

STATEMENT
of
COMMISSIONER JONATHAN S. ADELSTEIN
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

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COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION,
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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice-Chairman, and members of the Committee, as we are in the middle of what passes for deep winter in Washington, I am reminded of what I learned growing up as a fourth-generation South Dakotan. My great-grandmother homesteaded near the Badlands, and thrived, along with so many other pioneers who were scattered over large distances, by staying connected and pulling for each other.

Today, through vast technological progress, we have the opportunity to connect this country in ways more profound than my great-grandmother could have ever imagined. It will take the same American spirit to provide for all of our neighbors, not just those in rural, insular and other high-cost areas, but Native Americans, residents of our inner cities, minorities, those with disabilities, non-English speakers, and low-income consumers.

We must upgrade our communications infrastructure in every corner of this country. And we must do a better job of making innovative communications technologies more widely available and affordable to everyone. All of our citizens should have the opportunity to maximize their potential through communications, no matter where they live or what challenges they face. To promote the communications needs of everyone in this country, we should focus on improving access to broadband services, modernizing universal service, and protecting diversity, competition, and localism in our media.

Understanding the many facets of the communications landscape requires us to take account of the rapidly-changing marketplace and to reach out to diverse

communities. As a Commissioner, I have traveled to many unique parts of the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, and I have learned of the distinctive challenges each state faces. I visited the Gulf Coast of Mississippi shortly after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The enormous damage to the entire region was unforgettable and remains a painful reminder that the communications needs of our public safety and national security communities must remain at the forefront.

One of our central challenges is promoting the widespread deployment of broadband facilities to carry these innovative services. This must be a national priority. Even though we have made strides, I am concerned that the U.S. is not keeping pace with our global competitors. Each year we slip further down the regular rankings of broadband penetration. This is more than a public relations problem. Citizens of other countries are simply getting more megabits for less money. That's a productivity problem, and our citizens deserve better.

We must engage in a concerted and coordinated effort to restore our place as the undisputed world leader in telecommunications. An issue of this importance warrants a comprehensive national strategy to ensure that affordable broadband is available for all Americans. According to the ITU, the digital opportunity afforded to U.S. citizens is not even near the top, it's 21st in the world. So, it is not a national strategy just to overtake Estonia. It will mean taking a hard look at our successes and failures, and improving our data collection so that we can better ascertain our current problems and develop responsive solutions. We must re-double our efforts to encourage broadband development by increasing incentives for investment and promoting competition. We must also work to preserve the open and neutral character that has been the hallmark of the Internet, maximizing its potential as a tool for economic opportunity, innovation, and so many forms of civic, democratic, and social participation.

It will also mean being creative and flexible in our approaches. Some have argued that the reason we have fallen so far in the international broadband rankings is that we are a more rural country than many of those ahead of us. If that is the case, we

should strengthen our efforts to address any rural challenges head-on. We have got to make broadband truly affordable and accessible to everyone, even if that means communities tapping their own resources to build broadband systems.

The Commission also must do more to stay on top of the latest developments in spectrum technology and policy. Spectrum is the lifeblood for much of this new communications landscape. The past several years have seen an explosion of new opportunities for consumers, like Wi-Fi, and more advanced mobile services. But, we have to be more creative with a term I have coined “spectrum facilitation.” That means looking at all types of approaches – technical, economic or regulatory – to get spectrum into the hands of operators ready to serving consumers at the most local levels. Wireless broadband has been a top priority for me while at the Commission. And I truly believe that our preparation for the upcoming 700 MHz auction is one of the most important undertakings the Commission will conduct in all of the time I have served.

Universal service continues to play a vital role in meeting our commitment to connectivity. I have worked hard to preserve and advance the universal service programs as Congress intended. It is vital to keep them on solid footing. Increasingly, voice, video, and data will flow to homes and businesses over broadband platforms. In this new world, as voice becomes just one application over broadband networks, we must ensure that universal service evolves to promote advanced services, which is a priority that Congress, and this Committee in particular, made clear.

As for the media, we should never forget that the airwaves belong to the American people. It is critical to preserve their access to what the Supreme Court has called the “uninhibited marketplace of ideas.” First, with our ownership rules, we should do no harm; we should take far greater care than we have in the past before proposing any changes in our media ownership rules. Further, to make the media landscape look and sound like America, we need to open our airwaves to community-based and minority voices. And we need to establish public interest obligations on broadcasters as they enter the digital age.

Finally, we are charged by Congress to perform as a law enforcement agency, and we should be rigorous in enforcing all of the laws under our jurisdiction. We have numerous issues before us regarding consumer complaints about the Do-Not-Call directory and our Junk Fax rules, indecency, payola, video news releases and our sponsorship identification rules. All of these laws are important, and all allegations of wrongdoing demand our resolute attention.

Congress has charged the Commission with ensuring that the American public stays well-connected and well-protected. I will do everything in my power to carry out the law to promote these goals. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.