

Telecom act does not benefit most Americans

OUR OPINION:
Deregulation puts more power in fewer hands

When politicians, broadcasters and phone company executives are the only people who are happy, the rest of us should be worried.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 passed through the appropriate channels last week, giving the people with power more of the same and leaving consumers and the First Amendment in the dust.

In short, the bill eliminated many Federal Communications Commission restrictions that had prevented phone, long-distance, cable and television companies from doing business outside their fields. This prevented cable companies from getting into the phone business or AT&T from handling local calls.

Now, TCI may be offering great phone rates, and US West may be offering more Melrose and less Masterpiece.

President Clinton, et. al. say that opening the communications field to the market will increase competition and result in more choices and better prices for consumers.

It's not clear, however, that the bill will lead to consumer utopia. With the regulation gloves off, welter-weight companies will have to face-off with heavy-weight conglomerates. Any guesses on who will get clobbered?

Somewhere below the applause rising up from the Beltway, you can hear the dying breath of independent media. As companies such as Time-Warner-Turner gain momentum, nothing can keep them from buying-out

or out-competing the dwindling pool of dissident voices.

The merging of America's media will do nothing to democratize access to the marketplace of ideas. An increasingly elite group will determine what we see, hear and know. Executives may not abuse that power, but nothing is in place to protect us from their profit-driven motives.

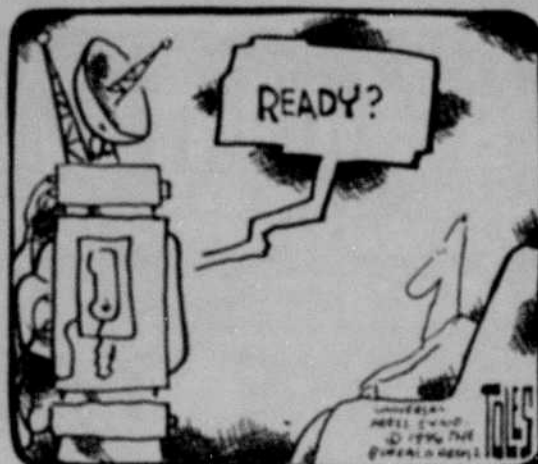
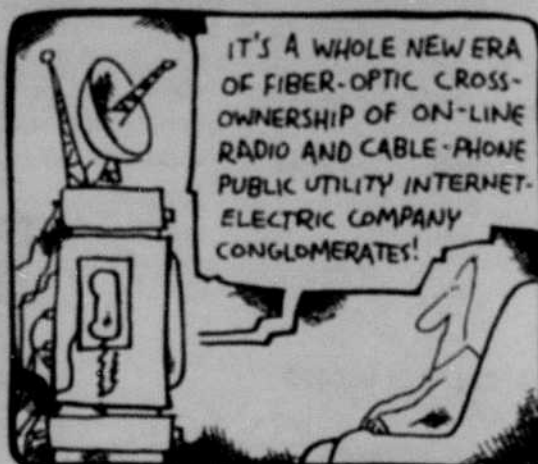
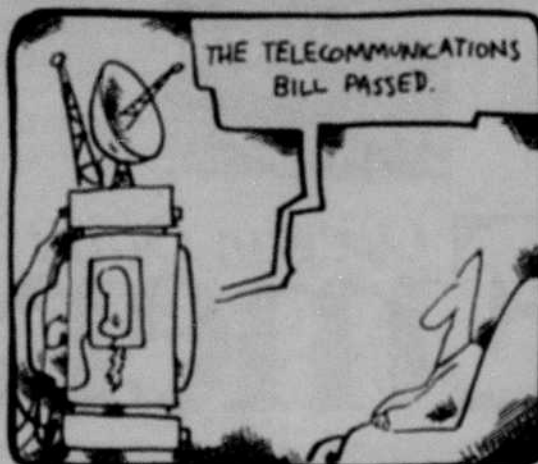
In addition, while politicians celebrate government downsizing, they have decided to install the V-chip in new television sets, allowing parents to block too-violent programming from reaching their children's ears and eyes. The problem, of course, is that someone at the federal level must decide what is "too violent."

And lest we assume that politicians are deregulation happy, on-line interaction is now considered broadcasting. Nothing that cannot be seen on the set can blip across the screen.

Other than the screen, however, computer communication shares no similarities with television. The Internet is more like a magazine rack, filled with everything from the *New Yorker* to *Nude Babes*.

