

Statement of Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein
Before the Public Interest, Public Airwaves Press Conference
April 20, 2004
Las Vegas, Nevada

Thank you, Gloria. It's great to be with so many leaders in the fight against media concentration. Today is really a continuation of the whistle stop tour that Commissioner Capps and I took last year to hear directly from the American people about the state of their airwaves.

Everywhere we went, we heard resounding and bipartisan outrage that the public didn't want to see more media consolidation and lose even more local control over their airwaves. Everywhere, we heard that radio and TV were increasingly commercialized and homogenized. People were upset by the lack of coverage of key issues that matter in their local communities. And many felt they were hearing fewer and fewer viewpoints expressed.

One of my main concerns is with the dramatic decline in the coverage of civic and political affairs, especially at the local and regional level. Broadcast television continues to be the main source of campaign and election information for the American public, yet study after study shows that the level of political coverage is pitiful.

In 2002, more than half of all top-rated local news broadcasts in the seven weeks leading up to election day had no campaign coverage at all. Of the stories that did run, less than 15% even covered local campaigns. And most coverage was about strategy and polls rather than real issues – only 24% of the stories in 2002 were about issues.

So many studies are troubling. In 2000, for example, the combined TV coverage of all campaigns in 2000 was about 74 seconds per night – and that included local, state and federal elections. But people heard a lot more from paid political ads, many of them negative. To me, that just depresses turnout. This lack of media coverage could help explain why half of Americans don't vote. And it will only get worse if we allow the media consolidation train to keep rolling.

The FCC is supposed to protect the public against the natural tendencies of corporations to seek out efficiencies above all else. We have two principal ways of doing that. First, we have protections against concentrated media ownership, but most of these were gutted last summer. Second, we have public interest obligations.

The FCC is supposed to ensure that broadcasters serve the public interest in exchange for free use of the public airwaves. This cornerstone of broadcasting was articulated as early as 1927 - that stations must be operated as if they were owned by the public; as if a community got together and turned the station over to the best person to manage it in the community's interest. Broadcasters would therefore be the conscience of our communities, a proxy for each of our voices and views. To this day, some broadcasters serve this function remarkably well and take pride in their local communities and their stewardship of the airwaves. Judging from the studies, some do much better than others, and many don't do nearly enough.

And the FCC's specific public interest obligations have been so weakened that broadcasters have very little they are required to demonstrate.

We are entering the digital age of broadcasting, and it's time to restore these public interest obligations.

The digital age offers tremendous opportunities for both broadcasters and the public. Broadcasters can turn today's analog channel into 5 or 6 channels.

They should use this digital broadcasting to expand the diversity of viewpoints and voices available to a community over its airwaves. In a country with such a rich melting pot of cultures and ideas – with more than 30% minority population – only a mere 4% of radio stations and 1.9% of TV stations are owned by minorities. So digital broadcasting should be about expanding opportunities for everyone.

The Public Interest, Public Airwaves Coalition today has taken a huge step by putting forth a specific proposal - that broadcasters should air a minimum of three hours per week of local civic and political discourse and use three percent of their extra programming capacity in the same way. These and other proposals deserve our immediate attention.

But we can't wait until after this election cycle is over. I will start today by challenging broadcasters to show that they are serious about serving the public. I want to renew the challenge made by the Advisory Committee on Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters in 1998, that some stations took up in 2000. Broadcasters should be easily able to commit to five minutes per night of candidate-centered discourse and issue coverage for the 30 nights before the election. Coverage of candidate positions on issues is far more useful for the American public than horserace coverage.

So here we are at the broadcasters' convention, and I am asking broadcasters: Can you spare five minutes? Can you spare five minutes for the public, when you are projected to receive \$1.2 billion this year in revenue from political advertising? If some broadcasters can't even do that, we will all know that at long last, they have no sense of responsibility left.

This challenge was made in 2000, and stations agreeing to the challenge aired three times as much as stations who didn't make the commitment. Companies like Scripps, Hearst-Argyle and Capitol Broadcasting Company rose to this challenge, while some of the most well-known television networks and group owners largely ignored it. Belo this year has already agreed to one hour a week of coverage.

This minimal challenge, while important, doesn't fulfill all the goals of broadening candidate access and furthering the public interest.

Just as digital technology brings enhanced opportunities for broadcasters, it should also bring enhanced public interest obligations. New horizons in broadcasting should correspond to

new horizons in serving the public interest. Several broadcasters acknowledged this principle back in 1998, and it remains even more true today.

So the FCC needs to urgently get on with determining new rules for the digital era. Congress has already said that the public interest obligations that were imposed since the inception of analog television will carry over to the digital era. So let's get on with figuring out the blueprint.

We should start with the goals outlined by the groups here today - broadening candidate access and political discourse, fostering diversity of perspectives through independent production, and avoiding excessive commercialization, as well as encouraging more educational programming for the development of our children.

The new era of broadcasting is being shaped now. Let's make sure that our future generations will look back at this time and say, "yes, much was given to broadcasters in this digital transition, but, yes, much was also returned to the public."

With some hard work, I'm confident the FCC can achieve solutions that serve broadcasters, the public, and, most of all, our democracy. It's about time we started. So I am asking all broadcasters, led by the NAB, to take the step that these groups have done and become part of the solution.