

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
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NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION
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Thank you for your very warm welcome. The pleasure is mine, I can assure you, to be with folks who do so many good and wonderful things to bring local information, news, music and just plain diversity to the communities they serve. That's a wonderful word—"communities"—because it's where we live and work and raise our kids and try to be good citizens. It's the immediate world that surrounds us and we need to know about it, understand it, be a part of it, and help improve it. And yet many of the major trends in media over the past 40 years have pushed "community" aside, diversity aside, local cultures aside. It hasn't been good for citizens. It hasn't been good for media. And it hasn't been good for America. So being here this afternoon with folks who are working hard to provide platforms for diverse and unique perspectives is exactly where I want to be. And I am always pleased to come over to the straight-thinking New America Foundation which does a stellar job in bringing issues, intelligence and civic-mindedness to our national dialogue.

These are challenging times for our media. 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 informed, contributing participants in the affairs of the nation. We have made some progress on a few fronts and stopped some bad things from happening, and I'm happy about that. But overall our public policy has not come close to matching the media needs of our people. I want to stress one critical aspect of that today. My particular emphasis is going to be 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 Unfortunately, as this audience understands so well, too often real substantive news has been replaced by fluff. Democracy is not well-served by fluff. It cannot be sustained by fluff.

What we need to do as citizens is some hard thinking about how to better inform ourselves in the digital age. How to provide the news and information infrastructure to make sure that happens. In the same way that Washington, Jefferson, and Madison built the information infrastructure of their time, we must build it anew in ours. The Founders knew they were embarked on a risky experiment—preserving the fragile young republic they had fought so hard for and finally won. They 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. And they went on to build postal roads and to subsidize the costs of distributing newspapers—all kinds of 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 and to keep the democratic experiment going. So they built the information infrastructure of early America. Now it's our time to be information infrastructure builders just like the Founders were information infrastructure builders—to provide ourselves with the tools and the resources we need to sustain self-government and to safeguard and prosper our nation. It's a time of new tools and new technologies compared to two centuries ago, to be sure—but it is the very same enduring democratic challenge across all those years.

We are not meeting that challenge today. More and more, we see the perils of a hyper-consolidated commercial media and the damage it has wreaked on our civic dialogue. On top of that came successive Federal Communications Commissions that not only blessed the mega-consolidation—actually encouraged it—but then went on to pull the props out from under almost all of the public interest oversight that it previously performed. As newly-consolidated companies tried to pay off the huge debts they had incurred to combine, and as they strove to satisfy the always-escalating expectations of Wall Street and the financial crowd for fatter bottom lines, the news media was the first to feel the pain. Feel the ax, actually. Newsrooms were shuttered, journalists fired, and investigative journalism put on life-support. The inevitable result has been, to be blunt about it, a too often dumbed-down national dialogue on matters vital to our country's future. The result has been evermore glitzy infotainment masquerading as real news. It has been thousands of journalists walking the street in search of a job instead of walking the beat in search of a story. It has been shouted opinion replacing solid fact. As the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan reminded us, everyone is entitled to their own opinion—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 with teachers suffering as much as the kids, 50 million Americans have no health insurance, and our children enter a world more challenging by far 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.

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. But 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. 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: institutions paying stations for favorable coverage, including reports of a hospital that paid a TV broadcaster \$100,000 for some positive stories. And this, although it's a revelation that was no surprise to anyone

working on media reform: the FCC is doing practically zero enforcement of broadcaster licenses during the renewal process. The last time we took away a license on public interest grounds was more than 30 years ago. What can we do about all this?

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.

Or how about this—some positive steps to strengthen community media? Why can't the Commission make this a priority? Why can't we understand its huge potential to both enhance the media and empower communities? How about dealing promptly with the issues and petitions you bring us? How about finally determining that carriage of PEG channels on the basic tier is a public interest obligation that cable companies need to live up to? We need to ensure this obligation is being met. And if a company insists on all of the benefits of cable without being called so, we should insist that if they walk like a duck and talk like a duck, they ought to be called a cable duck too. This has been sitting for too long at the Commission while PEG channels get moved to digital Siberia.

Let's talk about new media for a minute or two. I know you folks are community media now, not just community radio or community traditional media. And that's exactly as it should be. If it works as it should, the Internet can provide us with a wonderful new town-square of democracy, paved with broadband bricks. Barriers to entry are low, the links are ubiquitous, and we can all be participants. Interesting innovation and entrepreneurship are obviously taking place. So the future holds tremendous digital promise. But, let's be candid—the promise of new media is far from fulfilled. Nothing is guaranteed and, in truth, what has been lost in traditional media has not yet been 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 if our goal is that every American should possess the skills to discern real news from infotainment, trustworthy sources from untrustworthy, and fact from opinion, then we have some work to do. If kids—and seniors like me, too—are going to harvest the awesome potential of our media tools and technologies, then we have some serious educating to do. And let's face it—making media work for all of us is tough slogging.

I see a huge role for community media centers and PEGs to play here. Already you are helping to provide the skills the country needs in the new literacies—digital, media and news literacy. I know that for several decades your members have been out in the neighborhoods providing a platform for programming otherwise not seen, reaching out to citizens the mega-broadcasters never even see. And I know the great work you are already doing to provide critical training, to fill the many literacy voids that exist, and to work with schools, anchor institutions and all sorts of community organizations. Now the time is ripe for us all to pull together to strengthen our partnerships with media outlets in communities across the land, including public media, and for your organizations to be hubs of a new media revolution. The FCC shows signs of being a willing partner to take some forward-looking steps on the digital literacy ramifications of broadband adoption, and you and your members can do a lot to help make this a reality and to help ensure that our initiatives have real clarity of focus on local communities and specifically the kind of news and media literacy I have mentioned today. Our future is so tightly interwoven with new media—indeed, all media—that if we can't field a K-12 media literacy curriculum soon—and by that I mean a hefty down-payment in the next year or two—then we are foolishly limiting the potential for future generations to take advantage of the new tools out there that can help make them productive, informed, and involved members of their communities and their nation.

I have heard some talk about calling a youth media symposium this fall or winter to bring together the disparate groups who are working on literacy programs and to actually get a coordinated effort up-and-running. This strikes me as an eminently sensible and worthwhile idea. And I believe that community media folks could be at the epicenter of getting this moving, attracting participants, and developing a program that would lead to early action. Again, there is a huge role for your members to play here.

So the kinds of things I've mentioned—and they surely don't exhaust the list—would go a long way toward bringing the public interest back to life. The FCC should be—must be—in the vanguard of this. Many problems call out for Commission attention, I know that. But none call out more urgently than these. And, after all, we have a statutory obligation to serve the public interest; to foster localism, diversity and competition—the three pillars of the public interest; and to encourage the information infrastructure democracy requires.

So much to talk about, so much to do. I just want you to know that I intend to keep working on these challenges in the months and years ahead. 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 and that you and I have worked on for so long. I could never do that! I will be trying to do my part and I know you will be doing yours. And I know how

instrumental community media can be in confronting—and helping us overcome—these many challenges.

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.