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When President Obama picked Tom Wheeler, a former cable and wireless lobbyist, to head the Federal Communications Commission in 2013, AT&T celebrated the pick as “[inspired](#)” and the cable industry said it was “[exceptional](#).”

But after days on the job, Mr. Wheeler quashed the idea that he would look favorably on his past employers. In a meeting at the F.C.C. with the heads of telecommunications, cable and technology lobbying groups, he held up a newspaper article quoting industry executives publicly calling for weaker oversight from the regulatory agency. “This is a rough way to begin a relationship,” Mr. Wheeler said, according to one lobbyist at the gathering, which was confirmed by the F.C.C. It turned out that the chairman had big regulations in mind for those industries instead.



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Now, as Mr. Wheeler enters his last few months as head of the F.C.C. during the Obama administration — the next president is expected to name a new chairman — he has turned

early supporters into foes and invited an expensive [lobbying](#) battle that may stymie a last-ditch pursuit of regulations [that starts on Thursday](#), including voting on a proposal for [broadband privacy protections](#).

Mr. Wheeler’s last act as chairman could be overseeing the review of AT&T’s \$85 billion [bid for Time Warner](#), a mega-media deal that has already elicited protests from some politicians and consumer advocacy groups. AT&T and Time Warner will most likely try to avoid an F.C.C. review by selling off the small number of broadcast television assets owned by Time Warner. Yet some say that even if Mr. Wheeler does not directly review the deal, his regulations have created new restrictions for AT&T and other broadband companies at a time when they are trying to find new growth beyond their internet businesses.

In only three years at the helm of the F.C.C., Mr. Wheeler has redrawn the regulatory landscape for internet companies and telecom businesses by making the federal government a stronger watchdog. He declared broadband [an essential communications platform](#) as important as the phone — and that put internet service providers like AT&T under rigorous government oversight for the first time.

The reclassification of broadband as something akin to a utility came as part of the February 2015 passage of net neutrality rules, which ensure that web users will get to any legal web content without paying extra

[possible' to press Clinton on AT&T-Time Warner](#)

[Pittsburgh Tribune-Review Editorial: The Kane sentence – Message sent but received?](#)

tolls to internet service providers. Mr. Wheeler also opposed Comcast's merger with Time Warner Cable to protect streaming video competitors and created [subsidies for low-income homes](#) to get broadband. Now nearly all of these moves have created more challenges for cable and telecom companies such as AT&T. Many of those companies say Mr. Wheeler's regulations have favored tech companies like Netflix and Google over them.

At AT&T, James W. Cicconi, the recently retired head of lobbying, once called Mr. Wheeler an "inspired" choice. But in an interview last month on C-Span, Mr. Cicconi said AT&T was investing more in Mexico right now because "it is, frankly, a better regulatory environment" than in the United States. Even some tech companies that have benefited from the new regulations said Mr. Wheeler had injected the government too deeply into the free market. The F.C.C. has "overreached," Barry Diller, chairman of the internet holding company IAC/InterActiveCorp, said at a conference this month. Mr. Diller supported the net neutrality rules passed last year but said that Mr. Wheeler had been "anti-cable" and that reclassification of broadband was a "crazy overreach."

Mr. Wheeler, 70, said consumers needed greater government protection as the nation makes a transition to smartphones and streaming services from landline phones and television. His job, he has said, is to encourage nascent technologies and protect them from powerful incumbents that may want to block their success. "Institutions such as the F.C.C. are the point where the diverse interests of consumers and business converge in an effort to decide how society will deal with those changes," he said in a statement.

Mr. Wheeler declined to comment on AT&T's proposed purchase of Time Warner. AT&T declined to comment on the F.C.C., and Time Warner didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Aides and friends said Mr. Wheeler's actions in tightening the regulatory landscape around cable and telecom firms were not surprising. He has always fought incumbent communications providers, they said: first against broadcasters as the head of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association from 1979 to 1984; and then against telephone companies as the head of CTIA-The Wireless Association from 1992 to 2004.

