

**REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM  
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Thank you President Bollinger for visiting our conference, Dean Lemann for bringing us all together, and my friend Walter Cronkite who brings such wisdom and adds such stature to our gathering. One of my stellar experiences after joining the FCC was coming to know Walter, to be able now to count him as a friend, and to have the opportunity to work every day at the Commission for the kind of public interest ideals that his career personifies over so many event-filled years. There are many reasons why Walter Cronkite became the most trusted person in America. Not the least of these was his trust in the American people and his life-long commitment to making sure that the media where he worked reflected the interests, the diversity and the dreams of all his fellow citizens. There is no one in our national life that I admire more than this good man.

I admire this school, too. Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism is a city on a hill for those of us who believe that serious reform is necessary if we are to preserve a vibrant, diverse, local, intelligent and independent media environment. I know that President Bollinger and Dean Lemann are both fighting hard and thinking broadly—like Walter Cronkite is—to ensure that journalism, as a profession, remains capable of serving the essential cultural and political role that our system of government demands of it.

Down in Washington D.C., I find myself involved in a fight that I believe is similar in many ways. The question is what can and should government do to ensure that the broadcast media system continues to serve the *public* interest rather than just the financial interests of media corporations and their shareholders. I want to talk a little about that and then sit back and hear the thoughts of the distinguished folks gathered here on how the broadcast issues before the FCC intersect with the state of journalism generally. There may be many important meetings taking place in New York today. My take is that this gathering of working journalists, former journalists, publishers, academic experts, and media reform activists trumps them all.

No serious observer can doubt that journalism is currently experiencing rapid and even destabilizing change. The Hutchins Report—written 50 years ago, but still eerily relevant today—demonstrates that change has been a hallmark of the profession for a long time. But the pace of change has accelerated to warp speed in the last decade with the coming of new technologies and capabilities and, especially, the Internet that is bringing such profound changes to every information-based industry. The question then is: Will this change be for the better or for the worse? The answer is: It's up to us.

Regarding broadcast journalism, the answer won't be good for the profession or the country if we continue down the same road we've traveled for the past quarter century. Beginning in the 1980s, with a few hints even before then, those of us who believe that public policy has a role to play in securing public interest performance by our

broadcast media were told to get out of the way. A fundamental shift in our approach to media regulation was needed, we were told. And they sent us a new Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission who famously stated that a television is nothing but “a toaster with pictures.” And that’s how he treated it. Turns out that he was the toaster and what his approach made toast of was the public interest. Of course he didn’t do this alone. He had plenty of accomplices, some in very high places. Over the next two decades nearly every explicit public interest criteria we had to measure a broadcast station’s public interest performance was eviscerated. No longer did station owners need to consult with the citizens of their communities about what kinds of programs they wanted. No longer were they required to cover controversial public issues and to foster the healthy clash of antagonistic viewpoints so essential to decision-making in a democracy. No longer were they required to come in every three years and demonstrate their public service contributions at license renewal time; all they do now is send in a post-card once every eight years and we don’t generally even open up their public file to see what they’re up to. And, to gild the lily, we removed the constraints that separated program distribution from program production, and opened up the way for cartel control of the broadcast media from one end to the other.

Simultaneously came the great tsunami of media consolidation. Ownership caps were loosened and media behemoths gobbled up local outlets. One company grew to more than 1200 stations. We know the results now. Closed or amputated newsrooms. Entertainment passed off as news. Homogenized entertainment, national music play lists, no coverage for local talent, local music, local creativity. Too much of media using us, not enough of using media for the common good. Our country is paying a dreadful cost for this quarter century fling with government abdication and media irresponsibility.

But of course even that wasn’t enough for big media and their friends in high places. They wanted more—and they almost got it. In 2003, then FCC Chairman Michael Powell rammed new rules through the FCC—over my strenuous objections and those of my colleague Jonathan Adelstein—to allow a single company to own up to three television stations, eight radio stations, the monopoly local newspaper, the monopoly cable provider, even the Internet service provider, in a single market. I asked how that would serve local and community interests, independent journalism, minorities and local creative artists.

Thankfully, three million citizens contacted the FCC to express their outrage at this near-disaster for our country. I didn’t know 3 million people even knew there was an FCC! But it was a true grassroots, bipartisan movement that made a difference. Congress went on record with its opposition, and then a federal court found the rules both substantively and procedurally flawed and sent them back to us to rework. That’s where we are now. And I can tell you this: in spite of their spin messaging, big media is still pushing to loosen the caps even more, to allow more duopolies and triopolies and to do away with the present constraints on newspaper-broadcast cross ownership. I’ve read their pleadings and I can tell you they are still marching to the tune of their Pied Piper of Consolidation.

Looking back at where the FCC has been and where it is today, I think we can reach three conclusions:

First, the consolidation we have seen so far and the decision to treat broadcasting as just another business has *not* produced a media system that does a better job serving most Americans. Quite the opposite, in fact. Rather than reviving the news business, it has led to *less* localism, *less* diversity of opinion and ownership, *less* serious political coverage, *fewer* jobs for journalists, and the list goes on.

