

**REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
WALTER CRONKITE AWARDS LUNCHEON
USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION
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I feel tremendously honored to participate, for a second time, in this prestigious and always encouraging event. As we confer The Walter Cronkite Award on the best of America's broadcast journalists, it's a wonderful privilege for me to be here with folks who have shown—very often swimming upstream—what their medium is capable of doing to serve and inform the nation. We will hear more about their individual accomplishments shortly, but their success in producing these impressive public interest results is cause for hope. So we are here to celebrate today, and celebrate we will.

But our celebration is tempered by the realization that all is not well in the land of journalism. The praise-worthy reporting that we honor today becomes harder to find because there is less of it. Across our country's media landscape, accountability journalism is—let's be blunt—struggling to survive. Your work is vital to the health of our democratic discourse, but as that discourse is fed a leaner news diet, democracy goes wanting, too. Finding ways to nourish journalism is not just good for the profession—it's essential for the health of America's continuing experiment with self-government.

Last time when I was here, in 2007, Walter Cronkite was passionately leading the way in pursuit of a more robust media environment for broadcast journalism. He saw the problem brewing long before many of us understood the severity of the journalism crisis. That word "crisis" may be the most over-used sobriquet in the world. But it fits, so I'll use it. That very year, Walter had agreed, without requiring very much urging, to deliver a keynote at a Columbia University School of Journalism forum, and he spoke forcefully and movingly about what was happening to journalism.

He spoke of his early days as a reporter, saying "My generation of journalists knew we would have to work hard, we knew that our job was to expose truths that powerful politicians and special interests often did not want exposed. But we also believed that we would have the resources to do our difficult jobs and, for the most part, we were right.... Today, I do not believe most journalists have the luxury of that expectation. Instead they are saddled with inflated profit expectations from Wall Street. They face round after round of job cuts and belt-tightening that require them to do ever more with ever less. And let's be honest—in an Information Age like this one, the need for high-quality reporting is perhaps greater than it's ever been. It's not just journalists jobs at stake here—it's American democracy, it's freedom's future."

Walter felt very strongly about giving that speech. Here's how strongly: he had just returned from overseas with a serious eye problem; he was having real difficulty seeing; and he was scheduled to go into the hospital for surgery the very day of the speech. But he insisted on delaying his arrival at the hospital for surgery so he could make his remarks at the forum. That's the way it was.

In the four years since Walter's troubling but prescient remarks, we not only lost a true champion but we have not yet turned the tide. In fact, the plight of journalism seems only to get worse. The situation has morphed from one about journalists not having the resources to do their jobs to one about them not having jobs at all. How much better America would be served if reporters were walking the beat in search of a story instead of walking the street in search of a job.

Many of you have heard me before on the price broadcast journalism paid for the blistering pace of media consolidation experienced over the past two decades—an era of rampant private sector speculation made even worse by the abdication of public interest responsibilities by successive Federal Communications Commissions. Those Commissions not only blessed just about every media merger transaction that came their way, but they wiped the slate virtually clean of the public interest guidelines and responsibilities of licensees that had been built up by generations of reformers, far-seeing journalists, schools like Annenberg that taught the trade, advocacy organizations and protectors of the public interest. By the way, this is not such distant history. Big media likes to tell us the age of mergers and consolidation is over—but I guess Comcast, NBCU and AT&T never got the memo. And most of what I read from the analysts now is that the stars are aligning for more deals, more consolidation, more stations owned by hedge funds, banking trusts and private equity firms for whom the public interest may be a wholly alien concept.

I mention this history not to dwell on how we got here, but to find some signposts for where we may be heading. The overwhelming majority of news we citizens get still originates in newspaper and broadcast newsrooms—including the news we read online. It's just that there is so much less of it because so many resources have disappeared. How many stories go untold because there is no reporter on the beat? How many facts are never dug up? How many wrongdoers are not held accountable because investigative journalism is on the endangered species list in so many places? How *do* we hold the powerful accountable when 27 states don't have an accredited reporter on Capitol Hill? And don't expect the return of good times—and good times *are* returning for broadcasting—to result in rehiring all those laid-off reporters or the mass reopening of newsrooms that have been shuttered. Nor do I see the Internet, in spite of some very compelling and innovative experiments—some of them looking like they will survive—developing any time soon the model, the mass or the momentum to fill the void that has eviscerated traditional media. And, truth be told, we don't have the time to wait for something that may never occur. Even worse, there are a multitude of discouraging signs that new media is heading down the road that traditional media trod as regards both private sector consolidation and public sector policy shortfalls. Allowing that to happen would short-circuit perhaps the most dynamic and opportunity-creating communications technology in all of human history.

