

**REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS  
ON RECEIVING THE PUBLIC POLICY AWARD  
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TELECOMMUNICATIONS FOR THE DEAF, INCORPORATED  
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This is truly a special day for me. It brings back so many memories of our work together over the past decade. It's hard for me to believe that it was ten years ago that we were together in Sioux Falls, South Dakota at the 14<sup>th</sup> Biennial TDI Conference. I was a newly-minted Member of the FCC, and addressing that gathering was my first speech as a Commissioner. Since then, I have been privileged to work with so many of you in this room in trying to get your needs and your input before the FCC and to develop policies that could make a difference in your lives and all of our lives. Claude Stout and I became immediate good friends the moment we met and it was at a small dinner that he arranged in Sioux Falls the night before my speech that I first started to really understand both the depth of the challenges confronted by so many people in our deaf and hard-of-hearing communities, but also to realize the opportunity we had to apply the wonders of new technologies to help overcome those challenges. Working with folks like Claude and Roy Miller and Joe Duarte and Fred Weiner and Carol Sliney and so many more in this audience and throughout the community has been for me the most inspiring and rewarding part of my time at the Commission.

And what an honor it is to be receiving the Karen Peltz-Strauss Public Policy Award—from none other than Karen Peltz-Strauss herself! Karen is one of my heroes. I relied heavily on her in my early days as a Commissioner before she went out to work directly in the community, and I urged Chairman Genachowski to try to entice her back when he became Chairman—and he did. She and Joel Gurin and Greg Hlibok and their team are so great to work with. Here's how I work with Karen. Inevitably—each and every time—when an idea or proposal regarding your issues comes up, the first question I ask is: “What does Karen think of this?” If it's a “go” for Karen, it's just about always a “go” for me. She'll know the history, the substance, the practical impact, the cost and the right thing to do. Karen has worked for 25 years to make sure that the disabilities communities are not left behind as technology advances—ensuring that accessibility needs are met when it comes to communicating over the telephone, watching television and, today's challenge, accessing and using broadband. Our agency is such a better place than it would otherwise be thanks to her expertise and her commitment to you. So I thank her for that, for all the great advice and counsel she has shared with me, and for presenting me with this wonderful Award this morning. It is something I will always cherish.

I've been thinking in recent days about what a long way we've come in these ten years! Back then we were just at the dawn of the Twenty-first Century —talking about the potential of advanced communications services and technologies to change our lives for the better but still only on the cusp of actually experiencing their transformative power. Today most of us have seen that power first-hand, many of us have grown to

depend upon these amazing services and technologies, and we understand that access to broadband—both fixed and mobile—is vitally important to our lives. It's important to our lives as individuals because the door to opportunity is increasingly online. It's where jobs are found and secured, it's where companies recruit. It's important to our health as telehealth and telemedicine become important components of how we care for ourselves. It's important to how we educate ourselves and our kids for the competitive world in which we all live. Broadband is already playing a huge role in education but we haven't seen anything yet—the growth will be both phenomenal and transformative.

Broadband is also central to the future of our country. There is almost no challenge we face that does not have a broadband component as an integral part of its successful resolution. Job creation comes immediately to mind—both helping people find the jobs that are out there, but also creating new jobs through the deployment, adoption and utilization of this expansive information infrastructure. Few people would deny that our country faces competitive commercial challenges from other countries more severe than anything we have encountered since we were a colony a quarter of a millennium ago. Things don't look as assured for our future as once they did. Our economic future comes with no guarantees—only challenges to the preeminence we enjoyed for so long. But broadband can help. It can help us decrease, for example, our costly dependence on foreign fuels. It can also help us put the brakes on the degradation of our environment. And it can do so much more. So we need to grab onto these new tools of the Twenty-first Century and put them to work for ourselves and for our kids who are growing up in a very different world from the one into which you and I were born. The bottom line is this: participation in our economy, our society, and even our democracy increasingly requires high speed Internet access.

For broadband to work it has to be available to all and be utilized by all. Its premise is accessibility to everyone—no matter who they are, where they live, or the particular circumstances of their individual lives. Access to high-speed, high-value broadband is a defining right of this new age. Let's treat it as a civil right because that's how it should be seen. If we don't do that, the differences that already divide America will actually grow and the New Digital Age will instead become the Growing Digital Divide Age. What a tragedy that would be—to have within our grasp the most dynamic, liberating and opportunity-creating information technology in all of history—and let it be used to erect new barriers to inclusion rather than to break down the old. That's why we all need access to affordable broadband and an open Internet.