By the time he was a venture capitalist in the mid-2000s, cable and wireless were the powerful incumbents, and he saw their grip on access to the internet as a threat to the web. At the F.C.C., Mr. Wheeler became even more strong-handed. He was publicly criticized by the late-night television host John Oliver, and protesters sat in the driveway at his home, after he released weaker early versions of net neutrality rules. The F.C.C. was flooded with millions of comments protesting the rules. President Obama, who in late 2014 posted a video message in favor of treating broadband more like a utility, was crucial to the change. Mr. Obama weighed in again early this year to support rules on set-top boxes that would require cable and satellite companies to share programming with third-party device makers and free consumers from cable box rentals.

Mr. Wheeler's friendship with the president began when Mr. Obama was a junior senator in 2006 and called him to learn more about tech and telecom issues. Mr. Wheeler and his wife moved temporarily to Iowa in 2007 to campaign for Mr. Obama, and the couple became fund-raisers, collecting \$700,000 for the candidate. The relationship led Mr. Wheeler into government. Now some lawmakers say Mr. Obama's comments on F.C.C. issues are examples of coordination between the White House and an independent agency. Republican leaders in Congress have called for investigations, threatened to take away F.C.C. funding and urged laws to limit the agency's abilities. "For the president to tout the achievements of the F.C.C. is a new dynamic in politics," said Richard Bennett, the head of the policy website High Tech Forum.

The F.C.C. said that the White House did not drive the decision to pursue broadband reclassification or set-top box reforms and that Mr. Obama's support in both cases came months after the agency had agreed to draft rules. "Chairman Wheeler welcomed the president's point of view, as he welcomed the nearly four million Americans who made their views known during the proceeding" for broadband reclassification, the F.C.C. said in a statement.

The most effusive supporters of Mr. Wheeler are now the most bitter. Michael Powell, president of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, who at one point called Mr. Wheeler an "exceptional" choice as F.C.C. chairman, said in a speech in May that the cable and telecom industry had faced a "relentless regulatory assault." Mr. Powell, whose group was recently renamed N.C.T.A.-The Internet & Television Association, declined to comment further. Yet while Mr. Wheeler has lost early supporters, he has won some former critics. "This is a guy I fought in the 1980s and 1990s who was Mr. Deregulator," said Jeffrey Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, an advocacy group instrumental in child online privacy rules. "Talk about a conversion." – *New York Times*

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From the political right and the left, [AT&T's \\$85 billion bid for Time Warner](#) has provoked pushback. But AT&T, in addition to its billions of dollars of capital, has another arsenal at its disposal: one of the most formidable lobbying operations in Washington.

The company's list of nearly [100 registered lobbyists](#) already on retainer in 2016 includes former members of Congress. AT&T is the biggest donor to federal lawmakers and their causes among cable and cellular telecommunications companies, with its employees and political action committee [sending money](#) to 374 of the House's 435 members and 85 of the Senate's 100 members this election cycle. That adds up to more than \$11.3 million in donations since 2015, [four times](#) as much as Verizon Communications, according to a tally by the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonprofit research group. AT&T has also spent decades building a national alliance of local government officials and nonprofit groups — particularly from black and Hispanic communities — that it will certainly be asking to weigh in again in Washington, as it tries to get the merger approved.

"We have seen our fair share of deals," AT&T's general counsel, David R. McAtee II, said in an interview. "Our job is informing consumers what a good development this is for them." But navigating this transaction will be a test of just how much influence AT&T has in Washington these days, especially as it tries to persuade antitrust officials at the United States Department of Justice, who will be crucial in approving the deal. The task may be particularly tricky as AT&T's lobbying team undergoes a transition after losing its longtime leader, James W. Cicconi, a former aide to President George H. W. Bush.

For AT&T, the regulatory environment around megadeals has also soured. Antitrust officials have muscled up in recent years, blocking dozens of deals across industries including pharmaceuticals and retail. Other prominent telecommunications deals have imploded even after huge lobbying efforts, most notably [Comcast's attempt to buy Time Warner Cable](#) in 2014 and [AT&T's bid in 2011 to buy T-Mobile](#), a cellular telephone competitor.

