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Blue Ridge Communications brought out hundreds of coats and some holiday cheer to children in need throughout Carbon County on Friday afternoon. “We love to help out the community, and this is the first year where we have done something like this on such a grand scale,” Blue Ridge marketing and public relations coordinator Julianne Brixius said. “It was a way for us to get the community involved, so our customers were involved, because when they bundled, we donated a coat. It was a great way to get the community involved to help out other people who might need a little extra help, especially around the holiday season.”

As part of a special promotion throughout November, for each customer who chose to “bundle” their Blue Ridge services — adding Internet to their cable account, etc. — the company would donate one winter coat. “We asked them to do 1,000,” Blue Ridge sales coach Pattie Rauch said. “They really blew that number out of the water.”

Around 500 coats were set up at St. Peter’s Community Resource Center in Weissport, where families and charitable groups in need could select from sizes ranging from toddler to young adult, with a variety of colors and styles. Another 500 coats will go to the Stroudsburg area. “It’s a good program for kids who need coats. Ours needed them desperately,” Veronica Sakik, who brought her children Annalies, Christina and Carlos, said. “We’re really happy.” Browsing through a variety of puffy, cozy selections, Christina’s eyes lit up when she found a shiny olive-colored coat, exactly what she wanted and needed. “It’s nice and warm,” Christina said. “And it’s a beautiful color!” – *Lehighton (Carbon Co.) Times News*

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Imagine if 300,000 Ohio households in 1990 had no telephone lines. Those people would have been intolerably cut off from the larger world and state lawmakers would have been in a hurry to do something about it. Well, today, the 300,000 families who don't have high-speed internet are nearly as disadvantaged. Bills moving through the Ohio House and Senate deserve quick consideration.

In the 1930s, after electric power had long been available in cities, it took help from the federal government, plus cooperation among rural neighbors and communities, to bring electricity to sparsely populated areas that investor-owned utilities weren't interested in serving. Rural areas across the U.S. today suffer from the same market neglect regarding broadband access. At the dawn of the World Wide Web, when the internet seemed a novel luxury, it might not have seemed a big deal.

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doubt. The House also is looking at a proposal by Rep. Rick Carfagna, R-Westerville, who worked 14 years in the cable industry, to incentivize the state, communities and counties to chip in dollars, to make the cost of broadband expansion feasible for providers.

Today, 92 percent of Ohioans have access to high-speed internet. In a state where technology is increasingly being touted as the future of education and employment, leaving 1 in 12 Ohioans stranded in the dial-up age makes little sense. The legislature should prioritize these bills to end this technological isolation, which is not just infuriating for those missing connectivity but also holds Ohioans back economically and educationally. Thirteen other states have enacted similar programs.

Debate on awarding Ohio high-school seniors a diploma has centered largely on whether to enact or retain tougher standards, so it's refreshing that the latest change in certifying student readiness for the

Now, of course, broadband access is critical to running a business, completing school assignments at every grade level, taking online college classes, applying for jobs, obtaining health care, organizing community activities and staying abreast of current affairs, not to mention enjoying the universe of entertainment and information available to those with a connected device. Bills with bipartisan sponsorship in both the House and Senate would authorize spending \$50 million in Third Frontier funds to help local governments and groups bring broadband infrastructure to their communities.

Ryan Smith, a Republican state representative from Bidwell, says this digital divide is "probably the No. 1 constituent issue that I get contacted about." By phone or snail mail, no

Great Big Wide World recognizes greater achievement. Starting with the Class of 2018, high schools can opt to award the Seal of Biliteracy on school transcripts of graduating seniors who test high on conversing, reading and writing in English and another language.

In many countries, speaking two or more languages is typical; but some estimate that only 20 percent of Americans are bilingual. This seal not only rewards those who've mastered another language, it also reinforces the importance of being able to communicate and understand other cultures in today's global economy. The seal is a conversation changer, oui? – *Columbus Dispatch*

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A battle over online access is roiling an industry that includes Connecticut's top internet companies. Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai has proposed getting rid of "net neutrality" rules instituted during the Obama administration that play a pivotal role in regulating how broadband providers deliver and charge for content.

