

Statement of Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein
Before the Children NOW Digital TV Conference
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Washington, D.C.

Thank you, Patti.

Think about it. Parents wouldn't let their children wander by themselves through a neighborhood they don't know. But many parents let their kids do just that with their minds through TV. A third of children under six have a TV in their bedroom. And, as Children NOW reported, by the first grade, most children will have spent the equivalent of three school years in front of the TV.

Among other dangers, it turns out these neighborhoods are filled with slick storekeepers trying to lure kids in to buy candy, junk food and violent games. Not every street is Sesame Street. Clearly, some people in the neighborhood don't have your kids' best interests in mind.

The FCC's job is to make sure TV has safe places for children – and that parents know how to keep their kids out of the dangerous places -- and out of candy stores.

Parents, be warned: the cops on the beat aren't on top of the new developments in the neighborhood. The FCC is long overdue in defining the public interest obligations on broadcasters in the digital age. Just this morning, Congress held another hearing on how to complete the digital transition – but we still haven't figured out the ground rules for kids!

Most parents naturally question what their kids are watching. There are some great programs on TV, and studies show that true educational TV can help young children's development.

So let's make sure that tomorrow's digital television has more safe neighborhoods to wander in. Let's insist on more informative, educational, healthy choices for our children.

Broadcasters are the landlords of the television landscape. But the FCC is supposed to protect the public against the natural tendencies of corporations to seek out the bottom-line above all else. We have two principal ways of doing that. First, we have protections against media concentration, but most of them were gutted last summer. Second, we have public interest obligations.

Broadcasters' bargain with the government is that in exchange for free use of the public airwaves, they are supposed to serve the public interest. They are supposed to be good neighbors. To this day, many do it remarkably well. Many take pride in their local communities and their stewardship of the airwaves.

But the FCC provides very little assurance that all broadcasters will do so. It has so weakened the specific public interest obligations that broadcasters don't have much left to prove.

It's time to restore these public interest obligations for the new era of interactive, digital TV.

Digital TV promises to enhance the TV world for everyone, including children. Broadcasters can turn today's single analog channel into 5 or 6 channels. This makes room for more programs to educate, inform, and inspire our nation's children. And, as Senator Brownback said this morning, datacasting can give parents real-time ratings and content information so they know what their kids are getting – and can keep them out of the candy store if they want.

Broadcasters should use this capability to expand the diversity and quality of programming. They should use this opportunity to empower parents.

Interactivity can be both a positive and a negative for our children. We know that advertisers will exploit the opportunities and our children's vulnerabilities. But it also offers great potential to further learning and development. Broadcasters should understand the social responsibilities that come with interactivity targeted at children. And we on the FCC need to get the right protections in place before it's too late.

I firmly believe that new horizons in broadcasting should correspond to new horizons in serving the public interest. So we at the FCC must do our part. The FCC must urgently define the new rules for the digital era, and that includes children's television.

Six years ago, some broadcasters recognized that to the extent that multicasting expands broadcasting opportunities, the public interest obligations should also expand. It is time the FCC adopts that basic principle. We can't afford to wait any longer. How many more stations will begin multicasting before they understand the rules of the road? We're spending more time figuring out the end of the digital television transition when we haven't even completed its beginning.

We started a proceeding on children's obligations nearly four years ago. We need to complete it right away. Many issues involving children's TV involve the complex relationships between electronic media and a child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Much more research needs to be done on how interactivity affects the balance. I applaud Senators Brownback, Lieberman and Clinton for their legislation to do that. Compared to the complexity of those issues, defining public interest obligations should be easy.

Many organizations here today came together through the Children's Media Policy Coalition to promote two alternative approaches to help meet children's educational needs. They said broadcasters should dedicate 3 hours per week on main channels, with additional obligations on other channels, or 3 percent of broadcast time, to educational and informational programming. The Coalition also suggested important ways to avoid excessive commercialization and to give parents tools to help their children make appropriate viewing choices. The Benton Foundation found that the vast bulk of Americans agree. So, with that strong support, it's hard to understand why is this still lingering at the FCC.

With some hard work, I'm confident we can provide more safe places for our children to experience on TV.

It's about time we started. We can't let our children venture into an unknown, unprotected digital media environment – all because the FCC didn't do its job.

I want to thank Children NOW, as well as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association, for convening this excellent forum and taking the lead on this critical issue.