

(June 14, 2007) House bill aims to curb indecent TV programs

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Lawmakers say requiring a modified form of a la carte programming or kid-friendly cable packages could protect children from mature content.

<http://money.cnn.com/2007/06/14/news/newsmakers/bc.indecency.congress.reut/index.htm>

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. lawmakers introduced a bill Thursday aimed at protecting children from indecent television programs by forcing cable and satellite providers to offer a modified form of a la carte programming or make other changes in the way they operate.

Democratic Rep. Dan Lipinski of Illinois, and Republican Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska introduced the measure.

Also supporting the legislation is Kevin Martin, chairman of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, a longtime advocate of so-called a la carte programming which would allow parents more control over what their children watch.

A la carte programming would allow consumers to pay for the channels they wish to receive.

The bill would force cable and satellite television operators to comply with one of three options.

Companies could offer an "opt-out" a la carte option, requiring them to make refunds to consumers for unwanted channels in a programming package.

Under a second option, cable operators could create a package of child-friendly programs, news and sports that omits channels with more mature content.

The third option would be for cable companies to comply with the same rules that govern broadcasters, which are restricted from airing indecent material between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. Those restrictions do not now apply to cable or satellite services.

The Net and children: still scary

"Americans deserve greater control over content and their cable bills," FCC Chairman Martin said at a news conference with the lawmakers. "Our message today is very simple: No consumer should have to pay for content they do not wish to receive. Period."

But the cable industry said evidence showed that a mandated a la carte regime would result in higher prices and less diversity in programming.

"Instead of resorting to unnecessary mandates that would eliminate educational, family, religious and other quality networks, consumers have a wide variety of parental controls ... which would allow them to control content," said Brian Dietz, spokesman for the National Cable & Telecommunications Association. The group represents the country's biggest cable operators and programmers.

The National Hispanic Media Coalition and National Congress of Black Women echoed the cable industry's concerns and said the bill would snuff out minority programming. Religious network 'The Inspirations Networks' called the bill a recipe for disaster and said religious and family programming would be among the first to be harmed in an a la carte regime.

The legislation will most likely face an uphill battle as a similar bill introduced by Lipinski in 2006 died before it reached committee.

Networks win battle over FCC decency rules

"I believe there is more momentum right now," Lipinski said. "People are becoming more and more upset by what they are seeing on TV. There is more desire to look for solutions that can be done."

The FCC's crackdown on indecent content on broadcast television was dealt a blow earlier this month when a federal appeals court rejected the FCC's view that expletives uttered by celebrities during the 2002 and 2003 Billboard Music Awards broadcasts violated decency standards. Martin said Thursday the agency had not yet decided if it will appeal the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The new bill is also supported by Parents Television Council, Consumers Union and Concerned Women for America.