

Excerpted from:

Communications Daily

No Show at Hearing - AT&T Slack on Public Program Access, Appropriators Say

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AT&T drew bipartisan fire Wednesday [September 17, 2008] for not appearing at a hearing on industry compliance with public programming access rules. The company was invited to the hearing, "but they told us less than a week ago that they couldn't find someone to testify," said House Appropriations financial services subcommittee Chairman Jose Serrano, D-N.Y. "I consider their decision ... to be indicative of the company's apparent disregard of the importance" of public, educational and governmental programming to local communities. "I am completely with you on nailing AT&T" for its handling of PEG channels, said subcommittee member Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill. Serrano and Kirk said they will write to the FCC suggesting they take steps to address PEG channel delivery practices. Subcommittee staff said the letter will be sent within days...

AT&T has set channel 99 on its U-verse menu as the PEG point of access. Users select the city and choose programming they want to view. Critics call this procedure too cumbersome for viewers. The system is a "step backward for community television stations" and violates federal and state laws requiring public-interest channels be treated the same as commercial, said Barbara Popovic, speaking on behalf of the Alliance for Community Media. She urged a Congressional mandate that PEG channels be located on the lowest cost, most accessible tier of service, viewable without additional equipment.

FCC officials worry that providers are making PEG channels tougher to access. "Some programmers are moving PEG channels to a digital tier, or are treating them as on-demand channels," said Monica Desai, FCC Media Bureau chief. "Placing PEG channels on any tier other than the basic service tier" may violate communications law requiring that PEG access programming be on the basic service tier, Desai said...

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