

"USA TODAY hopes to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity to help make the USA truly one nation."

—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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ABC, Time Warner truce signals a new era for viewers

Time Warner's decision Tuesday to turn tail and put ABC programming back on its cable stations may warm the hearts of up to 8 million cable viewers who faced the prospect of missing out on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Not as easily forgotten, however, is the impression that increasingly large media giants feel comfortable trampling their customers' interests in search of fatter profits.

Disney tried to use its ownership of ABC as leverage to secure better deals for the other cable stations it owns, such as the Disney Channel, Toon Disney and a soap-opera channel. Want the popular product? Then you have to sell the lesser ones, too.

But Time Warner, preferring other options for its customers, had potent leverage of its own. By cutting off ABC from millions of homes Monday, Time Warner threatened to put a dent in the network's ratings during the crucial sweeps month.

This wasn't the first time cable and network giants battled at the expense of consumers. Earlier this year, Cox Cable temporarily dropped Fox from its lineup in a dispute over how Fox's cable stations were treated. But the retreat Tuesday by ABC and Time Warner suggests it might be one of the last.

The threat of competition from satellite TV was a key factor in pushing Time Warner to plug ABC back in — and a signal of increasing competition for viewers' business on many fronts.

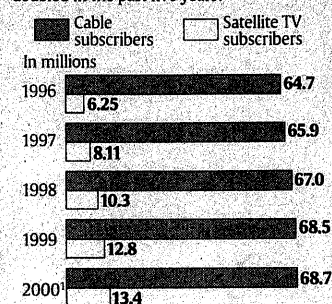
On Tuesday, EchoStar started running ads in four markets offering to install its satellite TV service free. Takers not only could get ABC, but lots of other cable channels as well, and for a price comparable to cable. And Disney announced plans to pay the cost of satellite service to at least some of the disgruntled Time Warner customers. Keeping ABC off the air at the risk of losing lots of customers doesn't make much business sense.

The good news is that this is emblematic of a new era of competition that rapidly consolidating media firms can't ignore.

Even without Time Warner's help, satellite TV is proving a formidable competitor to cable. In just the first three months of this year, DirecTV signed up more than 400,000 cus-

Finally, there's competition

Subscriptions to satellite television services, which compete against cable, have more than doubled in the past five years:



¹—Cable figure is from February 2000; satellite figure is from March 2000

Sources: National Cable Television Association; Satellite Broadcasting and Communications Association

By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

tomers, a 33% jump over last year. Overall, these companies now beam TV programming to more than 13 million homes.

The Internet offers the promise of still more viewing and listening options, as consumers can point and click to their favorite programs without paying a toll to their cable company. Listeners today can tune into Internet radio stations. TV stations upload some of their local programming onto Web sites. Movie studios are planning to release films on the Net. Even the networks are beginning to offer some news programs on their Web sites.

And competition for high-speed access to the Net promises to increase as well. By the end of the year, both leading satellite companies plan to offer high-speed links, putting it in the ballpark, at least, with cable modems. At the same time, phone companies are upgrading their own systems, with plans to offer not just fast Internet downloads, but some video programming as well.

To be sure, continued consolidation could choke off competition even in this new realm, a risk federal regulators need to keep a watchful eye on. But as long as consumers can vote with their feet, even a lumbering giant has to tread lightly.

Today's debate: Textbooks

Algebra texts fail students

Our view:

