

Are you addicted to public access television?

Some worry the new
delivery system
for AT&T treats PEG
programming unequally

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This is a column for the real intellectuals. The book-reading, newspaper-devouring, spectacle-wearing, square-peg types you want as your Trivial Pursuit partner.

You know, the ones who watch public access television.

They watch because they can't be bothered with the other garbage — reality shows, Hugh Hefner's girlfriends, "Inside Edition" and "COPS." They are civic-minded folks who keep abreast of village government, school board meetings, church socials and fundraisers.

For the record, I do not fit into that category when it comes to TV-watching. I support WTTW (Channel 11), but I also was addicted to the past season of "The Bachelor," and worse, I got teary-eyed during the final rose ceremony and marriage proposal.

But for the rest of you who are passionate about quality, local programming, a consortium of Illinois nonprofits, governments and public access television stations are warning of a new delivery system from AT&T they believe treats public, educational and government programming unequally.

If your town recently offered you the chance to switch to AT&T, you may have noticed public access chan-

nels were moved to Channel 99. Rather than being able to channel surf, as Comcast digital cable customers can, AT&T created a feature that resembles "On Demand" for public access television viewing. Once you get to Channel 99, you have to navigate a few screens and wait for programs to download before being able to view them.

Critics of the new system say it violates the very law AT&T helped write and pass in the General Assembly last year.

"AT&T apparently believes game shows and sitcoms deserve good quality and speedy delivery but not for civic information and emergency alerts, which are being sidelined into an application that is not like the commercial channels," said Barbara Popovic, of CAN-TV, who met with lawmakers Wednesday to share her concerns.

Popovic and other supporters are particularly disturbed because they negotiated the details of the new system in great detail before lifting their objections to AT&T's proposal last year. The law included language mandating that PEG (public, educational and government) channels be carried on the same format and with the same quality as commercial channels.

AT&T believes it is doing that.

"The use of a single channel

is absolutely accessible under the state law, and it was disclosed during bill negotiations that it would be put in this centralized location," said Andrew Ross, spokesman for AT&T. "The legislation was supported by PEG proponents, so any suggestion to the contrary is just not accurate."

State Rep. Jim Brosnahan (D-Evergreen Park), who sponsored the bill and worked through yearlong negotiations, agreed with AT&T.

"Based on what I know, I don't agree with the statement that AT&T is breaking the law. The video franchise bill was the strongest in the country, based on consumer protections and PEG support and mandatory build-out," he said. "The law has been a huge success."

Public access television supporters, however, including many mayors and village officials, are concerned enough that they took the matter to Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, whose office is reviewing the issue, her spokesman said Wednesday.

From my armchair, I'm not feeling awfully motivated by the whole debate. Then again, you wouldn't want me as your Trivial Pursuit partner, except for the "entertainment" category questions.

What do you think of the new AT&T system?

Send your thoughts to kmcqueary@southtownstar.com or call me (708) 633-5972.

Maybe you'll even wrangle me away from "Desperate Housewives."

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