Secretary Hillary Clinton tells us we are losing the information war—around the world, yes, but right here at home, too. She is so right. Informed electorates depend upon journalism for facts, not on talking heads hurling opinions at one another. Now I

don't have anything against opinion. I love opinions. In fact, I have a lot of my own—you may have noticed. Nor am I being partisan about this, because *it is the absence of facts, not the presence of opinions—right or left—that diminishes our national conversation*. Senator Pat Moynihan reminded us long ago that while we are each entitled to our own set of opinions, we are not each entitled to our own set of facts. And that's where the problem is with so much of the so-called “news”—too often it's opinion-fueled bloviation masquerading as news. Rather than supplementing news, opinion-mongering is supplanting news. I am not here advocating to take anybody *off* the air—I'm just trying to make room for facts *on* the air.

A lot of folks—foundations, universities, advocates—are helping tee these issues up for a national dialogue, this institution certainly being a leading force in researching and then telling the story. I want the place where I work—the FCC—to start doing *its* part. I spent my first eight years at the Commission fighting just to hold on to what was left of the public interest in our media and telecommunications rules. Sometimes we managed to stave off a crazy idea or two, but the tide still ran strongly the other way—toward consolidation in traditional and new media, toward a gatekeeper's Internet rather than an open Internet, toward evermore evisceration of the public interest. And I think many of us knew that real change at the FCC awaited bigger change in Washington that would open a window for change. Then that new era finally came and a window opened, and many of us thought real media reform was just around the corner. Alas, it's been 27 months now—and we're still waiting. Still waiting for media reform—or even a down-payment on media reform. Waiting for a public-interest licensing system with some guidelines to encourage news, diversity and localism across all our markets. Waiting for something credible to replace the slam-dunk license renewal system we have now wherein a broadcaster sends us basically a post-card every eight years and gets a license back with virtually no questions asked. Waiting for the sun to shine on who is bank-rolling all those political ads we saw in the last election cycle—post *Citizens United*. Those ads totaled more than \$2 billion. If a beautiful ad sponsored ostensibly by “Citizens for Spacious Skies and Amber Waves of Grain” is actually under-written by a chemical company refusing to clean up a toxic dump, shouldn't viewers be able to know that? Wouldn't fuller disclosure give them information they are entitled as citizens to have? Both sides of the political spectrum have committed sins of commission and omission here, so this is not a partisan issue. Anonymous ads sidetrack our civic discourse. Let's put a face on them and let the people decide.

These are just a couple of examples of things we at the FCC can do right now, under our current authority—not something we have to request from Congress. We should do these things now. It is our opportunity. It is our responsibility.

The one item we have been promised is a long-delayed Commission report that will assess the media landscape and the information needs of communities. A lot of us here today have been assessing the media landscape and the information needs of communities for a lot of years, Annenberg in the vanguard. What I hope this report delivers are hard-hitting action recommendations that can be implemented before the end of this year. A report falling short of that will have failed the public interest.

Here's another discussion the country needs to have: the future of public broadcasting. It is utterly unfathomable to me that some in Washington are trying to gut the very limited funding we currently provide for this precious news, information and education resource. Other democracies leave us in the dust by investing meaningful resources in public broadcasting while the issue here is lining it out of the budget. We are fortunate to have Gwen Ifill here today and I want to commend the fine work that she and the entire team at PBS' *NewsHour* do week-in and week-out to provide us with the news that an informed civic dialogue requires. And who could question the great work that NPR's reporters do on a daily basis to inform us about goings-on in our own backyards and events around the world. I particularly salute NPR for its commitment to operating bureaus world-wide while others have packed up and gone home. These last weeks prove once again how important an international perspective is for making sense of the world we all inhabit.

Providing a vibrant future for our media is the single most important thing you and I can do to preserve this democracy of ours. I feel that strongly about it. A lot of other big issues crowd in for our attention and decision, but those issues don't have a chance of being satisfactorily resolved unless they are first covered and explained. This country of ours faces some seriously stark challenges in the years just ahead—running the gamut from how to create opportunities for individuals to sustaining America's global competitiveness and leadership. Things that my generation took for granted are no longer assured. But to overcome these challenges we must first understand them. It is my fervent hope that the stories and reporting we celebrate today challenge each of us to do more to secure the robust future for journalism that our nation requires.

Later this year, my second term at the FCC will run its course. But I want this group especially—because I see so many friends here—to know that I will remain committed to these issues and committed to working with you for howsoever long it takes to get us back on the right track. It's not something you or I or even the FCC can do all alone, but we can make a difference, we can get results, we can find ways to make sure democracy's citizens are informed and enabled to preserve democracy's future. Our friend Walter said it better: "America is the most prosperous and powerful nation in perhaps the history of the world. We can certainly afford to sustain a media system of which we can be proud."

Again, congratulations to our winners. We're proud of you and we thank you for showing that it can still be done. Keep up the good work. For the rest of us, let's do everything we can to provide a helping hand.

Thank you very much