Parents who worry about that maybe shouldn't let their children browse the magazines unattended for hours at a time.

Most of the telecom bill is misguided, putting regulations where they shouldn't be and removing them from where they should. If Americans really want smaller government, they should be prepared to pay the price and quit expecting someone else to do their parenting jobs for them.



Don't like my driving? Stay off sidewalk

I drive a titty-pink '70s Buick, of which I am rather proud. I added the leopard-skin upholstery and cha-cha balls myself, and the eight-track cassette player is vintage. The whole package is a stunning mixture of kitsch and sheer courage.

On the down side, envious drivers have made many attempts on its life, and these accumulated collisions show. Still, for all its scars and aesthetic problems, it's better than a bike.

This is a controversial statement to make in Eugene — to say that a fuel-burning, smog-sustaining vehicle is better than the ecology and economy of, say, a Diamondback mountain bike (of comparable value to my car) is like saying trees make good paper.

Trees actually do make remarkably good paper, but you know, politics.

These politics were brought home to me recently by a pedestrian who stopped to inform me that my car was very polluting. He said, "You're [insert expletive]ing-up the planet for future generations because you're too [insert expletive] lazy to walk!"

Well, OK. I generally try to get along with these people who will spend nearly a thousand dollars on an object that doesn't even come with an eight-track player, but there is certain bicyclist behavior that, as a driver, I cannot abide.

Bicyclists are rarely found on bike paths. They prefer to pedal, at 6 mph, in the same lane with my car — which can't even sustain an idle at speeds less than 15 mph.

Old couples driving their mobile homes through mountain passes have the courtesy to pull over to the shoulder when they realize they're holding up 20 cars, but a bicyclist will have none of this. Maybe they have their built-in helmet headsets on too high to hear the frustration behind them. Maybe they think it's payback for all the exhaust they're forced to breathe. Couldn't tell you.

It's all the more puzzling because Eugene has some of the best bicycle paths in the state and is recognized nationwide for being bicycle nirvana. Recreational bicyclists have river routes, mountain routes, mall routes and more on which to pedal to their heart's delight. They've got maps, clubs and magazines to sustain them.

But streets! Streets are for cars.

Just as sidewalks are for pedestrians. Twice my car has nearly been struck by a bicyclist traveling on the sidewalk as I left my driveway. The first time this happened, I was given such a look of hatred that I believe the bicyclist was tormented by envy at the sight of my cha-cha balls and couldn't help himself.

The second time this happened was at night,

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OPINION



Sonja Sherwood

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and I can only assume that the bicyclist was one of these blind bikers cycling for charity because my headlights clearly announced my approach. Again, the look of hatred. This time the bicyclist also kicked my bumper on his way by (using his heightened sense of touch).

To this outrageous behavior I have one response: Go ahead and call me politically incorrect, accuse me of laziness and environmental abuse — but accost my car and I have no choice but to publish my complaint in a public forum. And the next time I meet you in a dark driveway, look out.

The bike vs. auto debate is old, with passionate contenders on both sides. People drive because it's fast, convenient and dry. People bike because it's healthy, ecological and cheap. Streets are for cars, bike paths are for bikes and sidewalks are for walkers. The problems arise when these things converge in dark driveways throughout the city, or at busy intersections during lunch hour. Then fingers go up, looks become hateful and bumpers get thumped.

If the solution is more bike paths, then let's build them. If the solution is less cars, then I challenge anyone to invent a bike with a roof.

In the meantime, is it too much to ask that all travelers stick to their respective places? A simple rule of thumb is that if your vehicle is ten times smaller and a hundred times slower than the vehicles around it, it is probably either a hindrance or a hazard. And if you think that riding on sidewalks is the answer, keep in mind that city ordinance 5.400 (1) forbids it (although it is damnably legal on campus). By the same token, drivers should be aware that running over slow bicyclists is manslaughter in any city.

Nobody's happy with the restrictions, but the sooner we recognize them, the sooner we can greet transportation segregation with smiles instead of middle fingers.

Sonja Sherwood, a senior majoring in journalism and English, is a columnist for the Emerald and sometimes drives around just for the hell of it.

Oregon Daily Emerald

P.O. BOX 3114, EUGENE, OREGON 97403

The Oregon Daily Emerald is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co., Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. A member of the Associated Press, the Emerald operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union.

Unsigned editorials represent the opinion of the Emerald editorial board; signed columns represent the opinion of the columnist.

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