



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on December 9, 2010

FCC Commissioner Blasts TV News for Ignoring Public Interest

FCC commissioner Michael Copps said the state of television news in America is in an “hour of grave peril,” telling the Betty Kay of the BBC’s World News America that TV is not “producing the body of news and information that democracy needs to conduct its civic dialogue.” In fact, warns, Copps, because of this lack the current state of public discussion could be putting the nation’s “democracy” in serious jeopardy.



I think American media has a bad case of substance abuse right now, Copps said, adding that we have to reverse that trend or I think we are going to be pretty close to denying our citizens the essential news and information that they need to have in order to make intelligent decisions about the future direction of their country.

Copps is pushing aggressively for the implementation of a public value test that would be used to determine whether or not TV stations are providing enough local news and information to their viewers. He noted that for many years we had some public interest guidelines that was part of the *quid pro quo* between broadcasters and the government which allowed broadcasters the free use of the airwaves in return for providing public interest content. However, what we’ve had in recent years is an aberration where we have had no oversight of the media even as the public continues to cry out for news and information, news and information, news and information.

He said a test for public value in broadcasting would get us back to the original licensing bargain between broadcasters and the people: in return for free use of airwaves that belong exclusively to the people, licensees agree to serve the public interest as good stewards of a precious national resource.

Copps insisted that his own agency has been lax in overseeing the public interest aspect of the media, allowing deregulation and the subsequent consolidation of broadcast entities to give television stations more power than they deserve over the content they deliver. Copps, who is set to address the Columbia School of Journalism on December 9, will tell the class of future media pros (releasing the text of his speech early to the [Los Angeles Times](#)): The place where I work the Federal Communications Commission blessed it all, encouraged the consolidation mania, and went beyond even that to eviscerate just about every public interest responsibility that generations of reformers had fought for and won in radio and TV.

Sounding peculiarly like a government bureaucrat in search of a problem to fix, Copps noted that over half of the 50 states do not have a full-time reporter covering the goings-on in the U.S. Congress, and cited a study showing that the average 30-minute local news broadcast includes a mere 30-seconds of



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news about local government.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Copps wants to toughen up on the process local TV stations go through to get their FCC broadcast licenses renewed (its a slam-dunk, no-questions-asked process now, he says). And he wants stations to commit to covering more debates and issues-oriented programming during election years as well as be more in touch with the communities they serve. reported the *Times*.

As to how stations would be tested to see if they are coming up to the proper standard of public interest, Copps offered several proposals that would indicate a broadcaster is making meaningful commitments to news and public affairs programming. Increasing the human and financial resources going into news would be one way to benchmark progress, he said. Producing more local civic affairs programming would be another. Our current childrens programming requirements the one remnant of public interest requirements still on the books helped enhance kids programming. Now it is time to put news and information front-and-center.

Copps said that his ultimate goal would be to see more localism in our program diet, more local news and information, and a lot less streamed-in homogenization and monotonous nationalized music at the expense of local and regional talent. Sounding more like the official Minister of Cultural Reform than a bureaucrat in charge of the airwaves, Copps said that much of the homogenized music and entertainment from huge conglomerates constrains creativity, suppresses local talent and detracts from the great tapestry of our nations cultural diversity, and suggested that a quarter of the television programming now given to prime time should be turned over to locally or independently produced talent a sure-fire way to get people to tune out local programming!

Cliff Kincaid of [Accuracy in Media](#) noted that while the deregulation and consolidation that Copps denigrates has lessened governments ability to control the content of local TV, it has also allowed for more creative ideas than would have been fostered under the watchful eye of government bureaucrats who are more concerned about protecting their turf than what is really in the public interest.

He pointed out that, thankfully, the FCCs reach doesnt extend to cable, otherwise there would never have been a Fox News or any other type of alternative news outlet that have captured a portion of broadcast televisions audience over the years.

Concluded Kincaid, What Copps and his fellow liberals are more upset about is that since deregulation conservatives have gained a bigger voice on television and radio and in the process have exposed the liberal agenda for everyone to see.

Photo: Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Kevin J. Martin, left, looks on as commissioner Michael J. Copps, testifies on Capitol Hill on Feb. 1, 2007: AP Images



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