

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: *A National Broadband Plan for Our Future*, GN Docket No. 09-51.

At long last! Since walking through the door of this building as a newly-minted Commissioner in 2001, I have called for, hoped for and dreamed about this—a national plan to ensure that every American has high-speed, opportunity-creating, affordable broadband. For too many years, government was asleep at the switch and the results showed as your country and mine dropped way down the rankings in terms of broadband penetration among OECD economies. It took a long time for good news to come—but come it has. In the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Congress and the President called on the FCC to develop a National Broadband Plan. Now it's been done. Put together under the visionary leadership of Chairman Genachowski, and with the hard work of a truly impressive team of both old and new FCC faces—managed by Blair Levin with remarkable ability and notable grace under pressure—we finally have a clear objective and a considered strategy aimed at ensuring that everyone in this country has equal opportunity in this new Digital Age, no matter who they are, where they live, or the particular circumstances of their individual lives.

The process to develop this Plan has been more comprehensive, open, public and transparent than any that I have encountered at the Commission. The Broadband Team cast a wide net to make the process inclusive. It searched out a myriad of traditional and non-traditional stakeholders that deserved to be heard, with special emphasis on folks who don't have a corporate lobbyist or lawyer working for them in Washington. After all, shouldn't a broadband policy *for* the American people be a broadband policy *of* and *by* the American people?

The Plan is premised on the understanding that high-value broadband is the Great Enabler of our time. This technology infrastructure intersects with just about every great challenge confronting our nation today—jobs, business growth, education, energy, climate change and the environment, international competitiveness, health care, overcoming disabilities, opening doors of equal opportunity, news and information, our democratic dialogue, to name only the most obvious. There is no solution for *any* of these challenges that does not have a broadband component to it.

There are so many important matters that this Plan covers, including recommendations to reform the Universal Service Fund, to identify additional licensed and unlicensed spectrum for wireless broadband, to implement a nationwide interoperable public safety network. We can't possibly delve into the merits of each of them here and do them any semblance of justice, but I do want to highlight a few.

Foremost among them is digital inclusion. Every one of our citizens must have access to this enabling technology in order to participate fully in 21st century life. This is not something that would be nice for us to do; it is *everyone's* right. And I think of it as a civil right to have this kind of access, because access denied is opportunity denied. America can no longer tolerate having digital divides between races and ethnic groups, between haves and have-nots, between those living in big cities and those living in rural areas or tribal lands, between the able-bodied and persons with disabilities. There is a huge and potentially debilitating irony here: this liberating and dynamic technology that can make so many things better could end, if we don't do the job thoroughly and do it right, by creating even wider divides in this country going forward than we have had in the past. Digital technology should close divides, not widen them. That's what puts such urgency into moving forward immediately and comprehensively to implement this Plan.

So broadband must leave no American behind—African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, disabled Americans, poor Americans, rural Americans, inner city Americans. It must also

include the original Americans—Native Americans. I have seen first-hand the unacceptable state of communications in much of Indian Country. In so many places where Native Americans live, poverty endures, unemployment is at levels no society should tolerate, education languishes, and basic public safety falls far short of what people have a right to expect. Up-to-date, state-of-the-art communications facilities and services are still strangers to most of Indian Country. Even the plain old telephone service that so many of us take for granted is at shockingly low levels of penetration there—below 70 per cent of Native American households. And we don't even begin to have reliable data on the status of Internet subscribership on tribal lands, because no one has even bothered to collect it. That's why I encouraged the Broadband Team to develop a Plan that works for Indian Country. I am very pleased that the Broadband Team heard me—and, more importantly, heard the people living on tribal lands. Implementation of the Plan's recommendations—a Federal-Tribal Broadband Initiative, an FCC-Tribal Task Force, an FCC Office of Tribal Affairs, data-gathering on tribal lands, Universal Service Fund reforms, among others—will give Native American communities the visibility they deserve, day-in and day-out, at the FCC and will build upon the trust relationship that Bill Kennard did so much to promote while he was Chairman of the FCC.

Another important focus of the Plan is ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities. In my time at the Commission, I have had the wonderful and totally inspiring experience of working with numerous disabilities communities, beginning with my very first speech as a Commissioner, which was to a deaf and hard-of-hearing audience. I've come to see and appreciate the talents these folks have and to begin understanding the challenges they must constantly overcome—every day, all day. These are individuals with so much talent, so many skills, such dedication and genuine desire, and all they ask is an equal shot at being productive members of society. We just cannot countenance their exclusion. At a broadband hearing that I chaired at Gallaudet University to solicit their input into the Plan, we saw how new technology can change lives and create opportunities for people who want to be, who need to be, fully participating, mainstream citizens. We've made some progress in recent years, no question about that, but there is so much more to do. Implementation of the recommendations in the Plan—a Broadband Accessibility Working Group and an Accessibility and Innovation Forum, among others—will help ensure that communications services, equipment and content are accessible to persons with disabilities. And, just last week, the Commission demonstrated its renewed commitment to address the very important issue of accessibility for all by naming Karen Peltz Strauss, a longtime advocate for and champion of disabilities rights issues, to lead the Commission's implementation of the accessibility components of the Plan. I am very grateful to Karen for agreeing to take on this important job.

