

Luncheon Keynote
Honorable Kathleen Abernathy
Before the
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Washington, DC
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I am delighted to be here today to address the 19th Annual MSTV Fall Television Conference. The title of this year's conference, "Digital Television and The Consumer Challenge: Bringing It All Home" is certainly appropriate given the critical DTV related issues facing the commission and the congress.

In the next few weeks, Congress will have a dramatic impact on the American consumer and television broadcasting as it addresses the establishment of a hard date for the return of analog television spectrum.

The terrible devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita pushed the DTV debate, and almost everything else, off of our collective radar screen. As a nation, we witnessed the terror of the storm and its aftermath, and the heartbreak of those caught in its path, particularly the thousands and thousands of people who lost everything in its wake.

As recovery efforts continue, it is in keeping with the theme of this conference to reflect on the lessons this awful experience has brought home to *us*, in business as well as in everyday life, as professionals as well as private citizens.

Perhaps the central lesson is, as the bible tells us, "from him to whom much is given, much shall be expected." Each of us has been moved by how so much misery can coexist with so much resiliency. All of us have been compelled to do whatever we can to help the survivors of hurricanes Katrina and Rita rebuild their homes, their lives, and their dreams.

The FCC has tried to do its part to help, actively working with federal, state, and local officials to get service back on-line as quickly as possible. Working literally around-the-clock to do everything within our power to help restore a semblance of normalcy to New Orleans and the gulf coast.

In turn, the efforts of local television stations before, during and after the storms deserve to be recognized and commended. Local television stations put aside their normal rivalries and pooled their resources in creative responses to the catastrophe. When there is time to write the whole story, there will be many, many examples of local broadcasters who stayed on-the-air despite great personal danger, defying the storm and the odds.

For example, eighty of the eighty-five employees of Belo Corporation's WWL-TV in New Orleans volunteered to stay at the station, providing 24-hour non-stop hurricane coverage for nine straight days. When flooding forced the studio to move out of the French quarter, WWL continued to broadcast from the studios of KLPB, the PBS station on the LSU campus.

Hearst-Argyle's WDUS-TV in New Orleans stayed in constant contact with law enforcement officials as the storm approached, relaying critical evacuation and safety information. They remained on the air until the transmitter took on water, and then continued to stream news coverage by moving their staff to sister station WAPT in Jackson, MS. The news crews remained in New Orleans to cover the story.

In Biloxi, Liberty's WLOX continued to broadcast even though the storm ripped off the newsroom's roof. With water pouring in, the station used to broadcast from a small side room, on a card table, with one laptop and one camera. When power failed for a short time, the station partnered with WXXV-TV the local Fox affiliate.

These are but several examples from among many. By pointing them out I do not intend to give short shrift to similar efforts by other gulf coast television licensees like Media General, Tribune, Emmis and Raycom. Their stations, and others, brought home to us yet again that broadcasting, the first in time among electronic mass media, remains the most firmly tied to the interests of the local communities you serve.

The benefits flowing from these stations' incredible efforts were many, and the beneficiaries were diverse. First and foremost, of course, local television reporters, armed with their knowledge about their local communities, were critically important in providing citizens with life saving information. They were the "boots on the ground," providing a lifeline of valuable, on-the-spot information and a familiar, reassuring presence in the aftermath of the storm.

But local stations also provided the information base for other media throughout the region. Local television news was re-broadcast on radio stations, satellite services, and cable networks and was streamed over the internet. Indeed, in contrast to sometimes wildly inaccurate blogging, local tv websites provided a reliable source of accurate information.

Local gulf coast stations also provided a vital communications link, allowing state and local public safety officials to reach out to the community at large. In return, local television served as the eyes and ears of public safety, permitting them to see trouble spots as they developed. And local stations brought the images of a devastated region to the outside world, helping those of us far from the gulf coast grasp, as mere words cannot, the enormity of the disaster.

As rebuilding efforts continue along the gulf coast, television broadcasting has become a major factor in helping to revive the region. The industry-sponsored "broadcast unity day" has exceeded its goal, raising over \$100 million. In addition,

countless local tv-sponsored telethons, clothing drives, and food drives have helped mobilize a nation.

“From those to whom much is given, much shall be expected.” Local television broadcasters have indeed been “given” much, as many influential leaders often point out. And of course the Commission tries from time to time to commoditize the value of what you have been given by imposing programming obligations of varying kinds. And yet, when all is said and done, local television stations have indeed brought home, especially to those who may have come to take broadcasting for granted, the real value of the service they provide. If there exists a better demonstration of real “localism” than how local broadcasters performed in response to Katrina and Rita I can’t imagine what it would be.

This experience must be the basis from which we can explore what the private sector, local and state authorities, and the Commission must do in order to ensure that local television stations are able to continue this kind of service when faced with future natural and man made disasters.

Finally, as many of you know, this is likely to be the last time I will have the privilege of speaking with you as a Commissioner, because my term on the Commission is coming to a close. As Yogi Berra would put it, I am coming to a fork in the road, and I am going to take it.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank David, Victor, and the many individual members of MSTV whose input has helped me sort through the complexities of so many of the issues that concern your industry. For that, and for the opportunity of being part of this program bringing home to all of us your extraordinary efforts during this extraordinary time, I thank you.