

House Democrats challenge Comcast, NBC on deal

By JOELLE TESSLER
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Congressional Democrats challenged executives from Comcast Corp. and NBC Universal on Thursday to show that the cable TV operator's plan to take control of the entertainment company won't hurt consumers and rivals.

In back-to-back hearings, members of House and Senate subcommittees expressed concern that the transaction could lead to such competitive harms as higher cable TV rates and fewer video programming choices.

"The issue before us really boils down to the seven C's," said Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., a senior member of the House Commerce subcommittee on communications and technology. "Will this combination of communications colossi curtail competition and

cost consumers?"

Comcast, based in Philadelphia, is seeking federal approval to acquire a 51 percent stake in NBC Universal from General Electric Co. The Justice Department and the Federal Communications Commission are expected to sign off, but likely with conditions. Input from Congress could sway the outcome of those regulatory reviews.

Comcast CEO Brian Roberts told lawmakers that the combination would produce "a more creative and innovative company that will meet consumer demands" and drive more innovation among competitors.

NBC Universal CEO Jeff Zucker added that significant investment made possible by the combination would help NBC Universal compete in a rapidly evolving entertainment business that has become a "media free-

for-all."

Comcast, which serves a quarter of all U.S. households that pay for TV, already owns some cable channels, including E! Entertainment and the Golf Channel. The deal would give Comcast control of the NBC and Spanish-language Telemundo broadcast networks, popular cable channels such as CNBC, Bravo and Oxygen and the Universal Pictures movie studio.

Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., said he is worried about the dangers of allowing the nation's largest cable and broadband provider to take control of NBC Universal's vast media empire.

"When the same company produces the programs and runs the pipes that bring us those programs, we have a reason to be nervous," said Franken, a comedian who spent nearly two decades as a writer and performer

for NBC's "Saturday Night Live."

Satellite TV companies and other rivals in the video business have warned that the combined company could drive up prices for — or even withhold — popular channels. And small independent programmers fear that Comcast cable systems could stop carrying channels that compete with its own, or relegate rival channels to premium tiers with fewer subscribers.

Public interest groups have also raised concerns that Comcast would begin charging for its media content online.

Roberts said the proposed transaction doesn't raise significant antitrust concerns because Comcast and NBC operate in highly competitive markets with a "lack of overlap." Several Republicans echoed that point.

"We've heard some of the usual predictions that this is the end of the media world as we know it," said Rep. Joe Barton of Texas, the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee. "Put me down as skeptical on that."

Comcast has already made some pledges meant to ease worries about the deal. Among other things, the company has vowed not to move NBC's free, over-the-air network to cable and pledged to ensure that rival providers can get access to Comcast-owned programming at fair rates.

But Herb Kohl, D-Wis., chairman of the Senate Judiciary subcommittee that handles competition policy and consumer rights, said those pledges are merely a starting point and called on regulators to attach strong conditions on any merger approval.

Vietnamese artist breathes life into a dying song

By AMY TAXIN
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Ngoc Bay purses her feet together and glides to the left, then to the right, guiding her eight-year-old pupil in the subtle movements of the centuries-old Vietnamese opera.

To the meandering tune of a high-pitched oboe and the rhythmic thumping of a drum, the 68-year-old opera singer with gray hair pulled back into a ponytail demonstrates for the boy in the Velcro sandals. He tries it, then his knees buckle, and he trips.

"I can't do it," Quoc Le moans in Vietnamese. He then slips off his sandals and tries again. This time, Bay's hands steady his shoulders to help him shimmy across the carpeted floor. He breaks into a smile.

The beginner's class in the heart of Southern California's Little Saigon is a far cry from the theaters in Vietnam where a youthful Bay once crooned to the adoration of her fans. But it is inside this windowless room where she has embarked on a mission: revive an esoteric artform that animated her but is in danger of dying.

The poised choreography of Hat Boi (HACK-boyh) has lost favor in her homeland and failed to take root among the immigrants here in the largest Vietnamese enclave in the United States. Bay

hopes to pass on the tradition to her students or at least give them a love for an art she learned to cherish as a girl.

