

POINTS OF VIEW

Who are bad guys in round of cable rate hikes?

As a responsible cable operator, I am compelled to respond to your editorial of Sept. 2, 1993, concerning the new cable rates.

I don't necessarily think the new rates are fair either, nor did our rates need regulating. Rarely in the history of the cable industry have cable operators united so strongly against a piece of legislation as we did the Cable Act of 1992. Congress, however, chose to impose regulation and to direct a beleaguered FCC to figure out how to make the impossible work.

The FCC made the broad assumption that all cable companies were charging more for services than they cost to deliver, so they calculated the per-channel "benchmark" rate for systems nationwide — rural or urban, large or small — based on the same formula.

Monthly rates for customers are figured by multiplying that per-channel rate by the number of channels on the system, and then adding equipment charges which are based on cost.

The number of channels and the type and age of equipment used varies widely among cable systems. That is why the new rates differ from one community to the next, even if served by the same cable company.

The FCC's major error was its failure to recognize the benefits that companies like MetroVision were creating by charging extremely low (subsidized) prices for broadcast basic service. We are filling that need because, like your editor, we believe that residents of our communities should have access to basic cable TV at an inexpensive rate as possible.

In fact, our broadcast basic service was free for many years. Then, the U.S. Copyright Office said we were not permitted to give a service away, so we charged \$1 per year — still more than fair. Now the government's new regulated rate, based on the uniform benchmark, is more than \$120 per year. Yes, something's screwy. The lower end users may no longer be subsidized by the higher end users. That solution seems to please only those customers who were doing most of the subsidizing. No doubt this issue will be revisited by Congress soon and the FCC will "fix" it for us again.

Despite the new prices we feel the need to address the incentive behind our delivery of programming. The cable industry began as a delivery service for customers who could not receive broadcast signals clearly over the air with antennas. Never mind that the broad-



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casters had promised universal service in exchange for their free use of the public airwaves. We were not selling those signals; we were delivering those signals.

We have never claimed any ownership of them, nor do we now. We do, however, take pride in the cable programming that our own industry has helped foster: CNN, Discovery, HBO, etc.

As it turned out, those same customers who bought our broadcast delivery service also became attached to these cable channels. They started to watch them, talk about them and even buy advertising on them. All of a sudden broadcasters (and even newspapers) are seeing dwindling shares of audience

and advertisers, and they're scared. Someone hungrier has come along and eaten the lunch they took for granted. Sorry, but that's free enterprise, and that's the way it works.

Now Congress has permitted the broadcasters to ask for cash or other consideration from any cable system who wants to carry broadcast programming.

MetroVision is pleased that these "retransmission consent" negotiations are proceeding smoothly with our local broadcasters. We hope to have agreements with all of them by the Oct. 6 deadline; however, as we have stated publicly, we will not pay cash to any broadcaster. We are opposed to paying for programming that is free over the air.

In the unfortunate event that a broadcaster denies us permission to continue delivering its signal, we will have to remove that station from our channel lineup. Either way, we will press forward with increasingly popular cable programming and look for new and better ways to deliver it. We'll look for ways to make it interactive, and easy to use, and more reliable, and more fun, and well, you get the picture.

This is an industry of entrepreneurs — bright, hard working, innovative en-

gineers, entertainers and business people who are dedicated to making television your link to the future. That is why we are spending millions of dollars right here in Livonia, Redford, Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi to install advanced fiber optics and make use of new technology called "digital compression" which has the potential to quadruple the number of channels our customers receive.

Most cable companies are private ventures started by real men and women like your dad and your mom who went to the bank, asked for a loan, and took a risk to develop the television system that is now the envy of the world. And we have done it at a price that more than 60 million Americans decide is fair every single month. Some 72,000 of those people live right here in the area MetroVision serves.

With or without competition, we will continue to deliver quality programming at reasonable prices if the government will please keep out of our business.

Guest columnist Tom Bjorklund is vice president and regional manager of MetroVision, which provides cable television service to Livonia, Redford, Farmington, Farmington Hills and Novi.

What's the truth about those MEAP and SAT scores?

QUESTION: Every newspaper or magazine I read points out how poor our high school graduates perform in the area of basic skills, especially reading and math. I teach in a school district where our MEAP and SAT scores have gone up. How much fact and how much myth do these journalistic news makers deal with? What process would insure children learn basic reading and math skills?

ANSWER: In general, most newspaper and magazine articles report what is called "group data," the easiest data to gain access to and the poorest type of data to quote from.

For instance, newspaper articles consistently report how SAT scores have decreased nationwide over the years. The inference then can be made that SAT scores are down in every school district including this residential area. Yet, I know for a fact, from talking with

administrators, that SAT scores have increased in many districts in this newspaper's readership area.

However, when the SAT scores of the middle and upper middle class school districts in this readership area are averaged in with Detroit and other communities with massive social problems, the overall SAT score in Michigan and nationwide is down. And an overall column on SAT or MEAP scores being down is, I guess, much more newsworthy than breaking out the data and looking at each district as an entity unto itself.

All this notwithstanding, we do have a major problem with too many younger adults graduating with weak basic skills for reasons that can no longer be blamed on newspapers nor rationalized away. What are some of the major issues?

■ Many districts have used social promotion (moving the kid on because he is too big for the desk and may beat up



DOC DOYLE

on smaller kids on the playground) for years. Regardless of how much time and energy teachers and principals devote to address the incoming adolescents, there has been minimal pressure on those students to "put out or get out". Instinctively they know what the mandatory age 16 system is all about, a system that will carry them on their backs, often to graduation.

■ We create middle and high school remedial (refresher) math and English

classes for non-performing students taught by those teachers who don't want to be there (they want the more disciplined, less obnoxious, brighter students). And then we give the kids the same material (basic math and English skills) year after year, with no accountability at all required of the student or their parents.

■ If the remedial math or English teacher retains certain kids, he/she gets those same kids back next year in the same text book, possibly the same seat.

■ In some school districts, if a teacher, especially a middle or high school teacher takes a hard line and punks those who are doing literally nothing, a conference with the building principal will result.

For those who weren't aware, most principals keep data on their teachers' grading style. Give an abundance of A(s) and you could be suspect, give too many E(s) and better have a reason.

And if the principal believes a teacher is not using the correct teaching methods and pushes too hard, he can expect the district's MEA representative to raise the question of the academic freedom clause in the contract.

■ But don't just blame the MEA or the building principal because the central office staff often requires principals to keep the grading data. So the blame, obviously has to end up, as always, in one office — the superintendent.

Regardless of how we paint the picture or rationalize, there are children graduating without the basic skills necessary for success in the work place. And community colleges have now inherited the task. You ask if I know of a process that I believe will increase children's basic skills in my next column.

James "Doc" Doyle, a former teacher/school administrator/university instructor, is president of Doyle and Associates, an educational consulting firm.

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