

The concentration of power and control over distribution of media is a growing problem in this country. Though we have more channels available than ever before, they are under the operation of a handful of giant corporations.

Though this means the threat of higher cost and probably poorer service, my real concern is that it also means "pre-filtering" of information through a few editorial minds in those giant corporations. We are struggling now to assure that diverse views are given an airing, that canned promotional essays are not passed off as "news", that some integrity and honesty remain in broadcasting. An informed public is the foundation of democracy. We can't be informed if, like baby birds, we're fed pre-digested tidbits from a handful of cable company czars.

Since passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the "deregulation" of cable, consumers have seen their rates jump an average of 59 percent — with some areas experiencing even more dramatic increases. Absence of choice is a huge contributing factor; fairness to customers is not.

We are required to buy channels we don't want or need because the cable operators bundle them together. The quality of customer service often reflects the fact that cable television is not a competitive market.

Meanwhile, the cost of cable modem service remains out of reach for many households, holding constant for years and selectively underserving rural and low-income Americans. The American people are watching the digital divide widen even as the need for access to high-speed networks increases.

Cable companies have become less responsive to the needs and requirements of communities. The quality of public accountability in local franchise agreements has declined, as big companies leverage their power to squeeze local governments.

In many communities, the truly independent sources of local news, information and culture come from the public channels produced at the local access centers. Unfortunately, local channels lack the resources to produce the programming that citizens want and need.

The last thing we need is to reward the anti-competitive actions of cable giants by permitting greater consolidation in ownership, reducing competition, and

encouraging more of the same.