

**FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
REMARKS TO THE FUTURE OF MEDIA WORKSHOP
PUBLIC INTEREST IN THE DIGITAL ERA
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Thank you all for being here and welcome to potentially the most important dialogue taking place at the FCC this week, this month, maybe this year. Because what you're here to talk about today goes to the heart of one of the most pressing challenges confronting our nation today. And it goes to the heart of what this agency should be all about. I'm talking about helping to ensure that our citizens have a media that truly serves the public interest.

Since I walked through the doors of this building nearly nine years ago, I have been working to revitalize the public interest, especially in our broadcast media—as required by our enabling statute. Frankly, when I got here, I couldn't understand why this should be such a steep climb. How can it be too much to ask? Wasn't this the deal in the first place: broadcasters would get to use the people's spectrum for free in exchange for serving the people in their diverse and local communities?

But then I found out that for most of the past 30 years, we had really dropped the ball. And I use “we” to include both the private and public sectors. I'll spare you the details because I think you'll hear them from the real experts today, but those three decades of horrendous decisions set in motion a media free-fall that has inflicted serious consequences on the body politic. The private sector harm here was a tsunami of media consolidation fueled by the same hyper-speculation that was fueling so many bubbles in so many other industries. Stations were gobbled up *en masse* and totally unrealistic expectations were visited upon both them and even upon the ones who managed to stay unconsolidated. A lot of broadcasters, I think, weren't thrilled and many wanted to keep their emphasis on serving their local communities, but it became harder and harder—almost impossible—for them to do so. “Play the game or get voted off the island” became the mantra of this dangerous game of Media Survival.

At about the same time these sins of commission were issuing from the private sector, sins of both commission and omission emanated from the FCC. We fell under the spell of an ideological deregulatory mind-set that fueled the evisceration or outright elimination of just about every public interest obligation or public interest guideline we had. Much of media began to resemble the vast wasteland that Newton Minow had predicted as early as 1961. Some say there are more outlets now than ever, but in terms of the real localism and diversity that more outlets should have produced, we ended up with a “wasted wastland” as someone once called it.

Now I’m not here to argue that the FCC ever did a stellar job of enforcing its licensing contracts with the stations. There never has been a Golden Age of the Public Interest—but there were years when we had meaningful public interest guidelines and when we at least went through the motions of public interest reviews. And broadcasters knew then—and I’ve had many of the industry’s greats tell me this—that the Ed Murrow era of journalism wasn’t fueled by just a more public-spirited attitude on the part of the broadcast industry, but equally or more so by the knowledge that this was the deal; this was the expectation; it’s what was needed to be produced in return for the license to operate. Yes, stations were supposed to make a profit—but back then the newsroom was not seen as the primary driver of a station’s profit. Nor should it be seen that way now.

So it’s no great wonder that things went sour. The market kept saying “more profit, more profit.” So if you’re making 15% this year, you have to do 20% next year. If you make 20% next year, you’ll need 25% or 35% the following year—or you’re bought off your island and put onto Big Media’s consolidated mainland.” The result? Newsrooms decimated (those more than 30% ABC News jobs cut last week being only the most recent example), beat reporters fired, bureaus closed. Did you know that over half our states don’t have a single reporter accredited to Capitol Hill? How’s that for holding the powerful accountable? Watchdog journalism is an endangered species, and more often than not, infotainment subs for the news people really need.

Some companies did this with relish, others with reluctance—but the result is the same—less news and information, a seriously dumbed-down democratic dialogue, diminished civic engagement, and the absence of meaningful public interest oversight.

There's some good news, though. And the good news is we have a chance now—better than in many, many years—to bring the public interest back. Change is in the air. And my belief is that, if we all do our work, the days of dismantling public interest protections and walking away from our statutory mandates; of treating TV as just a toaster with pictures and nothing more; of writing blank checks for every sort of hyper-speculative deal that some budding financial genius could devise; the days of wondering if such a thing as the public interest actually existed and waiting skeptically in the night for an angel of the public interest to appear to prove it—I believe those days are passing away. This Commission, with another helping hand from the American people, can—and I believe it will—bring the public interest back to life. Change won't be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

The question now is not *whether* there is a public interest, but how to make it survive and thrive. And that's why we're here today—to solicit and elicit your thoughts on how public interest oversight applies to the world we're in and to the world we're heading toward. How should it apply to the world of new digital media, but also how do we reinstill some of what has been lost in traditional media? This latter part is as important as the former because it is newspapers and broadcast media that still originate the overwhelming amount of the news we get—on the order of three-quarters or more—and that number is going to go down only slowly, so traditional media will be playing the major news role for some years to come. Five more years of watching it slide as it has been sliding is not something American democracy can afford. Address this problem with the urgency it deserves, please.

As for the new media to which much of our media will one day migrate, how do we ensure that it serves the public interest and that it nourishes the civic dialogue and citizen engagement that democracy depends upon—on a technology platform that has not

thus far been much subject to public interest consideration? Not an easy question—but that’s why we’ve got the experts here today. And there are lots of other questions. There’s budding and insightful scholarship on this, one example being Matthew Hindman’s new book, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. How do people really get *heard* on the Internet? It’s easy to type something and send it into the ether, but what guarantees that anyone reads it—what guarantees that it doesn’t just evaporate into the ether? Anyone who has access can log on and say what they want, but do minorities, women, the disabled, the poor, the non-affluent and the non-elite—do they really have an equal chance of being heard? And how much does the hidden architecture of network design tilt the field in favor of the kind of big company control and consolidation in the new media that we saw visited so harmfully on traditional media? The future town square will likely be paved with broadband bricks, and we need to make sure that every community, group and individual in this country has access to that town square. But it’s no slam-dunk it will happen that way. It will happen that way only if we *make* it happen that way.

Technology is public interest neutral. It can accomplish good things and bad—what decides the outcome is you and me.

Here’s a final piece of good news. Chairman Genachowski has teed up for the Commission a Public Notice that asks many of these questions. That Notice is entitled “The Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities in a Digital Age.” And he has brought on-board my new friend Steve Waldman to spearhead this work and to work with all of us in finding answers and identifying solutions. I hope each of you will work closely with Steve and respond as fully and creatively for the record as you can.

I don’t pretend there are a lot of easy answers to these tough questions. But, at their core, they’re not new and unprecedented either. The challenge to guarantee the flow of news and information all across the land long predates broadband. It’s actually a very old challenge. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison put it front-and-center as first things for their young country to ensure. And they figured out ways to

get the job done, to make sure that the information infrastructure of their day, which was newspapers, was widely available *as a matter of public interest policy*—because they knew their fragile new democracy depended on it. Today our technology is new, but our democratic challenge is exactly the same.

Again, thank you for being here, for the work you're doing today, and for the work I hope we will accomplish together in the weeks and months immediately ahead—with stress on the words “immediately ahead.” Good luck!