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Don't marginalize us

Charter deal has potential to bring the world closer

It's not often a familiar "local" company makes as much national news as Charter Communications did this week by announcing its intention to buy larger rival Time Warner Cable.

Cable television providers recently have found themselves in the broad category of information-sector businesses seeking fresh new ways to survive, compete and prosper.

This task takes on increasing urgency as customers discover novel Internet-based ways to access entertainment — in addition to shopping, doing our banking, researching school projects and other activities of everyday life. On the supply side of this information pipeline, it is costing cable companies more to purchase rights to broadcast the popular sports, movies, programs and games that consumers demand.

The travails of cable providers are unlikely to keep ordinary Americans awake at night. Along with satellite TV, cable companies are widely viewed as charging incrementally more each year for something that we somehow simultaneously value but find trivial. The fact that the Internet now allows consumers to bypass the cable or satellite dish is generating a great deal of excited discussion in corporate boardrooms.

But beyond the challenges from program-streaming services — such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu — Charter and other traditional "hardware" firms have additional reasons for striving to go wire-free, or at least cut costs. The technologies that have kicked off this strategic game, chiefly

Wi-Fi networks that tie into the nation's cellular phone grid, have the ability to deliver content and interactive features to anyone with a smart phone. This opens up new ways to make money, but also threatens the relevance of companies that fail to keep up.

News organizations like *The Daily Astorian* have been at the forefront of this wave, realizing that convenient and rapid access to content is a consumer demand that isn't going away.

When it comes to the Charter merger, what's in it for local customers? This is a key question for regulators reviewing the plan. Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler said the FCC will carefully look at whether it's in the public interest. "An absence of harm is not sufficient," he said. The FCC "will look to see how American consumers would benefit" from the deal.

Our congressional delegation should monitor this process, making sure Charter's moves do not further marginalize rural places like Clatsop County and the Long Beach (Wash.) Peninsula. If FCC does its job right, and if technology continues advancing, this merger can be a big step along the way to making our comparative isolation far less disadvantageous.

The benefit, even in places like Astoria, could be to shrink geography, making the choice to live and do business here even easier than it is today.

Catholics lead on same-sex marriage

By FRANK BRUNI
New York Times News Service

Take a look at this list of countries: Belgium, Canada, Spain, Argentina, Portugal, Brazil, France, Uruguay, Luxembourg and Ireland.

Name two things that they have in common.

They don't share a continent, obviously. Or a language.

But in all of them, the Roman Catholic Church has more adherents, at least nominally, than any other religious denomination does.

And all of them belong to the vanguard of 20 nations that have decided to make same-sex marriage legal.

In fact, countries with a Catholic majority or plurality make up half of those where two men or two women can now wed or will soon be able to.

Ireland, obviously, is the freshest addition to the list. It's also, in some ways, the most remarkable one. It's the first country to approve same-sex marriage by a popular referendum. The margin wasn't even close. About 62 percent of voters embraced marriage equality.

And they did so despite a past of great fealty to the Catholic Church's official teachings on, for example, contraception, which was outlawed in Ireland until 1980, and abortion, which remains illegal in most circumstances.

Irish voters nonetheless rejected the church's formal opposition to same-sex marriage. This act of defiance was described, accurately, as an illustration of church leaders' loosening grip on the country.

But in falling out of line with the Vatican, Irish people are actually falling in line with their Catholic counterparts in other Western countries, including the United States.

They aren't sloughing off their Catholicism — not exactly, not entirely. An overwhelming majority of them still identify as Catholic. But they're incorporating religion into their lives in a manner less rooted in Rome.

We journalists too often use "the Catholic Church" as a synonym for the pope, the cardinals and teachings that have the Vatican's stamp of approval.

But in Europe and the Americas in particular, the church is much more fluid than that. It harbors spiri-



AP Photo/Peter Morrison
 Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, right, and Deputy Prime Minister Joan Burton celebrate at Dublin castle, Ireland, Saturday. Ireland has voted resoundingly to legalize gay marriage in the world's first national vote on the issue.

tually inclined people paying primary obeisance to their own consciences, their own senses of social justice. That impulse and tradition are as Catholic as any others.

Catholics in the United States appear to be more, not less, progressive about gay rights than Americans in general are. In an especially ambitious survey conducted over the course of 2014 by the Public Religion Research Institute, about 60 percent of Americans who called themselves Catholic said that they approved of same-sex marriage, versus about 30 percent who didn't. The spread among all respondents was 54 to 38, and the group that clearly stood in the way of same-sex marriage wasn't Catholics. It was evangelical Protestants.

