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FREE MARKET?

I read with great interest Dan Gillmor's recent column about the pro-competitive benefits from the breakup of the old AT&T monopoly 20 years ago this month. As a professional "policy wonk" in the telecommunications field, I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Gillmor's observations that while the battle for long distance competition was successful, the Baby Bells – as the "new monopolies, playing all the same anti-competitive tricks that they had played while under Ma Bell's wing" – are now "trying to reverse all that progress, to control not only their pipes but the content that flows on them."

Indeed, even though the Bells' re-entry into the long distance market was predicated on the opening of their local monopoly, the Bells continue to perpetuate an anticompetitive pattern of "deny, delay and degrade" to rivals. Thus, while local competition remains stymied (new entrants have signed up only about 13 million local customers nationwide to date), the Bells have signed up nearly 29 million consumers for bundled packages of local and long distance services – a 3:1 ratio.

Mr. Gillmor asks whether regulators have learned anything from history. Apparently not and, absent renewed vigilance on their part, there is a very good chance that we might wake up to the re-creation of the old Ma Bell monopoly for "one stop shopping" on a regional rather than on a national basis.

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