

Expensive Wire

By Reg P. Wydeven
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A while back, I wrote about my family ditching our Amish-ness by getting digital cable, high-speed Internet and digital phones. It's been a month and a half, and I'm completely hooked. I stay up too late watching junk, like 'Celebrity Rehab' and 'Sponge Bob Squarepants'. I can also check my fantasy football stats online whenever I want and use my caller ID to screen telemarketers.

Even better, we got the cable for a special introductory price. But, I'm sure the cable company knows I'm now addicted, so I'll have a hard time saying no when they jack up the price after my contract expires. Hopefully the U.S. Federal Communications Commission will prevent me from being forced to choose between my money and my addiction.

The FCC recently opened an investigation into the pricing policies of major cable operators to ensure their customers are being treated fairly. The agency is examining Comcast Corp., Time Warner Cable Inc., Cox Communications Inc., Charter Communications Inc., Cablevision Systems Corp., Bright House Networks, Suddenlink Communications, Bend Cable Communications, GCI Company, Harron Entertainment, RCN Corp. and also Verizon Communications Inc., which offers pay-TV services with fiber optic service.

The FCC launched its investigation after the Consumers Union sent a letter to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation asking for an investigation into the practice of moving analog channels to the digital tier. The FCC had received a significant number of consumer complaints about this practice, which has accelerated this year.

Cable companies move analog channels to digital to free up bandwidth for other uses, such as high-definition channels. Therefore, analog customers will have to get a digital set-top box from the cable company or sign up for the digital TV tier to watch those channels.

This practice, the FCC contends, reduces the services offered to customers while resulting in higher prices. In addition, the FCC's probe will also explore whether cable operators and Verizon are confusing customers by coinciding the shift of analog channels with the country's transition to all digital broadcasting in February, which are completely unrelated.

The cable companies have two weeks to respond to the FCC's inquiries. Hopefully they crack the whip before I have to renew my contract!