
(July 27, 2006) As V-Chip Ads Break, Legislators Renew Call for Cable a la carte

As V-Chip Ads Break, Legislators Renew Call for Cable a la Carte
Say Parental Control Is Not the 'Ultimate Solution' Regarding Indecency

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WASHINGTON (AdAge.com) -- As a \$300 million public service ad campaign promoting the content-blocking v-chip officially breaks today, two congressmen renewed their efforts to require cable companies to offer a la carte packages to consumers.

Family Choice Act

U.S. Reps. Dan Lipinski, D-Ill., and Tom Osborne, R-Neb., proposed the legislation today, called the Family Choice Act, that would require cable providers to either adopt broadcast TV's indecency standards from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. or offer an a la carte programming option so subscribers wouldn't have to pay for channels they don't want. Another option would be the creation of a "family tier," which wouldn't contain programming unsuitable for children between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. The family tier would be limited to programs not rated TV-Mature or TV-14.

The two representatives, though praising the new v-chip campaign, which promotes how parents are in charge of what their children watch, said that they don't believe the device works.

"The v-chip is something we applaud, but we don't think it is the ultimate solution," Mr. Osborne said.

Mr. Lipinski called the campaign "just an attempt to push this [a la carte] issue off."

A la carte options

Under such schemes, currently in places such as France, Canada and Hong Kong, consumers pick and choose which cable networks they want. And importantly, they don't generally pay for channels they do not watch. Thus, nonsports fans could drop ESPN, the most expensive of the cable channels and currently a part of basic packages. Households without children could cease paying for Nickelodeon, and those without women could stop buying Lifetime, potentially saving on their monthly cable bill.

Not surprisingly, cable companies are opposed to a la carte options on the grounds that monthly costs would not be reduced for the vast majority of viewers and a la carte would lead to higher advertising costs for U.S. marketers and weaken their ability to target consumers.

'Epiphany for parents'

Meanwhile, the v-chip public service campaign was unveiled at a Senate Commerce Committee meeting today by Jack Valenti, retired president of the Motion Picture Association of America, who said the media industry was coming together in a campaign that would be an "epiphany for parents." Mr. Valenti said parents who "truly care" would follow the directions of the campaign to show who's boss of the TV.

Committee Chairman Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, who had once talked of extending broadcast indecency standards to cable, then backed off, praised the campaign, saying the government could never legislate something similar because of First Amendment issues.