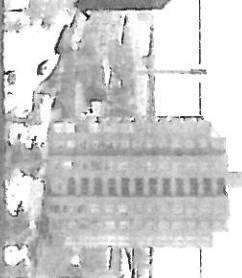


Omaha World-Herald

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER OWNED BY EMPLOYEES

METROPOLITAN EDITION
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2007



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Opinion Columns

Empower consumers in city-cable TV deals

BY THE REV. VAL PETER

The writer, of Omaha, is executive director emeritus of Girls and Boys Town and a member of the advisory board of the Parents Television Council.

Omaha and Bellevue will soon start negotiations to re-new cable television operators' contracts, allowing them to use our streets and sidewalks and bring cable TV into our homes. This is a plea to our public servants to help bring cable choice to our community.

Cable network programmers currently have a chokehold on the public. They literally bring in billions of dollars annually by saying you must pay them for channels you don't want, don't watch and may actually find offensive. And the programmers force their bundle onto every distributor. There is no alternative.

There is something terribly wrong with requiring customers to pay for a product they don't want and may even find offensive in order to get something they do want. Why do they get away with this? Because no one is stopping them.

For example, you can go to Oak View 24 to watch a movie, but you aren't forced to pay for the other 23 movies you're not there to watch. When you subscribe to Sports Illustrated magazine, you're not forced to also purchase Time and People.

When you pick up The World-Herald from a newsstand, you aren't forced to also purchase the New York Times. If you were, you'd go to a different newsstand. But in the cable world, there is no other newsstand.

The cable folks want you to believe that if they give us consumers real choice, prices would go up. That's balderdash, and they know it. Introduce competition, and two things always happen: Choices go up, and prices come down. It's the American way.

The cable folks use a very phony argument when they say: If you prudes don't like stuff, then just don't watch the offensive channels or get a V-chip or a digital box.

The reason this is a phony argument is clear. The big boys/media conglomerates know human nature. And they know one thing for sure: The greater the effort a person has to put into something, the less likely they'll do it.

That's why the V-chip and digital box are supported by cable giants. They know it takes more effort to get a V-chip than to simply mark down on a cable contract the five channels I don't want.

There's an old adage: as much freedom as possible and as little restriction as necessary. Who gets the first shot at "as much freedom as possible"? What do you think? Should the major media conglomerates get that, or should the common people?

I know what my choice is.

Also, most religious programming is offered to cable systems without charge. So in April 2007, the National Religious Broadcasters endorsed cable choice and the idea that free cable channels should not be excluded from a basic cable package. This pro-family solution was developed by the Parents Television Council, of which I am a member.

I urge elected officials to help us block channels we don't want and get a corresponding break on our cable bill. The satellite radio companies are proposing this. Cable TV should also. Please act now. You can have a big-time impact in this debate.