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TV wars far from over

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Abstract:

[...] News Corp. won fees for its broadcast stations and set the stage for a still messier battle between the big networks and cable providers.

Full text:

Who's going to pay for all the changes in the ever-shifting world of cable television, Internet access and telephone service?

You are, probably. Though even that is not certain.

If programmers, including revenue-starved broadcast networks like NBC, CBS, Disney, succeed in forcing Time Warner and others to pay more to carry their signals, then this year's local cable rate increases -- in the 5 percent to 10 percent range -- may go considerably higher in 2011 and beyond, analysts said.

"Broadcasters are looking for new fees, money they've never gotten before, and we're not the only one raising rates because of the increasing cost of programming," said Time Warner spokesman Jim Gordon. "All video providers are facing this."

DirecTV, a satellite provider in the Rochester region, will increase its rates Feb. 9 by an average of about 4 percent, director of public relations Robert Mercer said.

Some viewers are looking for a way out. As more ways are found to bring television shows onto computers and mobile phones, savvy customers are using that route to forgo the cable grid altogether.

The good news in all this is that local stations report generally good relations with Time Warner. Network affiliates like WHAM-13 and WROC-8 have their own contractual arrangements with Time Warner, including compensation.

"Negotiations with Time Warner have been collaborative," Tim Busch, chief operating officer of Nexstar Broadcasting, which owns WROC and operates Fox-affiliate WUHF, which is Channel 31 and cable channel 7.

"Nexstar charted a course a long time ago to win retransmission fees," Busch said. He said a separate deal with the cable provider kept local Fox Network programming out of the melee with News Corp.

WHAM-TV (Channel 13) general manager Chuck Samuels said that the station and Time Warner have a contract that will keep network programming on the air.

"As to whether we're getting full value for the content we provide, I'll leave to corporate," he said. "One thing to remember is that even if cable takes an over-the-air broadcast channel off, it is still available as free TV."

Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., which owns the Fox broadcast network and several cable channels, last week won a game of high-priced brinksmanship with Time Warner Cable, after threatening to pull programming if its demands for fees were not met.

In the end, News Corp. won fees for its broadcast stations and set the stage for a still messier battle between the big networks and cable providers.

Time Warner's 300,000 regional customers were insulated from the worst of that fight. Only a few local cable channels were affected, though the popular FX was one of them.

Need a wild card in all this? How about Congress or the courts stepping in to safeguard the future of free, over-the-air broadcast TV by stopping a proposed merger of NBC Universal and cable behemoth Comcast Corp.? Or the Federal Communications Commission agreeing to regulate cable TV as it does over-the-air broadcasters?

It's a complex and unsettled picture at this juncture, though at least some of the tumult will be carried out in public. Time Warner has an advocacy Web site Roll Over or Get Tough to garner public support against new or higher fees. Comcast and Time Warner have launched a site dealing with Internet transmission of TV programs.

"I expect we'll be talking about these issues all year," Gordon said.

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