

**Remarks of Mignon L. Clyburn
At the Workshop on Speech, Democracy and the Open Internet
December 15, 2009**

Good afternoon. I believe there is no better way to begin the Commission's workshops for our open Internet proceeding than with a focus on the Internet's role in enabling speech, journalism, culture, and democracy. The Internet has had an incredible impact on each of these elements, our role is to preserve and enhance those things that enable greater democratic participation and a better-informed citizenry.

One of the core reasons we've begun this proceeding is to ensure that the Internet remains an unbiased platform, where all speakers – including historically underrepresented voices – can reach all audiences on the same footing, and with extremely low barriers to entry. This is an incredible development.

As many of you know, for years I owned and operated a weekly newspaper in Charleston, South Carolina, where I learned first-hand the challenges that face individuals and small businesses trying to compete in traditional media. These challenges were particularly acute in light of the difficulty of competing against media outlets with established distribution networks. Today, thanks to an open Internet, a small community newspaper or a budding journalist essentially has the same distribution network as the Washington Post or the Memphis Commercial Appeal. Just think about what this opportunity affords all Americans. I guess I should say, all *connected* Americans – but that is a matter for another.

The Internet's openness is also particularly important for minority voices, which have traditionally encountered a whole host of barriers to reaching audiences through traditional media. How long have we wrangled with the problem of minority media ownership? This struggle is in large part due the difficulty for would-be minority media owners to have meaningful access to their target audiences. And while that struggle is important and ongoing – and is likely to continue for some time – when it comes to the Internet, the opportunity is here and now. That is, as long as the Internet remains an open platform.

The open Internet is fundamentally different than how broadcast TV or radio and cable television have developed historically. There are no gatekeepers on the open Internet that determine who gets to speak and what they can speak about. If anything, it is a unique opportunity for the First Amendment to truly flourish.

We have here with us today an impressive and diverse group of panelists – who have come together today from across the country, including West Virginia, California, Tennessee and South Carolina – to share their personal experiences with the open Internet. I am looking forward to our panelists' presentations on how the Internet's openness has affected their ability to do the important work they do, whether in journalism, political organizing, or cultural creation.

Our open Internet proceeding has just begun, and we will be discussing these issues for some time, but today's workshop will be an essential part of the foundation for our future work. Thank you to the staff for their terrific work, and to the panelists and those of you joining us here and on-line for taking time out to participate today.

###