

## What we watch is on the radar

### Nashvillian joins FCC as issues of TV, kids and Internet boil



Deborah Tate

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Two years after the Janet Jackson breast-baring scandal and three months after the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that sex scenes on television have nearly doubled since 1998, Nashville resident and Federal Communications Commissioner Deborah Tate is settling into her new job.

The mother of three has been spending her days in the past month watching risqué broadcasts, researching issues and attending a demonstration of Broadband Over Powerline in Texas. These are just a few of the duties for one of the top media and telecommunications regulators in the land.

Tate was a Republican appointee, and with the recent presidential nomination of Robert McDowell, the FCC is expected soon to have a Republican majority.

The agency is set to tackle indecency on television, concentration of media ownership and à la carte programming for cable TV, among other issues. Although not willing to draw conclusions about some pending topics, Tate revealed in an interview recently that broadband access is one of her top issues and that she would like to make it easier for parents to protect children from objectionable television.

The FCC is expected to announce soon its first series of indecency fines against media companies in about a year, after investigating a backlog of complaints.

The broadcast industry has complained that parents aren't using the V-chips available to them to block content they find objectionable. Consumer advocates have complained that television networks get to assign ratings to their own content, so they don't have a consistent meaning from channel to channel. And games and movies have yet another host of ratings.

"I think it's confusing," Tate said. "Even the parents that want to be good parents and watch out for their kids, all the different ratings systems may be confusing."

She said she'd like to bring industry groups together to iron out a solution.

Not exactly a controversial appointment to the FCC, Tate is known for getting fighting parties to agree. Soon after taking a director's job at the Tennessee Regulatory Authority, she got a longstanding dispute between BellSouth and competing phone companies resolved.

The fights at the FCC, however, are grander in scope. Consumer groups have been pushing for bigger fines and a new procedure for taking away broadcast licenses for indecency violations, measures that have passed the House but not made it through the U.S. Senate, according to Dan Isett, director of

corporate and government affairs for the consumer group, the Parents Television Council.

But Tate said another avenue is simply to get parents to take more control.

"Everyone of us, everywhere we go, we need to talk about taking responsibility as parents," she said. "Having raised three teenage children, I know how hard that is. As a parent, one of our rules in our family was that none of our kids had a television in their room. Part of that is, when you walk by a room where the television is, you see what's going on. I think parents do need to take responsibility."

Tate praised the cable industry for beginning to offer new family friendly packages of programming as a "good first step," although she shied away from saying more needed to be done. Comcast Corp. has plans to roll out a family friendly package by the end of March.

A hotly debated issue, and another big one for parent advocates, is whether cable TV companies should be required to sell programming à la carte, where customers can pick individual channels without having to buy whole packages of programming.

Isett, with the Parents Television Council, said consumers are being forced to "subsidize" programming they find objectionable and don't want to purchase. Industry groups have argued that the à la carte approach would raise prices for each channel and reduce diversity of programming.

In a dramatic reversal, the FCC published a report Thursday supporting à la carte programming as a way to lower costs and increase choices for consumers. The report contradicted a 2004 FCC report under former FCC Chairman Michael Powell that had been based on a cable-industry survey.

Tate has said she needed to study the issue before weighing in on à la carte programming, and she did not immediately respond to the report last week.

Another critical question has to do with broadband Internet access, as the U.S. has lagged behind some other countries that subsidize broadband.

"Broadband is crucial," Tate said. "It's crucial for our education. It's crucial for the jobs of the future. It's crucial for the global economy."

That's not so much up for debate as what should be done about it. Some cities have started their own city-subsidized broadband networks despite opposition from cable and telecommunications companies, which don't want to compete with the government. A Metro Nashville task force is studying just such a possibility.

"One of the reasons people don't have access to broadband is they can't afford it," said Celia Wexler, vice president for advocacy for Common Cause, which lobbies on issues such as media reform and campaign finance. "Or big companies think it's not economically worthwhile to hook them up."

Tate qualified her own opinion somewhat.

"In some ways, government can play a role when the investment hasn't occurred," she said.

But good regulation is about being consistent, not showing preference for a particular type of new technology and peeling back some rules, she said.

"I think there is a place for government, but it may be more of a leadership role than it is a direct investment role," Tate said. •