



**FCC Future of Media Panel
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**Remarks of Craig Parshall
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It is a privilege to be here today. The subject of this panel discussion – the future of media in America – is a profoundly important one, and one that is critical to my organization, National Religious Broadcasters (NRB).

Who We Are

NRB is a non-profit association that exists to keep the doors of electronic, broadcast, and digital media open and accessible for the communication of the Christian Gospel. Our membership primarily consists of Christian radio and television broadcasters that produce and/or telecast religious programming, but also includes a wide range of other ministry organizations that engage in communications activities. The vast majority of our broadcast members are non-commercial. The vast majority of our non-broadcaster members are non-profit entities. Our data indicates that in the Christian TV and radio production market, about 80% of programming is done by non-coms. There are about 2,400 Christian radio stations and about 100 full-power Christian TV stations in the United States. Fifty-five percent of these programs air on secular stations as well as Christian ones. Sixty percent air locally, 45% also air regionally, and some 63% also air nationally with obvious overlap within these categories.

The point here is that there is a general penetration throughout the nation of some form of Christian media.

Use of the web

In 2007, NRB conducted a comprehensive survey of the general Christian radio and television market as a follow-up to a prior 2005 survey. The results indicate the extensive use of the Internet by Christian communications organizations:

- 94% of all Christian radio and television stations had websites;
- 66% of all Christian radio stations streamed programming on the web, and more than one-third of those who were not, planned on doing so by 2008;
- 42% of Christian television stations streamed programming on the web, and 42% of those who were not, planned on doing so by 2008;
- 65% of all Christian radio and television stations used the web to promote their programming, and 60% of non-commercial Christian broadcasters used the Internet for the generation of donations.

Anecdotally, I can say that from 2007 to the present, all of these numbers have increased relating to Christian broadcasters' use of web sites, web streaming, and high-speed Internet services.

News and Information Programming

The thrust of this part of the Future of Media inquiry, as I understand it, deals with the need to increase the quality, quantity and availability of news and information to the American public. Non-commercial broadcasters and media outlets, a vast number of them Christian ones, comprise a wealth of resources available to help achieve this goal. Our data indicates that about 40% of all Christian TV and radio programs fall into the category of “news and information,”

if we include news analysis and talk formats in this grouping along with variety programs, longer-form magazine programs, as well as straight news shows.

Yet non-com Christian broadcasters accomplish a great deal with very little. The majority of radio stations have five or less full-time employees and five or less part-time employees. Being entirely donor driven as well, and restricted by FCC rules regarding sponsorships, all of this limits the ability of our non-com media groups to do as much original news and information as they would like.

But there are exceptions. One of our members, the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), has an array of national and international reporters who do original television coverage of local, national, and global news. Another of our television members, the Total Living Network (TLN), with a hub in Chicago, has its programming viewed in more than 30 states. Its regular line-up includes original weekly programming on women's issues, health, marriage and family issues, discussions with celebrities regarding lifestyle and faith issues, money and finance, current events, issues impacting persons 50 and older, and a program spotlighting local Christian ministries in the greater Chicago area. Total Living Network produced an original documentary titled *Acts of Mercy* about the humanitarian work of mercy ships, which are floating hospitals, staffed by volunteer doctors who perform extreme plastic surgery for hideously deformed individuals in West Africa. This program was nominated for an Emmy Award and received several other recognitions for excellence in documentary work.

Meeting Public Need

One thing that distinguishes Christian media groups from the mainstream press is the obvious mission-oriented approach to news and information. We believe this is a positive

attribute. Later, I will discuss how this might be viewed negatively, as a barrier to full participation by Christian media groups in America's future media landscape.