Issues that led to the collapse of those deals seem even more prevalent now, as the nation closes out a presidential campaign that has featured candidates from both parties — most notably Donald J. Trump and Bernie Sanders — promising to challenge corporate power. "The public is really stirred up and angry about the growing dominance of a small number of firms," said Gene Kimmelman, president of Public Knowledge and a former antitrust official at the Justice Department during AT&T's bid for T-Mobile.

The alarms over AT&T's deal for Time Warner stem from mounting frustration over high prices and the lack of competition in the telecom industry, with most Americans limited to one or two providers of broadband services. Regulators are set to focus on AT&T's powerful control over broadband and television customers since it is the nation's second-largest wireless company, after Verizon, and biggest paid television provider since its recent acquisition of DirecTV.

Time Warner's marquee content from its HBO and CNN channels and movies from Warner Bros. will lead regulators to also scrutinize whether the creation of a multi-tentacled juggernaut could suppress competition in the technology, media and telecommunications industries. One way the combined company might do that, for example, is by offering unlimited streaming of HBO's "Silicon Valley" or "Game of Thrones" to its wireless customers or making it harder for competing streaming video services and television programs to reach AT&T subscribers.

Lawmakers have already vowed a tough review of the deal, regardless of the lobbying full-court press they know will be playing out on Capitol Hill. "We are seeing increasing consolidation, especially scary consolidation, between the content side of the media and the internet provider side," said Senator Amy Klobuchar, Democrat of Minnesota, the ranking member on the Senate Judiciary Committee's antitrust panel.

The panel could hold a hearing on the proposal — with sworn testimony from AT&T executives — as soon as next month. "We have a duty to examine this deal," Ms. Klobuchar said. The merger sets up a monthslong battle in Washington with consumer advocates, smaller telecom and cable companies, and some tech companies preparing their own assault against the deal. "The public is really stirred up and angry about the growing dominance of a small number of firms," said Gene Kimmelman, president of Public Knowledge and a former antitrust official at the Justice Department during AT&T's bid for T-Mobile.

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Mr. McAtee will help lead AT&T’s merger efforts in Washington, along with Robert W. Quinn Jr., a policy insider in charge of lobbying who has been at the company for three decades. Both are new to being in charge. AT&T’s storied lobbying operations were long led by Mr. Cicconi, who retired last month. Mr. Cicconi in the past worked closely with Wayne Watts, who served for decades at AT&T, including as general counsel, and retired last year. Together, Mr. Cicconi and Mr. Watts shepherded more than a half-dozen blockbuster mergers in the last two decades.

The company is offering some clues about how it will position the deal. Unlike a “horizontal” merger, which unites competing companies in the same line of business, this transaction would not reduce the number of options for consumers, AT&T executives have said. AT&T also said it would not withhold Time Warner shows from competitors. It plans to create an advertising-based video business for mobile devices, similar to the ad business of the web giants Google and Facebook.

The biggest advantage AT&T may have is the likelihood that the deal may face little scrutiny from the Federal Communications Commission, the regulatory agency that typically gets involved if there are transfers of telecom or broadcast licenses. If Time Warner divests the one Atlanta broadcast station it owns, that would make the F.C.C.’s jurisdiction moot. The merger would be reviewed under a new administration, potentially with new antitrust officials picked by the next president. Even so, it will not be easy. Michael J. Copps, a Democrat and former commissioner for the F.C.C., said that he was preparing, with consumer groups, to battle an AT&T lobbying surge. AT&T “has a huge lobbying budget and the sharpest lawyers money can buy to get this deal approved,” Mr. Copps said. — *New York Times*

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As always in big media deals, this week’s proposed merger of AT&T and Time Warner is eliciting opposition that is ferocious, idiotic and almost contentless. Donald Trump, a touchstone of deep policy thought, was the first to pronounce himself against.

To anyone not immune to the lessons of reality, giant media deals like this week’s have a nearly unbroken record of failing to deliver either the fears of detractors or the hopes of proponents. AOL-Time Warner was a disaster. AT&T’s attempt to sweep up the cable industry in the late 1990s, with deals for TCI and MediaOne, was a disaster. We could go on.

