Cable Television Subscriber Equipment: Lessons from the Common Carrier Experience

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David Alan Nall*

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INTRODUCTION

The Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992\(^1\) (Cable Act or Act) will render significant changes in the cable industry, but perhaps no provisions of the Act will have more far-reaching consequences than those that affect the equipment provided by cable operators and installed on the premises of subscribers. Indeed, a muffled but nevertheless fundamental premise of the Cable Act is a distinction between cable service and cable equipment. Recognition of this distinction is the first step in a process that could lead to the "unbundling" of subscriber equipment from cable service, and from there to the unimpeded ability of subscribers to provide their own equipment to gain access to cable service. These developments could lead to a revolutionary restructuring, reintegration, and reinvigoration of cable, telephone, and computer technology in that most crucial of market locales, the American home.

In the 1992 Cable Act, Congress has provided a statutory framework for completely separating the provision of cable subscriber equipment from the provision of cable service, although the Act does not contain an absolute requirement that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC or Commission) take such a step.\(^2\) The FCC, however, already possesses a regulatory blueprint for creating a new communications equipment market, one written in its own history of unbundling customer-premises equipment (CPE) from communications services offered by common carriers. The FCC's history of allowing creation of private benefit, if it is without public harm, indicates that cable equipment can be separated from other cable services. The evolution of the FCC's policies on cable equipment will depend on many factors, but there is no question that the law and regulatory precedent support


unbundling. Underlying this policy direction is the concept of a decentralized, multi-provider information environment that will be capable of operating at many different levels, and in which consumers—not service providers—will determine what equipment will be installed in American homes.

I. THE FRAMEWORK: EQUIPMENT PROVISIONS OF THE CABLE ACT

The 1992 Cable Act includes provisions covering equipment rates, home wiring, and compatibility between cable systems and consumer electronics. The rate, wiring, and compatibility distinctions create the framework for the equipment provisions within the Act.

A. Regulation of Cable Equipment Rates

The Cable Act significantly affects cable equipment rates. The Act mandates reform of cable rates and charges the FCC with creating and administering a new rate system. These FCC rate guidelines will affect every cable operator and subscriber.

1. The Cable Act and Equipment Rates

"Cable equipment" and "cable subscriber equipment" are not terms that appear in the Cable Act. As used in this Article, these terms describe the equipment located on cable subscribers' premises. The equipment is subject to the rate regulation provisions of the Act because, generally, it is provided by cable operators. Typically, this equipment consists of "converter boxes," associated remote control units, connections for additional television receivers, and cable within subscribers' premises. It

does not include television receivers, monitors, or videocassette recorders.\(^6\)

S. 12, the Senate's original version of the 1992 Cable Act, contained no specific provisions relating to the regulation of rates for equipment located on the premises of cable subscribers.\(^7\) The House amendment, H.R. 4850, introducing language for the regulation of cable equipment rates, was substantially included in the final legislation.\(^8\) The House-Senate conference made two substantive changes in the Cable Act's language: (1) the FCC was directed to create "standards," rather than "a formula," for equipment rates; and (2) the description of equipment was changed from that "necessary" for subscribers to receive "basic service" to that "used" by subscribers for such purposes.\(^9\) The purpose of these changes was to give the FCC greater flexibility and more authority in crafting its equipment rate regulations.\(^10\)

Notably, the regulation of the equipment covered in this provision does not vary based on the type of service for which the

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\(^9\) H.R. CONF. REP. No. 862, 102d Cong., 2d Sess. 63-64 (1992), reprinted in 1992 U.S.C.C.A.N. 1231, 1245-46. The "basic service tier" consists of local over-the-air broadcast signals carried by the cable operator under the Cable Act's "must-carry" provisions, 47 U.S.C.A. §§ 533-534 (West Supp. 1993); any "public, education, and governmental programming" required by local franchising authorities under 47 U.S.C.A. § 531 (West Supp. 1993); and "[a]ny signal of any television broadcast station that is provided by the cable operator to any subscriber, except a signal which is secondarily transmitted by a satellite carrier beyond the local service area of such station." 47 U.S.C.A. § 543(b)(7) (West Supp. 1993). This last exception exempts so-called "superstations."

