

(June 14, 2007) Blog: Family Friendly Cable Mandate

Politicos propose 'family-friendly' cable mandate

Posted by Anne Broache

http://news.com.com/8301-10784_3-9729756-7.html

Just last week, a federal appeals court called into question an earlier finding that pop icons Cher and Nicole Ritchie broke indecency rules by uttering the "F-Word" and "S-Word" on broadcast TV awards shows a few years ago. On Thursday, politicians on Capitol Hill responded: with a proposal for new regulations aimed at promoting a more "family-friendly" selection of cable and satellite TV content.

With enthusiastic endorsements from Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin and parent advocacy groups, Reps. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) and Jeff Fortenberry (R-Neb.) on Thursday staged a press conference to unveil a bill called the Family and Consumer Choice Act.

In order to pass muster under the bill, according to a copy seen by CNET News.com, all cable and satellite TV providers would have to meet one of three requirements:

- Ensure that all content broadcast between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. complies with existing broadcast indecency rules (including, for example, the "F-word" and sexual or "patently offensive" activities),
- Allow subscribers to opt for a "family tier" that would exclude all programming with a "mature audiences" or TV-14 rating, or
- Allow subscribers to opt out of any channel they don't want to receive--with a few exceptions--and in return, place a credit on their bills equivalent to the cost of providing those channels.

Lipinski said in a statement that his proposal is a good way to help parents shield their offspring from violent and indecent shows "without limiting anyone's choices, and without imposing a single, one-size-fits-all mandate on providers."

FCC Chairman Martin, who has blasted last week's appeals court decision, has been prodding cable and satellite companies to provide so-called "a la carte" offerings since 2003, but the industry has not responded in a "meaningful way," he lamented in his remarks on Thursday. The need for such flexibility is especially important, he added, since cable prices have doubled over the past decade.

The cable industry, by contrast, argues that a forced a la carte regime would actually result in higher prices for consumers.

Here's why: special-interest channels are often bundled with more popular channels, thereby increasing the number of places where advertisers can show their commercials. But if fewer consumers opt for the entire bundle, advertising revenues would go down, which would likely force cable operators to raise rates for the more popular channels. That, in effect, would mean a selection of 10-15 hand-picked channels may end up costing the same as a basic cable bundle of 75 channels, the industry says.

A smarter option, the National Cable & Telecommunications Association argues, is to take advantage of what it calls "a wide variety of a wide variety of parental controls through cable set-top boxes and the V-chip which allow them to control content by time, show, network and rating." TiVo's KidZone service, which launched more than a year ago, is one such offering.

The Parents Television Council, a Washington advocacy group, disagreed. As PTC director of corporate and government affairs Dan Isett said at Thursday's press conference: "Lets be very clear: what is being proposed today is the creation of a free market in cable programming which does not exist today."