

FCC WORKING GROUP REPORT: THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF COMMUNITIES

In culmination of its work over the last year, the FCC Working Group on the Information Needs of Communities today delivered a report addressing the rapidly changing media landscape in a broadband age.

ORIGINS & MISSION

- In 2009, a bipartisan Knight Commission found that while the broadband age is enabling an information and communications renaissance, local communities, in particular, are being unevenly served with critical information about local issues.
- In January 2010, the FCC initiated a staff-level working group to identify trends and make recommendations on how all the information needs of communities can be met in a broadband world.
- The working group included journalists, entrepreneurs, scholars, and government officials. The group, led by Steven Waldman (former reporter and CEO of Beliefnet.com), interviewed more than 600 individuals groups and organizations, collected over one thousand public comments, reviewed existing research, held multiple hearings and made site visits to newsrooms across the country.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- **Fueled primarily by broadband-enabled innovation, the news and information landscape is more vibrant than ever before.** Digital technology is creating a world of opportunity to keep the public informed in ways unimaginable just a few short years ago.
- **The disruptive impact of the Internet has enabled an unprecedented free exchange of ideas and information.** Breakthroughs in hyperlocal news and citizen journalism are on the rise, empowering individuals with a wealth of new information to better inform decision-making and engender more accountable government.
- **Local news continues to play a vital role, with some stations seizing multiplatform opportunities.** Newspapers & TV stations have emerged as the largest providers of local news online.
- **An abundance of media outlets does not necessarily translate into an abundance of reporting.** In many communities, there are now more outlets, but less local accountability reporting. Where there are gaps, less quality local reporting can lead to less government accountability, worse schools, wasted taxpayer dollars, greater corruption and other problems.
- **Commercial and nonprofit media are now finding it increasingly advantageous to collaborate** rather than compete. Synergies between sectors are growing.
- **The nonprofit media sector has become more varied, and important, than ever before.** Most of the players neither receive, nor seek, government funds.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE

- **Accelerate move from paper to online disclosure.** Disclosure information required by the FCC should be moved online from filing cabinets to the Internet so the public can more easily gain access to valuable information. FCC should eliminate burdensome rules and streamline disclosures about local programming by moving files online.
- **Remove barriers to innovation and online entrepreneurship** by pushing for universal broadband deployment and adoption. Achieving this goal would remove cost barriers, strengthen online business models, expand consumer pools and ensure that the news and information landscape serves communities to the maximum possible benefit of citizens.
- **Target existing federal spending at local media.** Existing government advertising spending, such military recruiting and public health ads, should be targeted toward local media whenever possible. Each year, the federal government spends roughly **\$1 billion** in advertising without maximizing potential benefits to local media.
- **Repeal Fairness Doctrine, terminate localism proceeding and replace “enhanced disclosure” with a new streamlined system of online disclosure.** Broadcasters would disclose amount of programming about the community and other important information.
- **Discourage “pay-for-play” arrangements** – in which TV stations allow advertisers to dictate on-air content without disclosing to viewers – by requiring online disclosure of such arrangements.
- **Re-assess whether the satellite TV’s set-aside for educational programming and cable TV leased access systems are working;** put satellite disclosure online.
- **There should be state-based C-SPAN in every state.** Cable and satellite operators, public broadcasters and PEG channels should work toward that goal, and policymakers should consider offering incentives for those media organizations that take such steps, or to those that provide support for local cable news operations.
- Re-establish **tax certificate program for small businesses** including minorities and women.
- Policymakers should consider **clarifications or changes in tax rules that would make it easier for nonprofit news operations** to develop sustainable business models.
- **Focus on historically underserved** when policymakers craft strategies and rules.