

New TV network aims at 18-34 demographic

Current, co-founded by Al Gore, will use the Internet to give viewers the opportunity to air their material

BY EVA SYLWESTER
NEWS REPORTER

It's hard to walk through a college campus or any place where the marketers' coveted 18-34 age demographic congregate and not see iPod music players. Now, a new television network plans to translate iPod's concept of randomly shuffled chunks of entertainment onto the TV screen.

Former Vice President Al Gore co-founded the network called Current, which is set to be the first national network "created for, by and with an 18-34 year-old audience," according to a press release.

Beginning Aug. 1, Current will

broadcast to nearly 20 million subscriber households in the United States via DirecTV's basic digital tier, Time Warner Cable's basic digital tier and Comcast systems in key markets. In contrast to the half-hour blocks of traditional TV shows, the network's 24-hour programming will run in 15-second to five-minute segments, referred to as "pods," featuring a variety of topics. The mix will be 25 percent news, 30 percent information, 20 percent social, 20 percent escape, and 5 percent wild card.

"Novelty attracts attention. We know this," University psychology professor Michael Anderson said. He

added that people seeing something continuously tend to get used to it and start tuning it out.

A key element of Current's programming will be viewer input. According to the press release, Current will offer a free online training program through its Web site, www.current.tv, so that anyone with a digital video camera and computer can learn how to make his or her own video segments.

Viewers will then be able to access, via Current's Web site, the same list of assignments that Current's in-house production team works on. After agreeing to take on a story, amateur reporters can upload their video segments onto the Web site, where fellow viewers and collaborators can review submissions and vote their favorites onto the air. As of April 13, the

site had already received 366 uploads from 235 people.

One of the network's aims is to give young adults the same flexibility in television programming that they are accustomed to having on the Internet. A 2004 study by the Online Publishers Association found that 46 percent of 18 to 34 year olds are more likely to log on to the Internet compared to 35 percent who prefer to watch TV.

"The Internet opened a floodgate for young people whose passions are finally being heard, but TV hasn't followed suit," Gore said in the press release. "Young adults have a powerful voice, but you can't hear that voice on television yet."

Gore said Current aims to give those who crave the empowerment of the Web the same opportunity for expression on television.

"We want to transform the television medium itself, giving a national platform to those who are hungry to help create the TV they want to watch," he said in the release.

The network will maintain connections to the Internet and has a partnership with Google. "Google Current," a news feature that will run every half hour, will have news reports based on whatever the most popular Google search is at the moment.

Some wonder what the impact of the short program segments might be.

"It could potentially trivialize important issues and not give people the coverage they want to make informed decisions," Anderson said. "That's just my opinion, but if it's just for entertainment, why not?"

evasylwester@dailyemerald.com

Governor Kulongoski pushes for civil unions law

BY BRAD CAIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALEM — Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski said Wednesday he will push for a law allowing gay couples to form civil unions that would give them many of the rights available to married couples.

Kulongoski's announcement came as the Oregon Supreme Court posted on its Web site its plan to rule Thursday on the validity of 3,000 marriage licenses issued to same-sex couples last year in Multnomah County.

Members of the Legislature have been awaiting the court ruling to give them guidance on how to proceed on the issue of same-sex couples.

The governor said Wednesday that he is working with a bipartisan group of senators on the civil unions bill.

Kulongoski's backing of a civil

unions law expands on his announcement in January that he would support legislation extending anti-discrimination protections to gays.

"As I stated in January, we face a great moral challenge to make sure opportunity is an open door through which every citizen can pass, not a revolving door which turns for some and doesn't budge for others," he said.

Vermont is the first and still the only state to offer civil unions to gays, passing a law in 2000. Massachusetts has allowed gay marriage since last May.

Multnomah County issued nearly 3,000 marriage licenses to same-sex couples last year before the practice was stopped by Circuit Judge Frank Bearden.

In his ruling, the judge recommended that the 2005 Legislature

craft a law that would guarantee gay and lesbian couples the same rights as married couples.

But the ruling was appealed to the Oregon Supreme Court after the Defense of Marriage Coalition challenged the validity of the Multnomah County marriage licenses.

The coalition also sponsored a state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage that was approved by Oregon voters in November.

Few observers were offering predictions of how the Supreme Court would rule in the case Thursday.

Among other options, the court could decide that same-sex couples are entitled to legal alternatives to marriage such as civil unions. The court also could decide, based on the constitutional amendment approved by voters in November, that same-sex

couples have no such legal right.

Or the court could send the case back to Multnomah County for further action with no clear direction to the Legislature on how to proceed on same-sex couples.

"There's lots of side channels the court could take," said David Fidanque of the American Civil Liberties Union, who during the Supreme Court arguments said legislators should enact a civil unions law.

"Even if the court ducks the issue, it is our hope the Legislature will pass civil unions legislation," Fidanque said.

Tim Nashif, head of the Oregon Family Council and the Defense of Marriage Coalition, said he's hoping the court will simply invalidate the 3,000 marriage licenses issued to same-sex couples in

Multnomah County.

Any other action, such as endorsing a civil unions law, would be "pretty hard to swallow" in view of voters' approval of a gay marriage ban, Nashif said.

The state's leading gay rights group, Basic Rights Oregon, praised the governor's decision to move ahead on civil unions legislation.

"All Oregonians should take pride today in Gov. Kulongoski's tremendous public and personal commitment to ending discrimination," said Roey Thorpe, the group's executive director.

Kulongoski said the bill is co-sponsored by Democratic Sens. Kate Brown of Portland and Alan Bates of Ashland and Republican Sens. Frank Morse of Albany and Ben Westlund of Bend.

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Union: Health care dilemma represents nationwide crisis

Issues like caps and maximum contributions by employers and said "at some point it's possible (employees will) have to contribute to their health care."

Problems with the cost of health insurance are evident across the country and Oregon has been hit with particularly crippling financial problems, which Hampton said can account for some of the sticking points in health care.

"Health care tends to be an issue in every negotiation these days, private or public sector," Hampton said.

Union members said the financial crisis facing the state is no reason for a reduction in their health care benefits.

"I know we're in a crisis. The whole state is in a crisis," union member and Oregon state parks employee Angie Hazelton said. "We're not asking for a whole lot. We're just asking for a living wage."

Holmberg said the union is not just fighting to maintain the health care coverage they currently have, they're also working to draw attention to state senate bills aimed at controlling the rising cost of health care.

"What we're proposing is something that would be to the benefit of all Oregonians and would basically pull the reins back on the big business that is health care, so that it isn't just shifted to the employees," Holmberg said.

The union is rallying support for Senate Bills 501, 502, 503, 504 and

505. The union says the bills focus on creating a health care insurance rate review board, giving the review board power to set hospital prices, requiring public examination of the need for new hospital spending, requiring certain hospitals to set up financial assistance programs and expanding the Oregon Prescription Drug Program, respectively.

Hampton said because the state is handling the negotiations concerning health care coverage, he cannot comment on how the bargaining is going, but he said the issues the OUS is working on with the union have not generated much conflict.

"I don't feel that things are heating up in the issues we are negotiating," Hampton said, adding that OUS' side of the contract proposal does not include any major take-aways or reductions.

Negotiations are expected to last several months, and Holmberg said the union will be rallying in Salem on May 21 to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the statewide membership strike that saw 10,000 union members rally at the Capitol building.

"This action has put the emphasis on the major economic issues, and health care is one of those major economic issues that's surfacing at every single bargaining table across the nation," Holmberg said.

meghanncuniff@dailyemerald.com

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