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Delany deluded about Big Ten TV

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Sports programming is no different than any other economic entity. Its value is determined through demand. You'll pay whatever the market dictates if you want it bad enough.

That's why Comcast is right and Jim Delany is wrong.

The debuting Big Ten Network is "a niche sports channel." It's second-rate programming. It's comparable to the last day of a big clothing sale. You're excited at the prospect of getting a deal, but you soon realize that your choices are leftovers. The few good items were picked clean long before, leaving you with something of less than questionable value.

If that suits your tastes, fine. But why should those who prefer a higher quality of product partially subsidize the cost of something in which they have no interest.

That's the basis of Delany's requested Big Ten cable tax.

And that's precisely what it is -- a form of taxation without representation.

This isn't exactly the Boston Tea Party. The disgruntled will not toss their television remotes into Lake Michigan, but Delany's demand that Comcast include the Big Ten Network in its basic cable package reeks of imperialism.

He wants all of Comcast's nearly six-million cable subscribers within the eight-state Big Ten region footing the bill for a network with only marginal interest in its own backyard. And Delany is using the conference football games that ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 have no use for as leverage in pressuring Comcast to acquiesce to its demands.

Comcast said the Big Ten Network belongs on a higher-level digital tier arrangement or a special-subscription package similar to the NFL's "Sunday Ticket" and major league baseball's "Extra Innings." Those who desire the Big Ten Network and its heavy concentration of Olympic sports as well as low-grade football or basketball games can pay a special extra subscription fee.

What's wrong with that?

Leave the choice to the consumer.

This isn't about a reported additional \$1.10 on everybody's monthly Comcast cable bill. This is about control. Which piece of the equation is most important -- the content provider or the access provider?

The answer is neither. It's the audience that the billions in advertising dollars target. That's where the true power lies, and the corporate objective remains finding the most profitable path to reach as broad an audience as possible.

But we're discovering that there are limits to our television sports viewing when there are hundreds of options on cable. The NBA Finals were a ratings disaster relative to recent history. The rumored Stanley Cup finals produced the lowest prime-time ratings ever in the history of NBC.

If the ratings continue along this downward trajectory, the broadcast networks will find it much harder to justify exorbitant exclusive rights fees. You'll see even more major sports properties moving to cable networks, just a step away from a larger pay-per-view presence.

The NBA extended the league's predominantly cable television partnership with ESPN and Turner Sports on Wednesday for eight years.

The notion of "free television" is dying a slow death.

Rep. John Dingell, chairman of the House committee that oversees telecommunications, threw himself into the Big Ten-Comcast skirmish at the behest of constituents outraged at the possibility of losing televised access to every Michigan football game.

Would it really kill any cable subscribers if they couldn't watch the Wolverines waltz over a non-conference patsy?

The primary job of a politician is keeping his job, and that requires maintaining a finger on the pulse of his constituents. Few are as masterful at that as Dingell. But it's also his responsibility to paint a realistic portrait of what's going on.

Why should anybody who has no allegiance to or association with Big Ten sports have to pay one penny for their programming?

Delany talks out of both sides of his mouth. He lashed out at Comcast for referring to Big Ten Network programming as "a niche sports channel" and a home for "second- and third-tier sports events."

But if he thinks his product is of premium quality, then he shouldn't have a problem if the cable giant makes the Big Ten Network part of a premium sports package.

But Delany knows if given a choice, the consumer will probably reject the Big Ten Network because it is pretty much a niche sports channel. It isn't ESPN. It isn't Fox Sports Network.

He demanded that Comcast apologize for its perceived disrespect of the Big Ten brand, trying to frame it as a slap against women's sports.

Apologize?

For what?

Telling the truth?

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