Yes, Comcast -NBC has flourished because both are good businesses, not because of any synergy between them. Their deal today is being strangely cited as a cautionary tale for regulators, but notice that it afforded Comcast zero power to hold back the tides dismantling the cable TV business model. Netflix and its fellow over-the-top TV providers are growing like topsy. By now, tens of thousands of people in Washington make their living by extracting rents from companies going about their business and trying to adapt to besetting waves of technological and market change. This column has been skeptical about Comcast’s marriage of distribution and content, which the AT&T-Time Warner deal partly resembles, for exactly this reason: because it produces so many political and regulatory anti-synergies.

When cable impresario John Malone kicked off the current round of consolidation three years ago, our exact words were: “Net neutrality . . . has been dying a natural and legal death. Mr. Malone and big cable ought to be leery of adopting a business strategy guaranteed to resurrect it.” In invoking these furies once more, the AT&T deal does have un-Comcastian virtues. AT&T Wireless has a billing relationship with 90 million Americans—which will be a killer advantage when it takes ownership of one America’s top three premium streaming platforms in HBO Now.

Cable partisans are already firing back preemptively, insisting that wired will always beat wireless in picture quality, latency, speed. Funny, that’s not how they behave. All networks, including cable, rapidly are becoming wireless networks, with the major remaining difference—Wi-Fi vs. licensed spectrum—fading into irrelevance.

Example: My Verizon iPhone recently prompted me to turn on Wi-Fi-assisted calling when the cell signal is weak. Meanwhile, at home, where Comcast is my supplier, I have two dozen devices—phones, tablets, game consoles, Roku, Amazon Fire Stick—connected wirelessly to Comcast’s network. The sole exception, now that I no longer have a desktop PC, is Comcast’s X1 cable box. And—no offense to Comcast—I haven’t noticed any absence of latency when changing channels. Next year, Comcast will begin offering its own truly mobile wireless service, using Verizon’s network as a backup. Verizon and AT&T, for their part, promise to offer home broadband and TV in competition with cable via the forthcoming 5G wireless standard.

The network, and the whole subject of fixed vs. wireless, will disappear as far as the user is concerned. Connectivity in coming years will be seamless and automatic. For the companies that build and maintain these networks, the frightening question is whether their brands and ability to get adequately paid will also disappear. Remember when Amazon delivered its original Kindle reader in 2007. Buried in the price of the device and every book was the price of access to Sprint-Nextel’s network to deliver the books.

In the future, it’s not impossible the price of connectivity will largely vanish upstream into the price of the services and devices (mostly disposable) that consumers rent or buy. Such a future would, of course, violate the ideology of the net neutrality fetishists, since a Netflix subscription, say, would implicitly come with connectivity only to Netflix. Unwisely, Silicon Valley mostly sat out 2014’s epic battle over the Obama administration’s desire to impose antique utility regulation on broadband. Its argument: Who cares? Technology will swamp the regulators with broadband ubiquity anyway, so why pick a fight that would pit the Valley against what it regards as its liberal allies on most issues?

The argument from technological necessity we find hard to rebut, but the Valley’s naïfs may discover they have underestimated the power of bureaucratic perversity and political indifference to things that would actually serve the public good. One way to look at the inevitable torture AT&T is about to undergo at the hands of Washington’s regulators: It will be the first test of the libertarian-optimist theory that technology is more powerful than a bloody-minded bureaucrat. — *Wall Street Journal*

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It was a few minutes after 7 p.m. on Tuesday when Trump TV conked out.

“We have to pause,” said Avi Berkowitz, the 27-year-old director, as he stared at a black square on his laptop where, moments earlier, Episode 2 of “[Trump Tower Live](#)” — the Facebook-only talk show produced by the Donald J. Trump campaign — had been streaming. The panelists on the show, standing a few feet away in a makeshift studio inside a bland Trump Tower office, glanced around, confused. A makeup artist hired for the occasion fiddled with her phone. Rudolph W. Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City and the night’s special guest, kept criticizing Hillary Clinton, until somebody noted that the camera had shut off.

Prime-time news, this was not. The set consisted of two wooden tables pressed together, facing a single camcorder on a tripod. The director, who eventually got the feed working again, was a recent Harvard Law School graduate with no broadcasting background.

