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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Department of Psychology

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January 11, 2001

The Honorable William E. Kennard
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Kennard:

I am writing this letter to express my strong support of Children Now's and the Center for Media Education's (CME) comments that were submitted as part of the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on the obligations of digital television broadcasters to serve children (MM Docket No. 00-167). I spoke with members of both organizations as they formulated their comments for the Commission. I also serve on the Advisory Board for CME. Both organizations have provided information to the Commission that should ensure a quality media environment for children as digital television emerges in the marketplace. Their comments provide comprehensive coverage of the issues and potential solutions for the world of digital television. I highlight a few of the key issues here, including those areas where my viewpoint is slightly different.

Both Children Now and CME recommend that broadcasters be given considerable flexibility in meeting their fiduciary obligations to children with the advent of digital television, but that there also be clear guidelines as to what the needs of children are, and about how broadcasters should meet those obligations. I strongly agree. Broadcasters bring enormous creative skills to the table; nonetheless, they are in the business of making money. Striking a fair balance between the needs of children and broadcasters requires clear rules, but rules that afford choices so that these programs can succeed in the competitive marketplace.

The policies governing the implementation of the Children's Television Act have played a central role in guiding the dissemination of quality children's television programs and for regulating advertising practices on children's programs. As such, it serves as a model for digital television and I recommend that it be extended into this new arena. The 3-hour rule was instrumental in ensuring a minimal amount of educational and informational (E/I) programming for child viewers. My own research at the Children and Media Project finds that grade-school children are learning educational and prosocial

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lessons from commercial E/I programs as well as from other educational programs broadcast by PBS and Nickelodeon. The successful exportation of the 3-hour rule to the new digital television environment will be key to the quality and future of children's media. Children Now has proposed a 3% rule for digital television; the Center for Media Education has proposed a point system. Both have merit. Because the 3-hour rule created a standard that is now followed by industry, I recommend that the 3% rule be adopted for digital television. I also recommend that programming be required to go to children's homes, not to schools or libraries. In-home requirements serve to make parents a partner in education, and it guarantees universal access for virtually all American children. Unless there is breaking news, E/I programming should no longer be interrupted and rescheduled for a different time.

The capacity for interactive components in digital television creates an unparalleled opportunity for the Children's Television Act to be realized. At present, we don't know enough about how interactivity will enhance children's comprehension of educational messages seen on television, but the promise for individualized feedback and mastery of content is clearly present. In the implementation of the interactive rule, I recommend that all broadcasters be required to provide interactive educational sites for all E/I programs as soon as their digital programming appears. The rationale for this recommendation, rather than for a proportional rule, is as follows. Broadcasters are only required to provide 3 hours of educational and informational television programming each week. In statistical terms, that amount is nonsignificant and will remain so even if a 3% rule or a point system is adopted. It would take an enormous amount of time for E/I programming to be fully interactive if it is contingent upon a proportion of noneducational programs becoming interactive. In looking for supportive Internet sites for E/I television programming targeted at children in middle childhood, my research team found virtually nothing. With a proportional rule, noneducational programs will be the first to be interactive; E/I programs will be last. Moreover, the potential for children to learn educational content from educational interactive sites is so important that it should be required immediately for all such programs. Requiring broadcasters to support all E/I programs with interactive programs would get digital television off to a quality start.

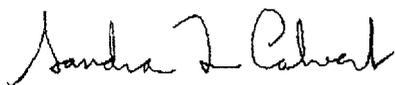
Interactivity also allows an unparalleled opportunity for advertisers to market products to children. Because of developmental limitations in young children's understanding of commercial material, I support the movement of the COPPA rules, as advanced by CME and Children Now, to digital television. It is important, though, to make it possible for interactive sites to be profitable for them to be viable. Large corporations will press their interactive branches for profitability. The quality of the content, and even the availability of it, will suffer if the interactive branches are not commercially viable. Given that the U.S. uses commercial material as a way to pay for media content, there must be some compromise here because the best interests of children and the best interests of business conflict. In this arena, I support Children Now's recommendation to create clear breaks between commercial and noncommercial interactive material. Similar to commercial separators currently used in television, children would have a front door that sends them to program content in one direction with the commercial content going another way.

Advertising sections on the front door should be less colorful, smaller in size, and primarily written text. Using words on a middle page for the advertising direction, plus a visual icon to send them back to the child content section of the site, would keep children from accidentally going to advertising sections. As suggested by Children Now, pages with educational content should not include commercial material on that same page as it may distract children from getting the educational message. Mousetrapping, where any click launches children into other commercial sites, should not be allowed on any interactive site directed at children.

Finally, I support CME's recommendation that E/I icons be standardized across broadcasters. I also support Children Now's recommendation to provide small permanent icons on the television screen that link viewers to explanations of E/I programming and that provide a standard icon for interactive options. Parents often know little about the educational television programs that are available for their children. As recommended by Children Now, a standard E/I icon inserted in the program should link to explanations about why the program is considered core, what core programming is, the age range toward which the program is geared, and a synopsis of the explanation provided by the broadcaster to the Commission as to how the program meets the E/I criteria. This type of symbol system is unobtrusive, yet can link to information that is very informative.

As the new digital television era begins, it is imperative that policies be in place to enhance and protect the development of our youngest citizens. The recommendations of Children Now and of the Center for Media Education for digital television provide a blueprint for ensuring that a quality media environment for our children will become a reality. I strongly support their recommendations, and I commend the Commission for moving forward to create rules for regulating digital television.

Respectfully submitted,



Sandra L. Calvert
Professor

cc: Children Now
Center for Media Education