As a major vote on Pai's proposal by the FCC looms this week, millions of online comments have poured into the FCC. The debate pits proponents of the changes, such as Charter Communications and Frontier Communications, who see the changes as responding to market realities, against critics who fear that an overhaul could embolden telecommunications companies to restrict content and relegate customers who are not willing or able to pay more to second-rate service. "Information is power, and everybody needs access to information," said Ramesh Subramanian, a professor of information systems at Quinnipiac University and a fellow at the Yale Information Society Project. "If the system changes, are the internet service providers willing to guarantee equal access to information for everybody?"

The 2015 rules for net neutrality — a term coined in 2002 by law professor and author Tim Wu — increased government oversight of broadband activity. Internet providers would be treated in many ways like public utilities and be barred from blocking or slowing rivals' content. The regulations also established "open-internet" safeguards to wireless services for mobile devices.

But changes have loomed since President Donald Trump picked Pai, a Republican, to lead the FCC. His proposal to do away with the current system is seen as likely to pass at the FCC's meeting Thursday because the GOP now commands a majority on the commission. "We will move from heavy-handed regulation to light-touch regulation — not a completely hands-off approach," Pai said last week in a speech at a telecommunications and media forum of the International Institute of Communications, in Washington, D.C. "We won't be giving anybody a free pass, we will simply shift from one-size-fits-all, preemptive regulation to targeted enforcement based on actual market failure or anticompetitive conduct."

Net neutrality supporters counter that the current framework compels large internet service providers to treat all web traffic equally and protect free speech. Among other arguments, they say many firms could risk content slowdowns or additional charges for unobstructed broadband access. "Net neutrality is essential to an open and free internet," U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Connecticut, said in an interview last week. "It guarantees equal access no matter who owns the platform, and it is essential not only to free speech but also innovation. If the internet service providers are able to block or overprice access to the public, it will mean higher prices for consumers, less innovation and new products — all kind of harms that could be prevented." Among local officials, Stamford Mayor David Martin joined an open letter by 58 mayors and county officials across the country opposing the net neutrality rollback.

Stamford-based Charter and Norwalk-based Frontier have expressed support for the prospective changes. They maintain that their millions of internet customers would not lose out if the current system were dismantled. In a statement, Charter said it does not block or throttle content, enact usage-based billing or charge modem or early-termination fees, to support customers getting their preferred content. "We support the FCC returning to the light-touch regulatory framework in place for more than two decades that allowed the online ecosystem to take root and keep up with the speed of innovation," the statement said.

The company also said that the 1934 Communications Act's Title II, which was widely viewed as the legal underpinning for net neutrality, was "written for the monopoly phone service in the 1930s, is simply not designed to provide consumers, and especially those living in rural and hard to serve areas, with a 21st-century broadband." In their own statement, Frontier officials similarly said the prospective changes would not affect their service. "Frontier does not block or throttle customer access to content, and Frontier supports sharing transparent information about its services," the statement said. "The changes being proposed by the FCC will not change that."

But Charter and Frontier have not directly answered whether the demise of net neutrality would usher in a new era in which broadband quality is based on what customers pay. "Broadband companies' position has historically been that net neutrality is unnecessary and that having it would take away one of their

options to serve customers better,” said David Souder, associate dean of graduate programs in the University of Connecticut’s business school. “It’s similar to the idea that on an airplane you have first-class seats and everybody else, and you pay more for first class and that allows airlines to charge lower costs everywhere else. Net neutrality took away their away ability to have ‘first-class’ seats.”

But some experts wonder whether the broadband companies would live up to their promises. “On the one hand, they say they have a long-standing commitment to open internet and won’t block or throttle content,” Subramanian said. “On the other hand, the fact that they seem to attack Title II, which actually says you should provide equal services and the same kind of access to everyone, leads me to believe they’re not totally sincere in this.”

