

REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MEDIA REFORM
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA
JUNE 7, 2008

Thank you. And thank you Free Press for showing America what an Honest-to-God grassroots citizens' conference looks like. You guys are democracy at its best!

It's been quite the year, hasn't it? Pentagon propaganda campaigns. NARAL text messages blocked. Pearl Jam censored. Cable giants using reset packets to "manage" Bit Torrent. The Internet racing down the same road to consolidated control as radio and TV. Sam Zell gobbling up Tribune. The FCC refusing even to *look* at the legality of Rupert Murdoch adding the *Wall Street Journal* to his media empire, while handing out permission slips to consolidate like they were candy on Halloween. Isn't it time for a change?

Here's the good news. The winds of change are blowing across America. Reform is coming to Washington, DC, and my goal is to make media reform one of the first out of the gate. Sure, comprehensive media reform will take some time. There's a lot of damage to undo. But I say we do something meaningful and achievable right off the bat. I call it a "Down Payment on Media Democracy."

My Down Payment has two parts. One is better TV and radio. "Public airwaves" has been an oxymoron for too long. These *are* the people's airwaves. And the American people make a bargain. Broadcasters get to use the public airwaves—worth billions—for free. In return, we, the people get programming aimed a little higher than the bottom line. Or at least that's what we're *supposed* to get.

Once upon a time the FCC actually enforced this bargain. We looked at a station's performance every three years and then decided whether to renew its license. We had real public interest guidelines. That's all gone. Now we renew licenses every *eight* years, and the only thing we look for is where to put the rubber stamp.

It is time to put a cop back on the beat. Broadcasters need to think twice before running one more infomercial on Sunday morning and bumping local public affairs. Don't get me wrong—a lot of broadcasters want to do the right thing. But we make their jobs harder, not easier, when we let the bad apples off the hook. I am here to say, with you: No more free rides!

The Down Payment on Media Democracy will provide meaningful review every three years, with clear guidelines for how broadcasters must serve their local communities. And the Down Payment will put stations that ignore the public interest on probation. I'll tell you this: a station on probation will get serious about serving the public interest real fast! But if it doesn't, then it'll be "good-bye license." We'll give it to someone who has a personal interest in the public interest.

The other pillar of the Down Payment on Media Democracy is Internet Freedom. If you want to blog about local politics, should you really have to pay some huge gatekeeper for every reader you get? Should anyone be telling you what you can read and see and hear on the Internet? Which applications you can run? Which devices you can use? The Down Payment is a clear, enforceable principle of non-discrimination at the FCC. AT&T agreed to this principle when it bought BellSouth—and AT&T doesn't seem any worse for wear. But that commitment expires at the end of the year. It's time that we had a net neutrality principle that applies to *all* gatekeepers, *all* the time. *Real* network neutrality.

That's a heavy lift against powerful interests, it's true. But that never deterred us before. It didn't deter us when Michael Powell tried to decimate our media ownership rules a few years ago. Together we put the kibosh on that. It was your energy that kept hope alive when insiders told us we were wasting our time trying to make net neutrality an issue. It is your tireless work that has dragged these crucial debates from behind closed industry doors into the sunshine of national debate. And it is your support—your dedication to our democracy—that gets me out of bed each day and inspires me to fight for the public interest.

On a night like tonight—with all the energy in this room—almost anything seems possible, doesn't it? To tell you the truth, I feel like that a lot these days. I *know* we can get this done. We can climb into the bright uplands of real democracy. Because as we change media, we change *everything*. We empower 300 million Americans to deal with all those issues that Big Media has dumbed-down or just plain ignored at terrible cost to our democracy. There is no real democracy without media democracy.

So tonight, moving forward in hope, let us move forward in mutual pledge to get that Down Payment and then push on for the final installment. Commissioner Adelstein and I will be doing everything we can. Byron Dorgan and Mike Doyle will be doing everything they can. But what really makes it happen is you. All of you here tonight. Your friends. Your neighbors. That third-grade classmate you run into at the supermarket. The candidates you meet—and you should be going out of your way to meet candidates in these critical months. Ask all these people to support the Down Payment on Media Democracy.

“Tell it,” as Bill Moyers challenged us so eloquently, so movingly, this morning. Tell it everywhere you go. *That's* the road for us to travel. *That's* the road to victory. And when we get it—and get it we will—we will trace our victory right back here to Minneapolis on this glorious night!

So let me ask you: Can we do this?

Yes, we can!