

REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR MEDIA REFORM
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Thank you Elon for that introduction. Thank you Free Press for making this glorious weekend happen. And thanks to Bob McChesney, John Nichols and Josh Silver for making Free Press happen in the first place and to Craig Aaron for picking up the mantle of leadership. Thank you most of all to everyone here for coming to Boston this weekend and for showing America that citizen action is alive and well and determined to finish the job of media reform.

I'm here because I'm more worried than ever about the state of America's media and what it's doing to our country. We see investigative journalism on the endangered species list, hundreds of newsrooms shuttered, reporters fired by the thousands, walking the street looking for a job instead of a story. And it didn't start with the Internet because the process of media being high-jacked by the profit-at-all cost gang has been going on for decades. For the consolidated owners of radio and TV, the license to broadcast became a license to despoil. Visions of sugarplums danced in their heads—spectrum that belonged, they decided, to them rather than to the people. I don't indict all broadcasters in saying this because some managed to hold the speculators at bay—but it's harder than ever for the best in media and journalism to succeed in a world dominated by those who are in it for the quick buck and who are often not even traditional broadcasters—they're stations run by hedge funds, banking trusts and private equity firms. Yep, the folks who brought media and journalism down are the same folks who darned near brought the country down, too. Having hedge funds deliver the news is like delivering lettuce by way of a rabbit, as my old boss Senator Fritz Hollings would say. Left to their own devices, these absentee landlords would put local and independent programming on a starvation diet and feed us instead monotonous homogenized music and mindless infotainment masquerading as "news."

The big money crowd keeps telling us media consolidation has run its course. Hmm—I wonder if Comcast and AT&T just didn't get the memo? Don't believe it for a second—the binge continues. And it's even more dangerous because they're now after *new media*, too—broadband and the Internet—which we all hoped would be the bulwark against more consolidation in radio, television and cable. So now it's visions of gated Internet communities that dance in their heads. And to keep reformers at bay, they've come up with the rallying cry of "Don't regulate the Internet." What they really mean, of course, is "Don't let anyone but us control the Internet." So regardless of whether it's a traditional or new media context, the real question remains the same: will we allow a few huge companies to control consumers' access to information? Well, without vastly increased public outcry, the answer is clearly "yes, we will."

Let me ask: Is there *anyone* here who wants a consolidated, cable-ized Internet controlled by a few corporate gatekeepers?

Is there *anyone* here who believes new media should suffer the same sad fate that decimated big radio, television and cable?

Is there *anyone* here who believes our civic dialogue—that precious and essential conversation we have with ourselves to keep democracy alive—can survive any more of this reckless folly?

Secretary Clinton tells us that we are losing the information war—globally, yes, but right here at home, too. She's so right. Informed electorates depend upon facts, not talking heads hurling opinions at one another. I don't say this in a partisan way, because *it's the absence of facts, not the presence of opinions—right or left—that hurts us*. I love opinions; I have a lot of them myself. But as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once remarked, while we are each entitled to our own set of opinions, we are not each entitled to our own set of facts. *That's* where the problem is—facts that never get dug up, stories that just don't get told. I'm not advocating taking anyone *off* the air—I want to make room for facts *on* the air. What we're dealing with here is a bad case of Big Media substance abuse—and they just can't break the habit. These folks have no intention, even as the economy improves, of reopening shuttered newsrooms or rehiring laid-off reporters. They might even fire more, just to prove to Wall Street that they understand the bottom line still rules.

There's another reason broadcast journalism, from which so much of our news comes—even the news we all read on the Internet—is on the ropes. It's an FCC that for more than 20 of the last 30 years aided and abetted the gutting of journalism, blessing and encouraging consolidation and eliminating the public interest guidelines we once had. During my first eight years at the FCC, you and I had to fight every step of the way against proposed rules to benefit the special interests. We fought some great holding actions and we warded off some unbelievably crazy ideas. But the tide still ran in Big Media's favor—mergers and acquisitions flourished while the public interest went on life support. You and I knew all along that the realization of our dreams waited on a new era of reform in Washington.

Then the new era came and we all just knew that media reform was right around the corner. Twenty-seven months later we are still waiting. Waiting for media reform. Waiting for even a down-payment on media reform—like an honest-to-goodness broadcast license renewal process to replace the utterly ludicrous, no-questions-asked regime now in place. Or some public interest guidelines to encourage broadcast news and diversity and localism. And you know where I come from—if a station isn't doing its job, put it on probation. If it still refuses, give its license to someone who will get the job done. These are things we can do right now using our *current* statutory authority. Just give us *some* sign that the FCC is putting the brakes on a system that is spinning dangerously out-of-control. This present Commission—of which I am a member—owns these issues now. It can't hide. It needs to put them front-and-center where they belong. Yes, we have made important progress on broadband and wireless and consumer issues and many others, and I applaud that. But the clock has run too long on the media-essential steps you and I have been talking about this weekend and for so many years.

What we have been promised is a Commission report assessing the media landscape. I have been assessing the media landscape for years—you've been assessing the media landscape for years—and the American people have been assessing the media landscape for years. Now is the time for action. And if this report doesn't come filled with strong, hard-hitting, public interest recommendations, it won't be worth the paper it's written on. You and I must demand action now.

The “future of media” is no Inside-the-Beltway issue. You folks proved that back in 2003 when you organized the grass-roots and three million citizens wrote in and told a previous Chairman that his proposed loosening of the media ownership rules didn't fly. Citizen action can still work, even in this age when so few people wield so much outrageous power. It is time to vindicate citizen action again—and these are exactly the issues on which to do it.

Winning the battle for America's media future is the single most important thing you and I can do to preserve this democracy of ours. Many other issues crowd in for our attention, but those other issues depend so heavily on how media treats them that their reform depends upon media's reform. And media's reform depends on you. In the end, it comes back to each of us in this room—and our allies and colleagues and families and friends and everyone you can talk to, write to, teach to, tweet to, sing to, even march with. Get the people involved again—they're ready to listen.

As for me, I pledge this: after my time at the Commission runs out later this year, I am staying on these issues; I am sticking with them; and I'm sticking with you to bring them home. These ten years it's your voices more than anyone's that ring true to my ear; your vision and passion that give direction to my work; your belief in media of, by and for the American people that makes me know—this must be done; this can be done; this will be done.

Thank you.