

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC FORUM: “INFORMATION NEEDS OF ATLANTA”
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Thank you all for coming this evening. It’s wonderful to be back in Atlanta—and to be talking with you again about the future of the media, a conversation you and I began with a forum on the media back in 2003. Tonight is a wonderful opportunity to re-engage and for me to get up-to-date on what’s been going on more recently. It’s especially nice to be in the home district of Congressman John Lewis, one of our nation’s true heroes and a champion of “equal justice for all” over his entire life and consistently during his career in the House of Representatives. I want to thank him personally and his office for working to make this event possible. And thanks for his heartfelt message to us on the video this evening. I am also very pleased to be here with my colleague on the Federal Communications Commission, Mignon Clyburn, who has proven herself to be an ardent defender of the public interest and who has joined in the crusade to get America the media it needs to sustain our civic dialogue and enhance our democracy. I am privileged to be with her here tonight and honored to call her friend. And, of course, deep thanks go to Georgia Tech for hosting this event and providing us with the facilities to convene this important discussion and for all the help they have provided.

This forum is in one way bittersweet for me because I am set to leave the FCC at the end of the month and this will be my last stop outside the Beltway before I take leave of Mignon and my other colleagues. Over my ten years at the Commission, I have made it my priority to get out of Washington and engage citizens in conversations on what is needed from our media to inform not just this community, but every community across the land. I have participated in dozens and dozens of hearings, town hall gatherings, and public forums of all kinds from coast to coast, from huge cities to rural Indian country, from south to north and all directions in between. Here is what I have learned: That people want more from the media than they are getting. That you and your neighbor and the person down the street have serious concerns about the media you are receiving on a daily basis. That the huge cut-backs we have seen in newsrooms and the number of journalists plying their trade is not serving democracy well. That something valuable and precious has gone missing. And that a lot of people—millions of people—want to repair what’s broken.

A number of years ago, the then-Chairman of the FCC wanted to loosen our media ownership rules that limited the number of stations one company could own. It was an absolutely horrible idea, highly detrimental to diversity of voices and viewpoints, damaging to the preservation of localism and to the advancement of competition that our media so desperately needs. But I was told that nobody outside the confines of Washington, DC, really cared—it was all too technical, too arcane for people to get involved in. Just let the FCC handle it. Well, my fellow Commissioner at the time, Jonathan Adelstein and I begged to differ, and we took to the road and we attended hearing after hearing long into the night listening to the people, hearing their concerns, and suddenly we saw around us a movement building for a better media. And three

million people contacted the Commission and the Congress saying Chairman Powell's rules were exactly the wrong thing to do. So the Senate voted to disapprove what was rammed through the Commission in spite of the popular outcry; the House was debating it; and then the Third Circuit Court told us the rules were flawed in substance and flawed in process. Who says citizen action can't count—even in these times when so few people wield so much outrageous power? You just try to tell John Lewis that grassroots movements don't work!

To make a long story short, here's what went wrong with media. The story has a private sector part and a public sector part. For thirty years and more, private sector media consolidation has seen broadcast outlets bought up by the hundreds, as a few mega-media companies gobbled up small, local, independent outlets and created huge empires where they could standardize programming, cut back on what Wall Street considered non-essential parts of their business—like spending on hard news and reflecting the diversity of their communities of service—all the while trying to show the captains of finance that they were subservient to the bottom line and the quarterly report. Stakeholders—that's the people the stations are supposed to serve—to the back of the bus, stockholders to the front, became the new *modus operandi*. It was, and is, a far cry from the original broadcaster commitment to serve the public interest in return for free use of the people's airwaves. The result has been hundreds of newsrooms shuttered, thousands of reporters walking the street in search of a job rather than walking the beat in search of a story, and true investigative journalism on the endangered species list. Real news too often replaced by glitzy entertainment, hard facts by shouted opinions, and local and regional music by stultifying, creativity-killing playlists and national music homogeneity. Even those station owners who tried to resist—and there were many who did, and still do, strive to do their job—even they came under incredible pressure to cave. It made it much harder for them to do their job and to be the good stewards of the public airwaves that many still want to be. Still today the speculative fires burn on—and our democracy suffers.

To make this the perfect storm, the private sector debacle was blessed, even encouraged, by the public sector. This is the saddest part of the story. The place where I work—the Federal Communications Commission—was at the center of it all, blessing the consolidation tsunami, seldom finding a merger they didn't like, and then making things even worse by eliminating almost all of the public interest guidelines and enforcement that we once had on the books—rules and procedures that had been fought for and won by generations of media reformers. And when the Internet and the promise of new media came along, the two previous FCCs helped the big companies travel down the same misguided road that radio, TV and cable had gone down—consolidation blessed by government, no real public interest oversight, and access to perhaps the most dynamic and opportunity-creating technology ever devised put into the hands of a few huge telecommunications giants.

