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Commentary

For kids' sake, TV must go a la carte

A la carte pricing would give cable subscribers meaningful programming choices

By Kevin Martin, Newton N. Minow and Dan Lipinski

July 20, 2007

With the click of their remote controls, television viewers today can access some of the best programming ever produced. But as any viewer knows, networks also are offering some of the coarsest programming ever aired. More than 45 years ago, one of the authors of this essay, then-Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton N. Minow, described TV as a "vast wasteland." He noted, "when television is good, nothing -- not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers -- nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse." That statement is truer today than it was back in 1961.

In a recent congressional hearing on the impact of TV violence on children, the senators in attendance were shown a sample of the incredibly violent fare confronting American families in their homes on a regular basis. The senators requested it be turned off before even five minutes had elapsed.

In 1961, the television industry was challenged to improve the vast wasteland of TV programming by giving its audience better, smarter and more interesting content. The greatest challenge for families now is not that there is too little programming to watch. Rather, it is finding family-friendly content in the growing sea of channels that customers must subscribe to in order to receive cable or satellite service.

Illinois recently passed a law to encourage more competition and choice in cable service. We should also help parents determine what programming their children should be exposed to. But that means parents must have real choices, and those choices must have meaningful consequences. We believe a la carte pricing, in which subscribers would pay for only the content they want, offers families the ability to have this control. For instance, parents could choose not to subscribe to channels with a significant amount of programming rated TV-MA (for mature audiences), but still have access to sports, news and entertainment programs they want their children to be able to watch.

Subscribers' choices, however, must have meaningful consequences. If a family must continue to pay for programming even when parents object to it (as they do now), there is no incentive given to programmers. Instead, there should be marketplace implications for programmers when subscribers don't want a channel, whether it is because they find the

content to be inappropriate or because they simply aren't interested. With a la carte pricing, the marketplace would drive programming.

Cable and satellite operators could implement a la carte pricing in a variety of ways. U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.), a co-author of this essay, recently introduced legislation that would allow cable and satellite subscribers to "opt out" of unwanted channels and not be charged for their cost. Another a la carte option would be to allow customers to "opt in" to particular cable networks in the same way that premium channels like HBO are offered today. Alternatively, cable and satellite operators could allow their subscribers to pick a smaller package of channels, choosing from offers of "10 packs" and "20 packs" of channels. In addition to providing television viewers with greater control over the type of content for which they are paying, a la carte could also help reduce soaring cable bills. Cable rates have more than doubled in the last 10 years. When cable companies point to the increased number of channels being offered as an explanation for the increase in prices, they ignore the fact that most of these channels are not actually being watched. According to a Nielsen Media Research report, the average cable subscriber is paying for more than 85 channels that she doesn't watch in order to obtain the approximately 16 channels that she does.

Americans deserve greater control over content and their cable bills, and research indicates it would be welcomed. According to an Associated Press-Ipsos poll, 78 percent of respondents would prefer to choose and pay for their own tailored selection of channels. Under an a la carte system, people would not have to pay for content they do not wish to receive.

Meanwhile, parents would have the tools necessary to provide their children with the best television has to offer.

We are of different generations, different political parties and of different views on many issues. But we all agree that our government should enlarge and expand choice for television viewers and help parents decide what is best for their children. Children today spend more time with television than in school. Parents need help now.

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