

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS  
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What a privilege to be here for this event today and I really appreciate not just Jon McTaggart's warm introduction, but the vision and leadership and determination he brings to everything he does. He inherits a wonderful legacy from the legendary Bill Kling and I think he is going to take that legacy and build upon it and help public media realize the tremendous potential it has to inform America's civic dialogue and America's democracy.

I had the opportunity to tour your impressive facilities this morning and to talk with some of you on the fine work you are doing and the preparations you are taking to ensure an even more formidable role for public media in our fast-evolving digital future. These are challenging times for our media—commercial and public—and I want to talk about that for the next few minutes.

I have spent the last 10 years on the Federal Communications Commission working to ensure that every citizen in the land has available the news and information they need to be contributing participants in the affairs of the nation. We have made some progress on a few fronts and stopped some bad things from happening, but overall our public policy has not even come close to matching the media needs of our people. My particular emphasis today is on the news and information America gets—and doesn't get. And right now it's not getting enough—not enough to inform us as citizens and not enough to provide us with the information we need to make good decisions for the future of our country.

We have to be a news-literate society, understanding and engaged with the substance of public issues if we are going to keep our self-governing experiment afloat. Unfortunately, all too often real substantive news has been replaced by fluff. Democracy is not well-served by fluff.

More and more, we see the perils of a deregulated and consolidated commercial media and the damage it has wreaked on our civic dialogue. This has too often led to the dumbing-down of the national dialogue on matters vital to our country's future. It has led to evermore glitzy infotainment masquerading as real news. It has led to thousands of journalists walking the street in search of a job instead of walking the beat in search of a story. It has led to shouted opinion replacing solid fact. As the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan reminded us, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but everyone is not entitled to their own set of facts.

Meanwhile the challenges we face as a nation are so deadly serious. Our economy founders, our global competitiveness has lost its edge, nearly a fifth of the workforce is un- or under-employed, our education lags and our teachers suffer as much as the kids, 50 million Americans have no health insurance, and our children enter a world more

challenging than the one where you and I grew up. If we don't have a media that can dig for facts, cover all these beats, separate fact from opinion, and hold the powerful accountable, then tell me please how in the world are we going to meet and master these challenges? How are we going to overcome? To me, getting our journalism and our media right is Step Number One in getting our democracy right.

And that is why public media is such an important piece of the puzzle. Because the work that is being done here at American Public Media reaching 16 million listeners every single week truly serves the public interest. The Information Needs of Communities Report released by the FCC staff over the summer identified enormous gaps that exist in our media environment, primarily the fact that there is a serious dearth of local accountability journalism. The Report identified public media and non-profit entities as important players to fill the gaps, but we need to do more to make sure that you have the resources necessary to take on this Herculean task. Yes, there were recommendations in the report addressing the underwriting issues that currently are less than clear and potentially limit funds. In addition some other recommendations were put forward to find ways to support a better model to foster sustainability. And these are important. But what was missing in my opinion was the bold outline of what is truly necessary if public media and nonprofit media are going to fill these tremendous gaps where commercial media has come up short.

So I was disappointed that the Report didn't put forward a more robust set of recommendations for action—particularly actions the Commission itself could take under the authority it already has. That's where the Report fell down. It was kind of like a doctor identifying a patient's symptoms—but then prescribing no medicine. And there are plenty of worrisome symptoms that the report does a good job of illuminating. For instance, one-third of local broadcast TV stations do little to no news. Or this: As an often-accepted practice, institutions pay stations for favorable coverage, including a hospital that paid a TV broadcaster \$100,000 for some positive stories. And the revelation that was no surprise to anyone working on media reform: the FCC does practically zero enforcement of broadcaster licenses during the renewal process. The last time we took away a license was more than 30 years ago.

Well, here's one ill the Commission could fix right now: instead of the current FCC rubberstamp license renewal process, wherein every eight years a broadcaster sends in his application and we grant it without doing any serious review about the station's public service performance, how about a policy that demands licensees to renew every three years and we take a good, hard look at the licensees' records and match them up with some guidelines to demonstrate they are providing your communities with real local news and information, that they are reflecting the diversity of all your media market's citizens, that they are open to the expression of diverse viewpoints, and that they are actually talking with people in their communities of service about the programs people would like to see and hear and the issues that are important to them? Is that asking too much? I don't think so. And, if we find that a station is not serving its community of license in a significant way, then let's take that license and give it to someone who will.