New media offers tremendous opportunities but it is not on auto-pilot to rescue us from the wreckage of traditional media. There could be a wonderful new town square of democracy there, paved with broadband bricks. But, truth be told, 90-95% of the news

we read on the Internet still originates from the traditional newspaper and television newsrooms. It's just that there's so much less of it than there used to be. While there are any number of interesting experiments and innovations taking place on the Internet, so far there is no model to support the kind of resources that online journalism would require if it is ever going to replace all the journalism that has been lost over the past three decades. So it is that we find ourselves at the present moment with radio and TV news and information shells of their former selves, shilling programs that encourage a dumbed-down civic dialogue based too often on fluff. Democracy is not well-served by fluff.

A well-informed electorate is the premise and prerequisite of functioning self-government. Right now, your country and mine faces deadly serious challenges. 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; and 50 million Americans have no health insurance. If we don't have a media that can dig for facts, cover the 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 ever going to overcome? To me, getting our journalism and our media right is Step Number One in getting our democracy right.

There's a real irony here. When the actions of government weaken the Fourth Estate, as has happened over these past three decades, there is less of a check on government itself. The estimable David Simon, creator of the *The Wire* and former journalist at the Baltimore Sun hit the nail on the head when he said, "The next 10 or 15 years in this country are going to be a halcyon era for state and local political corruption." It will take a lot more vibrant and vigilant journalism than we have now to keep that from happening.

But it's not just the accountability stories or the "things-gone-wrong" stories that need to be told. There's good news out there, too—although we don't get to see very much of it on TV. As Congressman Lewis pointed out, you live in a diverse community, with lots of people doing lots of interesting, and lots of often very good, things. How often do these stories manage to get through the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality that seems to dictate so much of our present-day "news"? I'm a strong believer that if we want more diversity in our stories, if we want to understand what's really going on in our communities, then we need more diversity in who owns our media outlets. But here's the reality of ownership diversity: in a nation that is now almost one-third minority, people of color hold only about 3.6% of full-power commercial TV stations? So maybe we shouldn't really be surprised that what we see on our media doesn't even come close to what's actually happening in our communities. Talk about an area where the Commission needs to take some positive actions to break down barriers!

There are so many abuses out there. Here's another example: some broadcasters are doing end-runs around our media ownership limits by way of so-called "shared services agreements"—a fancy term for covert consolidation that lets one company control another without actually formally owning it. It's something we should not tolerate. But, just last week, our Media Bureau actually dismissed a complaint against

such a shared service agreement, even while admitting that the arrangement was at odds with the purpose and intent of our rules on duopolies. Go figure. I guess we'll get around to it later, but it just seemed to me that this might be a case where we should have acted on behalf of the public interest instead of kicking the can down the road.

There is one final issue I would like to address. It's about all those political ads we are subjected to on TV and the lack of clarity and transparency that surrounds them. Get ready—we've got 11 months ahead of us with political ad saturation bombing like we've never seen before. We are not well-served when those who are attempting to manipulate our political dialogue and determine election outcomes through these ads can disguise themselves and hide behind misleading names. If a group calling itself "Citizens for Purple Mountain Majesties" is in reality the mouthpiece of a company that is refusing to clean up a toxic dump or is spewing pollution into one of the Great Lakes, don't citizens have a right to know that? Yes, I said "a right." Open government can only exist where people and groups trying to influence elections stand up and tell us who they are and who is footing the bill for these ads. That's not happening nearly often enough. The fissures in our democracy can only widen if anonymous money retains its unchecked influence in our elections. The FCC has the authority to do something about this right now. It's time to use that authority. It's time to require fuller sponsorship identification of the special interests that are bank-rolling so many of the ads we all watch all the time.

I'll leave you with this. Forty years in Washington have convinced me that while some change can come from the top down, real change comes from the grassroots up. It comes because the people demand it and mobilize to make it happen. Abraham Lincoln was a great President—but there would have been no Emancipation proclamation without the abolitionists and other reformers who demanded action. Franklin Roosevelt is my personal hero—but there would have been no social security and other New Deal programs without labor organization and a host of other reform advocates pressing him to move ahead. John F. Kennedy came to support civil rights—but there would have been no such conversion without Martin Luther King and John Lewis and a host of other heroes and crusaders who led and marched in the cause of freedom. It's no different in our time. Here in media democracy is a cause that goes to the roots of self-government, an issue that just about every other issue depends upon if we really are going to overcome.

So I hope when you leave here tonight, you'll answer the call. You'll talk to your families and friends about this. You'll speak out, write, sing, maybe even march. Tell the FCC what you think, but don't stop there. Tell all those who make public policy what you think. As for me, I may be leaving the Commission soon, but I can guarantee you this: I intend to keep speaking out and working hard on this challenge. It's too important to stop now. It's too important for you not to be involved. We can do this. We can make it happen. And then, as citizens united, we will realize the dream of media of, by and for the American people. Media democracy—I love the sound of it, don't you?

