

**REMARKS OF
FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
UNITY 2004
WASHINGTON, DC
AUGUST 5, 2004**

The first thing I want to do is nominate Unity for a Public Service Award of the Week for convening this assembly and for putting really important issues right up where every American can hear them and think about them. The visibility this event has achieved gives you a golden opportunity not only to talk about issues that are important to you—but to *do* something about them. That banner I saw over the speakers' platform this morning says it all: "A Powerful Alliance, A Force for Change."

Our subject this afternoon is media consolidation—and I think almost everyone here understands just *how* important it is. I was pleased to see it brought up this morning, and I hope this particular panel will talk in detail about how to inform the American people of what's at stake. I see a lot of friends here today who have labored mightily to do just that—to drag this issue out of the obscurity which big media would like to keep it in and let the sunlight of public debate shine upon it. I know this: it's a huge story. It doesn't lack an audience and it doesn't lack interest. Everywhere I go, it's what people want to talk about. There's an audience, alright—witness the 2.3 million Americans who contacted the FCC last year to express their concern when the Commission's majority tried to open the floodgates to more consolidation. And big media is trying to hide the issue, no doubt about that—witness its almost total lack of coverage since day one.

Your fellow citizens and mine are hungry for news from the front lines. And the journalists in this room are the people to bring it to them. You know first hand what media consolidation has wrought. In a new survey of you and your colleagues, over three-quarters of you cited such harms from media consolidation as less diversity of viewpoint in local news, a decline in news quality, less community coverage and increasing corporate bias in news reporting. You understand two things: it's about your profession and it's about your country.

Many of you have added your voices to the dialogue, sometimes at risk to yourselves and your careers. In the ownership hearings that Commissioner Adelstein and I conducted around the country, you stepped up to tell us your real-life experiences about what happened as a result of consolidation when news staffs and resources were slashed, when workloads were increased, and when the bottom line took precedence over news-gathering. We need you to keep sharing your experiences now if this story is going to reach the kind of audience that will make the ultimate difference.

Realize at the outset that we are not talking about some future threat. We are talking present reality. Big conglomerates already own radio, television and cable – both cable systems and cable channels. They often own the local newspaper monopoly, too. They own the production of programming and they own its distribution. Increasingly they control creativity itself. Think about that.... We are seeing local talent and local

creativity driven to the sidelines, denied the very opportunity to create. Local musicians are denied airplay on local stations. Independent programming is being quickly run out of prime-time. Big media is giving us less of America.

If entertainment is in trouble, contemplate news, information and the civic dialogue for a moment. It hits home especially hard in this election year. Study upon study paints a bleak and depressing picture. From 1996 to 2000, coverage of even the Presidential race on the network evening news dropped by one-third. The average Presidential candidate sound bite in 2000 was less than 9 seconds. Coverage of Congressional, state and local races is virtually non-existent. In the 2002 election, over half of the evening local newscasts contained no campaign coverage at all. What coverage there is tends to focus inordinately on the latest tracking polls and handicapping the horse race. Campaign ads outnumber campaign stories by a huge margin. Some estimate that many Americans saw more prime-time entertainment on a single night than they saw election coverage during an entire campaign!

Wouldn't it be nice to see broadcast media in this country step up to the plate and designate the rest of this election year as the "Campaign for America" and devote truly meaningful time to the issues? And I don't mean just a few minutes here and there, but time commensurate with the tough challenges that confront every citizen in 2004. Good grief, we're in a war, we've got a health care crisis in America, there is worry in most corners of the country about people's jobs, about schools, and the list goes on. Yet those charged with using the public airwaves for the public good can't find a little time to cover what's at stake? That's serving the public interest?

If the majority of Americans are not getting what they should out of today's media, minority groups are faring even worse. Across this country, I have heard first-hand the frustration and the anger every minority group feels about this. Their issues don't rise to the level of serious coverage. When they appear in programming, it's usually in caricature. And they are often ignored even in the advertising that is selected.

I believe that diversity of viewpoint diminishes as diversity of ownership and diversity in management jobs diminish. People of color make up over 30 percent of our population, yet they own only 4.2 per cent of the nation's radio stations and around 1.5 per cent of TV stations. The numbers of minorities have dropped across the board—owners, general managers, news directors and the news workforce. That's not right. America's strength *is* its diversity. America will succeed in the Twenty-first century not in spite of our diversity, but *because* of our diversity. We must expect our media to reflect this diversity and to nourish it. But we've got a long ways to go.

If I ended my remarks here, you might put me down as Dr. Doom and Gloom, given the power and the resources big media can deploy into the battle. But I'm not dismayed at all. You see, that cockeyed Commission decision in June of 2003 to remove so many media ownership limits galvanized millions of Americans across this country. Concerned parents, creative artists, religious leaders, civil rights activists, labor organizations, journalists, young people, old people, conservatives, liberals, even

independent broadcasters and many, many others stood up in never-before-seen numbers to reclaim their airwaves.

Their representatives in Congress answered the call. The U.S. Senate voted twice to overturn the FCC decision in its entirety, and over 200 Members of the House of Representatives asked the House Leadership for permission to vote on the same resolution of disapproval. So far, they have been denied that vote. If they held that vote, I think I know how it would turn out, don't you?

Just over a month ago, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the FCC's media concentration plan was legally and procedurally flawed. That's good news. The bad news is that these rules now come back to—guess where?—the very Commission that dreamed them up in the first place. So we could still end up with rules every bit as bad as the ones that were returned to us. You should also know that among the many reasons for the court's dissatisfaction with what the majority wrought was that it ignored proposals to increase minority diversity.

So people want to resolve this question now of how many—or, rather, how few—companies are going to control what we watch and listen to. And they want to be part of the decision. Last time the majority shut the people out of its deliberations. So Commissioner Adelstein and I have asked Chairman Powell to schedule hearings, beginning right away, so *all* the Commissioners can go into individual media markets around the country and learn for themselves what consolidation means for local viewers and listeners. We don't have time to waste on this. It's an issue with the American people. It's an issue with Congress. And it's an issue you as journalists—no matter who owns the company you work for—need to cover.

I have always held to the idea that the American people, once given the facts, will far more often than not come out on the right side of an issue. Having traveled America, I think I know their impulse on the consolidation issues. But, you know, there comes a point when—if people are denied the facts, if they are denied the information they need to make good decisions—their decisions will suffer and the country will suffer, and that gets us to the very stuff of this democracy of ours, doesn't it? So we look to journalists for that information—we look to you. If not you, who? And if not now, when?

Thank you.