

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC HEARING ON LOCALISM AND LICENSE RENEWAL
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
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Tonight we continue a truly remarkable grassroots dialogue about the future of the media. Over the past year we have seen cascading national concern over what many Americans, myself included, see as disturbing trends in the media. We have seen citizens from all over the country -- conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat, young and old, rural and urban, north and south -- come together to express their concern, even their alarm. For many months, the discussion focused on new and looser ownership rules implemented by the Federal Communications Commission, with people asking how many -- or, perhaps more accurately, how few? -- broadcast stations media conglomerates should be allowed to own. For what purposes are stations granted licenses? And how does the public interest fare in a more heavily consolidated environment? This ownership dialogue continues, in Congress, in the courts, around the nation. Tonight we address core media values, particularly localism, from a little different perspective, but we should realize that this is part of a larger discussion about protecting the people's interest in the people's airwaves. No one part of this grassroots dialogue can be divorced from any other part. Media ownership is totally germane to any discussion of localism.

Let's begin at the beginning tonight, reminding ourselves that all of us do indeed own the airwaves and that corporations are given the privilege of using this public asset -- and to profit from that use -- in exchange for their commitment to serve the public interest. Broadcasters have been given very special privileges and they have very special responsibilities to serve their local communities. Serving the public interest is supposed to be their lodestar.

Now broadcasting is not an easy business. Many broadcasters still want to serve the public interest, but these days station owners are less and less captains of their own fate and more and more captives of unforgiving Wall Street and Madison Avenue financial expectations. Some tell us the answer is to rely more and more on marketplace forces as a guarantor of the public interest. These people trust that the public interest will somehow magically trump the urge to build power and profit and that localism will somehow survive and thrive. I don't think we can afford to rely on magic here.

Since the 1980s, fundamental protections of the public interest have weakened and withered -- requirements like meeting with members of the community to determine the needs of the local audience, teeing up controversial issues for listeners and viewers, encouraging antagonistic points of view and providing viewpoint and program diversity, to name just a few of the obligations that we once had.

In addition, the Commission pared back its license renewal process from one wherein we looked closely, every three years, at how stations were serving the public to one wherein companies now need only send us a short form every eight years and their renewal wishes are granted. License renewal has become a slam-dunk. It's not called "post card renewal" for nothing.

This erosion of public interest protections comes at high and dangerous cost to the American people. Some call my concern excessive, but I feel in my bones that few priorities our country confronts have such long-term importance to our democracy as how America communicates and converses with itself and how this process has deteriorated recent years.

We come to San Antonio to talk directly with members of this community and this state and to tap local expertise that can give us a look both broad and deep at what is happening here. How can we possibly know if licensees are serving their communities without hearing from the community? Are stations adding to the civic dialogue? Are they encouraging local talent? Are they reaching out to minority groups within the community?

And -- an issue on which I have focused attention since I came to the Commission -- are they adhering to community standards or are they airing excessive amounts of indecent and violent programming? Few can deny that we are seeing a race to the bottom on our airwaves. Sometimes, I wonder if there even is a bottom. Just this week, we cited Clear Channel for apparent violations of the indecency statute on twenty-six different occasions, but the proposed fine doesn't rise above a cost of doing business for such a large conglomerate. We should have long since been fining violators for each utterance on a program, rather than treating the whole program as just one instance of indecency. That could represent a credible fine. But we haven't been able to get ourselves there yet. I mention Clear Channel because Clear Channel's headquarters are here, but I don't want to cite only Clear Channel. It is a pervasive problem -- and it is getting worse.

Industry, collectively, is doing next to nothing to clean up its act. But if we at the Commission could just bring ourselves to send one of these more outrageous cases to a hearing for license revocation, Big Media would get the message real quick and they would begin to take us seriously, which they don't right now.

There is something you can do to start taking back your airwaves. The Commission began this past fall the process for all stations across this country to renew their licenses. We need your help with this. Stations are required to keep a public inspection file, but the Commission does not generally look at that file nor examine how a station has served its local community unless we hear from members of the community. We rely on *you* to tell us if there is a problem in your community. There are various ways to tell us what you think, from filing a formal petition -- which is not the easy or user-friendly process it should be and one which I recommend only to the stout-of-heart -- to filing an informal objection to sharing with us your even more informal comments, letters or e-mails. Anyone of our FCC folks here can give you more information on the license renewal process; you can call us at 1-888-CALL-FCC; or you can find us at www.fcc.gov. I am told a hand-out explaining all this is available tonight.

We began these localism hearings in Charlotte, North Carolina in October. We heard from the good people of North and South Carolina about the importance they attach to their local media. We did get a little side-tracked on one score, however. Some of our panelists and commenters seemed to confuse such things as conducting blood drives and

fundraising for charities with the sum total of their public interest responsibilities. Now these fundraising activities are commendable activities, to be sure. But they are only a part of a broadcaster's responsibilities to the community. It's as American as apple pie for corporations in every line of business to participate in that kind of community self-help and we all applaud them. But the question on the plate tonight goes to how well this very different and very special industry is serving its very special obligations to use the airwaves for the larger benefit of us all. So I hope our panelists and commenters tonight will resist the temptation to catalogue all of their non-broadcast efforts and will focus instead on the greater picture of what they are doing as trustees of the public's airwaves.

I would like to thank all of you in this audience who have given up your evening to be here to discuss the importance of local broadcasting to your communities. It shows how important this issue is when so many of you have come out, some from the far corners of this great state. Texas is making its voice heard, and I am enormously pleased to be here to listen and to learn.

Thanks to each of you, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for bringing us together tonight.