Digital Divide? Yes!
And it’s FCC Chairman Michael Powell’s job to close it.
(Broadcasting and Cable — Voices Airtime — February 19, 2001)

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In his first major statements to the press as FCC Chairman, Michael Powell presented what many parents and child advocates believe is an unfortunate vision for his agency. Breaking against long-standing bi-partisan agreements on digital divide (e-rate and universal service) and public service to children (the Children's Television Act rules), Mr. Powell suggested that these positive policies would not find a supportive home at the Commission.

Perhaps it was just foolish overstatement. As we all know, one of today’s hot button issues that generates widespread concern is the failure of the media industries to serve the needs of children, while pandering to them with violent-themed and commercially-overloaded programming.

A broad coalition of groups fought hard for more than a decade to get rules in place that would ensure some minimal level of children’s educational programs on broadcast television. We had hoped that during his tenure Chairman Powell would continue to build upon this important legacy. Instead, his recent remarks show little willingness to enforce these policies, claiming they have “marginal impact.” But research by his own agency and by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center clearly shows that the rules have increased the amount of educational and informational programming for kids.

The Children’s Television Act is one of the few remaining requirements that broadcasters must meet to serve the public interest, a core principle at the heart of the FCC’s mandate. The television industry continues to trade on its privileged public trustee status to press both
Congress and the Commission for a long laundry-list of special requests – from digital
must-carry to removing ownership caps to eliminating cross-ownership safeguards. At the
same time broadcasters complain (as many did at last month’s NATPE meeting) that their
obligation to children is onerous. Unfortunately, Chairman Powell’s remarks about
children’s television are just the kind of signal that could send some stations to their vaults
to pull out “The Jetsons” and the “Flintstones” as cheap replacements for the educational
shows currently on the air.

As we move into the digital era, the FCC should play an even more prominent role to ensure
that media serve children’s needs. Interactive television will usher in a powerful new digital
media culture that is sure to become a pervasive presence in the lives of children. The
FCC’s current rulemaking proceeding on digital television provides an opportunity to build
into the framework for the new media a commitment to harness the capabilities of these
technologies to enhance children’s learning in a variety of ways.

At the same time, without effective safeguards against manipulative interactive advertising
practices targeted at children, DTV could become a Pandora’s box of minute-by-minute
behavior tracking, detailed consumer profiling, personalized "one-to-one" marketing, and
instant "t-commerce" sales transactions.

Through its implementation of the e-rate provision of the Telecommunications Act of 1996,
the Commission has already provided many of our nation’s schools and libraries with
affordable access to the Internet, part of a broader national commitment to bridge the
“digital divide.” However, there is still a wide disparity in the quality of that access, with
more affluent communities far outpacing their counterparts in lower socio-economic areas.
As broadband becomes the state-of-the-art technology, these inequities could be further
exacerbated. Given this administration’s promise to “leave no child behind,” we find Mr.
Powell’s regrettable reference to a “Mercedes divide” one of the more cynical remarks he
has made, significantly more disturbing than FCC Chairman Mark Fowler’s “toaster”
comment of two decades ago.

We hope that Mr. Powell will reconsider the positions he has articulated in his first few
weeks at the helm of the FCC. We expect him to play a decisive leadership role in working
with industry, parents groups, and educators to build consensus for policies that serve the
broader public interest. If he chooses to promote a narrow ideological agenda focused only
on the special interests of the media industries, he should not be surprised to see a rising
tide of opposition from angry parents and the many others who care about a quality media culture for our children.