\(^10\) H.R. CONF. REP. No. 862, supra note 9, at 63-64, 1992 U.S.C.C.A.N. at 1245-46. The statute's equipment rate regulation provision reads:

The regulations prescribed by the Commission under this subsection shall include standards to establish, on the basis of actual cost, the price or rate for—

(A) installation and lease of the equipment used by subscribers to receive the basic service tier, including a converter box and a remote control unit and, if requested by the subscriber, such addressable converter box or other equipment as is required to access programming described in paragraph (8); and

(B) installation and monthly use of connections for additional television receivers.

equipment is used. The provision's phrase, "such addressable converter box or other equipment as is required to access programming described in paragraph (8)," refers to "programming offered on a per channel or per program basis." Thus, even though the equipment regulation provision is within the heading of "basic service tier regulation," the FCC's standards for regulation of cable equipment are directed to be independent of the kind of programming made accessible by this equipment, as long as the equipment is "used" with basic service. In the provision requiring the FCC to establish procedures and criteria for the regulation of unreasonable rates for cable programming services, the statute simply mentions cable equipment rates as one of many factors to be considered in determining unreasonableness. A fair interpretation of the statute is that the rates for subscriber equipment were not intended to be subsumed under service categories, and equipment is thus distinct from "basic service," "cable programming service," or "per channel or per program service." The rates for cable subscriber equipment have thus been "unbundled," (separately priced) to borrow the term applied to equipment used

11. 47 U.S.C.A. § 543(b)(8) (West Supp. 1993) (noting that converter boxes may be "used" with basic service but are often "required" to access premium and pay-per-view channels).

12. 47 U.S.C.A. § 543(c) (West Supp. 1993). "Cable programming service" is defined as "any video programming provided over a cable system, regardless of service tier, including installation or rental of equipment used for the receipt of such video programming, other than (A) video programming carried on the basic service tier, and (B) video programming offered on a per channel or per program basis." 47 U.S.C.A. § 543(i)(2) (West Supp. 1993). This confusing definition essentially covers non-premium cable networks. Cable equipment is included within the definition of the service but is distinguished from the programming itself. The FCC found that the inclusion of equipment within the definition of "cable programming service" was not meant to divide the regulation of equipment rates among various tiers of service, but to ensure that equipment used exclusively with such programming did not escape regulation. Rate Order, supra note 5, para. 283.


14. See Rate Order, supra note 5, para. 283 (interpreting Act to mean actual cost standard applies to all equipment used to receive basic service). The opponents of the Cable Act on the House Commerce Committee provided further evidence that the regulation of service and equipment are distinct by noting that "remote control units are not necessary for subscribers to receive basic service," H.R. REP. NO. 628, supra note 8, at 187, a remark that may have been the genesis for the statutory language changes discussed supra note 9 and the accompanying text.
with communications common carrier services, even though the provision of this equipment remains primarily the domain of cable operators.\(^{15}\)

2. The FCC's Equipment Rate Regulation

The FCC has designed a comprehensive scheme for cable equipment rate regulation.\(^{16}\) Under the FCC's new rules, the rates for equipment will be based on "actual cost," including an allocated share of overhead and a reasonable profit.\(^{17}\) This approach is thus significantly different from the "benchmark" approach applied to cable service rates and may even yield different results than the "cost-of-service" regime that the FCC will adopt in the near future.\(^{18}\) Cable operators will follow FCC guidelines for identifying the costs to be recovered through equipment and installation rates, and for calculating those rates. At a minimum, there will be separate charges for each significantly different type of remote, converter box, and installation. Local

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15. Rate Order, supra note 5, para. 287 ("We conclude that unbundling rates for equipment, installation, and additional outlets from the rates for basic service best comports with our Congressional mandate."). The reason for the unbundling of rates is clear. The House Commerce Committee stated its express concern that "cable operators have been leasing equipment at rates that far exceed their cost." H.R. REP. No. 628, supra note 8, at 83. Unbundling equipment rates from service rates is a direct means for establishing reasonable rates for both equipment and service. See discussion infra part II.B.

16. Rate Order, supra note 5, paras. 273-323. Numerous petitions for reconsideration of this rulemaking are pending as of this writing, and the details discussed below thus could be subject to change.

17. Id. para. 295. In providing for a reasonable profit on the provision of such equipment, the FCC addressed a primary concern of the House Commerce Committee opponents of the Cable Act regarding the equipment rate provisions of the Act. These members had interpreted the "actual cost" standard to exclude any reasonable profit. H.R. Rep. No. 628, supra note 8, at 187.


The "benchmark" approach involves the Commission setting a rate, based on a formula derived from cable system characteristics, against which a given cable operator's rates would be compared. Id. paras. 34-35. The "cost-of-service" approach involves examination of the particular costs of the individual cable system using ratemaking principles set up by the Commission. Id. para. 39.
franchising authorities will regulate these rates, if the authorities are certified.19

Under the FCC’s guidelines, cable operators will establish an Equipment Basket to which they will assign the direct costs of service installation, additional outlets, leasing, and repairing equipment. The Basket will include an allocation of all those system joint and common costs that installation, leasing, and repairing equipment share with other system activities, including a reasonable profit, but excluding general system overhead.20 The operator must also calculate an Hourly Service Charge (HSC) through which it would recover all Equipment Basket costs, including a reasonable profit, except for the operator’s costs of purchasing and financing the lease of customer equipment.21

