

**REMARKS OF ACTING FCC CHAIRMAN MICHAEL J. COPPS**  
**FREE PRESS SUMMIT: CHANGING MEDIA**  
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Every year there's one speaking engagement I look forward to more than any other. Every year it's the same one. It's getting together with my friends at Free Press to talk about media reform. The last time we did this was last June at the Media Reform Conference in Minneapolis. I talked then about how "winds of change" were blowing across America and were about to usher in a period of much-needed reform. Well, now I can finally admit it—I wasn't 100% sure. As anyone who has lived through the past few elections knows, it ain't over till it's over—and sometimes not even then.

But the good news, the happy news, the historic news is that change has come to America. Change has come to Washington, DC. Reform breezes are blowing through the corridors of power all over this city. And if things go well, we may be launched on an era of reform to match what the Progressives and New Dealers of the last century gave us. What a shining, beckoning opportunity we have.

But it's no sure thing that it will end so well. Reform is never on auto-pilot, and in spite of all the marvels of twenty-first century technology, there is no GPS system that can deliver us to a new, progressive promised land. My friend, the late Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., believed that periods of reaction in America are succeeded—with a lot of blood, sweat, toil and tears—by waves of reform. But it's impossible to predict how long the window of reform will remain open. I don't think we'll be circling the wagons any time soon—but if we're not quick about it and smart about it and thorough about it, the winds of change could blow themselves out before our job is done. We must seize the opportunity when we have it. Us. Now.

Change is different this time because it's riding on a wave of technology transformation the likes of which we've never seen. Change isn't limited to just politics. Technology change is reshaping every aspect of our lives. How we live, work, play, care for ourselves, entertain ourselves, govern ourselves—all is in flux. The only questions are how quickly will change come in all these areas and how change in one will affect the others. What will the world look like when the dust settles?

In communications, will "old media" stalwarts like newspapers and broadcasting simply disappear—or will they adapt and survive? How about journalism? Will anyone figure out a business model to support in-depth, investigative journalism—or must we develop something completely new, perhaps based on philanthropy, non-profit models or public media? What about the core values of localism, diversity and competition that Free Press fights so valiantly for? Do they still hold sway in a world in which connecting with someone in Germany is as easy as connecting with someone in Germantown, or where you can find any opinion under the sun simply by typing "any opinion under the sun" on Google? (153 million hits, by the way—I tried it.)

Important questions, all. But if we focus too much on the questions it can leave us paralyzed. Just ask Prince Hamlet. We need to act thoughtfully, yes; but we need to *act*—and I mean act while the tide runs in our direction. Shakespeare again—I think he said something about taking the tide at its flood or else being bound in shallows and misery. When it comes to public policy, eight years of shallows and misery was enough for me. I don't even want to think about any more such years!

Good ideas are running on the present tide. Good people are stepping up to good causes. I don't want to start naming names because I'll inevitably leave someone out. But if you haven't already, do yourself a favor and watch Senator Kerry's hearing last week on the future of journalism to get a sense of some of the creative ideas out there. Or pick up a copy of Free Press' new book, *Changing Media: Public Interest Policies for the Digital Age*. I've already read, underlined and dog-eared it. You should, too. You don't have to agree with everything in there—probably no one will, nor would its authors expect 100% agreement—but I commend it, not just to the Free Press faithful, but to those who may be diametrically opposed to the recommendations the book makes. *Changing Media* is an important contribution to our national dialogue. It tees up issues we all need to be talking about, and it is particularly relevant now as the FCC sets out to develop a Congressionally-mandated broadband plan for America.

In the few minutes we have together this morning, I'd like to focus on another piece of the puzzle—what are the organizing principles that should serve as our touchstone as we sift through the myriad ideas out there and try to create a media that is truly of, by and for the American people? Here is my current short list.

Principle Number One: It's all about democracy. Paraphrase James Carville if you like: It's the democracy, stupid. A democracy runs on information. Information is how we make intelligent decisions about our future and how we hold the powerful accountable. Deprive citizens of relevant, accurate, and timely information and you deprive them of their ability to govern themselves. Indeed, if you look at the three core values of our media policy from time immemorial—localism, diversity and competition—they are really aimed at a single goal: to ensure that the American people have access to a wide range of information on issues of public concern.

