



NEWS

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This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action.
See MCI v. FCC, 515 F.2d 385 (D.C. Cir. 1974).

OPENING REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS VOICE OVER INTERNET PROTOCOL FORUM DECEMBER 1, 2003

Today is “listen and learn” day for this Commissioner. It’s an opportunity I welcome and I want to commend Chairman Powell for convening this forum and putting together an impressive array of expert panelists.

We don’t come early to this issue and it is increasingly apparent that Commission action is needed soon. We may have already moved beyond the “nascent” phase for this technology, with more people signing on daily and the roll-out picking up what I think is impressive speed. We can only call a technology nascent for so long. We’ve let VoIP bubble up on its own, but now it’s starting to boil. Before it becomes too hot for end-users and entrepreneurial-minded businesses to touch, we must bring clarity to the issues. This is truly transformative technology. Consumers and entrepreneurs need to know how it is going to be treated going forward.

So what we have here today is a wake-up call. The network is evolving. The long-awaited convergence of voice, data and video onto Internet-based networks is on the verge of turning the pipe dreams of just a few years ago into new commercial reality. It’s the right time for this Commission to contemplate just what these exciting new possibilities mean for the communications landscape.

One thing is sure: this exercise will take us back to fundamentals. We are dramatically changing the way we communicate in this country, and around the globe, and we are challenged to adjust our policies and rules not only to accommodate, but to facilitate, this process of change. It goes to basic questions and to examining how what we do on VoIP will affect so many of the programs currently in place. Indeed, it is difficult to think of an area of telephony that won’t be affected by what we do here—consumer-wise, business-wise, regulator-wise.

While none of us knows where this will all come out, we need to pull back and think anew. It’s incumbent on us to identify good policy going forward and not just shoehorn VoIP into statutory terms or regulatory pigeon-holes without adequate justification. It’s no slam-dunk that the old rules even apply. But we do need to discuss the consequences of the proliferation of VoIP services on our important statutory objectives—universal service, homeland security, 911 services, accessibility by people with disabilities, and encouraging the build-out of advanced telecommunications services. We need to craft a space in which this technology succeeds because of its inherent ability, not due to regulatory arbitrage or exception. Indeed, tackling VoIP may force us to come to terms with other pending proceedings that also cry out for solution.

We are all enthused about this technology. Now we need to take our enthusiasm and turn it into answers. Question marks have haunted VoIP for too long. Consumers are confused. They need to know what they can expect if they sign up for this new service. Investors and carriers are wary. They need to know in this capital-intensive industry how to plan for the networks of the future. I think we all understand that we do no favors to anyone if we sit back and practice benign neglect. It’s both pro-consumer and pro-business for the Commission to bring clarity to this dialogue.

So let's get started. Again, I thank the Chairman for assembling this forum today. I hope it will be the first of several, reaching out to stakeholders all across America as we attempt to bring equity and effectiveness to rules and regulations that protect the public interest. Our motto ought to be, "Leave no Stakeholder Behind."