Comcast usage soars 34% to 200GB a month, pushing users closer to data cap

Enlarge / A Comcast van in Sunnyvale, California, in November 2018.
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Comcast said its customers' monthly Internet data usage increased 34 percent between Q1 2018 and Q1 2019, rising to a median of 200GB. The rise is being driven by streaming video, and, in particular, 4K video, Comcast said.

"Our customers' demand for speed and data usage keeps increasing," Comcast CEO Brian Roberts said in a call with investors yesterday (transcript). "Our median broadband home now uses over 200 gigabytes of data per month, an increase of 34 percent year-over-year, which accelerated from the fourth quarter." (Stop the Cap reported on Comcast's remarks earlier.)

The median customer is using only about 20 percent of Comcast's 1TB data cap, which is enforced in 27 of Comcast's 39 states. But the rise in median usage almost certainly means that more Comcast customers are exceeding the 1TB cap.

As we reported in January, OpenVault research on the US cable industry found that 4.1 percent of households were using at

least 1TB a month, up from 2.1 percent the previous year. That same research found that US cable Internet customers were using an average of 268.7GB per month.

Comcast used to reveal the percentage of its customers that exceed its data cap, but the company seems to have stopped making that data public. In late 2013, when the cap was 300GB, Comcast was saying that only 2 percent of its customers used more than that. By late 2015, that was up to 8 percent.

Comcast raised the cap from 300GB to 1TB in June 2016. Comcast says on its website now that only “a very small percentage of our customers use a terabyte of data in a month,” without providing a specific percentage. When contacted by Ars today, Comcast declined to provide a specific percentage.

Comcast’s website hasn’t been updated to reflect the new 200GB number yet. “As of December 2018, Xfinity Internet customers’ median monthly data usage was 174GB during the past six months,” Comcast’s site says. That same statistic was 151GB as of June 2018.

Streaming video drives up broadband usage

Comcast would prefer that customers buy Comcast cable TV instead of watching Netflix or other non-Comcast online services. But Comcast cashes in on increased streaming video usage because of its 1TB cap, charging $10 fees for each additional block of 50GB or $50 monthly for an upgrade to unlimited data.

“I think that we start with the central view that streaming is going to happen, video over the Internet is more friend than foe,” Roberts said.

While Comcast “wish[es] every bit was our bit,” customers streaming more online video and particularly 4K video is “in

the sweet spot of where this company is going to grow," he continued.

Roberts noted that Comcast has partnerships with Netflix and Amazon to resell their video services on Comcast cable boxes.

"It's a deep, successful, beautiful, elegant integration that the tech teams have done at both companies," Roberts said, perhaps somewhat overselling the installation of a video app on a cable box. "And we've done that with YouTube. And you can imagine we'll do that again with others as the world continues to evolve."

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