If the FCC moves ahead with disbanding the net neutrality status quo, the opposition would not likely dissipate. Many groups are already weighing litigation. Blumenthal said he would not back down, either. “My fight against the FCC’s proposed repeal of this essential consumer principle will continue,” Blumenthal said. “It will be intensified and increased. I will begin legislative action, but there’s no guarantee of the outcome given the majorities that Republicans have in both houses of Congress.” – ***Southern Community Newspapers***

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The biggest winner in the battle to win the fracturing television audience has been Netflix. Will it become a loser amid the deal making roiling the media industry? Disney’s TV operation dwarfs Netflix in size, but the **two companies are heading in opposite directions**. Netflix’s revenue increased 32% in the first nine months of its current fiscal year, reaching \$8.4 billion, and operating income rose 163%, to \$593.4 million. Disney’s TV revenue for the same period was \$18 billion. Yet its growth was flat compared with last year, and its operating income fell 11%, to \$6 billion.

Viewers increasingly are cutting the cord in favor of streaming content online or on mobile devices. The AT&T- Time Warner merger, **announced last year**, and the potential 21st Century Fox-Disney deal, which **may be announced as soon as late this week**, are signals of an industry searching for ways to adapt to changing consumer habits. Disney already has said that **it is planning to pull its movies from Netflix** in 2019 and it is likely to relaunch them on its own family-entertainment streaming service. By buying out Fox’s stake in streaming service Hulu, it also would take majority control of a Netflix competitor, bolstering it with content from Fox’s television studio and FX cable shows, like “The Simpsons.”

Similarly, **AT&T hopes to use Time Warner content**, including on a new internet TV service, to gain a competitive edge among distributors. Another digital threat comes from Amazon and Apple, which have spent \$4.5 billion and \$1 billion, respectively, on original programming in the past year. That is small compared with the studios, but, with seemingly bottomless resources, they are sure to ramp up those investments.

Still, Netflix shouldn’t be underestimated, even without Disney’s content. Netflix’s troves of data on viewing habits helped it create shows like “House of Cards” and “The Crown.” On the surface, those looked like risky investments, some \$100 million per season, but they have paid off. Going direct-to-consumer is a new challenge for Disney. Setting up those operations, including investments in infrastructure and customer acquisition, will be expensive and time-consuming. Hulu would help with know-how and consumer data.

While the deal making may not dethrone Netflix, it faces risks. High audience numbers will be driven by blockbuster shows, not loyalty, which helps explain why content exclusivity on platforms is rising. But hits come and go. Research by MoffettNathanson suggests that winners won’t just be the players with the best content, but those who can build a consumer-friendly interface with a deep reservoir of library programming alongside constantly refreshed, original content. Deals or no deals, consumers care about content and price. That will be a challenge for everyone. – ***Wall Street Journal***

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Verizon Communications Inc. will pay around \$2.25 billion for a five-year digital streaming partnership with National Football League, according to a source. An NFL spokesman declined to comment on the financial terms of the deal. Under the partnership, Verizon renews its agreement to stream NFL games on its mobile devices but loses its exclusive rights to the airings. The No.1 U.S. wireless carrier said the deal will come into effect from January. “Verizon’s portfolio of premium digital and mobile media properties, including Yahoo Sports, will stream in-market and national games, including national pre-season, regular season, playoff games, and the Super Bowl nationwide to sports fans – regardless of mobile network,” the company said on Monday. – ***Reuters***

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A spokesman says former U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge expects to leave a Texas medical facility in time to be home in Maryland for Christmas. Ridge suffered a heart attack on Nov. 16

while attending a Republican Governors Association conference in Austin, Texas. He's been recovering at a local rehabilitation center.

The 72-year-old Republican served two terms as Pennsylvania's governor, from 1995 to 2001. He was the first homeland security secretary, serving under President George W. Bush until 2005. Ridge's spokesman, Steve Aaron, also said Sunday that Ridge's hospitalization won't affect his security firm's contract with the Transport Workers Union of America to review airplane maintenance outsourcing to overseas companies. Aaron says Ridge will be involved but that the work is being handled by a team at his firm. – *Associated Press*

