

Remarks of Commissioner James H. Quello
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"Big Brother is Watching You, But Are the Kids?"

The title of this panel is "Big Brother is Watching You, But Are the Kids?" From the perspective of this Commissioner, the answer is: "Yes, but not very much, and even if they were, what substantiated, positive effect would it have?" This may sound somewhat sarcastic, but there is some truth hidden behind that statement.

Those who support Big Brother taking dramatic, even potentially unconstitutional, steps to get more children's television on the air start from the premise that children will actually watch the educational and informational programming aired by broadcasters, and that this programming will somehow enhance the lives of children, including disadvantaged children who are facing more pressing problems such as inadequate education, a lack of nutritional food and adequate housing, violence, and drugs, just to name a few. Oh, if only it were so. However, this Alice in Wonderland view of the world tends to fall apart under reality-based scrutiny.

In an article that appeared recently in The Weekly Standard entitled, "The Dirty Little Secret of Educational TV," the question was posed as to how much children actually learn from educational programming. The article noted a paucity of research on this question. The author states, and I quote:

"Given that we do not live in the sort of society in which it is possible to ban [television], but rather in a society in which parents are eager to offload their responsibilities for limiting the damage onto politicians and policymakers, the latter have a strong incentive to foster the illusion that TV can be made into a Force for Good. If only the government regulates it properly, the adherents of educational television fondly suppose, the cathode-ray tube will become a window on the world, a universal access point to the arts and sciences of mankind, one that will transform us through the miracle of technology into a nation of scholars and poets, of connoisseurs and craftsmen, of geniuses and gentlefolk. This is sheer self-deception."

The article goes on to explain that, because children have no intellectual context in which to place the constant stream of moving images provided by television, they actually gain very little of real educational use. This is true because learning is active, not passive, requiring the active participation of the learner in answering questions, repeating or re-enacting what she has been told, and formulating out of

rather a point of view that is her own. Television today, unfortunately, is a passive medium.

Where does this leave the FCC in the debate over children's television? We have been handed by Congress the job of enforcing the programming requirements of the Children's Television Act. The only question with which we must grapple is how best to enforce the Act without trampling on the Constitution. We cannot, and perhaps even should not, follow the recommendations in "The Dirty Little Secret" to eliminate all requirements to air children's educational and informational programming. However, the "Dirty Little Secret" should be part of the debate over how the Children's Television Act should be enforced. Why? Because we must be realistic in our expectations of what can be accomplished under the Children's Television Act. Does educational television enhance significantly children's learning? And even if it does, are children watching it? And in the grand scheme of things, how does educational television add to the lives of children living in poverty and violence without adequate food, clothing, and shelter? I would like to hear from our panelists today their responses to these questions.

There is something else this Commissioner would like to hear today, albeit not from our panelists. This Commissioner would like to hear from the Chairman of the FCC that the full Commission will be given a draft Report and Order in the children's television proceeding to consider and vote on in the near future. In my view, the comments are in, the record is ripe for decision, and nothing more of any substantive value is to be gained by the continued expenditure of rhetorical capital on the issue. Resolving the children's television proceeding promptly is one issue, at least, on which we should all agree.

There are some questions, however, that I can answer today, unequivocally and without bureaucratese. Should children's television be enriching? Should it carry positive, pro-social messages? Should broadcasters strive to provide children with the highest quality programming possible? Absolutely, yes. But television should not be required to carry the weight of the world on its cathode-ray shoulders.

Am I a heretic for raising these questions? Worse yet, am I **against** children because I don't support specific quantitative children's programming guidelines? Absolutely not. I am **for** children because I believe that we as a society should look at ways of helping to ensure that children have enough food, clothing, and shelter, and can live in a world free of excessive violence, drugs, and disease. Until these fundamental, life-threatening problems are resolved, what the FCC does to bring more educational and informational programming to television is of secondary importance. This reality should be the backdrop for the FCC's decisions on children's television. Otherwise, we may look into the Alice in Wonderland looking-glass and see only our own reflections.

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