And yet, interestingly, the qualms that certain public figures have about same-sex marriage are routinely explained — by the media, and sometimes by those people themselves — as ineluctable consequences of their Catholicism.

"We need to be stalwart supporters of traditional marriage," Jeb Bush, who converted to Catholicism as an adult, said during a recent TV interview. "It's at the core of the Catholic faith."

Rick Santorum, Bobby Jindal, Chris Christie and Marco Rubio, among others, have cited their Catholic devotion as a barrier to embracing same-sex marriage. But seldom does anyone point out that this explanation puts these men in the minority, not majority, of Catholics in the United States. Their stances win them more political favor among

Baptists than among Catholics.

That's because "Catholics" includes not just worshippers who attend Mass weekly and perhaps tilt in a more conservative direction, but those who go less frequently and those for whom Catholicism is as much an ethnic as a religious identity.

For this large and diverse group in the United States and other Western countries, same-sex marriage has rapidly gained favor and Catholic leaders' expressions of protest, such as firing employees who marry same-sex partners or speak up for marriage equality, are becoming untenable.

Cognizant of that, Catholic bishops in Germany voted earlier this month to relax morality clauses in contracts with lay workers so that those

who remarry after a divorce or enter into same-sex civil unions (same-sex marriage isn't yet legal there) needn't fear losing their jobs.

Is this a sign that in Europe and the Americas, same-sex marriage could become analogous to divorce: something that Catholic leaders technically frown upon but don't bother to inveigh against all that much?

I wonder, especially in light of comments by Diarmuid Martin, the archbishop of Dublin, after the Irish referendum. He noted "a growing gap between the culture of Ireland" and the church, which, he said, "needs to take a reality check."

He meant that its leaders do, and they can turn not just to Ireland but to many other densely Roman Catholic countries to gauge the hearts and souls of Catholics today.

Could same-sex marriage become analogous to divorce?

Smoking, vaping and nicotine

By JOE NOCERA
New York Times News Service

"We need a national debate on nicotine," said Mitch Zeller.

Zeller is the director of the Center for Tobacco Products, a division of the Food and Drug Administration created in 2009 when Congress passed legislation giving the FDA regulatory authority — at long last! — over cigarettes.

In addition, the center will soon have regulatory authority over other tobacco products, including electronic cigarettes, which have become

enormously controversial even as they have gained in use. Through something called a "deeming rule," the center is in the process of asserting that oversight over e-cigarettes.

Opponents of electronic cigarettes, which include many public health officials, hope the center will treat these new devices like it treats cigarettes: taking steps to discourage teenagers from "vaping," for instance, and placing strict limits on the industry's ability to market its products.

Proponents, meanwhile, hope the center will view e-cigarettes as a "reduced harm" product that can save lives by offering a nicotine fix without the carcinogens that are ingested through a lit cigarette. In this scenario, e-cigarette manufacturers would be able to make health claims, and adult smokers might even be encouraged to switch from smoking to vaping as part of a reduced harm strategy.

When I requested an interview with Zeller, I didn't expect him to tip his hat on which direction he wanted the center to go, and he didn't. In-

deed, one of the points he made was that the FDA was conducting a great deal of scientific research — more than 50 studies in all, he said — aimed at generating the evidence needed to better understand where to place e-cigarettes along what he calls "the continuum of risk."

Zeller is a veteran of the "tobacco wars" of the 1990s, working alongside then-FDA Commissioner David Kessler, who had audaciously labeled cigarettes a "drug-delivery device" (the drug being nicotine) and had claimed regulatory authority. Zeller left the FDA in 2000, after the Supreme Court ruled against Kessler's interpretation, and joined the American Legacy Foundation, where he helped create its hard-hitting, anti-tobacco "Truth campaign." After a stint with a consulting firm, Pinney Associates, he returned to the FDA in early 2013 to lead the effort to finally regulate the tobacco industry.

"I am fond of quoting Michael Russell," Zeller said, referring to an important South African tobacco scientist who died in 2009. In the early 1970s, Russell was among the first to recognize that nicotine was the reason people got addicted to cigarettes. "He used to say, 'People smoke for the nicotine but die from the tar,'" Zeller recalled.