With that kind of approach, I don't think it would take very long for the word to go forth that the FCC is back in the business of enforcing the public interest.

Here's another action we could take—say “No” to some of these mega-media mergers that have done so much to eviscerate localism by allowing a few media moguls to gobble up more and more of our broadcast outlets. In mega media, the bottom line often trumps the public interest.

These kinds of actions would go a long way in bringing the public interest back into the fold. Until we take those steps, we continue to do a disservice to the American people and we neglect our statutory obligation to provide a media that fosters localism, diversity and competition.

But what of new media?, you ask. While the future holds tremendous digital promise, and while we see amazing entrepreneurship and innovation and creativity online, the promise is far from fulfilled. Nothing is guaranteed and, being brutally frank about it, what has been lost in traditional media is not yet being filled in by new media. Not by a long shot. And realize this: the overwhelming bulk of the news we get—well over 90 per cent—continues to originate from newspaper and broadcast journalism. The problem is: there is so much less of it.

So we really need to be thinking about how best to inform our citizenry in the digital age. In the same way that Washington, Jefferson, and Madison attended to the information infrastructure of their time, we must tend to ours. They knew they were embarked on a risky experiment—preserving the fragile young republic they had fought so hard for and finally won. Our Founding Fathers knew how important the spread of information was to the success of their experiment. They wrote a First Amendment to ensure that the American people would be informed. They built postal roads and subsidized the costs of distributing newspapers so that citizens everywhere in the land would have the news and information they needed in order to make good decisions for the future of their young nation. They built the information infrastructure of early America. Now we are called upon to do that again—to provide ourselves with the infrastructure and the tools we need to sustain self-government and to safeguard and prosper our nation. We need to be information infrastructure builders just like the Founders were information infrastructure builders. New tools and new technologies, to be sure—but the same enduring democratic challenge across the years.

I am intrigued by the idea echoed just this week at our FCC Phoenix hearing by Laura Walker of WNYC and by my esteemed friend Susan Crawford to allow for a spectrum set aside for the digital needs of public media. There may be real promise in this idea and one that resembles the foresight this country had in 1967 to reserve airwaves for public broadcasting. But you need to act fast. There is momentum right now to sell as much spectrum as feasible to commercial wireless carriers. Wireless needs more spectrum, no doubt about it. But the people need more news, information, diversity and cultural programming too, so let's not be too quick to generalize about who gets what and who gives up what. Let's be sure we don't risk the long-term benefits of true public

interest media for a short-term payday. Especially when we don't know where the spectrum money will end up. When the super-committee in Congress begins in earnest to determine how to get money to the treasury to pay down the national debt, things could move pretty fast. Let's go into this understanding the stakes, the benefits and the potential consequences.

There is so much more I would like to talk about this morning—and I am so pleased that in the meetings we have had over the past two days here in Minneapolis-St. Paul, we have had the chance to cover a wide gamut of media and other public policy issues. Digital, media and news literacy—we could spend hours on that one. Our future is so tightly interwoven with new media—indeed, all media—that if we can't field a K-12 literacy curriculum, we will be limiting the potential for future generations to separate fact from fiction and restore the civility of our civic dialogue. Public media has a huge role it can fill here. Support for public media is another. I know you understand that story better than I do—but if we can't have in this country a calm, reasoned dialogue about the meager assistance we provide public media while other democratic countries provide their public media with huge orders of magnitude more, we will fall short of providing the promise of telecommunications capable of fostering as Lyndon Johnson said, “the enlightenment of the people.”

So much to talk about, so much to do. I intend to keep working on these challenges. As some of you know, I will be leaving the FCC later this year. But I'm not leaving these issues that we have discussed here this week. I could never do that! I will be trying to do my part as I know you will be doing yours. And I know how instrumental public media can be in confronting—and helping us overcome—these many challenges. You're the jewel of America's media, and I am counting on you to keep the gem glowing and the country moving forward.

We can get this done. And we have to. As my late, great friend Walter Cronkite said, “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.” I say “Amen” to that.

Thank you.