

Set makers support blocking option

Thomson, CEMA say parents should have control over programming

By Paige Albinak

Over the objections of broadcasters, Thomson Consumer Electronics, the largest seller of TV sets in the U.S., is going forward with a plan to sell sets that will allow parents to block news, sports and advertising.

At a technical standards group meeting last week in Chicago, Thomson's trade association, the Consumer Electronics Manufacturers Association (CEMA), declined to actively support Thomson's initiative. CEMA preferred instead to refer to the FCC's rules on the subject. Those rules specifically say the V-chip, can block unrated programming.

"We understand that this is an emotionally charged issue for some broadcasters," wrote CEMA President Gary Shapiro to members of the group. "We also believe that parents in the marketplace—not broadcasters, manufacturers or the government—should determine what features sell and how they should be used."

"This whole debate should be about



CEMA's Gary Shapiro

what the parent wants," says Dave Arland, a Thomson spokesman. "This is not about the end of television on the planet Earth."

Other set makers, namely Sony and Panasonic, have not said whether they intend to offer parents the choice of blocking unrated programming. But at last week's meeting, all the set makers indicated they would like to have that option.

"We are still looking at the development and implementation of the V-chip," says Caroline Lappetito, spokeswoman for Sony. "We are going to evaluate what additional functions may be needed with V-chip-equipped TVs and we are going to see what consumers require."

Broadcasters say Thomson's initiative goes against the spirit of television ratings agreements they signed a year and a half ago and again last summer. During those negotiations, broadcasters, the cable industry, the creative community and advocacy groups created an age- and content-based television ratings system to work with the V-chip.

Broadcasters say that the ratings system purposely exempts news and sports and that set makers should not circumvent that agreement. Broadcasters also are concerned that consumers would purposely block advertising and inadvertently block emergency warnings.

But broadcasters can get around Thomson's plan by rating all programming TV-Y, the lowest possible rating. Sources say this is the route broadcasters likely will take should set makers offer the option to block unrated programming. Broadcasters also could choose to scrap the voluntary ratings system altogether.

Family advocacy groups—including the American Psychological Association, the Center for Media Education and the National Parent Teacher Association—say that they never intended the ratings system to apply to news and sports, but they do want parents to have the option of blocking unrated programming.

"[T]o be effective, the V-chip must give parents the ability to block unrated programming they feel is inappropriate for their children," the advocacy groups told the FCC when they first filed on the subject on Nov. 24, 1997. ■

Sinclair defends Glencairn relationship

Says no new charges have been raised by LMA complaints

By Chris McConnell

Sinclair Broadcast Group says it's heard it all before. Responding this month to charges that it is controlling a company with which it has struck a series of local marketing agreements (LMAs), the broadcaster said that the FCC already has signed off on its relationship with Glencairn Ltd. in previous rulings.

Sinclair's response follows charges by the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and KWTV(TV) Oklahoma City—owner Kelley International Licensing that Sinclair controls Glencairn. The groups made the charge in urging the FCC to reject Glencairn's acquisition of KOKH-TV Oklahoma City from Sullivan Broadcasting.

"Kelley's 'proof' consists of facts regarding the ownership structure of

Glencairn, all of which are well-known to the commission, as well as rank speculation as to the future behavior of Glencairn and Sinclair," Sinclair told the FCC.

The broadcaster pointed to past FCC decisions to approve Glencairn station acquisitions after reviewing the company's relationship to Sinclair. "Kelley presents no new facts," Sinclair said.

Glencairn's voting stock is 100% owned by its president, Eddie Edwards. However, 90 percent of the company's equity is held in nonvoting stock in trusts established by Carolyn Smith, mother of Sinclair President David Smith. Carolyn Smith holds another 7% of the equity herself, while Edwards holds the remaining 3%.

Baltimore-based Sinclair has more than a dozen LMAs with Glencairn stations, and the deals have drawn objec-

tions from other broadcasters before. Both Post-Newsweek Stations and Pulitzer Broadcasting have charged that the LMAs give Sinclair an unfair advantage.

Earlier this summer, Rainbow/PUSH questioned Glencairn's independence from Sinclair in an FCC filing and later called on the commission to hold a hearing on the relationship between the two companies.

Responding to Kelley's petition, Sinclair said the commission already has rejected objections to Glencairn's ownership structure: "Kelley has presented no factually supported allegations of any instance in which Edwards, at the direction of Sinclair, has failed to exercise the degree of control over the affairs and operations of the Glencairn stations that is expected of a broadcast licensee." ■