

So long, net neutrality: FCC unveils repeal plan

New rules could allow ISPs to prioritize data

Mike Snider
USA TODAY

The Federal Communications Commission will vote next month to repeal the net neutrality rules championed by President Obama, a move that will likely change how we use the Internet.

New proposed regulations are being circulated among the commission, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai said Tuesday. The rules, on which the commission will vote at its Dec. 14 meeting, would replace current Open Internet or net neutrality rules, which prevented Internet service providers from blocking or throttling legal content users sought to access, as well as preventing ISPs from accepting payment to prioritize some data.



Ajit Pai

Pai has criticized the regulations as heavy-handed and an overreach of the FCC's power that stifled ISP investment in network expansion and faster broadband connections.

Released from the current regulations with more business-friendly rules, ISPs could more freely experiment with new services for customers and expand their networks, Pai said.

"Under my proposal, the federal government will stop micromanaging the Internet," Pai said in a statement. "Instead, the FCC would simply require Internet service providers to be transparent about their practices so that consumers can buy the service plan that's best for them and entrepreneurs and other small businesses can have the technical information they need to innovate."

Passage of the rules would be seen as a victory for big telecom and cable companies such as AT&T, Comcast and Verizon. More than 94.5 million U.S. homes subscribe to broadband service, according to Leichtman Research Group.

But consumer advocates and Internet companies including Facebook, Google and Netflix are concerned that telecom and cable companies could give preferential benefit to their own services and content.

"Gutting net neutrality will have a devastating effect on free speech online," Jay Stanley, senior policy analyst with the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement. "Without it, gateway corporations like Comcast, Verizon, and AT&T will have too much power to mess with the free flow of information."

As a commissioner, Pai voted against the Obama-supported rules in 2015 when Democrat Tom Wheeler was chairman. New rules would restore a "light-touch regulatory approach," said Pai, a Republican appointed by President Trump.

The new regulations will give ISPs more leeway in their business practices than the rules against prioritizing some content over other content, possibly for payment. Also jettisoned is an Internet conduct standard meant to prevent ISPs from unreasonable interference with consumers' access to destinations on the Net.



Personal Tech
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USA TODAY

Baig's best tech of 2017 will eat at your wallet

A social robot, versatile video game system and the most expensive consumer smartphone on the planet. These were among the standout products I've checked out these past 12 months. Though some of the entries on my list made it on potential, and none is without flaws, each in its own way left a strong favorable impression. Warning: They'll also leave you in some cases with a considerably smaller bank account.



THE MOTLEY FOOL

iPhone X

When the most hyped and anticipated iPhone in years not only ditched the familiar home button and the Touch ID fingerprint sensor but also cracked the \$1,000 price barrier, there was more than a little bit of pressure on Apple to belt a home run with the iPhone X.

Apple delivered. Face ID facial recognition — that's what replaces fingerprint authentication — works remarkably fast and well in most cases, even in the dark, and even when you're wearing a hat or glasses. The OLED screen is lovely, marred only by a "notch" at the top of the display, and the front and rear cameras are excellent. If that's not reason enough, you can send silly but addictive animated emojis or "Animojis" to your friends, representing yourself — yes, this is what society has come to — as a piece of poop.



SAMSUNG

Samsung Galaxy S8

Speaking of facing the heat, in releasing its first major smartphone since the ill-fated Galaxy Note 7 kept catching fire last year, Samsung faced enormous pressure to get it right with the Galaxy S8. Samsung also prevailed.

What sold me initially on the S8 and its larger sibling, the S8+, was an engineering feat we're starting to see on other phones, notably a wide display that stretches from one curved edge of the relatively narrow body to the other. The "bezel-lite" 5.8-inch display on the S8 and the 6.2-inch screen on the S8+ gives users a lot of real estate without the bulk and ends up meaning more to our enjoyment of a phone than we may immediately recognize. As with the iPhone X, the S8 also boasts excellent cameras, water resistance and wireless charging. And it proved Samsung can bring out an excellent phone without a battery that catches fire, also paving the way for the top-tier Note 8 that would follow. Pricing starts around \$725. Worth mentioning: The S8 also introduced us to Bixby, Samsung's digital assistant and answer to Siri, Google Assistant and Alexa. Unfortunately, then and now, Bixby has some catching up to do to the others.