Equipment sales, like equipment leases, shall be based on costs. In the case of sales, subscribers must be warned of risks that cable system upgrades will make the equipment incompatible. They must also be given notice of pending changes that would make the equipment incompatible.22 Promotional offers—which may include below-cost provision of equipment or installations—will be allowed, so long as they are “reasonable . . . in relation to the operator’s overall offerings in the Equipment Basket.”23 The costs of such promotions must be recovered as general system overhead, not through increases in other portions of the Equipment Basket.24

Costs of additional connections will generally be recovered through charges for the related equipment (converters and remote controls) and installation charges.25 Additional programming costs, if any, resulting from additional connections within a

19. Rate Order, supra note 5, para. 294.
20. Id. para. 295.
21. Id.
22. Id. para. 298. The notice provision is thus similar to the notice requirement of 47 C.F.R. § 68.110(b) (1992), which requires telephone companies to give notice to their customers of any changes in their networks that may render customers’ terminal equipment incompatible.
23. Rate Order, supra note 5, para. 301.
24. Id. paras. 301-302.
25. Id. para. 306.
subscriber’s home can be recovered through monthly charges for the connections. Costs associated with efforts to boost the signal within a given customer’s premises may also be recovered through monthly charges to that customer. Network costs for designing the system so that it can generally serve multiple outlets per home are to be treated as part of general system overhead.

B. Cable Home Wiring

Section 16(d) of the 1992 Cable Act comprises the “home wiring” provision of the statute, and directs the FCC to create rules for “the disposition, after a subscriber . . . terminates service, of any cable installed by the cable operator within the premises of such subscriber.” This provision is intended to give subscribers who have terminated cable service “the right to acquire wiring that has been installed by the cable operator in their dwelling unit.” In adopting this provision, Congress was mindful of cable systems operators’ responsibility to prevent signal leakage and their legitimate interests in preventing cable service theft. The House Commerce Committee report also stated that “the Committee does not intend that cable operators be treated as common carriers with respect to the internal cabling installed in subscribers’ homes.”

Within this narrow mandate, the FCC has adopted rules that establish a “demarcation point” that is located at (or about) “twelve inches outside of where the cable wire enters the outside wall of the subscriber’s premises.” The location of the cable

26. Id. para. 307.
28. H.R. REP. NO. 628, supra note 8, at 118.
29. Id. at 118-19. So as not to foster the threat of cable theft, the scope of this provision does not reach to common wiring within multi-unit buildings, but only to wiring serving the premises of individual subscribers. This does not mean that all wiring in multi-unit dwellings is exempted. See In re Implementation of the Cable TV Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, Cable Home Wiring, Report and Order, 8 FCC Rcd. 1435, paras. 10, 12 (1993) [hereinafter Home Wiring Order] (noting demarcation point for wiring in multi-unit dwellings set at or about 12 inches from the point where the wiring enters the subscriber’s individual dwelling unit).
31. Home Wiring Order, supra note 29, paras. 11-12. This same demarcation was adopted by the FCC for purposes of equipment rate regulation. Rate Order, supra note
demarcation point is thus similar to the network demarcation point separating the facilities of communications common carriers from customer-owned inside wiring. Under the current rules for cable home wiring, however, the demarcation point has no meaning until a subscriber terminates service and opts to purchase the wiring installed in the home. In cases where subscribers own their home wiring, and seek service from a cable operator (for example, from a second cable operator or "overbuilder") who requires the use of converter boxes provided by that cable operator, the results would resemble the so-called "interpositioning" situations that arose in the 1970s involving telephone equipment. When service provider equipment is interpositioned, questions may arise concerning subscriber control over wiring that is "theirs," but functions only to connect a cable system-provided converter box with cable system facilities.

C. Consumer Electronics Compatibility and the "Buy-Through Prohibition"

Section 17 of the 1992 Cable Act and the FCC's proceeding on compatibility between cable systems and consumer electronics compatibility and the "Buy-Through Prohibition"

Section 17 of the 1992 Cable Act and the FCC's proceeding on compatibility between cable systems and consumer