Earlier this year, we marked the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Telecommunications Act. Vice President Al Gore's words at the signing of that bill back in 1996 really captured the true goal of that landmark legislation. He said then, and it still resonates today, "I firmly believe that the proper role of government in the development of the information superhighway is to promote and achieve at every stage of growth, at every level of operation, at every scale, the public interest values of democracy, education, and economic and social well-being for all of our citizens. If we do not see to it that every project, every network, every system addresses the public interest at the beginning, then when will it be addressed?"

The people I see in this audience today have been leading the way to make that vision a reality, by ensuring that the 54 million Americans with disabilities can share in the benefits of the Digital Age. New technologies and new media certainly hold great promise—but optimism alone doesn't get the job done. Hard work gets it done. You are doing that work. Our job at the FCC is to help ensure that every American with a disability has access to functionally equivalent communications services—a mandate that, if it's going to work, must evolve as rapidly as the technological innovation we see going on all around us.

That is why I was so thrilled to be in the White House watching President Obama sign the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act into law last October. Thanks to your tireless advocacy and to true champions on Capitol Hill including my friends Congressman Ed Markey, Congressman Henry Waxman, Senator Jay Rockefeller and Senator Mark Pryor, this sweeping piece of communications and civil rights legislation is now the law of the land, and it's going to make a world of difference. The statute tasks the FCC with quick and far-reaching action to expand opportunity for persons with disabilities. And I am happy to report that the FCC is hard at work following up to implement the mandates of this historic legislation.

Allow me to share with you some of the areas where we've already started moving forward:

- Two months ago, we announced the creation of a two-year pilot program to get the Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program up-and-running. The Twenty-first Century Act allocated \$10 million annually from the TRS fund for this nationwide effort. The goal here is to make communications technologies and services accessible to low-income individuals who are deaf-blind.
- The FCC has issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to implement the express mandate of Congress to reinstate and modify the video description rules that were originally adopted by the Commission in 2000. Video description, which provides important—sometimes essential—information that is otherwise conveyed to the viewing audience only visually, makes video programming more accessible to the blind and visually impaired. Some broadcasters have provided this service of their own accord since the Commission's rules were overturned in court more than a decade ago, and I salute those that have done so for their leadership. The requirements of the new law will greatly expand the amount of programming that is video-described. The Commission must take action to reinstate video description rules before the end of the year to meet Congress' deadline. You know, sometimes there is just no substitute for a good deadline!
- The Commission is also working to craft rules that ensure that persons with disabilities are able fully to use advanced communications services, equipment and networks. This hard-won requirement of accessibility was first enshrined in Section 255 of the 1996 Act, and even before passage of the Twenty-First Century Act the current Commission was already digging into some of these issues, in particular

focusing on the need to expand disability access to wireless telecommunications. But now the Commission has the express statutory mandate to expand that requirement beyond traditional telecommunications services like voice telephony and into the world of advanced offerings like the mobile devices that so many of us use to go online, watch video, send text messages—and, sometimes, even to make a plain old telephone call, too!

- Two advisory committees have been set up by the new law—the Video Programming Accessibility Advisory Committee and the Emergency Access Advisory Committee—and they have been meeting regularly and working toward issuing recommendations for FCC action:
  - The Emergency Access Advisory Committee, for its part, has already completed a national survey of persons with disabilities regarding emergency calling. We look forward to its recommendations about what policies and practices we can put in place to achieve equal access to emergency services for individuals with disabilities as we migrate to Next Generation 911 that will be capable of receiving emergency calls via voice, text, and video.
  - And the Video Programming Accessibility Advisory Committee is developing recommendations on a host of critical issues central to the new law: closed captioning of Internet programming previously captioned on television; video description of television programming; accessible emergency information for people with vision disabilities; compatibility of accessibility features and new video programming devices; and accessible user interfaces on video programming devices.

