

**REMARKS OF
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LEARNING AT HOME: FAMILIES' EDUCATIONAL MEDIA USE IN AMERICA
THE JOAN GANZ COONEY CENTER
AT SESAME WORKSHOP
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Good afternoon. Thank you to the Cooney Center for having me here today. Thank you to Vicky Rideout for inviting me to join you and for the incredible work you do in your studies of children and media. Thank you also to Mel Ming, the President of Sesame Workshop, for such a kind introduction.

I actually met with Mel very early during my tenure as a Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission. At the time, it seemed like the right thing to do. Because I am a Sesame Street kid. I was among the first generation of children to watch and learn from the small screen antics of Big Bird and friends. Even better, my children are Sesame Street kids. They too know about sunny days, sweeping the clouds away, and how to get to where the air is sweet.

But how we got here—to a new digital world, that is another story. Today I want to talk about this new digital age and the opportunities it presents for children, media, and education. But before I do, I want to tell a quick tale.

Imagine: It's 1966. Joan Ganz Cooney—the namesake of this center—decides to gather friends and colleagues for dinner. This takes place in an apartment, some blocks south from where we are right now. She is a producer for Channel Thirteen, the first public broadcasting station in New York. The table includes Lewis Freedman, who is her boss. It also seats Lloyd Morrisett, an executive at the Carnegie Corporation and an expert in funding educational research.

Conversation at the table turns to the possibilities of television. Now before I go on, think television in 1966. That means glass screens encased in bulky wood-paneled boxes. That means antenna ears. That means changing channels by turning the dial rightward with a noisy set of clicks. The number of television channels was limited—and we watched only what was on, when it was on. So in 1966 that was *The Green Hornet*, *That Girl*, and *The Jackie Gleason Show*.

As the story goes, Lloyd Morrisett began to speak about his daughter Sarah. She was fascinated with television. At age three, she apparently sat before the glow of the set and tuned in to watch test patterns before any programming even lit up the screen. She also had memorized a slew of commercial jingles. She could sing them on command. In time, conversation over dinner migrates. If television could capture a child's attention like that, what else could it do? So the question at dinner was not whether or not children would learn from television. The answer was obvious—they would. The question was what could they learn?

Now you might look back on that dinner conversation and think now there was nothing especially novel about it. But it was radical. Because in 1966 it would have been easy to write off television as a tool for teaching. After all, only five years earlier President John F. Kennedy's Chairman of the FCC, Newton Minow, famously called television programming a "vast wasteland."

So shrugging off the educational possibilities of television would have been simple. It would have been the conventional wisdom. But instead of discounting this powerful platform, they decided then and there to explore what empowering things it could do.

In due course, history was made. Because that small conversation led to something big. It led to a study funded by the Carnegie Corporation on the power of television and the possibilities for education. That study gave shape to what became the Children's Television Workshop and yielded Sesame Street. In its wake a whole range of quality children's television programming followed.

Now speed to the present. The gale force of digitization is remaking our world. We live in an age of always-on connectivity. The number of screens has multiplied. Increased broadband capacity and decreased costs of cloud computing are changing the ways we access content. So many of our social spaces are virtual. And mobility means the invisible infrastructure of our airwaves is responsible for so much more than television.

In fact, we are now a nation with more mobile phones than people. One in three adults has a tablet computer—and that number is growing fast. Our children, however, still watch an average of three to four hours of television a day. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, that means that by the time they graduate high school they will have spent more time watching television than they have in the classroom. But as screens proliferate, our children's habits are changing. Three-quarters of all children now have access to a mobile device like a smartphone or tablet. Seventy-two percent of children under age eight have used these devices for some kind of media activity. Almost one in five now do so on a daily basis. Among teenagers, half own their own smartphones. Nine in ten have used social media and 95 percent use the Internet regularly.

As Jim Steyer, from Common Sense Media suggests, we may think of our children's online and mobile activities as their "digital lives." But that's wrong. Because their plugged-in, networked world *is* life.

So just like those guests at dinner a few decades ago, I think we need to resist the easy temptation to dismiss the possibilities of so many new screens, connections, and technologies. Because the fundamental issue is the same. It is not a question of whether or not children will learn from these new digital platforms. They will. The question is what could they learn?

That is how I look at these issues from a policy perspective.

It is also how I look at them as a parent. After all, I am someone who knows the challenge of a household with two parents with two jobs, two children at two schools, and too

few hours in the day. I also know good parenting sometimes requires turning it off and shutting it down.