We're in trouble on this score. Two decades of mindless deregulation—only briefly interrupted—topped off by a veritable tsunami of consolidation across not just communications, but most business sectors, have succeeded in bringing our economy low and endangering the essential civic dialogue on which democracy depends. I've said it before but I'll say it again: we are skating perilously close to depriving our fellow citizens of the depth and breadth of information they need to make intelligent choices about their future. Newsrooms decimated. Beat reporters laid off. Newspapers literally shrinking before our eyes. Infotainment. Sensationalism. Cable news mud-wrestling. Homogenized play lists. You all know the bill of particulars.

We're not only losing journalists, we may be losing journalism. Some blame the Internet and bloggers, and that's certainly a part of the story. But the problems started

way before that. All that consolidation and mindless deregulation, rather than reviving the news business, condemned us to *less* real news, *less* serious political coverage, *less* diversity of opinion, *less* minority and female ownership, *less* investigative journalism and *fewer* jobs for journalists.

Hyper-commercialism and high quality news make uneasy bedfellows. As my hero FDR said in a letter to Joseph Pulitzer, “I have always been firmly persuaded that our newspapers cannot be edited in the interests of the general public from the counting room.” Broadcast journalism is no different. Readers, viewers and listeners are citizens to be informed and entertained, not products to be sold to advertisers. This is not to say that good journalism is incompatible with making a profit. But when TV and radio stations are no longer required to serve their local communities, when stations or newspapers are loaded down with crushing debt or owned by huge corporations preoccupied with cutting costs through economies of scale, it should come as no surprise that some things precious get lost.

There are those who argue that’s all over now. Consolidation and conglomeration are yesterday’s news. I don’t buy it. As soon as the economy begins to turn the corner, I predict we’ll see another urge to merge—to buy, leverage, and find those elusive economies of scale. More news rooms closed. More journalists fired. More private equity—less public dialogue.

I don’t want to paint with too broad a brush. Many broadcasters and publishers still have the flame of the public interest burning brightly in their breasts—I know, I meet them all the time—but the unforgiving expectations of Wall Street and next quarter’s earnings reports have made life more and more difficult for them and pulled them in directions many of them don’t want to go.

Whatever we do should help those stations that are trying to do the right thing and nurture the democratic dialogue. And let me be clear. When I say “democratic dialogue” it is not code for “the Fairness Doctrine.” The Fairness Doctrine is long gone and it’s not coming back—as much as some conspiracy theorists see it lurking behind every corner. A couple of weeks ago, when we finally got the FCC back on track to do something about the shameful state of minority and female ownership of media properties, some had the gall to suggest it was just a ruse to bring the Fairness Doctrine back. Resurrecting the straw man of a by-gone Fairness Doctrine to deflect this country’s belated passage to equal opportunity is a kind of issue-mongering that has no place in twenty-first century America. We will *not* lose this opportunity to make real and lasting progress on media reform because some find it is in their self-interest to keep this phony issue alive.

That brings me to Principle Number Two: old media is not dead. Judging by some of the stories out there, you’d think that just about everyone sits down at night to watch their favorite shows on Hulu and that TV news and local newspapers have gone the way of the buggy-whip. The fact is that most consumers still get their news and information from their local newspapers and broadcast stations. The Internet, for all its many glories, doesn’t yet fully compete with them in such areas as investigative

journalism or in-depth local reporting, and may not anytime soon. Traditional media remain critically important and it's something we need to deal with.

I'm not saying that old media won't fade away but we're not there yet—and sometimes change takes longer to arrive than we think. We've been out helping consumers with the DTV transition—you'd be amazed at how many people are still happily watching TV on 30-year old sets and 20-year old VCRs.

