Competition, Connectivity, and the AI Future

INCOMPAS Policy Summit Keynote

Remarks of FCC Commissioner Olivia Trusty
Venable LLP, Washington, D.C.

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Good morning. Thank you for that introduction and for the invitation to speak today. It is a pleasure to be with so many innovators, builders, and problem-solvers who are shaping the future of communications in this country.

I also want to thank the entire INCOMPAS team for your leadership and for the work you do every day to advance competition, innovation, and connectivity. INCOMPAS has long been a constructive and pragmatic voice in communications policy, and I have personally valued your continued engagement, especially at a time when technology, markets, and policy are evolving at extraordinary speed.

I also want to acknowledge INCOMPAS member companies who are not merely participants in the communications marketplace; you are builders of it. You deploy networks, push technology forward, and drive competition in the communications marketplace in a way that benefits consumers, businesses, and the broader economy. So it is fitting that today I want to talk about the enduring relationship between competition and innovation in communications, and what that relationship means as we enter an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence.

Competition and Innovation: A Longstanding Policy Priority

If you span the history of telecommunications, whether we're talking about voice, video, or data; long-distance or local service; wired or wireless, one theme stands out: competition. Indeed, over time, communications policy in the United States has increasingly focused on promoting competition, where we have more

providers, more choices for consumers, and better quality services. To achieve those objectives, efforts within Congress and at the FCC have been dedicated to opening markets, lowering barriers to entry, and leveraging market forces, not bureaucratic mandates, to drive innovation

With laws like the 1992 Cable Act or Congress granting the FCC general spectrum auction authority in 1993, the statutory focus on competition didn't begin with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, but the 1996 Act crystallized it. The idea was straightforward: when providers compete, consumers benefit through lower prices, better service, and faster deployment of new technologies.

In shaping these legislative directives, Congress also recognized that competition is not static. It requires ongoing attention to market structure, entry barriers, and incentives for investment. The goal, in that respect, was not competition for its own sake, but competition as a means to promote innovation and serve the public interest.

And that vision has largely proved correct. Competition has helped lay the foundation for nationwide wireless connectivity. It has supported investments in high-speed broadband networks that power our economy today. And, it has encouraged experimentation, new business models, new services, and new ways of reaching customers.

INCOMPAS has been part of that story from the beginning. Your members have consistently shown that competitive providers can challenge incumbents, deploy infrastructure in hard-to-reach places, and deliver meaningful alternatives for consumers and enterprises alike.

A Marketplace Few Could Have Fully Predicted

At the same time, it's fair to say that competition and innovation have taken forms that policymakers in the 1990s could not have fully anticipated.

Back then, communications policy was often organized around silos, local versus long distance, wireline versus wireless, voice versus data. Today, consumers don't think in those terms. They want options, flexibility, and reliability.

The market tells us consumers want fiber connections at home and at work. They want fixed wireless where it makes sense. They want satellite services to reach remote and underserved areas. And, they want reliable mobile broadband on-the-go.

Voice service, once the centerpiece of communications regulation, is increasingly just an application riding over broadband networks. Video is no longer limited to broadcast television or traditional multichannel video providers. Streaming services now play a central role in how Americans access content, on their schedules, on their devices, and on their terms.

This evolution has brought enormous benefits to consumers. Choice drives innovation, and innovation drives better outcomes. But it also challenges regulators to keep pace, to avoid outdated assumptions and to ensure that policy frameworks reflect how networks and services actually function today, not how they functioned decades ago.

For regulators, that means asking difficult questions: Are our rules technology-neutral? Do they promote investment rather than discourage it? Do they recognize convergence rather than reinforce silos? These questions matter even more as we look toward the next major technological shift.

Competition, Innovation, and the Rise of AI

That brings me to the intersection I want to focus on this morning: competition, innovation, and the future of artificial intelligence.

AI has the potential to be one of the most transformative technologies of our time. We are already seeing its impact across sectors, from health care and education to manufacturing, logistics, and national security.

AI tools can increase productivity, improve decision-making, enhance network operations, and unlock new forms of creativity and economic growth.

INCOMPAS's launch of its AI Competition Center reflects an important truth: how AI develops will depend in large part on whether markets remain competitive, trusted, and dynamic.

Concentration, whether in the computing power to run AI, data, or connectivity, can limit innovation and raise barriers to entry. Competition, by contrast, creates pressure to improve performance, reduce costs, and expand access. It helps ensure that AI's benefits are not confined to a few firms or a few geographies, but are widely shared.

But for AI to deliver on its promise, one foundational requirement must be met: universal, high-quality connectivity.

Connectivity as the Foundation for AI

AI does not exist in a vacuum. It relies on networks, networks that are fast, resilient, and ubiquitous.

Universal connectivity is essential if all Americans are to benefit from AI. That means continued investment in fiber networks, deployed by incumbents and competitive providers.

It also means embracing innovative offerings that use fixed wireless, satellite, and other technologies to extend high-capacity services to every corner of the country.

And connectivity for AI is not just about fixed access. Increasingly, AI will be mobile.

