

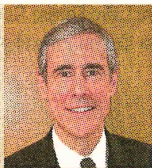
We live in the Sensory Age

SPOONFUL OF SUGAR

BY RICHARD A.

SUGAR:

Serving tastings of money, taxes and the law



We read about the Stone Age, we read about the Industrial Age, we just lived through the Information Age, and we are in the midst of what I call the “Sensory Age.”

In the Sensory Age, producers are trying to surround consumers with audio visual products that monopolize our senses. They make us laugh, cry, thrill us, entertain us, inform us, assure our safety, and our health. But, like other ages in the past, this one is equally stormy and disruptive.

The pipeline producers — TV broadcasters, cable companies, satellite TV companies, and telephone companies — all vie to disseminate their products on smartphones, computers, tablets, and televisions. They all want to connect with us 24 hours per day.

The content producers — newspapers, social media and e-commerce companies, and entertainment companies — all compete to dominate the pipelines.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington D.C. overruled Federal Communications Commission regulations on “net neutrality.” What happened is this: a pipeline company (Verizon) won the ability to charge content producers (like Amazon and Netflix) higher pricing for heavy broadband usage, arguing that the FCC had no legal authority to regulate the pipeline companies.

This could leave consumers at the mercy of the pipeline companies for much higher pricing to access their favorite TV shows, online publications and more.

In late April, the Commission rewrote proposed rules to balance “net neutrality” with

exceptions for content producers who pay more to have preferential access to heavy data broadband pipelines.

But in March, a pipeline producer and an entertainment company (or content producer) reached a historic deal: Disney agreed to have Dish Network carry its content over the Web through smartphones, tablets and computers outside of pay-TV subscriptions.

Previously, Disney confined its distribution only to pay TV pipelines.

In April, a content producer, Amazon.com, joined Apple TV, Roku, and Google Chromecast, by introducing an Internet video-streaming set-top box that plugs into an HDTV, and allows a content producer to distribute directly to your TV through your Internet pipeline, bypassing the normal TV distribution channels.

This year two pipeline companies, giant Comcast and Time Warner Cable, announced a merger and submitted for approval from the FCC and the U.S. Justice Department. Now the federal agencies must determine if the merger will harm the public interest by being anti-competitive.

Comcast argues that it faces competition from other pipelines and content producers like Google, Apple, Netflix, AT&T and Verizon.

But Consumer advocates argue that the merger will give too much control to Comcast over what consumers can watch on TV and do online, because their dominance can control the pricing of TV and web offerings.

Pipeline companies have even invaded the space of home security networks, allowing consumers to remotely close their garage door, turn off their lights, and watch when their kids come home from school.

So yes, the pipeline producers and content producers are fighting to monopolize my sensory experiences 24 hours per day. How it all turns out is unpredictable, except for the certainty that the way I get information, entertainment, and useful information is certain to change in this Sensory Age.

• *Richard Sugar is a North Shore resident who practices law in Chicago. Submit your column questions to R.A.S.Sugar1898@gmail.com.*