

Statement of
COMMISSIONER ROBERT M. MCDOWELL

Re: The Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities in a Digital Age,
GN Docket No. 10-25

Thank you, Steve, for your presentation. I will be monitoring this docket with great interest. Many of the questions teed up in this proceeding are directly relevant to our statutory authority – most notably, our obligation to review the continuing need for our media ownership obligations every four years. I support all Commission efforts to probe for pertinent data that can help us understand the current competitive landscape in which the regulated media struggle to survive and adapt. And because I am sensitive to many media companies’ financial challenges today, I also am pleased that the Public Notice that launched this examination makes clear that the Commission will consider filings already submitted in related dockets without commenters having to take further steps. The last thing we need to impose on the people and companies affected by our actions is yet another government filing burden.

And that leads to threshold questions that I hope will be at the center of this discussion: Should government have any role at all in any effort to preserve or change journalism? Furthermore, what are the constitutional, legal and policy implications of such efforts? How would the freedom of the American people be affected by any government action beyond the solicitation of comment?

Taking a step or two further down this analytical road, I fundamentally disagree with certain opinions that some may bring to this ongoing conversation. As the son of two journalists, I certainly recognize that the business models which supported professional journalists throughout the 20th Century are in the midst of great upheaval. But as a student of history, I don’t equate today’s transition period, as uncertain as it may be, with the imminent death of American journalism or a lessening of the media’s ability to support the functioning of our democracy.

To take that view, one would have to ignore the fact that our democracy emerged and thrived during two centuries when “the press” experienced not just one evolutionary cycle, but several. For example, historians report that in the decades leading up to the American Revolution, colonial newspapers were generally one-person enterprises run by printers who filled their pages with advertisements and stories taken from . . . *other* newspapers. Once revolutionary fervor was in the air, however, publishers adopted a new, partisan tone which helped spur a growth in readership and fostered the development of more competing papers. The partisan tone of the press sharpened considerably in the early days of the Republic – the very time when our Constitution’s Framers fashioned the First Amendment. In fact, it wasn’t until the early 20th Century that the concept of objective journalism arose, driven in part by the commercial interests of the new “mass” media then emerging. It was this era, of course, that gave birth to the Communications Act of 1934 and that has shaped the mindset, to one degree or another,

of Commission regulators over the last 76 years.

But now that the latest technologies are fracturing mass audiences into ever-narrower slivers, I wonder what American journalism's distant past may portend for its future. Will we see a resurgence of more openly partisan news models? If we do, might that trend actually bolster competition and diversity, as several historians say it did at the time of the Founders? And what does the availability of a greater number of narrowly targeted electronic news and information outlets – whether the targeting is based on geography, demography, ideology or any other organizing principle – mean for the regulatory structure of the one sector of the electronic media that is still premised on the notion that each regulated outlet must serve all the needs of everyone?

I won't hazard any the answers to these questions today, but I remain confident that certain fundamental American principles must and will prevail. At the top of that list is the need to preserve the media's constitutional freedom from government entanglement.

I look forward to reviewing the information and opinion the Commission receives in this and related dockets.