

**REMARKS OF  
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS  
FCC HEARING ON MEDIA OWNERSHIP  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE  
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Thanks are due first and foremost to my friend and colleague, Commissioner Tate, for her leadership and hard work in organizing today's hearing. I know how much she loves this city and we appreciate the hospitality she, and all the good citizens of Nashville, are showing us. This is hallowed and historic ground for those of us who happen to love country music. I started listening to country way back in the early Fifties. Every afternoon on the local radio in Milwaukee, where I grew up, there was a country music program. My brother, Tom, would tune in his room and he was a big Hank Snow fan. I would be tuned in down the hall waiting for my favorite, Hank Williams, to come on. Later on, just as Hank Williams would have it, Tom "saw the light" as to how great Hank Williams was, and I found myself "moving on" for some "stolen moments" with Hank Snow and appreciating his great artistry.

Thanks also to Senator Frist, President Fisher and Belmont University, and Mayor Purcell for welcoming us and to Congressman Jim Cooper who will be here later today and who has been such a great leader on the issues we will be discussing.

Today is the second full-FCC hearing this year on media consolidation. I think it's worth taking a moment to reflect on why we're here today, what this hearing can teach us, and where we're going from here.

We're here today, most of all, because Chairman Martin and my colleagues understand that we cannot go down the road of contemplating far-reaching changes to this nation's media environment without first checking with the American people. Three years ago, the FCC learned this lesson the hard way. Then-Chairman Powell decided—under cover of night and over the objections of Commissioner Adelstein and me—to authorize a sea change in the number of media outlets a single corporation could own in a single community. He managed to ram that decision through the FCC on a 3-2 vote. But then the American people, the Congress, and a federal court rose up as with one voice to say "No Way"—that's not how decisions are made in our democracy, a nation of laws and principles and open exchange, not one of special interests and dollars and closed doors. So those ill-conceived rules were checked and sent back to the FCC to be reworked. Mark that well—because it shows that concerned citizens can still make a difference in this country.

Today's hearing is the full Commission's chance—the chance it didn't take advantage of last time around—to hear from the people who live every day with the effects and consequences of media consolidation—you. So we're here to listen to your history, your experiences, your satisfaction—or dissatisfaction—with the current media environment here in Nashville. Justice Holmes tells us that "a page of history is worth a volume of logic" and I couldn't agree more. **Your** experiences and perspectives are worth several bookshelves of legal submissions from Big Media's lobbyists.

And by the way, if anyone tries to tell you that Big Media's push for more consolidation has gone away, don't believe it. I've seen their recent pleadings. They're still following that same Pied Piper of Consolidation they followed three years ago. They haven't gone away, and their lawyers and lobbyists haven't gone away either. They have money and they have power.

So if we are going to succeed on this—and go on from there to a broader national dialogue on the future of the media in our democracy—a discussion that has been too long delayed and too long denied—it will be because of citizen action from millions of Americans and testimony at hearings like this one.

In addition to public testimony today, we are going to hear from two distinguished panels. The first is composed of people from every end of the music business. In Los Angeles two months ago, we learned how changes in broadcast ownership have squeezed independent content producers off of broadcast television. Now, we're going to hear what changes in radio ownership have meant for practitioners of Nashville's greatest art form who want to get on the radio and for listeners who want to hear them. You know what I learned recently? If you want to tune into country music in Los Angeles or New York City, forget it. There are no full-power country stations in either of those huge markets. What a tragedy. And it's not just country. Last week came reports that Washington, DC may lose its last classical music station to sports talk radio.

History teaches us that creative artists have often been leaders for progressive change and democracy in times of great social and political strain. Their words of protest and wisdom have not only meant a great deal at crucial moments in this nation's past, but still reach out to us down the corridors of the passing years. Our panelists are continuing that proud tradition today and I thank each of them for their courage in coming here today. (And I should warn them that as well as taking notes on what they say, I'll probably be asking for autographs, too.)

Our second panel will address the state of both broadcast and print media here in Nashville. We are fortunate enough to have scholars and advocates on this panel who understand the critical ties between vibrant local media and our democratic way of life—the personal experiences local media can communicate or suppress; the political conversations it can enable or prevent; the abuses of power it can expose or cover up. Our panelists also have much they can teach us about the relationship between commercialism and journalism. I know some believe that buzzwords like economies of scale, leverage, synergy, cross-promotion, diversification, monetization of assets, and so on will somehow save the news business and restore it to glory. That's journalism reduced to just another business and America's media—the way we communicate with one another outside our immediate circles—is decidedly *not* just another business. Local news is democracy's lifeblood—a precious resource, a public trust, and it demands the most careful stewardship from government and, yes, businessmen and women as well. The nation's airwaves are the *people's airwaves*. Broadcasters are permitted to use the people's airwaves for free—and they make a very good living doing so—but only if they serve the public interest. We must hold them to that bargain.

In an era where minority ownership appears to be at shockingly and embarrassingly low lows, while payola allegations continue to raise their ugly heads, when infomercials and propaganda are passed off as news, and where license renewal has become a mindless *pro forma* farce, I believe that the bargain that America made with commercial broadcasting has gotten wildly out of whack. Almost every public interest requirement that broadcasters had to prove they were meeting in order to get their licenses renewed has gone by the boards. You know, I don't think the working press really likes the direction we're heading—not one bit. I think that, given their druthers, our nation's TV and radio news directors, producers and reporters would like to produce high-quality, hard-hitting coverage that serves the public interest and not special interests. How can we help these public-spirited professionals to convince their corporate

parents to give them the resources they need? The FCC could help—not just by foregoing destructive new rules, but proactively working to reinvigorate the public interest. As the dean of the Columbia School of Journalism pointed out earlier this year, the great network news operations of earlier decades existed in part because corporate parents knew they had to go to the FCC and justify their re-licensing every few years. What I hear now from many members of the working press is that, without a meaningful relicensing process at the FCC, there's no way to focus the attention of broadcasting's corporate leadership on the need to comply with meaningful public interest obligations. So we need to restore a sense of balance to the broadcasting bargain. I say to you and I say to my colleagues: it should be the top priority of the FCC to put some life back into our public oversight responsibilities. Let's act like the future of our media depends on it—because it does.

To me these questions about our media are as important as any I know. All the other issues members of this audience care about are funneled and filtered, increasingly, through big media. Dumbed-down news is not helping our democracy any more than homogenized music and national play-lists are giving us entertainment truly reflective of the creative genius of this diverse nation. We are paying too heavy a price for the lack of diversity, localism, creativity and competition that so much consolidation has visited upon us. There is a bottom line here and it's this—the people don't have enough say as to how *their* airwaves are being used and it's time to do something about it.

Thank you for coming here today and for sharing your thoughts with us. I plan to listen and learn and then go out and work for a media environment that works for every person in this hall. We should all, every one of us, be activists in this great cause.