Inclusion of all Americans is all the more important given the critical role broadband will play in informing our civic dialogue and stimulating citizen engagement in our democracy. We are late in understanding the broad civic implications of broadband as we begin to migrate so much of our national conversation to the Internet. America's future town square will be paved with broadband bricks—and it must be accessible to all and reflect the diverse voices of our diverse country. Sustaining democracy by effectively informing all of our communities in the Digital Age goes—in my humble opinion—to the core of what we are trying to, and what we must, achieve as we implement the Plan. With high-speed Internet, those who are connected have the world at their fingertips. For the unconnected, that world is beyond reach. Already we see a blossoming participatory and experimental culture on the Net. We see evolving new platforms that astound us, from smart phones to tablets to the advent of at-home 3-D viewing and we can communicate with someone on the other side of the world as easily as with our next-door neighbor.

But an increase of technology does not by itself guarantee a more informed citizenry. A 2009 study indicates that, as a country, we now consume in excess of 1.3 trillion hours of media per year. Yet the production and distribution of essential news and information content has never been more in doubt. The same hyper-speculation and consolidation that wreaked such havoc on so much of our

economy began early with media, and the destruction was compounded by the almost complete dismantlement of public interest oversight of our broadcast stations, decimating news, newsrooms and news media. A new Pew Research Center report shows a 50 per cent decline in network news reporting and editing capacity since the 1980s and a 30 per cent drop for newspapers since 2000. The pink slips that have replaced pay stubs for so many thousands of beat journalists and the evaporating state of watchdog journalism have left us, to be frank, on a starvation diet when it comes to nourishing our democratic dialogue. A serving of America's daily news and information is about 500 calories short of a healthy meal. Opinion should feed on facts, not on more opinion—and right now, neither our traditional nor our new media is supplying the nourishment we need to maintain the health of the body politic. If we don't tread carefully we will have a society with plenty of fat-filled chatter but not enough of the protein of facts, terabytes of opinion but an empty cup of investigatory journalism to tell us what's really going on, information aplenty about celebrities and weather but a famine of real local, national and international news. And this is not just about the future—it's about the present, too.

So it's a two-pronged challenge that we face. First, ensuring that the Internet of the future can support the information infrastructure which democracy requires; and, second—for the years immediately ahead—stemming the decline of traditional media journalism that still supplies the overwhelming bulk of our news and information. What we need urgently to avoid is seeing the same harms that have been visited upon our present-day media inflicted on the new media of the Digital Age. So I'm pleased that the National Broadband Plan recognizes the need to come to terms with the news and information implications of the digital transition, and I am also pleased that the Commission has launched a separate, but really inherently related, examination focusing on "The Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities in a Digital Age." A Commission without steady focus on this would ignore one of the core implications of broadband infrastructure. This is an area where public policy needs to be proactive. Technology in and of itself is neutral. It can do great good—or it can cause real harm. What determines the outcome is what we make of it.

In closing, there is so much teed up by this Plan. The public safety chapter is based on a level of data and analysis far better than anything the Commission previously had available. The emphasis on ICT research and development is long overdue—something, by the way, that the statute instructs us to consider but which has gone largely ignored for the past several years, much to the nation's competitive detriment. And the commitment that I see throughout this document to digital literacy, for the young and for all of us, strikes another chord that I have been sounding over several years. If broadband is to become the platform and the venue for most of our communications, how can we not supply the training and the education that people need to use it and to control it?

Each of us would have, I suppose, some variations on the Plan that has been prepared. And, of course, implementation of the Plan will entail many difficult decisions. In matters involving spectrum, for example, I am always conscious of the fact that the airwaves belong to the American people and the stewards of this precious resource should at all times be serving the public interest. Our allocation of the people's spectrum finds its touchstone right here. In matters involving competition in our communications ecosystem, we will have to be vigilant to ensure that our strategies actually work. Lack of competition could conceivably require us to take actions going beyond what is generally discussed here. I daresay that I don't need to remind many people here that competition is not, to my mind, the defining hallmark of America's current telecommunications sector. But it is at the core of our enabling statute. In competition, and elsewhere, should we find that we lack the tools we need to conduct effective public interest oversight of the evolving broadband network, we may have to invoke other available authorities already invested in the Commission—or, should we lack some authority that we need, we may have to request it. We are dealing with a broadband information ecosystem where many parts come together to form a complex, synergistic and interdependent whole. If we lack the oversight tools to treat it systemically, we do the ecosystem injustice and we invite serious harms. So, yes, robust

discussions and difficult decision-making await us. Of course, time is not the friend of a nation that has so much broadband work that has gone unattended, but I am encouraged by the Chairman's determination to move quickly to put this Plan to work for the American people.

The Plan is not static—it will require adjustment and flexibility as we proceed. But this is one of its strengths rather than a weakness. Taken as a whole, it points the compass and sets us on the right path so that Americans living in the four corners of this great country, and everywhere in between, can reap the benefits of broadband.

Lots of new and novel questions came to the fore in this proceeding. There are fewer answers than there are questions, and fewer still easy answers. But, at its core, the basic challenge we confront is neither new nor novel. It is to build this century's infrastructure in order to create opportunity for each of us. Previous generations of Americans have faced the same challenge. To the great benefit of our nation, they usually found ways to get the job done, and they did it by deploying their combined strengths and their resources to build the infrastructure their particular times demanded, whether it was turnpikes, roads, canals, bridges, railroads, highways, electric power, even basic telecommunications. This generation's challenge is to build the infrastructure of the Digital Age. In presenting this Plan today, Chairman Genachowski walks an all-American path totally in keeping with how the generations who came before us built this country. At last, we begin to walk the broadband walk.