



Because Our Children Are Watching

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Senator John McCain
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Dear Senator McCain:

As you are no doubt aware, there has been a strong push in recent weeks for the unbundling of basic cable packages, and with good reason.

There is something terribly and fundamentally wrong with requiring consumers to pay for a product they don't want, and may even find offensive, in order to get something they do want. It would be unthinkable for a magazine publisher to tell you that in order to get *Better Homes and Gardens*, you also have to pay for a subscription to *Playboy*. But in effect, that's exactly what the cable industry has been forcing cable subscribers to do for years. Twenty years ago there may have been some policy justification for a cross-subsidy business model; but today the practice amounts to nothing short of licensed extortion of American families by the cable industry.

As the issue of broadcast indecency continues to heat up, consumers are becoming aware that the public airwaves will continued to be barraged with indecent content unless and until we also address the even more vulgar, even more violent and even more sexually graphic material coming into our living rooms through basic cable (which reaches more than 85% of US households).

The cable industry knows that there is a strong movement afoot either to give the FCC the authority to regulate content on basic cable, or to give subscribers the option of family-friendly cable tiers or à la carte cable packaging, which would allow consumers to pay for only those channels they actually want. In response to this movement, this week the cable industry announced that it would provide free equipment to subscribers so they can block unwanted channels.

Why did it take so much public and congressional pressure for the industry to provide this solution? The answer is simple: their monopolistic leverage has provided them immunity from being held accountable. Obviously the cable industry has had the technology and wherewithal to provide consumers the ability to block cable channels they deemed unfit for their children for quite sometime. But instead the industry withheld this technology and even *charged consumers* for its use in an effort to line its pockets without any regard for what was truly best for their customers. This week's announcement is at best an empty gesture meant to appease angry consumers and lawmakers, and it shows the industry's desperation to maintain the status quo.

Still, we are heartened by the fact that the cable industry is at least willing to acknowledge that a problem exists, and we are heartened that they have proposed a

solution. But it is not the right solution because consumers are still paying for those blocked networks.

Why should parents have to subsidize cable channels that undermine their core values and beliefs? Why should a parent who wants their child to benefit from educational programming on the Disney Channel or the Discovery network also have to pay for offensive material like the following, from MTV's *Real World: San Diego*:

Cameran: "Brad's gonna have to be wacking it the whole time he's here."
Brad: "Why me?"
Robin: "Because you've had sex with somebody for five years, constantly on a base, haven't you?"
Brad: "Yeah."
Cameran: "This'll be the longest you've gone."
Robin: "This will be the longest you've gone without sex for 5 years."
Brad: "Oh, damn."
Robin: "Speaking of masturbation..."
Cameran: "I have my vibrator."

Or stomach-turning jokes about pedophilia, as in the following example from Comedy Central's *South Park*:

TV anchor: "Do you actually believe in heaven?"
Man: "If heaven is an 8-year-old boy, and the ladder is my penis."

And it's not just that an outraged public is paying for something it doesn't want, it is also – indirectly – footing the bill for offensive material on the public airwaves. In essence, Americans are paying Infinity Radio's broadcast indecency fines through forced subscription fees that are paid back to Viacom's equally-foul cable networks.

Offering parents the ability to choose the channels they want, and to pay only for those channels, puts power back in the hands of the consumer – of parents – and forces the producers of indecent or violent programming to fund their own raunch.

The cable industry has been carried on the backs of American consumers long enough. It is time for this extortion to end.

Best Regards,

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