I know many of you here today were instrumental in getting this legislation passed in the first place. You did a great job! And now that the action has shifted over to the FCC, you have brought your talents to the advisory Committees and have already given us valuable comment on our proposed rules. I can tell you this for sure: the successful implementation of the law requires that we continue this close and ongoing collaboration with you. So I encourage you to continue to participate actively as these proceedings move forward at the FCC. It's important for this particular law. And it's important for all the things we can do together in the years ahead. As my old boss Senator Fritz Hollings often cautioned: decisions made without you are usually decisions against you.

The FCC needs to be constantly vigilant that we are holding up our end of this bargain, too. During my years at the Commission, I have tried to open our doors to the full panoply of American stakeholders, so that the Commission isn't just hearing from the biggest business interests with their armies of lawyers and lobbyists, but also from consumers and citizens who are the overwhelming majority of folks who must live with the consequences of what we do in Washington. There will always be more work to be done on this outreach score, but I believe our current Commission has made important

strides in this area, and I'm excited to see the level of collaboration we are engaging in with the disabilities communities.

We need to hear from you not just on the items related to implementation of the Twenty-first Century Act, but to sustain a dialogue across the whole wide range of telecommunications and media issues before the FCC. For example, in the coming months, the Commission is going to be very focused on reform of our Universal Service programs. Looking to tackle not only challenges hindering the deployment of broadband networks but also the barriers that stand in the way of millions of Americans adopting broadband service in their homes. As many as one-third of the American people have not adopted high-speed broadband at home—and we know the disparities are even starker for Americans with disabilities, with one recent survey showing that only 54% of Americans with disabilities use the Internet. And we know too that unemployment rates are much higher among the disabled. These are exactly the kind of underserved populations that the Lifeline program—which provides discounted phone service to low-income households—is designed to assist. As we work to reorient this program to support broadband and to provide the services every American needs to be competitive in the Twenty-first Century, we need your ongoing input so that we can maximize the benefits for the disabilities communities.

We also need your valuable input as the Commission works to strengthen the VRS program. This program has been a critical communications link for the deaf and hard of hearing and we cannot allow abuses that we know exist in the program to threaten its long-term viability. The Commission has made some tough decisions and has more on its plate. I am committed to moving forward with reform of the program in a way that protects the interests of consumers who rely on VRS every day to reach their colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

Finally, allow me to address something we need to think more about in the context of our changing communications landscape. We have a stark small “d” democratic challenge to overcome as we move into a new era of communications with one another—to ensure that we all have accessibility to a dynamic, information-laden media. Here I am talking about accessibility to a robust media for *all* Americans—you, me and 310,000,000 others. This is about traditional media—radio, television, cable and newspapers. And it is about broadband, too. This is about broadband, too. It is about fostering a broad information infrastructure to guarantee the flow of news and information throughout the land. Ensuring that every American has access to local news and information is the premise and prerequisite of democracy. Our future depends upon an informed citizenry and the widest possible dissemination of news and information to fuel the nation's conversation with itself. While at first glance you may think this goes beyond your issues—it doesn't. It impacts them directly. How the issues you personally deem most important are covered and treated by the media makes all the difference on how those issues will fare in the court of public opinion and in the councils of power. If you're happy about how our current media system is handling your issues, you need not listen to the rest of my remarks. But if you think your top issues might benefit from a little more diverse coverage, a little more local flavor, and a little more competition

within the media industry, then you need to put media up there toward the top of your major issue concerns.

This conversation about the future of the media must, of course, include Americans with disabilities, who need access to their local news to be fully participating members of our communities. With respect to closed captioning, we've certainly seen some progress in the more than twenty years since the Television Decoder Circuitry Act that brought closed captioning to television sets and fifteen years since the 1996 Act extended closed captioning to nearly all television programming. But that was 15 years ago and there are still some serious gaps and it is high time that the Commission revisit our rules in this area. For example, generating captions based on the teleprompter text in a nightly newscast guarantees that deaf and hard of hearing individuals will miss breaking news, weather updates, and live field interviews. Viewing habits and programming schedules have changed since captioning rules were originally adopted more than a decade ago and the exemptions that were provided now encompass critical programming like early morning newscasts. These are some of the basic things the FCC can and should do to ensure that deaf and hard of hearing Americans have access to local news programming.