This is also why Zeller found e-cigarettes so "interesting," as he put it, when they first came on the market. A cigarette gets nicotine to the brain in seven seconds, he said. Nicotine gum or patches can take up to 60 minutes or longer, which is far too slow for smokers who need a nicotine fix. But e-cigarettes can replicate the speed of cigarettes in delivering nicotine to the brain, thus



Joe Nocera

creating real potential for them to become a serious smoking cessation device.

But there are still many questions about both their safety and their efficacy. For instance, are smokers using e-cigarettes to quit cigarettes, or they using them to get a nicotine hit at times when they can't smoke cigarettes? And beyond that there are important questions about nicotine itself, and how it should be dealt with.

"When nicotine is attached to smoke particles, it will kill," said Zeller. "But if you take that same drug and put it in a patch, it is such a safe medicine that it doesn't even require a doctor's prescription." That paradox helps explain why he believes "there needs to be a rethink within society on nicotine."

Within the FDA, Zeller has initiated discussions with "the other side of the house" — the part of the agency that regulates drugs — to come up with a comprehensive, agency-wide policy on nicotine. But the public health community — and the rest of us — needs to have a debate as well.

"One of the impediments to this debate," Zeller said, is that the e-cigarette opponents are focused on all the flavors available in e-cigarettes — many of which would seem aimed directly at teenagers — as well as their marketing, which is often a throwback to the bad-old days of Big Tobacco. "The debate has become about these issues and has just hardened both sides," Zeller told me.

It's not that Zeller believes nicotine is perfectly safe (he doesn't) or that we should shrug our shoulders if teenagers take up vaping. He believes strongly that kids should be discouraged from using e-cigarettes.

Rather, he thinks there should be a recognition that different ways of delivering nicotine also come with different risks. To acknowledge that, and to grapple with its implications, would be a step forward.

"This issue isn't e-cigarettes," said Mitch Zeller. "It's nicotine."

'People smoke for the nicotine but die from the tar.'

— Mitch Zeller
 director of the Center for Tobacco Products

Exciting idea to grow the agriculture market

New effort gives 'Ag of the Middle' a boost

The Northwest is blessed with a diverse agriculture sector, both in terms of the crops and livestock that are produced and the scale of the operations that produce them.

Large, commercial-scale farms generally feed sophisticated supply chains with mature systems that take their raw commodities, deliver them to processors and turn them into numerous finished products that are marketed and sent on to retailers. Their business depends on economy of scale.

The growing number of small-scale farmers, mostly part-timers, produce for retail consumers. They market to the final user through a simple, direct supply chain — farmers' markets or CSAs (community supported agriculture). Not very complicated, no need for extensive infrastructure or sophisticated marketing plans because the business rests on one-on-one relationships.

But what of the medium-sized farmer and the artisan producers? They may raise too much to sell on the farmers' market circuit, too little or are too specialized for the mass market. They need more distribution infrastructure and marketing support than smaller operations, but lack the scale to participate in established supply chains. Some have their own brands and don't want to throw in with others in a regional or national effort.

A study produced last month by Ecotrust explores the opportunities and challenges of those producers — what it calls the "Ag of the Middle."

"In slightly abstracted terms, Ag of the Middle producers are those too small to compete in commodity markets, and too big to participate exclusively in direct to consumer channels such as farmers' markets; what we

now describe as 'local values, wholesale volume,'" the report says.

It's an interesting read. Though focused on the needs of Oregon producers, it advances ideas that could significantly increase the viability of these operations throughout the Northwest and expand the regional economy.

The 250-page study describes a haphazard system in which growers and other food producers spend too much time on the supply chain instead of developing their product. They must cobble together outlets, pick, pack and store things themselves and deliver small amounts to multiple buyers.

The report says Ag of the Middle producers often lack branding or marketing strategy and do without communications and strategic planning. The result is a system that is "highly fragmented, lacking consistent data and information, and dependent on personal relationships," according to the study.

Simply put, among the things producers need to do are establish shared infrastructure — processing, storage, distribution and marketing; promote interdependencies between diverse producer sectors that could expand everyone's business; and find ways to get or appear bigger to take advantage of scale.

To that end, Ecotrust is retrofitting a Portland industrial building to be a food development, storage and distribution hub that will put some of the ideas to the test. It will have 16,000 square feet of development, incubator or processing space for meat, grain and greens.

This is one of the more exciting concepts we've seen to expand the ag economy. We wish them well, and hope a working example of the concept will lead to imitation.