



How Children Can Benefit From The Transition To Digital TV

Policy Brief

September 2004

Part of the Benton Foundation's ongoing public interest policy series

Putting The Remote Control Back Into The Hands Of Parents

Since television's invention, it has been trumpeted as a powerful tool for transforming teaching and learning. In fact, television's inventor, Philo T. Farnsworth, believed television would become the world's greatest teaching tool and help eradicate illiteracy. Unfortunately, television has not always lived up to this vision, but the digital TV transition offers a new opportunity.

Today, parents are struggling to ensure that their children have the education and skills they need to compete and win in the 21st century economy. But children spend more time watching

television than any other activity except sleeping – and for many parents that is cause for concern. In fact, children spend 4 times as much time each week watching television as doing homework. Are there educational benefits to this viewing? By the time a child graduates from high school they will have watched 8,000 simulated murders. Should parents expect more? As children watch an average of 25 hours a week of television, is it possible to find a minimum of at least three hours a week of truly educational content?

All television is educational television. The question is: what is it teaching?

~Nicholas Johnson

What's At Stake

With Federal Communications Commission (FCC) action on this issue imminent, public interest advocates are working to ensure that the transition to digital television (DTV), doesn't just deliver more channels and a sharper picture, but more programming and features that are beneficial to children and parents alike.

The FCC is considering what public interest obligations should apply to DTV broadcasters including: whether current requirements to air 3 hours of instructional and educational programming (called the 3 hour rule) should be extended to new digital channels; whether embedded, "click-through" children's advertising should be

prohibited; and whether digital broadcasters should empower parents with better program and rating information.

A survey conducted by the Benton Foundation shows that the American public overwhelmingly (85%) supports the idea of extending the responsibility of broadcasters to provide at least three hours of educational and instructional programming on the new digital channels they create.

Television Plays Key Role In Shaping Our Children

While family may be the most important influence in a child's life, television is not far behind. The DTV transition is coming at a time when children of all ages are heavy media consumers. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, children ages 8 years and older consume over three hours of television daily.

Television is like having a third parent in the home – competing vigorously for our children's hearts and minds. Television can inform, entertain, and teach. However, some of what TV teaches may not be the things we want our child to learn. Studies show that TV

viewing may lead to more aggressive behavior and less physical activity.

But research studies also have shown that exposure to educational television can have positive effects on the social, intellectual and educational development children. For example, one study demonstrated that children ages two to four from low- and moderate-income families who watched *Sesame Street* and other educational programs, performed better on vocabulary, school readiness, and math tests than non-viewers.

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Congress Takes Action

With this in mind, Congress enacted in 1990 the Children's Television Act with the goal of increasing the amount of educational and informational programming (E/I) available on analog television. The law also limits the amount of time broadcasters may devote to commercials during children's programs.

Unfortunately, broadcasters often failed to meet their obligations. Initially broadcasters cited a wide variety of educational and instructional shows claiming that *The Flintstones* taught history and *The Jetsons* taught science. The FCC issued regulations to clarify what they meant by E/I programming, including an added expectation that broadcasters air 3 hours of children's programming from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. at night.

Nevertheless, one study looking at the effectiveness of the so-called 3

We cannot blame the schools alone for the dismal decline in SAT verbal scores. When our kids come home from school do they pick up a book or do they sit glued to the tube, watching music videos? Parents don't make the mistake of thinking your kid only learns between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.

~George H. W. Bush

hour rule for educational television found that:

- Nearly one-quarter (23%) of the programs labeled as core educational programming were found to be “minimally educational” and “unlikely to provide substantive lessons for the audience.”
- The majority (57%) of core programs were found to be “moderately educational,” but contained problems that “may hinder children's learning.”
- Networks did a poor job at highlighting and publicizing E/I programs and symbols used to identify E/I programs varied.

New digital technology allows broadcasters to simultaneously broadcast up to six programs on one channel, enabling broadcasters to offer considerably more programming for children, and more information to empower parents. The FCC is now considering new rules which would help maximize the impact and minimize the dangers of digital technology:

Educational/Informational Programming

Requiring broadcasters to air three hours on every new multicast digital channel, in addition to the existing channel.

Giving Parents Better Tools Through Interactive Television

Datacasting technology can be used to provide parents with better rating information throughout the length of any given program. Parents could click a link to learn why a program is rated in a certain way as well as access rating information from various groups.

