

Don't charge for religious shows as we limit smut

By Jerry Falwell

January 1, 2006

Washington is engaged in a welcome debate about how to protect our children from indecent programming on television. We hope our elected officials will approach this effort wisely, taking care not to institute a misguided policy known as "a la carte" or "per channel charge" that would have the unintended consequence of preventing millions of Americans from tuning in to religious programming.

Although we sometimes take it for granted, the rise of religious broadcasting has arguably been the most important advance for the spread of Christianity since the publication of the Gutenberg Bible 500 years ago. With the emergence of cable, satellite, and digital technology, the ability to share the gospel over the airwaves has been revolutionized over the past quarter century.

Early missionaries sailed the oceans, braved the elements, crossed continents, and climbed over dangerous mountain passes to visit villages from sub-Saharan Africa to the furthest regions of Asia. But in the last half century, the ability of the Church to reach the lost has been revolutionized by a new technology: television.

Today over 90 million American households and millions more worldwide can now hear the gospel through a religious broadcast directly into their home. It can truly be said that satellite and cable television have been second only to the Bible in the most powerful evangelistic tool in history.

Thanks to modern technology, many formerly local ministries are now global in scope. Yet at this most promising moment the very survival of religious broadcasting is threatened in the United States. A flawed federal regulatory proposal has reemerged that would institute a per-channel charge on cable television (sometimes called "a la carte") which threatens to purge Christian broadcasts from the vast majority of U.S. households.

Proponents of placing a per-channel charge on cable and satellite programming range from Naderite consumer groups to well-intentioned proponents of decency standards. They mistakenly believe that a federal mandate on per-channel charge would reduce cable costs to consumers and make television a better medium for their children. On both counts, proponents of these regulations are sadly mistaken.

First of all, under a federally mandated per-channel charge, cable costs are more likely to go up rather than down.

An October 2003 report by the General Accounting Office (GAO) states that a per-channel charge regulation could “result in higher per channel rates” and “cable rates could actually increase for some consumers.”

The GAO report also found that because increased license fees would be passed on to cable subscribers, monthly cable bills would not decline for most consumers.

As for making television more family-friendly, I agree wholeheartedly with our friends who say we need tougher decency standards. But we should not throw the baby out with the bath water. In our zeal to protect our children from MTV and VH1, we should not adopt policies that would prevent millions from hearing the gospel. The answer is more family-friendly programming and additional religious and family-oriented channels – the very niche networks that would be endangered by a federal a la carte mandate.

How tragic it would be to endanger religious broadcasting in America because of a policy dictate from Washington. What a shame it would be for this great country to deny those seeking inspiration and redemption access to the Word of God. And what a shame it would be if we denied a daily message of hope to those faithful whose physical infirmities keep them from leaving their homes.

I hope and pray that the bureaucrats and politicians in Washington are listening: Adopt higher decency standards. But protect the ability of cable and satellite broadcasters to share the message of God’s love with as large an audience as possible.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell is the founder of the Old Time Gospel Hour, chancellor of Liberty University and chairman of The Moral Majority Coalition.