5, para. 282 n.666.
32. In re Review of §§ 68.104 and 68.213 of the Commission's Rules Concerning Connection of Simple Inside Wiring to the Tel. Network, Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rule Making, 5 FCC Rcd. 4686, para. 30 (1990), recon. pending (establishing network demarcation point at no more than 12 inches within the customer's premises, with equipment and wiring on customer's side of the demarcation point to be unregulated).
33. See Home Wiring Order, supra note 29, para. 5. A group of diverse parties has petitioned for a rulemaking to give subscribers access to ownership of cable home wiring without terminating service. Joint Petition for Rulemaking of Media Access Project, United States Tel. Ass'n, and Citizens for a Sound Economy Found. (July 27, 1993).
34. See, e.g., In re Amendments of Pt. 68 of the Commission's Rules Concerning Connection of Tel. Equip., Sys. and Protective Apparatus to the Tel. Network, Third Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 94 F.C.C.2d 5, paras. 1-2 & n.2 (1983). Telephone carriers insisted on the use of so-called "protective circuit arrangements" (PCAs), claiming they were needed to prevent harmful voltages or signals emanating from customer-owned equipment, concerns not too dissimilar from the signal leakage issue noted in the House report. Ultimately these concerns were addressed by amendments to the Part 68 certification and registration program, the history of which is discussed in more detail infra part II.A.
electronics provide the largest number of pieces in the unbundling jigsaw puzzle. The main thrust of the statute and the FCC's inquiry is how to eliminate the impairment of the advanced capabilities of television receivers and videocassette recorders by "cable scrambling, encoding, or encryption technologies and devices, including converter boxes and remote control devices required by cable operators to receive programming." The FCC has been directed to craft regulations "to promote the commercial availability, from cable operators and retail vendors that are not affiliated with cable systems, of converter boxes and of remote control devices compatible with converter boxes." This provision constitutes a direct invitation to the FCC to fashion regulations that would unbundle the provision, not just the rates, of cable equipment from cable service. A comprehensive regulatory scheme with the ultimate goal of cable equipment unbundling would likely satisfy this statutory requirement and the larger goal of compatibility with consumer electronics.

Section 17 also calls on the FCC "to require cable operators offering channels whose reception requires a converter box . . . to the extent technically and economically feasible, to offer subscribers the option of having all other channels delivered directly to the subscribers' television receivers or videocassette recorders without passing through the converter box." This provision appears to be at cross purposes with the Act's "buy-through prohibition." However, in implementing the "buy-through prohibition," the FCC resolved this apparent inconsistency by noting that addressable systems "typically incorporate encryption systems that frustrate the

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39. 47 U.S.C.A. § 543(b)(8) (West Supp. 1993). The buy-through prohibition generally restricts cable operators from requiring subscribers to acquire any "tier" (package) of cable service other than basic service as a condition for purchasing per channel or per program service. There is an exception, limited in duration to 10 years, for any cable system that "by reason of the lack of addressable converter boxes or other technological limitations, does not permit the operator to offer programming on a per channel or per program basis." 47 U.S.C.A. § 543(b)(8)(B) (West Supp. 1993). The language of the exception thus appears to promote the use of operator-provided converter boxes to meet the terms of the prohibition.
functioning of certain features of home electronic equipment," contrary to Section 17's compatibility directive. The FCC further held that "forcing the premature upgrading of equipment could interfere with accomplishment of the tasks set forth in Section 17." The FCC thus declined "to mandate the continued use of any particular mode of operation" in order to enforce the prohibition.

Section 17 of the 1992 Cable Act requires the FCC to report to Congress in the fall of 1993 on compatibility between cable systems and consumer electronics and to adopt regulations 180 days after submitting its report. These regulations are likely to be the most important factor in setting the stage for cable subscriber equipment unbundling. Two important questions are whether and how much the FCC will consider its own history of unbundling communications customer-premises equipment from common carrier services when it shapes these regulations.

II. The Blueprint: The FCC's History of CPE Unbundling

Converter boxes and the like may be "necessary" to receive cable service in many cable systems, because of system design, frequency mapping, encryption, or other technical reasons. But

41. *Id.*
42. *Id.* para. 20.
44. The FCC's report to Congress indicates that these rules will require that unscrambled cable signals be passed directly to televisions and VCRs without the use of cable set-top equipment. Scrambled signals will be passed through a cable operator-provided "Decoder Interface connector." FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION, CONSUMER ELECTRONICS AND CABLE SYSTEM COMPATIBILITY 64-65 (1993). Use of this equipment for signal security would thus be similar in principle to the use of bundled "loopback" equipment by telephone companies. *See infra* note 72. The purpose of both types of equipment is to ensure the integrity of the electronic signal provided by the service, not to dictate the customer's equipment options.
mere "necessity" for delivery of service is not a sufficient justification for bundled, sole-source provision of equipment to cable subscribers. Telephones, answering machines, fax machines, and so forth are necessary to receive telephone service, but the FCC long ago began a regulatory process that led to the unbundling of this equipment from telephone service. Throughout that process, the FCC focused on a central theme: creation of private benefit as long as there is no public harm. The same philosophy can be applied to cable equipment.