Continued Protection for Children from Aggressive Advertising.

As television transitions to digital, advertisers are also trying new ways to reach consumers.

New Opportunities For Children

While interactive advertising technologies for a DTV environment are still being developed, children are likely to be a primary target. Young children inherently lack the reasoning ability to understand that advertising may be biased and exaggerated. Research shows that children do not recognize the commercial intent of television advertising until the age of seven. The vulnerability of children to commercial persuasion, coupled with innovations by advertisers to reach child consumers, raises concerns about what marketing methods may be employed on digital television. As the advertising industry develops new digital interactive methods of reaching child consumers, existing regulations that protect children from commercial influences must be reexamined and updated.

It is difficult to think of an interest more critical than the promotion of the welfare of children who watch so much television and rely upon it for so much of the information they receive. All children deserve access to programming that addresses their range of interests and needs at various ages of life, including educational programming that can supplement schooling. Also, the remote control needs to go back in the hands of well-informed parents. Digital television provides new opportunities to make this happen.

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How You Can Get Involved

There are several ways that parents, activists and others can get involved to ensure a better future for our children. Broadcasters must be held accountable for fulfilling their existing obligation to air quality programming, and parents need to be actively involved, both in supervising what their children watch as well as making their voice heard in important policy debates.

1. **Review what your local stations are doing.** Go online to the FCC's website (see FCC Parent's Place below) to view a listing of core educational programming in your media market. If you know the station call letters visit:
<http://svartifoss2.fcc.gov/prod/kidvid/prod/query1.htm>.
2. **Contact your stations and demand better educational and instructional TV.** <http://www.openairwaves.org/telecom/> lists who owns the media in your community with contact information. On the FCC 398 report, each station is required to list a "children's programming liaison" at the station, as well as their contact information.
3. **Make your voice heard in federal policy debates.** Let the FCC know what you think, and register your complaints about particular stations and programs:
Call the FCC at: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322)
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554
e-mail: fccinfo@fcc.gov

Note: This policy brief used as a primary resource, the Children Now Spring 2004 newsletter "Digital Television: Sharpening the Focus on Children," available online at www.childrennow.org and offering a more detailed analysis of the issue.

I wish there were a knob on the TV to turn up the intelligence. There's a knob called "brightness," but that doesn't work.

~Author Unknown

About the Benton Foundation...

The mission of the Benton Foundation is to articulate a public interest vision for the digital age and to demonstrate the value of communications for solving social problems. Current priorities include: promoting a vision and policy alternatives for the digital age in which the benefit to the public is paramount; raising awareness among funders and nonprofits on their stake in critical policy issues; enabling communities and nonprofits to produce diverse and locally responsive media content.

Helpful Online Resources:

Parent's Place at the FCC

<http://www.fcc.gov/parents/>

Look up children's educational programming for your broadcast area. Learn more about the Children's Television Act, including restrictions on advertising during kids programs. Find out more about the television industry's voluntary ratings for TV programs. Learn how you can block television programming that you don't want your children to watch through the V-Chip, the Cable "Lockbox", and other devices.

Children Now and the Children's Media Policy Coalition

www.childrennow.org

Learn more about the DTV transition and how it impacts children. View comments of the Children's Media Policy Coalition to the Federal Communications Commission on a broad range of topics including the impacts of media consolidation on children's programming and the public interest obligations of digital broadcasters. Find out how you can make your voice heard in critical children's policy debates.

Common Sense Media

www.commonsensemedia.org

Need a trustworthy information source on the movies your kids watch, the computer programs they play, and related federal policies? Want a forum where adults and kids learn from each other, speak out, and participate in creating a responsible and enjoyable media environment for everyone? Common Sense Media, a non-partisan, non-profit organization, gives parents, educators, and kids a choice and a voice about the media they consume.

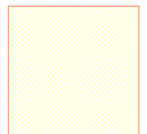
Parent's Television Council

<http://www.parentstv.org/>

The Parent's Television Council mission is to promote and restore responsibility and decency to the entertainment industry in answer to America's demand for positive, family-oriented television programming. The PTC also assists parents in exercising responsibility for their children's viewing habits with the Family Guide to Prime Time Television.

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