

Family fare proponents push à la carte cable: Advocacy groups say family-friendly packages are flawed.

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Advocacy groups say plans of cable television companies to offer family-friendly programming packages are flawed and designed to thwart consumers from getting what they really want: à la carte sales, in which subscribers pick and choose their channels.

The marketing model traditionally used by cable companies and the two leading satellite TV services requires consumers to subscribe to channels in various prepackaged “tiers.”

For most consumers, it has been impossible, for example, to subscribe to Nickelodeon without also subscribing to MTV or to get Discovery Channel without also getting FX. That means that in order to get Nickelodeon’s *SpongeBob SquarePants* and his hijinks in Bikini Bottom, you might also have to take the bikinied bottoms running wild on MTV’s *Spring Break*.

“Right now, to get the good channels, you have to buy the raunchy channels,” complained Jim Metrock, head of the Birmingham, Alabama-based child advocacy organization Obligation Inc.

Portions of the cable industry—under pressure from the federal government—now seem more willing to package family-friendly channels into a special programming tier to help parents keep at bay programming with sex, violence and rough language.

Time Warner Cable, the nation’s second-largest operator, announced the specifics of its family tier package in mid-December. Then on December 23, Comcast Cable, the country’s top cable company, announced its plan to offer such a package early in 2006.

“We think the more variety in services we can give the customer, the better,” said Ray Kistler, Comcast’s general manager in Mobile, Alabama. Pricing will vary by market. Comcast’s family tier will include 16 channels that the company identifies as “family-friendly programming networks of primarily G-rated content” as well as all broadcast network affiliates, religious channels, Hispanic programming and public access programming.

In addition to the 20-25 channels that customers receive on Comcast’s “Basic Cable” tier, the family tier will offer Disney Channel, Toon Disney, Sprout, Discovery Kids, Science Channel, Nickelodeon/Nick Too, Nickelodeon GAS, TBN, HGTV, Food Network, DIY, CNN Headline News, the Weather Channel, National Geographic, C-SPAN and C-SPAN 2.

All 16 channels in the family tier will continue to be available as part of other existing packages, according to the company.

However, proponents of à la carte, multichannel pay-TV programming—encompassing both cable and satellite TV—insist that talk of family tiers is merely an effort to derail their drive to force providers to sell programming by the individual channel.

“They are throwing a bone out there to keep the government from doing anything. In every other aspect of our lives, we buy what we need,” said Metrock. “Let’s say I just wanted ESPN. I’d have to buy 59 other channels to get ESPN. Or if I wanted the Disney Channel I would have to buy 59 other channels. They say you don’t have to watch them. Well, yeah, but I don’t have to pay for them either—or I shouldn’t have to.”

It’s not that simple, counters the cable TV industry. “Several economic analyses have all concluded that à la carte would likely lead to higher prices, less choice and less diversity in programming,” said Brian Dietz, a spokesman for the National Cable Television Association.

“The current method used by cable and satellite providers to deliver program packages does allow niche channels to survive along with . . . some of the more popular networks,” Dietz said. “There are nearly 400 networks that are available, and obviously everybody doesn’t watch all 400, but there are channels that serve every interest.”

Time Warner's family tier announcement prompted a skeptical Brent Bozell of the Parents Television Council to charge that the company is "deliberately offering a product designed to fail." Bozell noted that, according to Time Warner, no family would want to watch sports, classic movies, religious programming or "any news channel other than Time Warner's CNN." *-Religion News Service*