

COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
REMARKS AT THE NEWS LITERACY PROJECT'S DC KICKOFF
E. L. HAYNES PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL
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Thank you for the opportunity to be here and for the privilege of joining my friend Gwen Ifill to commemorate the start of something very special at E. L. Haynes Public Charter School. Thanks you for your great leadership, Gwen. It's also a pleasure to be here with my friend Alan Miller, President of The News Literacy Project and a powerful force behind this growing movement. The News Literacy Project at E. L. Haynes Public Charter School is a big deal—I think it's a *very big deal*. It's big because it brings something really important to this school, and it's big because it's something important for this democracy of ours—important to each of us as citizens and as decision-makers for the future of our nation. As a Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission, I have been pushing for programs to ensure that each and every citizen of this great nation has available to them the news and information they need in order to be contributing participants in the affairs of the nation. This particular project looks like it's shaping up to help make that happen.

Let me tell you why I think this is so important. We need to be a news-literate people. Democracy's premise is a well-informed citizenry. We can't govern ourselves well without good news and information. So our goal must be that every American possesses the skills to discern real news from all the glitzy and often unimportant infotainment that too often passes for news. We need to be able to differentiate fact from opinion, and we need to be able to distinguish trustworthy information from untrustworthy. At a time when facts are scarce, when hundreds of newsrooms have been shuttered and thousands of reporters fired, and when shouted opinions are far more abundant than in-depth journalistic reporting, it is tough slogging to make sense out of the barrage of information hurling at us. If we are truly serious about tackling the mountain of problems our country confronts, we need to find our way back to the facts real quick and truly understand the problems that endanger our country's future—your future—and what solutions might work to overcome them.

I was reminded of the power of news when I saw a story coming out of Japan after the devastating tsunami and earthquake a few months ago. Power to the newspaper's printing machine was knocked out, but people were desperately hungry for any morsel of news and information they could get their hands on. So the paper's dedicated staff actually wrote out the news, by hand, and then physically posted it around town. We saw something of the same spirit at work here at home this year as tornadoes and floods and droughts and fires stalked the land. Just last week we had an earthquake and a tropical storm right here in DC. Just a few examples of how news and information are the lifeblood of a functioning society!

As we saw in Japan, and also from the Arab Spring that flowered across the Middle East earlier this year, *new media*—broadband, the Internet and social media—are

opening exciting new ways for us to learn and to communicate. Our nation's marketplace of ideas now includes millions of websites and terabytes of information. Updates from social media and journalists on-the-go can become the broadband bricks and mortar for a new and better town square of democracy for the 21st Century. The barriers to publish your own thoughts and opinions have never been lower, and the expectations for what this new media can bring us have never been higher. But for us to reach that potential, we need news literacy, media literacy and digital literacy. All of us—young folks like many of you, older ones like me—need to know how to navigate the digital terrain. We can't afford for anyone to be left behind by today's digital revolution. That's why it is so important that we institute programs like this in schools and communities across the land.

We can do this job. It's going to be a lot of work, but it can be done. Educators, the public sector, the private sector—all working together. It's an exciting prospect. There are roles for schools—as we see here this morning—for local businesses and civic organizations, government and philanthropies, community media centers, libraries and PEG stations, and for many others to utilize their expertise, their resources, and even their personnel.

You know, this is not a new challenge that we face. Times and technology change—but our small “d” democratic challenge persists from generation to generation. Our Founding Fathers knew two centuries ago how important the spread of information was to the success of their fledgling country. They wrote a First Amendment to ensure that the American people would be informed. They built postal roads and subsidized the costs of distributing news so that citizens everywhere in the land would have the news and information they needed so they could decide wisely for the future of their young nation. So George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were struggling with this back at the very beginning. Perhaps you've heard that famous Jefferson quote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter.” But then he added: “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.” “...(C)apable of reading them.” That's news literacy, isn't it? So how does Jefferson's advice translate into our Twenty-first century world? It translates into what we see before our very eyes right here this morning at E. L. Haynes.

Thank you very much.