

Why *A La Carte* Video Would Eviscerate Diversity and Minority Participation in Cable

David Honig
President, Minority Media and Telecommunications Council

[509 words]

Today the Senate Commerce Committee held a hearing on the future of video service in America, taking into consideration how the marketplace has continued to evolve given the myriad choices in programming channels and in delivery mechanisms - including the explosion in online video. At the hearing, Senator John McCain reintroduced the discredited idea of forcing distributors to sell programming on a per-channel or *a la carte* basis - an idea he unsuccessfully championed in 2004 and again in 2006.

But the reasons that *a la carte* was roundly rejected by Congress years ago are just as relevant today: such rules would decimate the economic model that has encouraged ever-increasing diversity of viewpoints on television and has made possible even the modest increase in minority ownership of programming.

On the surface, *a la carte* seems appealing. Certainly greater consumer influence over programming has merit. Nonetheless, the few diverse, independent channels that have managed to survive must be preserved, and new independent channels must not face insurmountable barriers to entry.

Unintentionally, *a la carte* would be the death knell for program diversity.

To understand why, think of multichannel cable as a video library. In a traditional library, natural curiosity motivates visitors to browse the shelves and check out books they'd never heard about. In the same way, cable channel surfing allows viewers to encounter and enjoy programming they'd never choose if the government had forced them to order cable "*a la carte*."

If traditional libraries operated *a la carte*, they'd only need drive-up windows. Readers could order books they'd already heard about - one book at a time. Far fewer books would be written and published, and most books would be mass appeal titles. Our intellectual and cultural life would lose much of its vibrancy and depth.

Similarly, under cable *a la carte*, new channels featuring gospel music, international culture, or African American movies would never get off the ground. Without the daily exposure that comes with channel surfing, it would take these new channels decades to attract the millions of loyal viewers a channel needs to recoup the costs of producing high quality programming for a national audience.

That's why a slew of respectable, dispassionate studies from the FCC, the Government Accountability Office, the Congressional Research Service, and several analysts concluded that *a la carte* rules would send minority-owned and other diverse programming channels to the digital graveyard while ultimately costing consumers more money per month for far fewer viewing options.

As I wrote in 2006, television exposes us to cultures with which we're unfamiliar and ideas with which we may be uncomfortable. That's a good thing: without that programming diversity, Americans would become less informed, less challenged, less enlightened and more culturally illiterate. Without programming diversity, we would be more likely to shy away from debate and isolate ourselves into the polarized subgroups that make our political discourse so full of hatred and stereotypes. That's why *a la carte* isn't just a 'technical' television issue. It's a potential stake in the cultural and intellectual heart of our nation.