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July 8, 1998

Senator John McCain  
The Senate  
Congress of the United States  
Washington, D. C. 20515

Re: Digital Television

Dear Senator McCain:

This evening I watched your Senate Commerce Committee hearing—on C-Span—regarding the proposed legislated conversion to digital television broadcasting. I won't pretend that I understood all of the technical terminology bandied about any more than the senators on your committee did, but I'm a reasonably intelligent citizen and I understood enough to make me so angry I'm practically choking on it.

It all boils down to this: In the early days of black and white television, citizens could buy their first TV set when the prices came down enough to be affordable. Later, when color was introduced, people were not forced to go out to buy new TV sets. I'm sure you'll remember, as I do, that people bought their first color sets not only when the prices came down but, in particular, when color was "perfected." Until they chose to buy those color TV sets, citizens were perfectly able to receive color-broadcast programs in black and white. It was their *choice* to stick with black and white or to opt for color.

When TV screens were enlarged, it continued to be the individual citizen's *choice* of whether or not to buy larger screen TV's. When cable television came along it was, still, the citizen's *choice* of whether or not to pay for cable TV reception—if she could afford the rather exorbitant monthly charges, and if she could tolerate the installation of a hot, ugly black box sitting on her TV set that runs up her monthly electricity bill.

The bottom line message I'm hearing from these people who want you to mandate a nationwide conversion to digital television broadcasting while phasing out analog television is that, ultimately, all citizens in America will be forced to buy new TV sets, forced to have additional ugly, hot, black boxes perched on those TV sets, will be forced to pay cable fees, forced to pay higher electricity bills, and—you can count on it—will very quickly be forced to purchase upgraded TV sets and required peripherals with alarming regularity in order to receive material broadcast via "improved" digital technology upgrades. How do I know this? I own a computer. It is impossible to use new or improved software today without buying expensive, upgraded hardware that can run it. That situation is an outrage, but these digital TV people see a good thing there and they want to get in on that deal. It's exactly the

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kind of corner that these proponents of mandated digital television broadcasting want to force the American people into. It is unacceptable.

What galls me as well is that the representative from Time Warner Cable kept repeating that these digital TV's would offer the "consumer" (I despise that word) wonderful capabilities—not one of which he identified or described—plus an improved picture. I don't give a damn about an improved picture. The picture I have right now is excellent and doesn't cost me anything. And I don't care about "wonderful capabilities" that remain nameless.


Further, I'm amazed that the individual from Circuit City (I think that was the vendor name) could sit there and tell you bare-faced lies about the capability of these \$7,000 TV sets he's proposing to sell and could, with such facility, evade some very important questions and answers. To wit, the TV sets cost \$7,000 but the converter or delivery box needed for broadcast reception is, as yet, unavailable. And, he wouldn't admit it but, when you cut through his smokescreen it was very clear you would have to buy a new VCR to go with that \$7000 unusable TV. I wonder what else you would have to buy that he wouldn't "fess-up" to. Special power lines installed in your home? Special plugs installed like 220's for air conditioners? I'd like to know why he evaded telling you who the manufacturers were. Are these TV sets made in China by virtual slaves getting \$1.00 a day while we still have to pay American prices (like everything else made in China that we're forced to buy because you can't find American goods in any store?). Or, perhaps, in Mexico, where they can't even assemble a Swingline stapler that works?

Lastly, he indicated that his well-trained sales force would be able to help customers understand what they were buying. The operative word here is "sales." I've met very few computer salesmen who could answer simple questions clearly; I see no reason to expect sellers of computerized TV's to be any better. They are out to sell, not to help the customer out of the goodness of their hearts.

In summary, these P. T. Barnums who came before you today "for the good of the American people" must be stopped in their tracks. If digital television broadcasting is such a good thing, market demands will drive its success. It does not need help from Congress or my tax dollars. Let these people work for their money as I have to do. And don't help these vultures "for the good of the American people." Phone bills can run as high as mortgage payments since Congress broke up Ma Bell "for the good of the American people." I'm still trying to recover from what Reagan and Bush did to us "for the good of the American people."

If you really want to do something "for the good of the American people," you can build a couple million affordable homes for starters to drive down the cost of living, and then make sure that C-Span is available to every home in the United States, not just cable subscribers.

Very truly yours,

  
Copy to:  
Brian Lamb, C-Span