

REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER NATHAN SIMINGTON AT THE MEDIA INSTITUTE 2022 FREE SPEECH AMERICA GALA

Thank you for that kind introduction. It is my great pleasure and signal honor to speak with you all tonight.

There is no industry in America like broadcast media. No other business sits at the intersection of so many different industries. No other business has the same locally-oriented mission of service. No other business enjoys the same level of public confidence. No other business serves the same critical public safety functions. And no other business is tasked to accomplish all that broadcast accomplishes and still abide by the many rules that reflect the earnest trust placed in it by the American people. And yet broadcasters manage it all.

Broadcasters create and distribute news content. That's what we all know them for, right? And that's what some of us grew up on. Broadcasters were with us to celebrate our national triumphs, to inform us of urgent events breaking just beyond our stoops, and to solemnly mourn our collective losses. Broadcasters haven't just told us the news; they've brought it into our homes—and helped us make sense of it.

Broadcasters have not just informed us, they've entertained us. From live and local sports, to nationally-distributed sitcoms, to a perfectly-curated playlist for an evening drive, broadcasters have helped to shape family evenings and work conversations by water coolers. And now, as content viewing and listening has become more and more asynchronous, broadcasters are still contributing to the national conversation through locally-created content distributed globally online. Sometimes that content is hard-hitting, on-the-ground journalism; sometimes it is the simple joy of a dancing weather reporter; but none of it would happen without broadcasters and newsrooms across America.

Across America. That's the difference, isn't it? Broadcasters work across the country. Newsrooms dot the American landscape because the work of broadcast is local. And needs to be. There is no alternative. No other organization can do the work of local broadcasters, because no other organization can be where they are and do what they do. No one but local broadcasters can send a stringer to City Hall to report on local political corruption, produce a high school football game, and run a charity food drive all in the same day. There's no monthly subscription for that.

And it isn't just supporting local communities with reporting—it is coordinating emergency response to disasters. When the power goes out, and tornado sirens blare, no one is reaching for their hand-cranked cell phone or flipping to a media app. Broadcasters have the knowledge, the technical capability, and in fact the legal duty, to guide the American public through disasters. And this duty they not only meet, but exceed, every day.

Broadcast is not a nice to have. Broadcast is not something we can select from a menu of media options. Broadcast is woven into the fabric of this country—its heritage, its culture, and its daily function—in a way that no other commercial enterprise can claim. And it is under threat.

You know, if you listened to everything I just mentioned, you might be forgiven for thinking that I was talking about local newspapers. Because, indeed, so much of the same could be said of print newspapers, especially in their essentially local nature and their public-minded mission. And yes, that's true. Local newspapers have long been, and in many communities still are, an indispensable public institution. But in many more communities, they are not. And why? It isn't that the American public no longer needs or wants reliable information—in fact, we need it now, perhaps, more than ever before.

No, local papers are no longer relied on in many communities because they went out of business. And some of that—most of that, even—was simply about dollars and cents. Print is a lower margin business than digital, and many Americans these days prefer screens to pages. Things changed. Fortunately, many print outlets have adapted. Others have not been as fortunate.

But undoubtedly contributing to the decline of local print media was the cross-ownership rule. Originally drafted for a time of tycoons and barons, the cross-ownership rule prevented media magnates and school superintendents alike from owning an AM radio station and daily plain dealer in the same rural town, and employing people in the same newsroom. The cross-ownership rule didn't kill local print newspapers. Among other things: local papers are still here. But it certainly hasn't helped things.

The agency where I work was built in a different era, with very different commercial and cultural realities. And though we've done a great job keeping up with the times, we must be careful that the patina of legacy rules does not turn to rust. We must change with the times—and these times are, in some cases, tough for broadcasters. The Commission can help this vital public good with its rules, and must do so wherever it can.

This means reasonable waiver requests should be granted for owners looking to preserve failing stations in small markets. This means that legacy reporting rules should be modernized, or even eliminated, when the purpose that they serve no longer remains clear. And it means that the Commission must do whatever it can to reduce the burden of fees on the smallest broadcasters, who struggle to pay their own electric bills.

Don't get me wrong. Broadcasters are still creating, innovating, and even growing. And there is much to be excited about. New broadcast technologies are enabling improved viewing and listening experiences. Broadcasters are using new infrastructure to better serve their communities through localized content delivery. And broadcasters are getting smart about collecting and using data to improve consumer experiences and their own value as a marketing partner. All of this will help enable broadcasters to compete in the unified media marketplace of today.

But those innovations, while exciting, are not what I am most excited about for broadcasting. I view the innovative use of broadcast channels for delivery of data to be a true game changer. For the first time, television broadcasters can use their antennas to transmit not just things we can see and hear to our screens, but data that we can download to our devices. The possibilities are practically without bound. Broadcasters can send updates to software that

runs smart homes or autonomous vehicles. They can support at-home learning in rural school districts. And, yes, they can even download the new episode of HBO's "House of the Dragon" for you. And just as television broadcasters have made great technical strides, I look forward to partnering with AM and FM broadcasters as they pioneer their own new broadcast technologies and standards.

Data will bolster the future of broadcast, and, indeed, broadcast must have a future. With its essentially local nature and its fundamentally irreplaceable position as a public safety sentinel, we cannot do without it. We cannot and must not permit broadcasters to slacken in their duty to serve the public. But for broadcasters to discharge that sacred obligation, we must help them to flourish.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you this evening; let's watch the rest of tonight's proceedings together.