Still, I think there is real promise in new digital media. We have within reach the ability to call up quality programming when we want it, where we want it. We have a whole new realm of interactive and educational media that combines text, video, and gaming. This can multiply opportunities for joint media engagement between parents and children that researchers like Vicky Rideout teach us are so important. Just as important for the busy parent, these opportunities can occur anywhere. Because we can take our connected devices everywhere.

So from parenting back to policymaking. We need to seize the possibilities for good in these new media platforms. Just like what was done with television more than four decades ago. Think about how the work of the Carnegie Commission spurred the development of Sesame Street. Think about how that made quality preschool programming viable—and widely available. Think also about how the Children’s Television Act spurred the development of more educational programming by requiring a minimum of three hours per week on stations using the airwaves. And then ask what we can do now to stimulate more quality digital age educational content—and make it more widely available.

That leads me to what at first glance might seem like an unexpected place. It leads me to E-Rate. E-Rate is the nation’s largest educational technology program. It helps connect all of our schools and libraries to modern communications and the Internet. E-rate support is based on need. More funding is available for those schools and libraries serving low-income students and those located in rural areas. The program is run by the FCC.

E-Rate is a byproduct of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Now think back for a moment to 1996. You and I probably called the Internet the “Information Superhighway.” It was a long time ago. Back when the law was passed, only 14 percent of the nation’s public schools had access to the Internet. Today, thanks to the support that E-Rate has provided, more than 95 percent of schools are now connected.

That might sound like the E-Rate job is done. But nothing could be further from the truth. Because the challenge today is not connection—it’s capacity. Too many of our E-Rate schools access the Internet at speeds as slow as 3 Megabits. That is lower than the speed of the average American home. But in many cases, those schools have 200 times as many users!

Think about what that means. It means too many schools do not have the capacity to offer high definition streaming video. It means too many schools are unable to take advantage of the most innovative digital teaching tools. It means too many students will lack the ability to develop the science, technology, engineering, and math—or STEM skills—that we know are so essential to compete.

Now the good news. We are doing something about it. At the FCC we recently started a reform effort to put in place a modernized E-Rate system—what I like to call E-Rate 2.0. We are gathering ideas and combing through commentary on the program from stakeholders of every stripe. In the end, we want to give this program new focus. We want to make it a program that

supports more than simple Internet connectivity. We want it to support capacity—really high-speed broadband to all of our schools.

Let me put some numbers on that and tell you what I mean by really high-speed broadband. In the near term, we want to have 100 Megabits per 1000 students to all of our schools. By the end of the decade, we want to have 1 Gigabit per 1000 students to all of our schools.

I think we can do it. I also think the E-Rate reform effort and the interests of quality educational content collide—in the best possible way.

By bringing really high-speed broadband to every school in every community across the country we will create new opportunities for educational content at new scale. This scale has the potential to stimulate a new market for digital educational media.

This could be especially powerful for content aimed at older children. As so many studies have demonstrated, there is an alarming drop in educational media use after the very earliest years. While we have succeeded in reaching preschool children with educational television, we have a more mixed record with older children. But here is where I think new interactive digital technologies and mobile platforms are full of possibility. They can engage beyond simple text and video. They can target communities with unique needs. They can reinforce essential skills through interactive gaming. And by bringing high-speed bandwidth to schools everywhere, I think we can spur a whole new range of providers to develop this kind of educational content.

In addition, a reformed E-Rate speaks to the issues of equity and access that informed the work of the Carnegie Commission four decades ago. That is because a reformed E-Rate program will also make broadband more widely available.

Today, three out of ten households do not have broadband access. Think about what it means to be a student in one of those households—typically low-income and often rural. It means just getting homework done is hard. It means applying for a scholarship is challenging. By bringing broadband to all of our schools, we will make digital age opportunities more broadly available.

I think E-Rate reform is important. I think it speaks to the mission of so many of you in this room. Because if you care about educational media, E-Rate could help stimulate a new world of quality content. And as I suggested at the outset, the question is not whether or not children will learn from the proliferation of so many new screens, connections, and technologies. They will. The question is what could they learn?

A generation ago, Joan Ganz Cooney and the Carnegie Commission harnessed the power of television to provide a powerful answer to that question. They taught us that television can teach. They showed us that it can help build early literacy and numeracy skills that lay the foundation for later learning.

Now we can do even more. Because we are at a new and exciting inflection point in educational media. With an updated E-Rate, we have an opportunity to harness digital and mobile technologies and teach in new ways. We can extend the reach of broadband in our schools and expand the range educational content. We can seize the good in these new technologies and help prepare all of our children for success in the 21st century. And as a policymaker—and a parent—I think that is something worth fighting for.

Thank you.