But, like I said, America's media shortfall affects every citizen in the land. We just have to make sure that good, in-depth, hard-hitting news and information are available through our media. There is no doubt that many Americans are increasingly accessing news and information via the Internet—whether it's reading the newspaper digitally, watching a news station video online, accessing various blogs, or using a news aggregator to pick out the information they are looking for. The Internet has huge potential here—if we're smart about it and keep it open. Indeed, there may be no greater benefit that broadband can deliver than its ability to help inform our civic dialogue and stimulate citizen engagement in our democracy. But facing up to its challenges is also our public responsibility. We don't think about this nearly often enough.

But we cannot put our heads in the digital sand and assume that in-depth news and accountability journalism will magically appear online while it has been disappearing in our traditional media. We all know, I think, that thousands of journalists are walking the street in search of a job rather than walking the beat in search of a story, and that hundreds of newsrooms have been shuttered or put on starvation diets. Investigative journalism is on the endangered species list. I won't go into the reasons why in great detail here, but the short version is an undisciplined era of rampant private sector speculation and consolidation that shrank news production. And this consolidation process was aided and abetted by successive Federal Communications Commissions that encouraged it all, blessed it all, and walked willingly away from their public interest responsibilities. The newspaper and the TV newsroom still produce probably more than 90% of the news we get—even the news we read online—it's just that there's so much less of it—so much less in-depth reporting, so much less accountability journalism, so few reporters in state capitals and fewer bureaus around the world compared with what used to be.

Unless we fix the problems facing traditional news outlets, today's problems in journalism will only continue, and inevitably get worse, in the broadband world of tomorrow. Right now I don't see the model, the mass or the momentum in new media to fill the void that has eviscerated traditional media. And we don't have the time to wait for something that may never occur. We just have to find ways now to ensure that American citizens have access to a worthy media by reasserting public interest values for traditional broadcast media and taking other steps that I will be happy to talk about to make sure the digital world is able to realize its huge potential to nourish our democratic dialogue. And we need to be especially vigilant that we don't allow the dynamic, opportunity-creating potential of broadband and the Internet to travel down the same road of consolidation and too much control by too few companies that inflicted so much damage on traditional media. Will we be smart enough to do this? I don't know. So far the signs are not particularly encouraging. And so much is at stake.

One more thought in this regard. We all remember that famous quote from Thomas Jefferson who, when talking about newspapers—the information infrastructure, the broadband, of his time—said that, if given the choice, he would prefer newspapers without government over a government without newspapers. But that wasn't all he said. Jefferson went on to say, “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers, and be capable of reading them.” At this critical juncture two hundred years later we would be wise to heed that advice. That is why we all need to be supporters of what are called the new literacies—digital literacy, media literacy and news literacy. Your leadership understands how crucial it is that meaningful support be given to educate our citizens about how important this is to their futures and that they must learn how to navigate the awesome power of the Internet. It's crucial that, with the proliferation of websites, our young people—and us elders, too—can distinguish between trustworthy and not-so-trusty places on the Net and that we provide our young citizens the education they need to use—and avoid being misused by—our media ecosystem. These are the kinds of things we need to be doing now, not only to instill the importance of quality journalism and to find ways to support its creation, but to strengthen our democracy through a citizenry armed with the news and information it needs to make informed decisions about the future of our country.

So, put all the things together that I've talked about this morning and I think we'll agree—there's a lot to do. A whole lot to do before every American shares in the benefits of advanced telecommunications and world-class media that can open the doors to a better future. I am proud to have travelled this far down the road with you, but we all realize there are so many more steps we need to take together for all people with disabilities—and indeed for all Americans—who want to be, need to be and indeed deserve to be, fully participating, mainstream citizens in our society. If we pull together—if you continue and even expand your cooperation with other affected communities and build effective alliances with them, with business and with government—if you stay vigilant as new technologies develop—and if you keep pushing, really pushing, at the public policy level, we can meet and master all these challenges.

As many of you know, I am completing my time at the Commission this year. But

I also want you to know this: I am going to continue speaking out and working on these issues in the years ahead. Your voices inspired me as I walked through the doors of the Commission ten years ago and they continue to inspire me today. Your work, my work—our work—is not done. But we're on the march, we're making progress, and we shall overcome.

Thank you for the good and wonderful things you do, thank you for today, and thank you for the friendship you have shown me through the years. God bless you all.