counts as a negative impact, as customers are ultimately saving money and can choose the full resolution.

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