A. The Origins of the Unbundling Policy

The policy favoring unbundling of customer-premises equipment first began to develop with the assault upon the restrictive interconnection practices of AT&T in 1948. A petition was filed against AT&T for interference with the use, distribution, and interconnection of the Hush-A-Phone, a cup-like device that snapped onto the telephone handset to reduce the interference of ambient noise and to increase privacy, but which had the side effect of making the user's voice somewhat softer and less clear. After observing that such a reduction in quality affected only the two parties to the call and not the entire network, the court concluded that the tariff constituted an unwarranted interference with the "subscriber's right reasonably to use his telephone in ways which are privately beneficial without being publicly detrimental." After observing that such a reduction in quality affected only the two parties to the call and not the entire network, the court concluded that the tariff constituted an unwarranted interference with the "subscriber's right reasonably to use his telephone in ways which are privately beneficial without being publicly detrimental." In 1968, the FCC began its own crusade for interconnection with its Carterfone decision, which the Commission later called

46. Id. at 269.
47. Id.
48. In re Use of the Carterfone Device in Message Toll Tel. Serv., Decision, 13 F.C.C.2d 420, recon. denied, Memorandum Opinion and Order, 14 F.C.C.2d 571 (1968). The Carterfone was a device used to interconnect mobile radio systems to the toll
its point of embarkation "on a conscious policy of promoting competition in the terminal equipment market." Relying on the principle established in *Hush-A-Phone*, the Commission invalidated the tariff that prohibited the attachment of customer-provided devices on the switched telephone system, including the Carterfone. Since communications users who utilized the switched network prior to *Carterfone* were restricted to the use of Bell System equipment, *Carterfone* provided customers with the opportunity to choose between AT&T and the various independent terminal equipment suppliers for their interconnection needs on the switched network.

In *Mebane Home Telephone Company*, the Commission extended "the broad principle" of *Hush-A-Phone* and *Carterfone* to "interconnected devices such as PBXs and key systems which may replace telephone system equipment," stating that "experience indicates that not only have customers obtained substantial private benefit from such interconnection, but there has been no technical harm to telephone company operations." One year later, the FCC instituted an investigation into the economic effects and interrelationships of telecommunications regulatory policies,

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Docket No. 20003. The Commission found that there had been a great deal of innovation by the so-called "interconnect" providers (i.e., providers of private branch exchanges and customer-premises telephone systems) and telephone companies in the "post-Carterfone years" and noted the following:

We find the interconnect competitive marketplace has been characterized by innovation on the part of both interconnect and telephone companies, thereby affording the public a wide range of choices regarding the terminal device or private communications system which best serves their needs. Benefits include availability of new equipment features, improved maintenance, and reliability, improved installation features including ease of making changes, competitive sources of supply, option of leasing or owning, and competitive pricing and payment options. Although it is difficult to predict future innovative developments, because so much is dependent on new product lines and new marketing strategies adopted by the telephone carriers in response to competition, it appears likely that the public will continue to benefit from the competitive interconnect marketplace in terms of innovation in the immediate future.

A defining moment came when the FCC acted to ensure the technical feasibility of its competitive CPE policy through a telephone equipment registration program under Part 68. The Part 68 program was designed to promote competition by establishing technical standards that ensured CPE could be directly connected to the network without causing the network any harm. To prevent discrimination, the FCC also required that customer-provided and carrier-provided CPE connect in the same manner to carrier facilities. The Commission perceived these rules as a

52. Id. para. 246 (citations omitted).
natural outgrowth of the policies enunciated in *Hush-A-Phone* and *Carterfone* and of the need to determine exactly how interconnection should take place.\(^5\)

The Commission continued its move toward a CPE unbundling policy when it rejected the Primary Instrument Concept (PIC), which would have required each single line subscriber to basic telephone service to lease one telephone set from the telephone company.\(^5\) Concluding that PIC was "fundamentally inconsistent with the principles" enunciated in *Hush-A-Phone, Carterfone, Mebane*, and the Registration Program, the Commission stated:

> We determined in Docket No. 19528 and elsewhere that the public benefits from diversity in the supply of terminal equipment and that consumers for this further reason should have the option of furnishing their own terminals, including main stations. Among these benefits as found in Docket No. 20003 (61 F.C.C.2d at 867), are the public's wider range of options as to terminal devices, competitive stimulus to innovation by telephone companies and independent suppliers, the availability of new equipment features, improved maintenance and reliability, improved installation features including ease of making changes, competitive sources of supply, the option of leasing or owning equipment, and competitive pricing and payment options. . . . We remain of the opinion that the proven and reasonably anticipated public benefits from the competitive supply of terminal equipment, including primary instruments, take precedence over the considerations urged by the telephone industry. If anything, this judgment is the more firm in light of potential developments in home and small business terminals and the heightened desirability of protecting the consumers' freedom of options in such circumstances.\(^6\)

