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Bring on Qwest television

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Consumers should be delighted that advancing technology now makes it possible for telephone companies to provide video over their copper wires, and cable companies to offer telephone service through their cables. If competition works its usual magic, that will mean lower prices or better services or quite likely both.

In the Denver area, that competition will play out largely between Qwest (telephones) and Comcast (cable). Qwest is negotiating with a group of 32 Colorado jurisdictions, the Greater Metro Telecommunications Consortium, over a model franchise agreement for video. Rival Comcast, to no one's surprise, is arguing that since its cable franchises require "buildout," providing service everywhere in the franchise area, Qwest should be required to do the same.

But as it happens, under federal policy Comcast doesn't need a franchise to offer telephone service over the Internet and so it isn't subject to any such "buildout" requirement in that field. We don't hear it arguing that it should be, either. We think Qwest should face the same buildout requirements in television as Comcast does in telephony - that is to say, none.

Trying to guarantee that every neighborhood in a community will have a second cable television provider might even mean that nobody gets one, if the deal doesn't look financially feasible in a given city or county.

If prices fall or services improve in the areas where competition arrives first, so much the better. After all, communities do not try to force uniformity of prices or service in other businesses more important than cable TV.

Neither telephone nor television or any other communications service is a monopoly any longer. They compete not only with each other, but with satellite, and with who knows what in the future. The level of regulation that was considered appropriate when they were monopolies is becoming less and less significant as the technologies develop. It isn't all that long ago that people were saying with great but misplaced confidence that the copper wires leading to home telephones would never carry the bandwidth needed for television. But as it turns out, they can.

Customers will decide, in the end, what package of goods and services provides them with the best value, but it seems clear that many will prefer to get all their services from a single provider. The more people who have a choice of two or more, the better - and the best way to achieve that is to refrain from putting up unnecessary buildout barriers.

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