

REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC HEARING ON MEDIA OWNERSHIP
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Thank you for welcoming us here this afternoon. As some of you know, I once lived in this wonderful area and actually graduated from Northeast High School in St. Petersburg. That was quite a few years ago, to be sure, but your welcome shows that Thomas Wolfe was wrong - it turns out you can go home again. But tonight isn't about a stroll down memory lane. It's about our future, yours and mine, and this meeting is part of a remarkable grassroots dialogue that began almost 5 years ago and which can now - if you and I do our jobs right - help us create a better media environment all across this land of ours.

What we are here to do is to learn from our two distinguished panels, but even more importantly from you in this great audience, how you think this area's media is doing in serving you. Media has a solemn obligation to do that, you know - because you own the airwaves - you and you alone. No business, no broadcaster, owns an airwave in the United States of America. They're yours. Broadcasters do get the privilege of using those airwaves, and in return for a license, they pledge to serve the public interest - to bring you good local news, information and entertainment; to bring you a diversity of issues, cultures and viewpoints; and to provide entertainment that reflects your diversity, interests and creative genius. So I'll be looking tonight to understand your history, your experiences and your satisfaction - or dissatisfaction - with your current media environment.

Now I know the Tampa-St. Petersburg area is one of a dramatically diminished number of metropolitan areas that still has two major and competing newspapers. Of course this is a huge and diverse area of many different interests and there is a lot here for even two papers to cover and I'm interested to learn if you think this is one big area or if it's more differentiated than that. To me, competition in journalism is coin of the realm. Recently I had the privilege of appearing on a Columbia University Journalism School panel with one of my heroes, Walter Cronkite. He told us a little story that I think merits telling here because it gets at what competition in journalism means - and that includes broadcast journalism, of course.

"My first job was with the Houston Press," Cronkite told us, "and our competitor was the Houston Chronicle. We each put out several editions a day. Each time the Chronicle put out a new edition, a copy boy ran eight blocks to its loading dock to bring back a copy - literally hot - or at least warm - off the press. My editor would then spread it out on his desk to compare what they'd written with what I'd written. I can still hear him holler out: 'Cronkite! The Chronicle spells this guy's name S-m-Y-t-h. We've got S-m-I-t-h. Which is it?' Or: 'The Chronicle says it was 1412 Westheimer - we say it was 1414. Who's right?'"

"That kind of check on our work several times a day sure made us better reporters! But how many towns have that kind of newspaper competition any more? Most

towns today have only one newspaper. And the result is just what you'd expect. The accuracy in news reporting isn't the same anymore."

But imagine just for a moment, that either the *Times* or the *Tribune* went away and the remaining paper, now a monopoly, also owned eight radio stations, three television stations, the cable channels and the largest local internet site. What would happen to the quality of the media then? What would happen to the diversity of voices? Right now, Latinos and African Americans in Tampa make up almost 50% of the population. We need to be asking how local coverage is meeting the needs of these and many other diverse communities. My guess is we need to do a better job of it - a much better job. You know, minorities are now nearly a third of our country's total population, but people of color own just 3.2% of the full-power commercial television stations and only about 2% of total broadcast assets. Could it be this is why minority interests and issues don't get covered very well? Could it be this is why minorities are so often caricatured and stereotyped in news stories? Our media have an obligation to reflect our country's diversity. They have an obligation to nourish our country's diversity. It's a job not getting done.

Or take the elderly. We don't usually think of our seniors as a minority group. But talk about a group being disadvantaged and disenfranchised by big national media. These are folks who treasure news about the communities they live in, who value news, and who go out and actually vote. I'm joining those senior ranks now and I know first-hand something is missing. Something has been taken away.

Getting back for a moment to the world I asked you to imagine where there are a few corporate giants owning all the major outlets. That's exactly the world that former FCC Chairman Michael Powell envisioned three years ago when he rammed new rules through the Commission to loosen the few remaining controls we had against further consolidation. What he didn't expect was three million people contacting the FCC to voice their outrage. Congress joined in and then the U.S. Court of Appeals decided those rules were badly flawed and sent them back to us. Lesson One: Citizen action can still make a difference and even carry the day, provided it's passionate, organized and determined. Lesson Two: With the FCC having all these rules teed up again, the need for citizen vigilance is just as urgent.

But there's a difference this time. We can aim higher now. We don't need to play just defense - we can start playing offense. We can not only defeat bad new rules - although we must still do that. But now we are in a position to revisit the bad old rules that got us into this mess in the first place. And we can go on from there to restore meaningful public interest responsibilities to our broadcast media. For starters, let's go back to an honest-too-goodness licensing system that doesn't grant slam-dunk renewals, but stops to ask if a license-holder is really doing its job to serve the common good. All license holders have to do now is basically send in a post-card and that's it. And let's do this license renewal every three years - the way it used to be - not every eight years like it is now. Let's also put what stations are doing to actually meet their public interest obligations up on the Web, so citizens can know how their airwaves are being used. And let's make sure that all that new digital capacity we're giving broadcasters returns something positive for our communities and local talent and civic issues coverage. If your local broadcaster can multi-

cast half a dozen program streams, is it too much to expect that some good portion of that be used to enhance localism and diversity? So these are the kinds of things we all need to be talking about and I'll bet there are other ideas we'll hear today.

Let me conclude with a brief thank you to the many representatives of the community that are here tonight – representatives from the Latino and African American and other communities, all kinds of community-based and public interest groups, labor unions, seniors who have been disadvantaged and disenfranchised by excessive consolidation, consumers, and broadcasters, too. I'm always happy when broadcasters do come out and participate in dialogues like this. I only ask my broadcaster friends to focus tonight on the issues at hand. We want to learn about how you are using the airwaves to enhance the public interest – and many of you indeed are. Unfortunately, at a recent hearing like this, most of the broadcaster presentations focused on how they let their celebrities take time off to support worthwhile charities and how the station donated to these charities. Now I love those charities, so don't misinterpret what I'm saying. Our country has a long, proud history of corporate charitable giving. But that's not the issue for our attention here, so I urge you to focus on the matters of localism, diversity, and competition as reflected in how the airwaves are used. I'm sure there are other groups I've unintentionally forgotten to thank, but I'm glad all of you are here. Most of you are from Tampa-St. Petersburg, but I know others have come from across the state to this only hearing the FCC will be holding in Florida. Personally, I wish we had more such events so people wouldn't have to travel so far.

This has been my top priority issue since I joined the Commission almost six years ago. I know there are many critically important issues troubling America right now – issues of peace and war, finding and keeping good jobs, making sure families have health insurance, educating our kids, creating equal opportunity. And for individual members of this audience, one of these issues may trump all others. But here's my message: even if media consolidation is not your number one issue, it ought to be your second most important. That's because all those other issues you care about are increasingly funneled through the filter of big media. Now if you're happy with how your number one issue is being presented and discussed as they come through that funnel, fine – you don't need to listen to me. But if you think that big issue might just benefit from a little more diversity and competition, then you need to get involved. There's no litmus test to getting involved. You can be conservative or liberal, Democratic or Republican, red state or blue state. I thank you for being here and I look forward to hearing from you. This is an issue that I have seen take root all across this broad and diverse land. It's an issue of democracy. Call it media democracy – I like the ring of that, don't you?