

TESTIMONY OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
HEARING ON ACCESSING THE COMMUNICATIONS MARKETPLACE
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES SENATE
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I welcome this opportunity to return to the Senate—which was “home” to me for so many years—and to share some thoughts with you over the state of our communications industries which are so important a part of our economy and an even more important component of our society and culture. I think we have some serious work to do to ensure that these industries are making their maximum contribution to our nation. We have a media environment that, while impressive in many ways, is not fully serving American democracy or the American public. We have a telecommunications marketplace that, without some serious thought, will never extend the wonders of the Internet to millions of Americans. And despite the searing lessons of 9/11 and Katrina, we still are not ready for the next man-made or natural disaster. Perhaps our nation’s unreadiness on 9/11 can be explained by ignorance; if we’re not prepared next time, that’s dereliction.

Let me begin with the issue which you know is closest to my heart: the broadcast media. I know that many local broadcasters strive mightily to serve the public interest. But increasingly the public-spirited part of the profession is being squeezed out. Too much of TV and radio today is homogenized, often gratuitously violent programming. Even worse is what we *don’t* see enough of—the community and civic affairs coverage that is democracy’s lifeblood. I’ve traveled all across the country—to a dozen media hearings just in the last year—and I’ve seen people’s impatience with the status quo. It is time for the FCC to focus not only on avoiding bad *new* rules, but to revisit the bad *old* rules that got us here in the first place. I am very pleased the Chairman has committed to complete our long-dormant localism proceeding before moving forward on media ownership. Going beyond that, we need to find a way to bring basic public interest standards back to broadcasting and the spirit of public interest to other media, too.

Turning to telecommunications, I think the FCC’s—and the nation’s—greatest challenge is to bring the wonders of modern technology to *all* our people: to the inner city and to our distant farms and ranches, to tribal lands, to our disabled and challenged fellow citizens, to our poorest citizens and our oldest citizens. We simply cannot afford to leave anyone behind without leaving America behind. Right now, your country and mine is *21st in the world* when it comes to broadband digital opportunity and that’s according to the International Telecommunications Union. How can we expect a generation of students to enter the digital classroom at dial-up speed? How will they compete as individuals? But wait a minute—we’re paying a business, competitive cost, too. Fewer Americans with broadband means a smaller Internet marketplace and a glass ceiling over the productivity of small businesses and entrepreneurs in too much of our great land. But, then again, what did we expect without having a real broadband strategy?

I hope this Congress will push the FCC to be a more proactive participant in developing a strategy and developing solutions. Have us gather better statistics about our country’s woeful broadband situation. Set our agency’s talented engineers and policy gurus to work writing reports and teeing up options for you to consider about how we can inject life back into our

nation's stagnant broadband market. Keep our feet to the fire to encourage innovation, competition and the provision of advanced telecommunications to all our people. The present situation is far too grave to allow the great technological resources of the FCC to be anything less than 100% engaged.

The FCC also faces a daunting challenge in improving our disaster readiness. I believe that in the aftermath of 9/11, this agency—which employs the greatest concentration of telecommunications experts in the nation and has statutory responsibility to secure non-military communications in time of emergency—allowed its expertise and authority to be marginalized. Chairman Martin has moved to make public safety and homeland security a top priority, even creating a separate Bureau this year. But the job is still far from done and our role is still not what it should be. One initiative we have adopted, and I think it is of particular importance, is using the FCC as a clearinghouse for public safety and homeland security ideas. Small businesses, charities, hospitals, and other entities that lack the resources to develop complete emergency plans should be able to contact the FCC and learn what has worked for others and what hasn't. It will take money, staff time, and serious dedication to get us there, but the safety of the people is always the first obligation of the public servant—and the agency is capable of doing more to keep America safe. Rightly done, this initiative can save the nation time, money and possibly even lives.

Turning to one of those smaller issues that doesn't usually get much attention, let me make one minor but I think important suggestion: Modify the closed meeting rule so that we can talk to each other at the Commission. I can't think of any recent proceeding that wouldn't have benefited from a full and frank exchange of ideas among the principal decision-makers. Every other institution encourages discussion among its members—whether it's Congress, the courts, or the College of Cardinals. You know, if it's good enough for Holy Mother Church, of which I am a member, it ought to be good enough for the FCC.

I want to finish by stating my firm conviction that the issues the FCC faces in the next two years are far too important and complex to be reduced to simple distinctions between regulation and deregulation or pro-business and anti-business. Our job is to make sure the people's business gets done. We need to find ways for stakeholders to work together, to combine the genius of our great enterprise system with the things people expect government to do. Partnership is how we built America. Working together, building together, recognizing our inter-dependence one upon the other—those have been the best moments in our nation's passage to greatness—and therein is the key to our future.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Co-Chairman and Members, thank you and I look forward to our conversation this morning.