

Kohl critical of NBC online Olympic coverage

(AP) -- A Democratic senator criticized NBC on Friday for its handling of online access to the Vancouver Olympics, calling it unfair and restrictive.

Sen. Herb Kohl of Wisconsin, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee's antitrust panel, wrote NBC Universal Chief Executive Jeff Zucker to complain about an NBC policy that he said appears to restrict some online access to people who subscribe to a pay TV service or have a provider that is partnered with NBC. Kohl said the policy unfairly prevents others from seeing Olympic events.

NBC responded that it is broadcasting nearly 12 hours a day of programming that anyone with a TV can see, even if they don't have cable. The network also is showing highlights and medal-winning performances online for free, although other events such as full-length hockey games can't be seen free online.

Kohl said he doesn't understand why NBC doesn't offer viewers the opportunity to pay directly for online access to all Olympic coverage.

"I fear that that this practice of locking up certain content only for pay-TV subscribers may be a preview of what is to come with respect to TV programming shown on the Internet, particularly in the context of the proposed Comcast/NBC Universal merger," said Kohl.

The criticism of NBC comes after congressional Democrats challenged executives from Comcast and NBC Universal at hearings earlier this month to show that the cable TV operator's plan to take control of the entertainment company won't hurt consumers. Lawmakers expressed concerns that the merger could lead to higher cable TV rates and fewer video programming choices.

In his letter, Kohl asked if, after the merger is completed, viewers will be required to have a pay TV subscription to view NBC Internet content. NBC did not answer that question in its statement.

Kohl wrote: "It is our view that video over the Internet has the potential to become a significant competitive alternative to traditional pay TV subscriptions and it appears policies such as the one described in this letter may have the effect of limiting the prospects of such competition."

As content becomes more readily available through the Internet and multiple cable channels, those who distribute that content are concerned people will migrate to free online sites.

NBC Universal said in its response to Kohl that it is broadcasting 190 hours of the Olympics to everyone while also making Olympic coverage available on cable and online.

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NBCOlympics.com shows video highlights - including nearly all individual medal-winning performances - that can be viewed for free because they are supported by advertising. The site also offers longer programs that are available only to people with subscription packages from cable, satellite or telephone companies, NBC said.

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