

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
PUBLIC FORUM ON BROADCASTING AND RELIGION
JANUARY 9, 2007**

Good morning. Welcome to this historic forum and thank you to everyone who had a hand in making it happen—particularly my friends at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United Church of Christ. This *is* an historic forum. Indeed, it is the first forum I am aware of to tackle the important question of how religious broadcasting is faring in the new media age in which we all live. Your presence today testifies to the gravity of the question.

At the FCC we have an agenda packed with issues that affect the religious community in so many direct and tangible ways. Spectrum for educational and instructional purposes, the E-rate, ensuring that the Internet remains as open in the future as it does today, getting broadband out to all our people no matter who they are or where they live—these are just a few that spring instantly to mind. But amidst them all, it is the future of our media that has been at the top of my list since I became a Commissioner 5-1/2 years ago. I had concerns coming in and they have only deepened as a result of what I have seen and experienced since then. I am concerned that issues important for the people to know about and upon which our democracy depends are receiving so little coverage in our media. I am concerned that so many groups and cultures and traditions and value systems are ignored by the media. I am concerned because entertainment has become so homogeneous that the great diversity and creative genius of our country are at risk. I am concerned at the rampant vulgarity, sexuality and gratuitous violence that pervade so much of our programming. I am concerned because of the diminution—or, better, the disappearance—of meaningful public interest obligations for our broadcast media. I am concerned that this nation’s media so seldom reflect and so seldom appeal to the better angels of our nature. I am a worried citizen.

None of these new media realities can be understood apart from the reality of media consolidation. Media consolidation is not a future threat, it is present reality. Big companies own television, radio, newspapers, cable systems and programming, even their own websites. They own the production. They own the distribution. They are constricting the market on creativity itself. And amidst the frenzy of consolidation we have endured, it is becoming ever more difficult to find quality stories that reflect religious viewpoints.

A little history to tell us how we got here: three years ago, under then-FCC Chairman Michael Powell, and over the objections of my friend Commissioner Adelstein and me, the FCC severely cut back—some would say eviscerated—the rules we had to check Big Media’s seemingly endless appetite for more consolidation. Without asking the questions that needed to be asked—questions like what is the impact of consolidation on minorities, senior citizens, children, families and religions, the Powell Commission rammed through new rules allowing a single media giant to own in some markets up to three television stations, eight radio stations, the cable system and cable channels, and the

local newspaper—which is already a monopoly in most American cities. And, just as bad, the agency did all this without seeking meaningful input from the American people.

But even before the vote was called on this sweeping proposal, something happened that the Chairman didn't expect. The American people found out what he was up to. An unprecedented army of left and right, liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat, red state and blue state came together, demanded action and got it. The American people (nearly 3 million of them contacted the FCC in protest!), Congress and a federal court rose up with one voice to say "No Way." So those rules were checked and sent back to the FCC to be reworked. Mark that well: citizen action can still carry the day. Concerned citizens can still make a difference.

But, reality check: we're back at square one. The FCC has teed up another ownership proceeding, industry is still pushing for more consolidation, and the battle is on again. By the way, if anyone tries to tell you that Big Media's push for more consolidation has abated, don't believe it. I've seen their most recent pleadings and they make it very clear that they are still following their Pied Piper of Consolidation—and they are prepared to fight for it. So if we are going to succeed this time around—and go on from there to have a broader national dialogue on the future of the media in our democracy—it will take widespread citizen action and organized efforts flowing out of events like this.

Media is so precious, so fundamental. It is how we communicate with one another beyond our personal spheres. Media is too important to our future to be left to the whims of advertisers or the financial masters of the market. Because it affects so much of who we are and what we do, media has immense social and civic responsibilities. And, as citizens, we have responsibility to demand and to secure a media environment that informs, reflects and nourishes the great diversity of America. Pope John Paul II put it eloquently: "The positive development of the media at the service of the common good is a responsibility of each and every one," and he went on, as his successor is doing, to emphasize the culture of co-responsibility each nation must embrace in the implementation of enlightened media policy.

I believe our country, our people, are ready to tackle these questions proactively. And they are ready to go beyond just playing defense against harmful new media consolidation rules and to revisit the old rules that got us into this mess. I am convinced that a strong majority want to reinvigorate broadcasters' public interest obligations—obligations that have been stricken from the rules over the past 25 years.

We have a chance now to chart a new course. We have a chance to ask questions that didn't get answered last time around. We have a chance, for example, to consider the effects of media concentration on children. We should study the relationship between concentration and positive children's programming. And we should examine the correlation between the rising tide of indecent and violent programming and the rising tide of media consolidation. It makes intuitive sense that the farther away a program originates, the less sensitive it is to local standards. Who is going to be more attuned to

community standards—the far-distant national owner who is driven by returns for shareholders or the broadcaster closer to the local scene who, in some communities, you still see at church, at the store and around town?

I believe people of faith are united by many common interests when it comes to the media. They want a media environment that recognizes their presence, covers their issues and provides them ample opportunity for expression. They want local media that covers the thousands of good works done in their communities every day. They want media that serves the needs of all our citizens, certainly including the poor, the disadvantaged and the disabled. They want a media that truly reflects the diverse threads that hold together the great tapestry that is America. They want those who operate the airwaves to understand that in return for the privilege of using the people's airwaves, the people expect a return that goes beyond someone's corporate bottom line.

I am here to ask for your help, again. I hope after our discussion today that you return to your congregations and classrooms and talk up this issue. Consider how media consolidation has affected your community and your ability to get local coverage, get local news and seek outlets for religious viewpoints. Make sure your community knows how important it is to get involved. Let them know they can make a difference and play a vibrant role in shaping the future of media in this country. Wouldn't it be great to have a coalition of faith-based communities that put this issue at the top of their concerns? That's where it should be, because all the other issues you work on aren't being well served—often they are not even mentioned—in today's big media environment. I believe that this effort starts today with your participation in this forum and I encourage you to set up meetings in your communities, where leaders from churches, synagogues and mosques can bring these issues to those you serve and mobilize their concerns on behalf of media policy that better reflects your interests and values. Together I am convinced we can make a difference. Let's act like the future depends on it. Because it does.

Thank you and Godspeed.