The FCC subsequently extended the Part 68 policy to additional services in CC Docket Nos. 79-143 and 81-216, eliminating carrier-imposed requirements for "interpositioned" carrier equipment and other restrictive "connecting arrangements"\(^5\) and

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56. *Id.* para. 48 (citations omitted).
57. *In re* Amendment of Pt. 68 of the Commission’s Rules Concerning Connection of Tel. Equip., Sys. and Protective Apparatus to Certain Private Line Servs., *First Report and Order*, 76 F.C.C.2d 246 (1980) (extending Pt. 68 to certain private line services that
proposing the unbundling of equipment used with digital services.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{B. The Computer II Decision}

Historically, most CPE was unbundled (separately priced) from transmission services, but offered pursuant to tariff. The telephone company was the sole provider for most CPE. Later, customers could provide their own CPE or obtain the CPE from the carrier pursuant to tariff. Carrier-provided CPE was generally only available to a customer of that carrier’s regulated transmission services.

\textit{Computer II}’s decision completely unbundled, detariffed, and separated CPE from carriers’ basic regulated services. It also required AT&T to provide CPE and enhanced services through fully separated subsidiaries.\textsuperscript{59} The Commission was motivated largely by the benefits that competition could bring through a continued pattern of separating CPE and ensuring interconnection:

Our action today is only another in a series of steps to isolate terminal from transmission offerings, increase consumer choice, and to open equipment markets to full and fair competition. By striking down carrier-imposed restrictions on requiring equipment interconnection over a decade ago, we foreclosed carriers from offering only the single option of end-to-end communications service. In implementing a registration program applicable both to carrier provided and customer provided equipment, we sought to isolate the technical standards for transmission and terminal offerings and assure competitive parity among all suppliers of customer provided equipment. In the same manner, in today requiring equipment to be made available to interstate users on a cost-based non-usage sensitive basis—with equipment investment fully isolated from transmission investment and from the separations process—we hope


to strengthen further the prospects for comparing competitive equipment offerings in the market.\textsuperscript{60}

It was, however, the determination that CPE is "separate and distinct" from transmission service that made it possible for independent CPE vendors to compete on equal terms with carriers in the provision of CPE.\textsuperscript{61} This rule, it should be emphasized, applies to all carriers. This decision also reduced the scope of regulation by classifying CPE as unregulated.\textsuperscript{62}

The Commission also recognized the wisdom of the overall CPE policy it had forged:

As a result of this policy the terminal equipment market is subject to an increasing amount of competition as new and innovative types of CPE are constantly introduced into the marketplace by equipment vendors. We have repeatedly found that competition in the equipment market has stimulated innovation on the part of both independent suppliers and telephone companies, thereby affording the public a wider range of terminal choices at lower costs. Moreover, this policy has afforded consumers more options in obtaining equipment that best suits their communication or information processing needs. Benefits of this competitive policy have been found in such areas as improved maintenance and reliability, improved installation features including ease of making changes, competitive sources of supply, the option of leasing or owning equipment, and competitive pricing and payment options.\textsuperscript{63}

The \textit{Computer II} decision lauded detariffing and unbundling for its effect on the pricing of transmission services:

We believe that the provision of terminal equipment on an unbundled and detariffed basis should enhance significantly our flexibility to assure cost-based provision of transmission services in an increasingly competitive marketplace. This step will also promote

\textsuperscript{60} Computer II, \textit{supra} note 49, para. 180.

\textsuperscript{61} "Except as otherwise ordered by the Commission, after March 1, 1982, the carrier provision of customer-premises equipment used in conjunction with the interstate telecommunications network shall be separate and distinct from provision of common carrier communications services and not offered on a tariffed basis." 47 C.F.R. § 64.702(e) (1992).

\textsuperscript{62} The Commission reinforced its determination that CPE was to be provided on an unregulated, competitive basis through the preemption of state regulation. Computer II, \textit{supra} note 49, paras. 184-189. In its 1986 decision clarifying the scope of the Commission's preemption powers, the Supreme Court cited with approval the judicial decisions approving the Commission's preemption of state CPE regulation. Louisiana Pub. Serv. Comm'n v. FCC, 476 U.S. 355, 375 n.4 (1986).

\textsuperscript{63} Computer II, \textit{supra} note 49, para. 141 (citations omitted).
our objective of assuring a viable competitive market for terminal equipment. As a result of our actions in requiring interconnection in *Carterfone* and in subsequently establishing technical standards in this area, we are convinced that there has now developed a strong viable market for equipment which assures users a wide range of competitive alternatives.64

*Computer II* was a regulatory watershed, which successfully defined two markets—one for CPE, one for communications services—where before there was only one. This "market rules" approach continues to be sustainable in today's regulatory environment.

