

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC HEARING ON MEDIA OWNERSHIP
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
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First let me thank my friend Reverend Jackson and his colleagues at Rainbow/PUSH for inviting the FCC to hold its media ownership hearing in Chicago here at this great venue. I understand he's flying in from Louisiana and will be here a little later. The only thing that could keep him away I think is doing what he always does, which is work so tirelessly for equality and justice for everyone in this great country. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here. Many thanks also to Senators Durbin and Obama for welcoming us and for their forthright leadership on the issues we are discussing.

I can't think of any better place to discuss media than Chicago—a city so vibrant and rich in its diversity, in its music, in its political discourse, and in its communities. If anyone can tell us what is going right and what is going wrong in our media today, I'll bet it's the citizens that call this place home.

I want to emphasize what is at stake here. Our media is precious. It's how, outside of our strictly personal spheres, we speak to each other, inform each other, learn from each other, entertain each other, increasingly how we govern ourselves. Almost half a century ago, Arthur Miller said that “a good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself,” and today that idea applies to our entire media system. I also believe that media is the most powerful enterprise in the land, bar none. If we are smart about it, our media will reflect the genius, the creativity and the diversity of our great country. If we are smart about it, we will take whatever action we must to ensure that the public airwaves truly reflect and truly enhance the talents and aspirations of all of us. And here I want to emphasize two words—*public airwaves*. The airwaves belong to you and me. No business, corporation or special interest owns *an* airwave in the United States of America. They're yours—and you allow broadcasters to use these airwaves—for free—in return for offering programs that serve you and your communities. We're here today to find out from you whether they're serving your interests and, if not, what you think the FCC can do to fix it.

To me, serving the public interest means the public interest of *everyone* in this great land. Some folks see America's diversity as a problem to be overcome; I say our diversity is an opportunity to be harnessed. It's our strength; it's who we are and it's what we can be. This city contains a rich and vibrant multitude of races, religions, traditions and stories. I want all your perspectives on whether the public airwaves here in Chicago are being used to reflect those races, religions, traditions and stories, or whether they only distort and caricature them.

Here's the rub: I don't believe that we're anywhere near taking advantage of our great diversity when it comes to media, and we can start by looking at who owns the media in the first place. In the last several months Free Press has completed two research studies on minority and women ownership in the media that are convincing and compelling. Here are just a few of the reports' downright chilling facts. People of color make up over 30% of our country's population, yet they own just 3.26% of all commercial broadcast television stations. Women, who make up 51% of us, own a whopping 4.97% of the stations. The story gets no better when it

comes to radio: women own only 6% of all full-power commercial broadcast radio stations and people of color own only 7.7%. Some may argue that Chicago is different. But only three of the 13 full-power commercial TV stations in Chicago are locally owned and operated; one is owned by an African-American; and none are owned by women. Four, or about 5%, of all commercial radio stations in Chicago have minority owners, one of which is female-owned. And remember when I said that people of color make up 33% of the U.S. population? Get this: nearly two-thirds of the people in the city of Chicago proper are people of color.

So is it any wonder why the depictions of minorities in our media are so often distorted? Why their issues get scant coverage? Why their contributions to the good things happening in America are so seldom even mentioned on the air? Let's be frank: ownership matters. Truth be told, ownership rules. Unless and until we do something to increase minority ownership and minorities in top broadcast jobs, our communications sectors will continue to under-serve the great Promise of America.

And that's not just Mike Copps saying we'd better get serious about minority ownership. When the court sent Chairman Powell's misguided ownership rules back to us in 2004, it took the FCC to task for ignoring these issues. We cannot make that same mistake again. Last month, we finally sought comment on dozens of serious proposals by our own Diversity Committee and others. We should not—we must not—act on media ownership until we address and act upon these vital issues. The time for lip service is over.

I believe there are many broadcasters who want to serve the public interest. Some are doing good jobs and I recognize and applaud them. But I'm worried that in this era of huge consolidated media—with a few broadcasting giants owning so many properties—it's harder for these folks to be captains of their own fates. More and more they are captives to the unforgiving expectations of Wall Street and Madison Avenue. In the process local coverage has diminished, the news has been dumbed down, and diverse local and regional cultures have been subsumed to homogenized, nationalized programming fare. Too often it doesn't reflect who we really are and it doesn't give us the information and understanding we need to sustain our civic dialogue. The bargain that America made with commercial broadcasters—that they could use the airwaves and make a good living from that use, but in return they would be stewards of the public interest—that bargain has gotten wildly out of whack in too many places. I want to know if one of those places is here.

You know, the FCC used to hold broadcasters to their end of the deal. We made them come in every three years to get their licenses renewed and we had a list of guidelines of things we'd be looking for if they were going to be re-upped. Were they going out and talking to their listeners and viewers about what kinds of programs and issues they wanted covered? Were they producing local news—not the “if it bleeds, it leads” stuff, but real news about what's going on and what's important in a community? Were they covering community sports, culture, political campaigns? Were they teeing up important issues and offering a variety of viewpoints about them? No more. That's all gone. Done in, beginning with an FCC Chairman in the 1980s who said that a television set is nothing but a “toaster with pictures”—and that's how they proceeded to treat it. So now broadcasters send in a post card, every *eight* years; those specific guidelines are long gone; we don't normally even look at the public files broadcasters are required to keep;

and presto!—they get their licenses no questions asked. Should we be surprised things are so out of whack? And don't just blame the broadcaster. Blame the FCC, too, for being asleep at the switch for much of the last 25 years. We need a system for license renewal that brings the bargain back to life, that enforces it by withholding licenses from those who aren't doing their jobs, and ensures that the airwaves that belong to you are actually serving you. I say to you and I say to my colleagues: it should be the top priority of the FCC to put some life back into our public oversight responsibilities. Let's start with licensing—and let's start now!

These media issues have 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—Iraq, 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 the 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 it goes 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. Big time. Act like your future depends upon it—because it does.

Thank you for coming here and for sharing your thoughts with us. I plan to listen and learn and then go out and work for a media environment that works for every person in this hall. We should all, every one of us, be activists in this great cause.