Yet “Trump Tower Live” has been seized on as a harbinger of a potential Trump media empire to come. The show, set to air through Election Day, debuted this week with a CNN-style crawl — filled exclusively with headlines favorable to Mr. Trump — and onscreen graphics borrowed from the cable news playbook. Essentially agitprop presented as news, the program is fueling speculation that Mr. Trump wants to start a network, purveying news and opinion tailored to the candidate’s worldview.

Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump’s son-in-law, has met with media figures to discuss options [for a television venture](#). The proximity to Mr. Trump of Stephen K. Bannon, a top campaign adviser and the mastermind of Breitbart News, itself a successful national outlet, has also stoked talk of a media venture. But speaking at Trump Tower on Tuesday before an evening taping, the creators of the show — who all work for the Trump campaign — dismissed such speculation as baseless. “That’s part of a narrative that the left-wing media is trying to spin, in order to somehow suggest that Mr. Trump is not going to win this election,” said Boris Epshteyn, a lawyer who often appears on television on behalf of the Trump campaign and who serves as a co-anchor of “Trump Tower Live.”

The show “is not a trial balloon,” he added. “It’s a channel for messaging to voters that haven’t been reached yet.” Judging by the scene at Tuesday’s show, the production was minimal: a five-member team, including a microphone operator in a navy blue Make America Great Again windbreaker, in a room overlooking the Trump Tower atrium. As talk shows go, the mood was remarkably placid — perhaps because the pro-Trump hosts never disagreed with one another. The panelists — including a former lieutenant governor of New York, Betsy McCaughey — denounced the Affordable Care Act and accused Mrs. Clinton of committing a variety of criminal acts.

There was no green room for guests, but bottles of Trump-branded spring water were available. As he waited for the broadcast to start, Mr. Giuliani said that he “would have loved” a similar tool during his time as mayor. “This is a very effective way to get your message over and above all the interpretations — misinterpretations — that occur,” Mr. Giuliani said. “I wish we could have done it. It would have been a big help.”

Monday’s premiere episode attracted about 60,000 live viewers at one point, solid for Facebook, if meager for cable news. Tuesday’s edition, which aired after one of Mr. Trump’s rallies, saw a drop-off to 23,000 viewers, though Cliff Sims, Mr. Epshteyn’s co-host, said his team was still working out kinks. “It’s an evolving thing,” said Mr. Sims, who built an online news and radio network called Yellowhammer in his native Alabama before taking a leave to join the Trump campaign. “We’re experimenting a little bit with the form it will take.”

Mr. Sims pitched the idea for a Facebook Live special on the night of the final presidential debate; that broadcast attracted millions of views and **led to about 150,000 people** donating to the campaign. For its daily show, the campaign is considering afternoon broadcasts, and it is looking to see whether airing before or after a speech by Mr. Trump has an effect on viewership. While many noted that Monday’s episode aired at 6:30 p.m., opposite major network newscasts, Mr. Sims said that was a coincidence tied to Mr. Trump’s schedule that night.

Still, the “Trump Tower Live” crew has not shied away from asserting that it offers a corrective to traditional news outlets. “We’re excited to be bypassing the left-wing media,” Mr. Epshteyn declared on Monday’s broadcast, prompting Mr. Sims to add, “It would be malpractice on our part if we didn’t utilize these massive social media platforms that we have.”

Mr. Trump, for his part, has said he is focused on winning the election, not creating a media property. He told a Cincinnati radio host on Tuesday, “I have no interest in Trump TV,” and industry executives say the start-up costs for a news channel would be prohibitive. Even Sean Hannity of Fox News, a dedicated Trump partisan, sounded skeptical when asked about the idea in an interview last week. “Good luck,” Mr. Hannity said. “It’s going to cost you half a billion just to get in the water.” Still, Mr. Berkowitz, the Trump Tower Live director, offered a hint about his show’s ambitions. “Younger people don’t watch CNN; they just don’t,” Mr. Berkowitz said, as the studio set was dismantled around him. “This is how they get information,” he added. “This is the best way to bring it to them. And we’re happy to do that.” – **New York Times**



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