Second, I think we have learned that the purest form of commercialism and high quality news make uneasy bedfellows. As my own hero, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, put it in a letter to Joseph Pulitzer, “I have always been firmly persuaded that our newspapers cannot be edited in the interests of the general public from the counting room.” So, too, for broadcast journalism. This is not to say that good journalism is incompatible with making a profit—I believe that both interests can and must be balanced. But when TV and radio stations are no longer required by law to serve their local communities, and are owned by huge national corporations dedicated to cutting costs through economies of scale, it should be no surprise that, in essence, viewers and listeners have become the products that broadcasters sell to advertisers.

It’s not just what FDR thought. Listen to Herbert Hoover, who was present at the creation of our broadcast media: “It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service, for news, for entertainment, for education and for vital commercial purposes to be drowned in advertising clutter.” Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised that the grassroots call we hear today for media reform has such a bipartisan ring to it!

Third, we have seen that the death of the news business is often greatly exaggerated. Even though I understand the serious challenges and uncertainty that media companies face, the truth remains that many—if not most—local newspapers and broadcasters continue to be extremely profitable compared to other industries. Do these papers need new models to survive in Internet Age? Of course they do. Will they find them? I’m convinced they will. Meanwhile they remain, along with television, the primary source of news and information for the huge majority of Americans. And the Internet won’t be competing with them in such areas as investigative journalism or broad global coverage in my lifetime—and I plan, like Walter, to live a long time.

So what can government do to reverse these trends and produce a media environment that actually strengthens American democracy rather than weakens it? Here are a couple of thoughts I’d like you to consider.

The time for action is now. “The times they are a-changin’” and the months just ahead may afford us the best chance in a generation to bring public interest standards back to broadcasting—and the spirit of the public interest to other media, too. For openers, of course, the FCC must be blocked from passing any destructive new media ownership rules like those approved in 2003. But we can do more than that now and I, for one, am tired of just playing defense. It’s time for those of us who share a

commitment to the rebirth of public interest stewardship to go on the offensive. We need not settle for defending journalism against bad *new* rules—now we can, we must, revisit those bad *old* rules and laws and decisions that eviscerated long-standing public interest obligations. I don't want to paint too rosy a picture, but I believe we have a special chance right now to make a difference. Last week, my fellow Commissioners and I were called before the Senate Commerce Committee for a general oversight hearing. And, you know what, despite all the astonishing changes and policy issues facing the telecom industry today, about 80% of the questions from both sides of the aisle were about how to return the public interest to broadcasting. Was I encouraged? You bet I was!

Every American is a stakeholder in how our broadcast media develop. Fiduciary responsibility to corporate stockholders is one thing; public interest obligations to stakeholders is quite another. So far stockholders have totally trumped stakeholders. This is not a sound investment in America's future and we must find a way to fix it. I want—and we need—a thriving broadcast industry where stewards of the airwaves continue to make a good living. But our notion of good stewardship must expand—or return—to putting some real muscle into the obligations that broadcasters undertake in return for their free use of the public's airwaves. It's a big quid pro quo, to be sure. But those airwaves are a big gift, too—to the tune of, conservatively, \$500 billion. The American people expect a return on *their* investment, too.

I didn't bring with me, unfortunately, any silver bullet to restore public interest airwaves. But I do want to start that conversation, and I can't think of a better place to do this than here at Columbia. Is the answer a stronger license renewal process, which would require stations to prove every few years that they have actually served their local community? Is it a community discovery requirement, which would force stations to actually solicit input from the local community about how programming might change to better serve that community? Might it be tax incentives to encourage long-term investment in broadcast journalism or other types of media? Encouraging a more active role for foundation investment? More public resources?

I'm not smart enough to figure that out all by myself. So I think we need a blue-ribbon panel of citizens and journalists—stakeholders as well as stockholders—charged with addressing these issues. I am inspired here by the process that President Bollinger engaged in to guide his thinking about how journalism is taught here at Columbia. Going about the process in such a thoughtful way almost guaranteed a credible outcome. I don't know who should convene this panel or the precise parameters of its charge. But it should be a panel on a schedule, because the last thing we need is a commission or a task force that politicks the issue for years while the media environment deteriorates even more. We need a working group with a meaningful deadline (like 6 months), charged with recommending real-world solutions to a real-world problem which pulses close to the heartbeat of our culture and our democracy.

Building a media environment that truly reflects and truly nourishes our diversity and democracy may be our nation's greatest calling now because, without that, all the other huge issues we confront won't receive the kind of true journalistic scrutiny they

need if they are to find satisfactory resolution. The best way to do this is together—the public as well as the private sector, stakeholders as well as stockholders. But, for heaven’s sake, let’s get away from all the endless, mind-numbing prattle about how this is somehow a question of regulation versus deregulation, or of being for or against business. This is about the *people’s business*, about citizens acting together. Isn’t that how we built this country of ours? It wasn’t just that we declared our independence in one glorious document; it was that we made a declaration of inter-dependence, one upon the other, to win and sustain our freedom and to build our country. This isn’t about ideology, it’s about ideals. Our challenge is to find ways to combine the genius of our great enterprise system with the things people expect their government to do. This is how we built America, and this is how we are called to redeem the Promise of America in every generation.

Thank you.