We will interact with AI not only at desktops, but through smartphones, vehicles, and other connected devices. That reality places new demands on mobile networks and underscores the importance of robust wireless infrastructure.

Competition plays a critical role here, too. Competitive providers push the entire ecosystem to build better networks, networks capable of handling AI's demand for higher speeds, lower latency, and greater capacity across the last mile, the middle mile, and the backbone.

Resiliency, Redundancy, and Global Reach

AI also raises the stakes for network resiliency, security, and redundancy.

As more economic and social activity depends on AI-enabled services, network outages become more costly. Redundancy, multiple paths, diverse providers, and resilient and secure architectures, become not a luxury, but a necessity.

Competitive networks contribute directly to that resilience. Domestically, they provide alternative routes and architectures. Globally, they play a critical role in areas like submarine cable deployment, ensuring that data flows are diverse, secure, and robust.

Here again, INCOMPAS members bring valuable expertise. Many of you have spent years deploying networks in communities where you did not have preexisting relationships or legacy advantages. You built trust, navigated local processes, and developed practical know-how for building infrastructure.

That experience will matter not only for networks that support AI, but also for the broader AI ecosystem, data centers, edge facilities, and the power capacity needed to support them.

Building AI infrastructure will also require coordination across sectors, and competitive providers are well-positioned to be leaders in that effort.

What the FCC Is Doing

Let me turn now to what the FCC is doing, and should continue to do, to support competition and innovation in this evolving technological landscape.

First, permitting and access to rights-of-way remain critical. Through the Build America Agenda, the Commission is focused on reducing unnecessary delays and costs associated with network deployment. Pole attachment reform and streamlined permitting are not abstract policy issues; they directly affect how quickly and efficiently networks can be built.

Second, we need an "all of the above" approach to spectrum. Licensed, unlicensed, shared, satellite spectrum – each plays an important role. Mid-band spectrum, in particular, is essential for delivering high-capacity broadband services. Making more spectrum available for commercial use, under clear and predictable rules, supports both competition and innovation.

Third, the Commission continues to advance the IP transition. Moving away from legacy technologies can improve resiliency and reliability, enable new services, and support efforts like robocall prevention. At the same time, businesses need sufficient certainty and predictability to make long-term investment decisions. Getting that balance right is essential.

Fourth, we are streamlining submarine cable licensing. Given the global nature of data flows, and AI workloads in particular, efficient and secure deployment of undersea infrastructure is more important than ever.

Fifth, cybersecurity remains a shared responsibility. The FCC's role is not incident response, but network reliability, resilience, and continuity of service. Public-private partnerships are essential to securing our networks while still enabling continued deployment and innovation.

And, sixth, in light of the recent Executive Order on AI, I expect the Commission to consider how best to approach issues like AI transparency and disclosure, including whether federal action can provide clarity and avoid a patchwork of conflicting state requirements that impede innovation and U.S. leadership.

Looking Ahead: Keeping Up With the Marketplace and Measuring Progress

To ensure our regulations keep pace with marketplace developments, the Commission has a responsibility to track the impact of our policies on competition and innovation, and identify areas where more work can be done. This requires data and an analytical approach that considers both where we've been and where we're headed.

This year's FCC Communications Marketplace Report provides a timely and valuable opportunity for the Commission to make these assessments.

In addition to evaluating the state of competition in the communications marketplace, in all its forms, unlike more siloed inquiries, this Report, required under the law, invites a broad examination of deployment, investment, and market dynamics.

It also requires careful evaluation of barriers to entry, particularly for entrepreneurs and small businesses. As AI becomes more deeply integrated into communications networks and services, those barriers, and opportunities, will increasingly include AI-related infrastructure and capabilities.

The Communications Marketplace Report also provides an opportunity for continued dialog with Congress. The FCC is already taking steps, under its existing statutory authority, to promote the robust, secure, and resilient communications infrastructure needed to support AI. And we are carefully considering the ways AI itself may intersect with our authorities, such as in the robocall context.

Moreover, as the President noted in his recent Executive Order on AI, working collaboratively with Congress can help maximize our ability to get regulatory policy right and ensure U.S. leadership in AI. Whether that involves new authorities related to the communications infrastructure that supports AI, tools that enable AI experimentation by small businesses and entrepreneurs, or other measures, the FCC's data, analysis, and policy expertise can help Congress build on the efforts already underway through the White House AI Action Plan and beyond.

My hope is that future Marketplace Reports will lean into these issues and provide policymakers, industry, and the public with a clear-eyed assessment of how competition is evolving, and what steps might be needed to ensure it continues to thrive.

Finally, let me close where I began.

Competition and innovation have been central to communications policy for decades. They are not ends in themselves, but means to deliver better outcomes for consumers, for businesses, and for our economy.

As we enter the AI era, that partnership between competition and innovation becomes even more important. AI's promise will depend on open markets, robust networks, and policies that encourage investment rather than entrenchment.

INCOMPAS and its members have a critical role to play in that future. I look forward to continuing to work with you, and to hearing your ideas, your concerns, and your solutions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you this morning.