C. Post-Computer II Developments

Two years after the Final Decision in *Computer II*, the AT&T divestiture consent decree was approved with modification by the district court,65 and two years after that, AT&T petitioned for relief from the structural separation requirements embodied in 47 C.F.R. § 64.702.66 The comments filed in response to the petition led to the creation of CC Docket No. 85-26, in which the FCC amended certain aspects of the *Computer II* regulatory model.67 This order permitted AT&T to provide CPE free from the structural separation requirements set forth in the *Computer II* decision.68 The CPE unbundling and detariffing requirements, however, were not revised. In fact, these requirements were extended in 1984 to equipment located on customers' premises

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64. *Id.* para. 179.
68. *In re* Furnishing of Customer Premises Equip. by the Bell Operating Tel. Cos. and the Indep. Tel. Cos., *Report and Order*, 2 FCC Rcd. 143 (1987), amended by *Memorandum Opinion and Order on Reconsideration*, 3 FCC Rcd. 22 (1987). Subsequently, the BOCs were also released from the structural separation requirements. *Id.*
used to terminate digital communications services, so-called network channel terminating equipment (NCTE).\(^6\)

In 1986, the unbundling of CPE was hailed as a major achievement by then-Chairman Mark Fowler, former Common Carrier Bureau Chief Albert Halprin, and James Schlichting, when they explained the benefits of competition in CPE:

The benefits of such competition are palpable. It is estimated that sales revenues in the CPE market increased by nearly 50% between 1983 and 1985. More than 2000 vendors are supplying end users with $14 billion worth of terminal equipment. The introduction of competition has also provided consumers with a wider variety of CPE options and with less expensive alternatives than existed in the earlier monopoly market. Consumers can obtain such new CPE features as automatic redial, hold, and other call-handling options. A wide variety of new terminal equipment has also appeared, including wireless telephony, customized dialing, and other specialty phones, as well as varieties of decorator phones. It is estimated, for instance, that there are currently 3 million cordless telephones in use. The benefits for business users have also been substantial; PBX and key system prices have been dropping. Nevertheless, the capabilities of business CPE have increased, with such features as high-speed facsimile and integrated data and voice capabilities now being commonplace.\(^7\)

These benefits did not arise fortuitously; rather, they resulted from intentional policy choices made by the FCC over the period of nearly twenty years that preceded these observations.

Since that article was written, the CPE unbundling rule has survived virtually intact. There have been conflicts over tariffs or petitions for services that include carrier-provided equipment

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69. *In re Amendments of Pt. 68 of the Commission's Rules Concerning Connection of Tel. Equip., Sys. and Protective Apparatus to the Tel. Network, Third Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, 94 F.C.C.2d 5, para. 29 (1983) (noting "high threshold burden on a carrier to demonstrate that a particular type of equipment located on the customer's premises should be considered part of a common carrier offering"), recon. denied, FCC 84-145 (Apr. 27, 1984). The unbundling policy has also been applied to equipment used with Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) service. *In re Integrated Servs. Digital Networks, First Report*, 98 F.C.C.2d 249, para. 25 (1984) (emphasizing the "Commission's fundamental policy of prohibiting restrictions on customer provision of premises equipment where such supply can be done in a manner which is 'privately beneficial without being publicly harmful'").

located on customers' premises, but most of these decisions have vindicated the unbundling rule. The Commission's Computer III rulemaking clarified the unbundling rule to allow carriers to install equipment on customers' premises which would be used solely for network testing. In 1990, the FCC proposed a modification of

71. See, e.g., In re BellSouth Telecomm. Digital Transmission Serv. F.C.C. Tariff No. 1, Order, 7 FCC Rcd. 5504 (1992) (Com. Car. Bur.); see also In re BellSouth Tel. Cos. Revisions to Tariff F.C.C. No. 4, Order, 7 FCC Rcd. 596 (1992) (rejecting two versions of BellSouth's Digital Transmission Service, a digital signal level zero, or "DSO," service that included bundled customer-premises multiplexers); In re BellSouth's Petition for Declaratory Ruling or, Alternatively, Request for Limited Waiver of the CPE Rules to Provide Line Build Out (LBO) Functionality as a Component of Regulated Network Interface Connectors on Customer Premises, Memorandum Opinion and Order, 6 FCC Rcd. 3336, paras. 1, 3 (1991) (rejecting petition to increase number of NCTE functionalities to be provided by regulated network equipment placed on the customer's premises); In re AT&T Comm. Revisions to Tariff F.C.C. Nos. 1 and 2, Memorandum Opinion and Order, 4 FCC Rcd. 4984, para. 9 (1989) (rejecting as violative of § 64.702 of the Commission's rules, a promotional offering by AT&T that would have provided customers "free" D4 channel banks and other CPE if such customers agreed to purchase certain AT&T tariffed services); In re Pacific Bell Request for Authority to Provide Asynchronous/X.25 Protocol Conversion for its "Victoria" Tech. on an Unseparated Basis for a One-Year Trial Period, Memorandum Opinion and Order, 3 FCC Rcd. 3082, paras. 14-23 (1988) (granting Pacific Bell a waiver for bundled CPE on a one-year trial basis, but deferring a decision under the NCTE waiver standard), vacated as moot sub nom. Independent Data Comm. Mfrs. Ass'n v. FCC, No. 88-1523 (D.C. Cir. Mar. 8, 1988) (per curiam).

