

MEDIA GIANTS FOR HEALTH CARE

I said on Twitter yesterday that Comcast was endorsing health care reform as a sop designed to butter up Obama's regulators who must approve the Comcast-NBC deal. But that becomes even more clear when you look at the letter Comcast's CEO Brian Roberts wrote.

Roberts starts with an utterly shameless suck up. Congratulations, Mr. President, you rock! But as part of that suck up, Roberts appeals to the themes—job creation, investment, and innovation—that Comcast will mobilize to justify its acquisition of NBC. (He does not, for some reason, mention the real reason behind the deal: profits.)

Congratulations on today's Summit on Jobs and Economic Growth. I believe that hosting a thoughtful and vibrant discussion with the Vice President, members of your Cabinet, business leaders, scholars, and other public officials about the persistent economic challenges confronting America and the path we must forge to foster job creation, investment, and innovation is a really important initiative.

Then, Roberts uses his non-attendance at the summit as his excuse for making his transparent bid to suck up to Obama.

Because of our announcement today that we have formed a joint venture with General Electric consisting of NBCU's businesses and Comcast's cable networks, I am unable to attend the Summit. I very much appreciate the outreach to the business community, and want to express one of the thoughts I intended to make at the Summit —that enactment of comprehensive health care reform legislation is, in my judgment, critical

to putting this country on a path of sustained growth and prosperity.

“I can’t attend because I’m busy becoming an even bigger media behemoth and oh by the way I’m sorry I haven’t mentioned yet that I support your signature policy issue but I do.”

From there, Roberts goes on to prove that he has been paying attention to Obama’s talking points, citing the cost and the amount by which it reduces deficits—which Roberts labels “a strong dose of fiscal responsibility.”

Then Roberts’ letter gets really interesting. He makes a sustained pitch for the digital technology aspects of reform.

I also strongly support the development of standards and protocols to promote the digitization of health records and documents, electronic data matching, and the interoperability of systems for enrollment in health services programs. Such steps could revolutionize how health centers and hospitals operate and enrich how health providers and patients communicate. Telemedicine and distant health services will literally transform the delivery and monitoring of health care services and the training of health care professionals. As a leading information and communications technology company, Comcast understands the generative power of broadband technology and its potential to improve the overall quality of health care, while stimulating job creation and restoring our economy.

Notice that Roberts assumes this will all be done via broadband and not—say—satellite.

The second to last line of the letter—just before Roberts says he looks forward to working with Obama in the future—reiterates the ties between information technology and healthcare.

We also look forward to working with your Administration to make health care information technology the best in the world.

It appears that Roberts is not just endorsing Obama's big policy initiative at an opportune time, he's also suggesting that Comcast, the biggest cable company, will be the one driving the expansion of health care tech.

Now, as it happens, I sat next to a Michigan state employee pitching a health care information technology project for stimulus funds earlier this year. He made it clear that the need to wire Michigan's rural UP to improve health care was critical to improving care. But he acknowledged that by wiring for health care, you would effectively provide a foothold for consumer broadband.

Golly, what a surprise, then, that the nation's biggest cable company is so hot to support Obama's health care program. Gosh, what a surprise that he thinks this might be a route to jobs.

Roberts has it pretty (ahem) wired. If he can get the Obama Administration to approve this merger and in the process have it understood that he will be very cooperative in efforts to wire for health care technology, he not only gets less competition for health care advertising focused on reaching the 30 million new insurance customers that health care reform will create. But he also stands to get a big share of the business wiring our nation's hospitals ... and living rooms.