

Witness Testimony

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Rethinking The Children's Television Act in the Digital Age
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. I am Sandra Calvert, a Professor of Psychology at Georgetown University and the Director of the Children's Digital Media Center.

Twenty-first century work skills require knowledge of, and a facility with, digital technologies. President Obama believes that education should be reformed, in part, by harnessing the power of digital technologies to transform the way that children learn in the 21st century.^{1,2} My own work at the Children's Digital Media Center, and that of my colleagues, includes an examination of how we can use digital media to enlighten and educate children as well as prepare them for their future. The Children's Television Act is an important vehicle for accomplishing this goal.

Knowledge of how to use digital media to educate and inform our youth is critical for our nation's future. From the cradle throughout their development, children's lives are embedded in digital media. In the first six years of life, children spend an average of 2 hours per day in front of a screen.³ From age 8 through the adolescent years, the amount of media time jumps to 6.5 hours per day, or to more than 8 hours of daily use if multitasking is considered. While television is still the dominant medium of choice for children and youth, newer interactive media are rapidly making inroads into their daily media experiences.⁴

Congress recognized the potential of media for children's development when it passed the Children's Television Act in 1990, which required broadcasters to provide educational and informational television programs to child viewers as well as to restrict the amount of commercial advertisements broadcast during those programs.⁵ Since the passage of the Children's Television Act, commercial broadcasters have had to provide no more than a mere 3 hours of educational television content per week. Even so, a 2008 content analysis reported by Children Now revealed that children's educational television programs were educationally insufficient, not at all what Congress intended when it required commercial broadcasters to provide educational and informational (EI)

television programs.⁶ While the success of this law remains a matter of public debate, what the Children's Television Act will mean in the 21st century is a key to children's future scholastic and occupational success.

With the implementation of the digital television as the standard format for televised broadcasts, the time to reconsider the requirements of the Children's Television Act is now. We have many children who are struggling or failing in school. Our children's standardized scores on mathematics, science, and reading literacy assessments trail behind their international peer group.⁷ This state of affairs is appalling. Our country knows how to create quality media, and well-designed educational content is effective in lifting the scholastic success of our youth. For instance, preschool-aged children who were frequent viewers of educational television programs such as *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* were more successful at school entry and during their high school years than those who viewed these kinds of programs infrequently.⁸ In addition, well-designed commercially broadcast educational and informational television programs are understood quite well by grade-school children, and many children view these programs on a regular basis. Consider the following academic science lesson reported online by a child who said that *The Magic School Bus* (originally broadcast by PBS but used as an educational and informational television program by FOX during the time that these data were collected) was his favorite program:

I watched The Magic School Bus. The episode that I watched was the episode where all of the class except for Arnold go into Arnold's body. By watching The Magic School Bus I learned that the villi is what sucks up the food in the small intestine. And I learned that all of the water is sucked out of the food in the large intestine. I also learned that not all food can be completely broken down. The episode also told me that the food that can not be completely broken down remains in a solid form when you eliminate it. And the food that is completely broken down comes out as a liquid.⁹

Noncommercial PBS stations are taking advantage of the newer digital media by creating website content that supports and supplements the educational messages they transmit via television programs. These newer digital media interfaces allow children to create, to interact directly with educational material, and to extend the learning that they get from viewing television content to a different platform that allows them to control what they are learning at a rate that fits their own current skill level.¹⁰ Interactive media can create scaffolds that build on individual knowledge bases, thereby maximizing effectiveness. The commercial broadcasters, by contrast, have been far less likely to take advantage of this powerful option. Financial incentives or legal restrictions are simply not present to press the commercial broadcasters to meet their 21st century responsibility for educating our youth.

Our nation missed a golden opportunity to expand the Children's Television Act when we gave a gift of new bandwidth to the existing commercial broadcasters. Digital

television allows broadcasters to transmit high-definition images, multi-cast 4-6 channels in standard definition format, and provide ancillary services such as interactive options and video on demand.¹¹ The Federal Communications Commission (2004) ruled that broadcasters had to provide educational and informational programs that were consistent with the total amount of time they had available to broadcast programs.¹² Many of the commercial broadcasters, however, did not choose to use that new public bandwidth to create multiple channels that would have required them to expand their educational and informational television programs.

At this point, it is timely for the commercial broadcasters to return something in kind to the owners of our airwaves- the American public- for the use of our bandwidth. Therefore, I recommend that Congress, in conjunction with the Federal Communications Commission, consider the following avenues to take advantage of the potential of our newer digital media:

- 1) Require commercial broadcasters to expand their educational and informational program offerings. Expansion could be accomplished by increasing the number and kind of educational and informational television program offerings broadcast for children on a weekly basis and by creating websites of existing programs that will supplement those messages.
- 2) Expand the number of players who are part of the educational and informational mix. Those who create interactive media should be high on this list. Tax incentives can sweeten the pot for broadcasters and other relevant businesses that create quality media for children.
- 3) Take steps to facilitate a constructive conversation among broadcasters, academics, policy makers, and public interest groups who are concerned with quality children's media. In particular, I recommend that the government establish and allocate funds for a Center that is a public-private partnership. By bringing diverse groups to the same table, an innovative approach for creating quality children's media content could be fostered. This Center could serve as a think tank for creating, for testing the efficacy of, and for distributing high quality media, particularly interactive media.

The Children's Television Act was passed by Congress almost 30 years ago as a way to use our media in a constructive way for our children's development. The promise envisioned by Congress at that time of a quality children's media environment remains just that: a promise. I ask you to act so that the dream of a quality media environment for children can become a reality in the early part of the 21st century.

Chairman Rockefeller and Committee members, thank you for your time. Please regard the Children's Digital Media Center as a resource to the committee as you consider this and other issues.

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