

GUEST COLUMNIST

State of Decency in DC

By Sen. Ted Stevens

When I first became Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee a little more than a year ago, I was approached by several groups and individuals who were concerned about decency in media content. It quickly became apparent that any attempt to resolve this issue must involve not only the broadcast industry, but also cable and satellite providers. Many doubted all of the parties involved could come together and address this issue successfully. However, in recent months, members of Congress, industry leaders, children's groups, and family-friendly and faith-based organizations have begun an important conversation about decency. While we still have a long way to go, we have taken important steps toward resolving some of the issues involved in this debate.

In November 2005, our Committee convened an Open Forum on Decency, and in December and January, we held hearings on this issue. During these discussions, more than 30 panelists shared their concerns and insights with the members of the Senate.

In the months following our forum and hearings, major developments occurred in the marketplace. In December, Comcast, Time Warner, and Cox each announced that they were instituting family tiers and that other cable companies were planning to do the same. After our January hearing, DirecTV and EchoStar also announced family tiers. Although these tiers vary from provider to provider, they generally include popular children's programming, the major broadcast networks, local access channels, and religious and ethnic programming. Some family tiers include well-known programming names, such as the Disney Channel, Discovery Kids, National Geographic, and Nickelodeon.

In addition to introducing family tiers, cable providers and broadcasters have worked together to make parental controls easier to use. Recognizing that education and out-

reach are crucial, different industry segments have joined forces in an unprecedented effort to make parents aware of the blocking mechanisms that are currently available.

Existing blocking technologies are able to filter objectionable channels and programs, whether they are delivered over-the-air or via cable and satellite, but few people know how to use these filters. For example, surveys show that only three percent of Americans know how to use the V-chip, which is included in every television larger than 13 inches sold today and enables parents to block programs based on ratings.

To help overcome this challenge, broadcasters, movie studios, cable programmers and operators, satellite providers, and the consumer electronics manufacturers have formed a coalition to assist parents. This coalition will develop

a \$300 million advertising campaign aimed at educating parents about how to use blocking technologies and better monitor television programming. Informational materials will also be provided at retail stores and inside TV packaging.

Our government should not be in the business of choosing which programs are appropriate for our nation's children. By showing the public how to use available blocking mechanisms, we ensure those in the best position to make viewing decisions – parents – are able to do so.

Going forward, we must continue the dialogue that began with our Committee's Open Forum on Decency five months ago. We must also allow time for recent efforts to take hold in the marketplace. I will continue to work with my Commerce Committee Co-Chairman Senator Inouye, the members of our Committee, interested groups and organizations, and those in industry to ensure Americans have the ability to monitor and filter the programming coming into their homes.

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