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Trumpism is slowly taking hold on your phone and computer, as the Federal Communications Commission starts chipping away at hard-fought protections on privacy and competition.

The measures, put in place before President Donald Trump took office, had upset the phone and cable industries. The new regime says consumers win if businesses face less regulation and have more incentives to invest. But consumer advocates worry these changes give broadband providers that own media businesses more power to favor their own services, among other things.

The changes are small and easily overlooked. But they're the first shots in what could turn into a full-fledged war over Obama-era "net neutrality" rules, which were designed to keep phone and cable giants from favoring their own Internet services and apps. Overturning these rules would also likely reverse a privacy measure meant to keep broadband providers from using and selling customer data without permission. "Death by a thousand cuts is a constantly overused cliché, but that's sort of what they're aiming for right now," said Matt Wood, the policy director of the consumer group Free Press, referring to the Republicans now in power at the FCC.

It's no secret Trump's hand-picked FCC chief, Ajit Pai, wants to cut regulations that he believes are holding back faster, cheaper Internet. Pai takes special aim at net neutrality rules, which regulate broadband as a utility and bar providers from playing favorites by offering speedier access to, say, their own streaming-video services. Pai considers these rules a mistake that slows investment in Internet infrastructure. His goal is to expand Internet access, especially in rural areas where choices are limited.

But an aggressive overhaul of net neutrality could be politically and legally difficult. For a telecom policy, net neutrality is popular with consumers, drawing attention from comedian John Oliver and spurring people to flood the FCC with roughly 4 million comments (not all in support, of course). A federal appeals court upheld the rules in June. This may explain why the FCC has so far opted for a piecemeal attack — an approach that may continue for a while.

A broad attack on the landmark 2015 net neutrality rules is expected. But under Pai, the FCC has made only some tweaks to the agency's approach. These rules have barred broadband providers

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from blocking and slowing some websites and creating faster access for their own services. But the rules also gave the FCC broader powers to stop telecom companies from hurting competition and consumers in other ways that weren't spelled out.



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When Barack Obama was president, the FCC used those broader powers to go after “zero-rating” plans, which give subscribers free data so long as they stick with their carrier’s own streaming-TV service, such as AT&T’s DirecTV Now. Zero rating may be popular with consumers — hey, free data! — but the FCC under Obama had argued that letting Internet providers play favorites undermines streaming-video competition and ultimately leaves consumers worse off. After Pai took office, the FCC reversed that stance and gave a thumbs-up to AT&T and others with zero-rating policies.

The agency also exempted additional smaller broadband providers from a net neutrality regulation that required companies to spell out their pricing, such as specifying how long promotional rates last and whether services capped monthly data usage. Until the FCC or Congress goes full-bore on net neutrality, the agency will likely “stand down” from enforcing it unless there’s a “really extreme” violation, said Marc Martin, technology and

telecom attorney with Perkins Coie.

The agency has also blocked part of a broadband privacy measure that requires companies such as Comcast and Verizon to take “reasonable measures” to secure customer information such as financial data or web browsing histories. The remaining privacy rules, which aren’t in effect yet, are now under threat. Under these rules, phone and cable companies must ask permission before using or selling your data. Phone and cable companies have complained that these rules are tougher than what Internet-advertising behemoths like Google and Facebook face. Pai says he wants to work with the Federal Trade Commission, another D.C. regulator, to come up with broadband privacy rules that are more in line with the laxer standards for Internet companies.

Republican lawmakers have proposed spiking them completely. Democrats say that would leave consumers vulnerable and allow companies such as Verizon or AT&T to sell consumer information to advertisers. There are vaguer privacy requirements that still apply under the net neutrality rules, but the agency may be loath to enforce them, Martin said. And the net neutrality rules are expected to be undone in any case. — **Associated Press**

The head of Comcast Corp.'s cable division, Neil Smit, will relinquish the post on April 1 and will be replaced by long-time cable division executive Dave Watson. A former Navy Seal, Smit, 60, cited

health reasons from a "previous career" and the desire to spend more time with his family. He will serve as vice chairman of Comcast, a position previously held by former chief financial officer Michael Angelakis.

Watson, who came to Comcast through a deal for a cellular phone company, assumes the new post as Comcast prepares to launch a wireless product and add to its bundle of landline phone, TV and Internet services. "Dave knows the business and has a track record of delivering results," Comcast CEO Brian Roberts said in a statement. Watson was not available for an interview, Comcast said. – *philly.com*



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