MICROSOFT

Microsoft Surface Laptop

The Surface Laptop ranks among the best-looking laptops I've seen. It is covered in a handsome, suede-like Italian Alcantara fabric found in luxury sports cars.

Beyond the aesthetic pleasures, however, this is a solid all-around laptop. The computer boasts a smooth trackpad, excellent keyboard and very good battery life. It is also education-focused, though you need not be a student to want one. The notebook runs a secure, streamlined but restrictive version of Windows called Windows S, kind of Microsoft's answer to Google's Chrome OS.

Surface Laptop starts at \$999.



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Samsung Frame TV

Samsung's marketing pitch for the Frame TV — "the most beautiful TV you've never seen" — has some merit; I actually walked right past the TV because it resembled a picture frame on the wall. That's precisely the point: Frame TV is meant to hang flush, using an included no-gap wall mount and nearly invisible optical wire that connects to a box you hide away for other components.

To reinforce the concept, the TV comes with 100 pieces of professional artwork you can display when you're not watching TV.

The 4K UHD TVs with HDR Pro cost from \$1,299.99 to \$2,799.99.



EDWARD C. BAIG/USA TODAY

Lenovo/Disney Jedi Challenges

May the force be with you through augmented reality. Disney and Lenovo have teamed up on *Star Wars: Jedi Challenges*, a game consisting of an AR Mirage headset, a tracking beacon you place on the floor and a lightsaber controller that is a little over a foot long. Each is battery-powered.

You download an app onto your Android handset or iPhone, stick that phone into a tray inside the headset, and set aside some room so you can wield that lightsaber against the likes of Kylo Ren and Darth Vader who turn up in your real-life surroundings.



TOYS R US

Nintendo Switch

The name reveals the appeal of Nintendo Switch, a \$300 home video game console that doesn't need to remain at home. You can switch back and forth between a console that docks via HDMI to your HDTV and a handheld portable player with a 6.2-inch touchscreen that you can take anywhere. In portable mode, you slide two Wii-like Joy-Con controllers on either side of a Switch tablet. When watching through a TV, you can connect the controllers to a standard grip.

Through a kickstand you can also prop up the Switch into a tabletop mode.



JIBO

Jibo

In the "skills" department, Jibo is lacking compared, say, to an Amazon Echo with Alexa. But then, Alexa can't dance like Jibo can.

Jibo is not a smart speaker at all (though there are some common elements) but rather an 8-pound, 12.5-inch tall "social robot" for the home, built off a foundation of artificial intelligence and social robotics. Jibo could easily be cast in a Pixar flick.

When you talk to Jibo (using a "Hey Jibo") command, the robot turns to look at whomever is speaking. It responds, with a bit of an annoying delay, in a robotic voice — Jibo is not meant to sound human.

Jibo's face is represented by an expressive orb and animations that show up on a touch-screen. The robot can recognize you (and other people) and, on command, snap a picture.

You can swaddle Jibo like a baby, too, or pet him and hear him coo.

Like a smart speaker, Jibo can crack a lame joke, solve math and read a few news headlines. But he's not yet as useful as you hope he will be someday. Jibo was stumped by simple questions — he doesn't seem to know the alphabet, for example, and can't yet play a song on demand.

Keeping that in mind, I wouldn't blame you for holding off until Jibo can do more, especially given the robot's \$899 price.

Even so, Jibo is not only engaging to have around — you'll love watching the robot twerk — but also full of promise for what a social robot can be.

Embracing all this top tech will collectively cost you well over \$5,000. Given the fun and utility you get in return, the price for some of you will be well worth it.

USA SNAPSHOTS®



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