A notable exception to the general pattern of enforcing the CPE unbundling rule is In re NYNEX Tel. Cos. Tariff F.C.C. No. 1, Order, 8 FCC Rcd. 693 (1993), which granted a carrier a waiver to provide a customer-premises multiplexer as part of a tariffed service, although it rejected the argument that the equipment was within the so-called "multiplexer exception" to the general unbundling rule. This decision was reversed by the Commission on review. In re NYNEX Tel. Cos. Tariff F.C.C. No. 1, Applications for Review, Memorandum Opinion and Order, FCC 93-471, 1993 FCC LEXIS 5471 (Oct. 29, 1993). Compare In re Amendment to §§ 64.702 of the Commission's Rules and Regs. (Third Computer Inquiry, Phase II), Memorandum Opinion and Order on Reconsideration, 3 FCC Rcd. 1150, paras. 138-140 (1988); In re International Business Mach. Corp., Memorandum Opinion and Order, 58 Rad. Reg. 2d (P & F) 374, para. 12 (1985), aff'd, Memorandum Opinion and Order on Reconsideration, FCC 86-122, 1986 FCC LEXIS 3789 (Mar. 25, 1986). Pending as of this writing is a request to exempt nondominant interexchange resellers from the unbundling rule. See Petition for Clarification or, Alternatively, Waiver, DA 93-688 (May 14, 1993).

72. In re Amendment to §§ 64.702 of the Commissions Rules and Reg. (Third Computer Inquiry), Report and Order, 2 FCC Rcd. 3072, para. 234 (1987). Carriers are permitted to provide remote-activated "loopback" diagnostic functionality by means of regulated equipment placed on the customer's premises. Loopback testing must either be transparent to the customer or offered "as an option that the customer could purchase with the expectation of more rapid repair service at less expense." Id. para. 233.
the rule to allow AT&T to provide bundled "packages" of unregulated CPE and services subject to "streamlined" regulation.\textsuperscript{73} After strong opposition from users, CPE manufacturers, and competing carriers, the proposal was not adopted.\textsuperscript{74} The only significant modification of the rule was effected in 1992, when limited bundling of cellular service and cellular CPE was permitted, with the requirement that "stand-alone" prices for cellular service remain constant.\textsuperscript{75} For equipment that is located on customers' premises and connects to telephone company facilities, unbundling is a fundamental fact of life and a policy that has withstood the test of time.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that there is a convergence of technology that is taking place in the telecommunications and electronic mass media markets. One manifestation is the FCC's "video dialtone" decision, which permits telephone companies to provide "switched video" on a common carrier basis.\textsuperscript{76} Cable companies are likewise jumping into new, wireless "personal communications services" as fast as the technology develops.\textsuperscript{77} Another form of convergence takes place when a consumer buys a high-resolution monitor that can display computer graphics or full-motion video,
or simply purchases a universal remote control unit that can interoperable with her television, VCR, home stereo, and cable converter box. What has been absent thus far is the integration of telecommunications and computer technology with cable systems at the subscriber's premises. Cable companies have not, however, overlooked the promise of integrating computer "intelligence" with cable equipment.\textsuperscript{78} The issue that is presented is who will control this technology—consumers or cable operators.

The CPE unbundling requirement has been a beneficial and viable policy for more than twenty-five years, ever since its regulatory origins with the \textit{Carterfone} decision. A similar unbundling of cable subscriber equipment from cable service would produce comparable benefits. Indeed, the rewards might be even greater if there is a "multiplier effect" that could be generated when cable, telephone, and computer technologies can be successfully integrated in interactive, multimedia devices available across a mass market. Movement toward unbundling cable CPE has been initiated by Congress in the 1992 Cable Act. History indicates cable CPE can be unbundled from other services without public harm. Based on its experience in unbundling common carrier equipment, the FCC should be willing to unbundle cable subscriber equipment. It will be an interesting process to follow.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{E.g.}, Bob Wells, \textit{Malone Calls Cable Engine of Multimedia}, \textit{BROADCASTING \\& CABLE}, Apr. 5, 1993, at 14, 15 (CEO of largest multiple system operator, TCI, discussing planned purchase of "converter boxes containing high-powered computer operating systems" and costing $300-350 each).