

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**  
**FCC HEARING ON LOCALISM**  
**PORTLAND, MAINE**  
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Tonight we continue a truly remarkable grassroots dialogue about the future of our media that began five years ago and which can now – if you and I do our jobs right – help us create a better media environment here in Maine and all across this land of ours.

Since the FCC re-opened its review of its media ownership rules last year, we have witnessed a growing national concern over what many people believe are disturbing trends in the media. Citizens from all over the country, conservative and liberal, red state and blue state, young and old, rural and urban, north and south have come together to express their concern and even alarm. For many months the discussion has focused on whether the FCC should further loosen its ownership rules with people asking how many -- or perhaps, more accurately, how few? -- broadcast stations media conglomerates should be allowed to own? For what purposes are stations granted licenses? And how does the public interest fare in a more heavily consolidated environment? Tonight we address core media values, particularly localism, from a little different perspective. But we must realize, of course, that it is all part of a larger discussion about protecting the people's interest in the people's airwaves. While the principle of localism is at the heart of the public interest, it remains true that no part of this grassroots dialogue can be divorced from any other part.

We are here tonight to learn 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, among other things, good local news, information and entertainment.

And I do believe that many broadcasters still have that flame to serve the public interest burning in their breasts. There aren't as many of them now -- there aren't as many station owners any more because of consolidation -- and the truth is that those who remain are less and less captains of their own fate these days and more and more captives of unforgiving Wall Street and Madison Avenue expectations. Some tell us the answer is to rely more and more on marketplace forces as a proxy for serving the public interest. They seem to trust that the public interest will somehow magically trump the urge to build power and profit and that localism will somehow survive.

Meanwhile, since the 1980's, fundamental protections of the public interest have weakened and withered. In addition we have pared back the license renewal process from one wherein every three years the FCC examined very rigorously whether the broadcaster was actually serving the public interest, to one wherein now companies need only send us a short form every eight years and generally nothing more. These days getting a license renewed is pretty much a slam dunk. It's not called postcard renewal for nothing.

So step by step, rule by rule, public interest protections were simply frittered away. Believe it or not, we had an FCC Chairman in the 1980s -- when a lot of this deregulation really got into high gear -- who said that a television was just “a toaster with pictures.” And that’s how they proceed to treat the people’s airwaves -- just another business, nothing special about it. All this has happened at high and dangerous cost to the American people. Our country confronts many urgent priorities but, to my mind, few have such long-term importance to our democracy as how America communicates and converses with itself and how this process has been eviscerated in recent years.

The good news is that I believe there’s a difference between the media ownership proceeding of three years ago and this time around. We can aim higher now. We don’t need to play just defense -- we can start playing offense, too. Now it’s not just a question of defeating bad new rules -- although we must still do that. 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-to-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. And let's do this license renewal every three years -- the way it used to be -- not every eight years like it is now. In doing so let's get answers to some all too important questions like did the station show programs on local civic affairs? What type of local political coverage did it provide leading up to Election Day? Did station owners meet with local community leaders and the public? And is the station providing children's programming that is actually educational?

Let's also put what stations are doing to 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 is given the privilege to multi-cast half a dozen program streams into your communities and homes, is it too much to expect that some good portion of that should 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 tonight. And I hope among them will be some discussion about the future of low-power radio and television, because in an age of consolidation, they are often the last bastions for media diversity and media democracy.

I know we will leave here knowing facts and having perspectives that just wouldn't have floated into us had we remained in Washington. We come to Portland to hear directly from members of this community and region and to tap its local expertise as to what is happening here. We start with our panels tonight and I would like to thank each panelist for taking the time and trouble to be with us this evening. Most of all, I thank you, the good citizens of Portland and the great State of Maine, for coming out to share your views with us. Maine is making its voice heard, and I am enormously pleased to be here to listen and to learn.