"I hope they can become good like me, before I pass away," Bay says, chuckling. "Here, nobody knows about Hat Boi. They like Western music."

In Vietnam, Hat Boi actors recreate battle scenes and love stories from Vietnamese and Chinese history in brightly colored costumes and make-up using stylized dance moves and singing. It dates back hundreds of years and rose to prominence during the 18th century with support from the Vietnamese royal court.

But as modern cinema swept across the Southeast Asian country in the early 20th century, Hat Boi began to fade. In recent years, the Vietnamese government has tried to drum up support for Hat Boi by sponsoring training programs, but the opera is now performed only on commission, ethnomusicologist Phong Nguyen says.

Teaching Hat Boi is no easy task. It takes years of practice to master. Some scholars question whether it is even possible to learn it in the United States, given the lack of cultural and institutional supports to pass on the tradition.

Others say the United States is precisely where the future of Hat Boi lies as Vietnamese-Americans become increasingly

successful and can afford to invest more time, and cash, in cultural preservation.

"The way the Vietnamese culture and art can be saved is by the Vietnamese overseas," says Michelle Phuong Thao, executive director of the Viet Art Center Foundation in Orange County. "It is going to be us to do it, not them."

As a teenager, Bay recalls singing along with her sister and cousin in nightly performances in her family's Saigon neighborhood, raking in a small fortune with help from a microphone her father had bought her. She had always loved music, ever since she tagged along with her father to see a Hat Boi troupe perform near her home as a young girl.

But Bay's aspirations did not always lie with Hat Boi.

With her melodic voice, she dreamed of performing in the modern Vietnamese theater, which was more in vogue with girls her age. After a dismal audition for the popular Cai Luong theater program at the Conservatory of Saigon in 1960, Bay says, she sat dejected, afraid she had missed her shot at stardom.

Outside the theater, her luck changed. An instructor caught sight of her and invited her to try out for a new, government-subsidized program aimed at boosting Hat Boi.

Bay immersed herself in the opera's archaic poetry and music,

despite ridicule by her friends in another theater program. Four years later, she graduated and became a successful artist performing across Vietnam.

After her husband died during the Vietnam War, Bay started teaching Hat Boi to another crop of star-struck youth — many who entered the conservatory to avoid the battlefield — and took a second job translating Vietnamese texts to English for U.S. army officials.

She would sometimes perform Hat Boi for free, thriving from the thunderous applause of the audience. They'd throw money tucked inside paper fans at her feet, she says.

After the war, the communist government took hold of the conservatory. Bay says corrupt officers tried to demand she sleep with them if she wanted to perform and threatened to take away her teaching job. But she refused.

In 1992, Bay emigrated to the United States. She packed cassette tapes, books and song sheets, hoping to start a Hat Boi class in the bustling Vietnamese community here. But when she arrived, her heart sank.

"When I came here, I didn't see Hat Boi," Bay recalls. "They said, Hat Boi? What is that?"

She eventually became a nurse's assistant, saved up enough to retire and brought her daughters and their families to live with

her in a small house in Orange County. Hat Boi had no place in her new world of suburban strip malls, Hollywood movies and blaring rock music.

Five years ago, she was asked to give a Hat Boi demonstration at the University of California, Los Angeles. The event inspired professors and advocates to search for funding to start the community's first Hat Boi class.

It began last year in a practice room at the Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association.

On Thursday nights, a handful of rambunctious 4-, 6- and 8-year olds cluster around a table sipping juice boxes before lining up to learn the opera's carefully choreographed steps. The adult students then take the floor, clutching fans draped with red and yellow tassels. Some remember their teacher from newspaper snapshots back in Vietnam.

In late February, Bay's class will give its first performance. The true test of the class' success, however, will be whether the children learn to appreciate Hat Boi along with the latest band to hit the airwaves.

"Somehow, it will integrate into their lives," says Ysa Le, the association's executive director. "Once you learn something ... I think it will be with you forever."