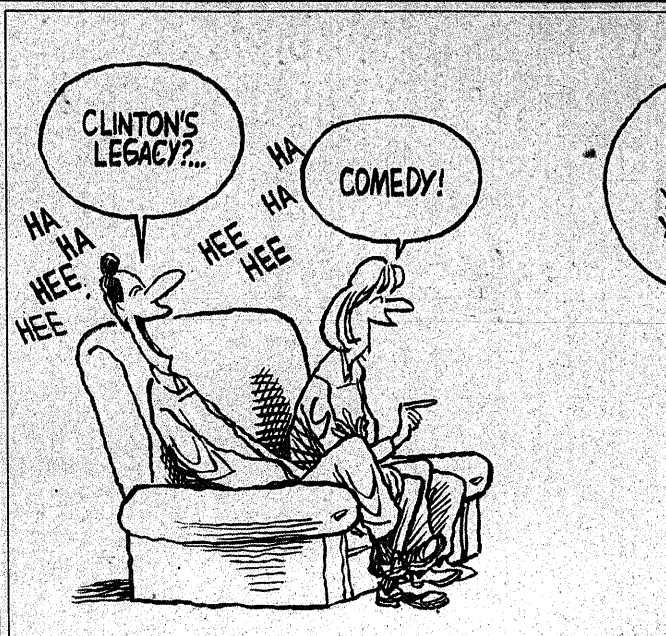
They can't even prepare kids for state-mandated exams.

Nearly all schools systems now require students to take algebra. Some states are phasing in statewide math tests that include algebra problems and must be passed to earn a high school diploma.

Yet no school district in the entire country provides students with an "excellent" algebra textbook, according to a review released last

tests or math tests with algebra problems that must be passed to earn a diploma. This in spite of the fact that the study of algebra texts found that there are no high-quality textbooks for states to buy.

Why not? For years, textbook publishers have churned out thick, expensive, colorful books that cover a thousand topics a millimeter deep. It's a profitable strategy for the publishers, because each text covers every topic demanded by several states' "adoption" committees — the groups that set down the rules for what texts must include.



Letters

Driving and dialing just

Cell phone use while driving should be made illegal — whether the phones are held in the hand or feature an external microphone and speaker ("Ban car phones? You might as well ban talking instead," Our View; "We need laws for cell phones," Opposing View, Dialing while driving debate, Thursday).

Driving a 2-ton vehicle is hazardous at best and is a full-time job that requires all of a driver's concentration. There will be those who will drive and talk on the phone at the same time regardless of any laws in place prohibiting the act.

If cell phone use while driving becomes illegal, offenders should be guilty of a misdemeanor — if no one is injured or killed. Otherwise, the crime should be a felony.

Getting all states to pass a standard law will be difficult at best, if not impossible. However, perhaps the federal government could play a part by having the Federal Communications Commission issue some form of regulation that would minimize usage while a vehicle is moving, and

a rule that would move states toward passing a uniform regulation.

N.E. Thornsbe
Reno, N.

Counting the wounded

USA TODAY's editorial opposing controls on cell phones was incredibly admitted that phone use resulted in 1 times as many accidents — the equivalent of driving drunk — but then, rejoiced the general highway fatality rate is down. And it concluded that there is no urgent reason to regulate car phones now.

Americans applaud the low number of deaths per million miles driven, but they don't reflect on the fact that several million people are injured each year on highways.

Why are we so reluctant to count wounded as part of the price of wars, cars and guns?

Daniel Ly
Fort Collins, C.

Airline-smoking talk only a smoke screen

USA TODAY reader Dave Pickrell's letter is disgraceful, and he is disingenuous ("Airline-smoking reality flies over heads," Friday).

He refers to himself as the president and founder of Smokers Fighting Discrimination Inc. and tries to argue that the air used to be better in airlines when smoking was allowed. In fact, according to Pickrell, it isn't the smokers who are the problem, but the horrible airlines that don't circulate enough air through the cabins.

He even cites nicotine measurements made in the "middle of the non-smoking section" to bolster his case. His conclusion is that "the skies were a much safer and healthier place when smoking was allowed."

At best, Pickrell is misinformed. At worst, he's just not telling the truth. I've flown both smoking and non-smoking flights, and I know the difference. And whoever sat "in the middle" of the non-smoking section anyway? An airliner is a long, aluminum tube with everyone on the inside.

To claim euphemistically that non-



Turmoil: Miami City Manager Daniel O'Brien, talks to reporters.