

Statement of Commissioner Michael J. Copps
Localism Hearing, Washington, DC
October 31, 2007

Thank you all for being here. You came on short notice, some from afar, and had to prepare on the turn of a dime, but your presence attests your dedication and public-spiritedness and we are grateful for that.

You are going to hear a lot of nice words about localism today. About how localism is one of the core values of broadcast regulation. About how from the earliest days of broadcasting, we've required licensees to serve the needs and interests of their local communities. About how localism is good for viewers, good for business, and good for the future of our democracy.

And it's all true. But my greatest fear is that all those nice words will float into the ether and we'll walk away and congratulate ourselves that we've struck a blow for localism. Meanwhile, consolidation continues to choke the lifeblood out of localism, with its outsourced news, homogenized play lists and distant ownership. Meanwhile, consolidation denigrates diversity, denies minorities and women, and diminishes our already-distorted democratic dialogue. It seems to get worse with almost each passing week. I, for one, can wait no longer. If we truly believe in localism – if it's not just lip service – the time has come to *do something* about it.

First, let's acknowledge that the loss of localism is not something that was inevitable – it was a conscious choice. Back in the 1980's, we had a Chairman of the FCC who famously said that a television set was nothing but a “toaster with pictures.” And that's how he and his accomplices set about to treat it - just another household appliance. So they did away with the requirements that promoted localism. Like talking to your community about the issues that concern the people who live there. Like guidelines at license renewal time that examined the station's commitment to local programming. And like a license renewal process that took place every three years to ensure accountability to the community rather than the every eight years they gave us for the convenience of the industry. So now we have no more community dialogue, no more real accountability, no process to hold stations to their commitment to serve the people. It's all gone – not by chance, but by design. Think about it! Why on earth would some little Commission think it had the right to pell-mell remove explicit performance requirements from broadcasters who are granted exclusive rights to use public property?

Which brings me to the current proceeding. This is the last official public hearing in connection with the Localism Notice of Inquiry that was launched in 2004. While I appreciate the Chairman's commitment to complete the localism proceeding before addressing the media ownership rules, the question remains what it means to “complete” the proceeding. Let me be clear what *I* mean. “Completing the proceeding” means, at a minimum, issuing a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, with clear recommendations, giving the public adequate time to comment on the specific proposals to put localism back into broadcasting, and a timetable for final Commission action.

And let's be clear: this is not just Commissioner Mike Copps' view. It's the bipartisan view from Congress. Recently, Democratic Senator Byron Dorgan and Republican Senator Trent Lott told us in no uncertain terms that, given the importance of localism, a mere report isn't enough. They want recommendations in a formal notice of proposed rulemaking with at least 90 days for public comment. "This must be done," they said "*before* moving forward with the ownership proceeding." We just received another bipartisan letter from Republican Senator Olympia Snowe and Democratic Senator Bill Nelson, calling on the FCC to seriously address localism and pending diversity recommendations *prior* to acting on media ownership. These issues transcend party labels and are in no way unique to red states or blue states. They are grassroots concerns.

The best ways to address these concerns may be through an honest-to-goodness license renewal process and a reinvigorated public interest standard. The bottom line here is that the FCC just *has to* get out of the business of allowing media conglomerates to acquire new licenses or renew existing ones without requiring that every licensee will actually use the public airwaves to serve the public interest.

We will soon know, it appears, whether the Commission's rhetoric about localism is the real thing or whether this proceeding is being truncated because the Commission needs to place a check mark in the Localism box that stands in the way of loosening such ownership rules as newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership that powerful industry players are pushing like mad. But Localism must never be seen as a means to an end—it's an end in itself. It is at the heart of what the public interest is all about. All deliberate speed in getting some localism back? By all means. A rush to judgment to clear the way for more big media mergers? No way. Right now there are too many Americans openly wondering whether this is all a big show – pretty window dressing to distract the public so the FCC and Big Media can cut their back room deal in peace. No one on this Commission, even if some feel differently about the pros and cons of changing the ownership rules, should want to perpetuate those kinds of public misgivings about the FCC. We need a process that allays fears rather than one that creates them.

I received an e-mail yesterday from a gentleman who works at a small-market radio station in the Midwest. In the e-mail he talks about the difference between a truly local station and the stations owned by big corporations in dealing with heavy rain storms that hit the area. He wrote of the big stations:

"These stations have their programming piped in from another community. They have also signed up for a service for their weather reporting which is recorded and sent from a thousand miles away. There were flood warnings and flash flood warnings, yet there was never a mention of that severe weather during the peak of the storms. Nobody even works in those buildings, they have an engineer come in to take meter readings and check on things a couple times per day.

“If this is the type of localism we are to expect, then the public interest is not being served by these companies.

“They can raise all the money they want for local charities and air numerous local public service announcements, but if the local citizens are not even warned about looming severe weather, what good is it?”

It’s a good question. And it goes beyond the weather forecast to whether we can have a media environment in this country that truly reflects our communities and diversity and creativity and that nourishes the civic dialogue on which our future depends. Let’s, for Heaven’s sake, treat this issue with some sense of civic sobriety and seriousness of purpose. It is in this vein that I look forward to hearing from our panels and public today. Thank you again for being here.