If old media is going to be with us a while still, what implications does this have for us? It means we still need to get serious about defining broadcasters' public interest obligations and reinvigorating our license renewal process. Since we still need broadcasters to contribute to the democratic dialogue, we need clear standards that can be fairly but vigorously enforced. It is time to say "Good-bye" to post card renewal every eight years and "Hello" to license renewals every three years with some public interest teeth.

I understand that many thoughtful people are ready to give up on the public interest. They would rather just impose a spectrum fee on broadcasters and be done with it. I'm not ready to throw in the towel. The public interest standard is like a grand old theater that has been badly neglected over the years. The structure is sound, and with a little imagination and a lot of hard work we can make it a showplace once again.

Principle Number Three is to make sure that the sins visited upon old media are not permitted to deny the promise of new media. You know me as someone who has supported and pushed the cause of Internet Freedom, Internet Openness, Net Neutrality, whatever you want to call it, for a long, long time. While the tide runs we need to assure this, and, for openers, I will be working for a Fifth Principle of Non-discrimination to be one of the first fruits of our reconstituted FCC.

Looking farther ahead, as broadcast and other content migrate online, how do we promote the goals that we, as a society, really care about? How do we nourish a dynamic civic dialogue? How do we get information about real issues of public concern? How do we educate and protect our kids? Historically, government regulation has been based on some sort of licensing relationship or statutory directive. But how does *that* apply to the online world, where websites not only are not licensed, but they may not even be *in* the United States? And what if the new media fail to provide the things we care about—the things we need? How do we advance those interests in ways that are effective and respectful of constitutional and jurisdictional boundaries? How do we accomplish our goals as a free society while making sure we don't impinge the potential of these open and dynamic new technologies?

I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions, but I do know we need to begin a serious national discussion. That's why I welcomed *Changing Media's* call for a top-level Commission charged to tackle big issues like these. How sweet it would be to have that kind of dialogue rather than yet another mindless go-round in that tired old debate about "regulation" versus "deregulation" that so poisoned our ability to reason

together over the past too many years. Certainly we need more regulation than the country has had these past several years, but regulation isn't always the answer. We'll need ways to address market failures in different ways. For example, should we find a way adequately to fund PBS or some other group that is actually interested in doing the job? Maybe PBSS—a Public Broadcasting System on Steroids. That can't be done on the cheap, and we'll hear laments that there's not a lot of extra cash floating around these days. But other nations find ways to support such things. The point is we need to start talking, start planning, now.

Principle Number Four is: Remember what got us here. A lot of organizing. Grass-roots work everywhere. Town hall meetings, media reform conferences, teach-ins, marches. Don't anyone think: "We won, it's over, now let's just go harvest the fruit." Change has come to Washington, but Washington has not been conquered. The tools that got you this far are still the tools to turn promise into reality.

At the end of the day I remain an optimist. Lessons are being learned. Old dogmas are dying. Opportunity is all around us. Even, believe it or not, at the FCC! Finally, the FCC can actually become an agent of change. What a change that is! I believe the national broadband strategy that the Commission is tasked to develop by next February is the most important charge we have been given, certainly since the '96 Act, and perhaps the most important challenge we have *ever* been given. I can't say exactly where it will lead, but I'm optimistic it will be a strategy that unleashes the power of truly transformative technology to change the lives of each and every citizen across this land of ours—no matter who they are, where they live, or the particular circumstances of their individual lives. Every citizen has a right to expect that. It's our job to make it happen.

Building a communications environment that truly reflects and truly nourishes diversity and democracy is arguably our nation's greatest calling because, without that, all the other huge issues we confront—and goodness knows they are legion—don't receive the scrutiny they deserve. So let's get on with the agenda. This is about the *people's* business, about citizens working together to strengthen our democracy. Isn't that how we built this country of ours? It wasn't just that we declared our independence in one glorious document; it was that we made a declaration of inter-dependence, one upon the other, to win and sustain our freedom and to build a better place. Every generation faces the challenge. And today strengthening democracy means building media democracy. The media agenda is at the center of democracy's agenda. If we work at it—really work at it—you and I can realize the dream. Us. Now.

Thank you for listening, and thank you for everything you do for America.