Christian media not only recognizes and identifies local and regional needs — poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment, crime, etc. — but it also seeks to solve those problems. In addition to the obvious application of a Christian spiritual message, we raise funds, energize volunteers, send people to soup kitchens, rescue missions, schools, jails, and to the epicenter of disasters. After the earthquake in Haiti, NRB worked with numerous of our member organizations to channel financial support to those relief groups with experience in Haiti and with boots on the ground. Public contributions were received through a text-message cell phone system. One of our smaller broadcasting networks raised \$250,000 for Haiti relief in over-the-air appeals.

Barriers to a Healthy Media Environment

But there are clear and present barriers to Christian media receiving full participation in the future news and information landscape. Too frequently to even warrant citation here, Christian media has been subsumed into that insidious category of dangerous “right-wing media.” Former President Bill Clinton gave us a useful example of that this month, when, during the solemn commemoration of the Oklahoma City Bombing, he opined that the “right-wing talk radio” and “right-wing media” supposedly helped to fuel the extremism that caused that mindless act of genocide. How did the mainstream media respond? President Clinton was given a soft-ball on ABC's “This Week” to simply repeat his Oklahoma speech, unchallenged. *Time* magazine's Mark Halperin praised him for having an “extraordinary” knack for “connecting the dots between the heated rhetoric ... and the bombing ...” And *Politico* carried an op-ed by one of the Oklahoma bombing prosecutors pointing out how the Oklahoma City

bombing could happen again, and how the current conservative and libertarian objections to the political scene in Washington may be partially responsible if it does. I found, to my dismay, an utter lack of challenges in the major press to Mr. Clinton's premise, either on the basis of logic, history, or the First Amendment.

What concerns me is that Evangelicals, including those in the Christian media, have been subjected to the kind of vitriol from respected journalists that one would think would be directed only to the rants of militia radio, the only kind of broadcasting that could conceivably qualify for Mr. Clinton's critique. *Harper's* magazine has made a cottage industry of this kind of anti-Evangelical attack. *Atlantic Monthly* recently had a cover article – "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?" - i.e., America's current economic decline. PBS's Bill Moyers has accused Bible-believing Christians of harboring a theological end-times belief that is a threat to planet earth. Former *Time* correspondent William Dowell, in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, compared evangelical conservatives to Al Qaeda.

In addition to this barrier of characterizing conservative Christianity as dangerous, there is another: I suspect that there is a general apprehension among many journalists that the firmly held religious beliefs of non-commercial Christian media make objective news and information dissemination impossible for them. Counter to this, is the frequent citation of the credibility of public broadcasting's NPR and PBS. The Director of Policy and Planning for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has called the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) "the most trusted source" of all news and information. And FCC Commissioner Copps called it the "jewel of our broadcasting industry" in the prior panel discussion on this subject.

Often cited is the recent poll relating to the trust that public places in various media outlets. Asked which media groups Americans trusted "a great deal" regarding news and public

affairs programs, respondents indicated that PBS was first (40%), followed by Fox News (29%). National Public Radio was fourth at 25%, after CNN. Aside from the fact that PBS enters more homes than either Fox or CNN, which could account for the result, there is another sobering fact that is undeniable: 60% or more of Americans do not trust, a “great deal,” any of the media, *including* public broadcasting.

This is an issue all of us face, Christian or secular. As for the idea that religious beliefs preclude journalistic objectivity, I think back to a fracas that happened in the fall of 2008 involving an NPR affiliate in New York. National Public Radio sent a professed Wiccan to report on a public art display that had converted a phone booth into a public prayer stall. When Catholics objected that the Wiccan reporter had been biased in covering the story, NPR responded, and I quote: “There’s no bias in this story and to imply that there is because of a reporter’s religious beliefs is absurd.” My question is this: Is it equally “absurd” then to posit a bias on the part of Christian journalists simply because of their religious beliefs?

There is no question that Christian coverage of the news needs to either strive for objectivity, or when a theological worldview dictates a certain slant, then simply admit it. But that is usually not the problem. Christian media often admits its bias. It is in the nature of the Christian mission to be bold in proclaiming biblical presuppositions.

On the other hand, secular media has its own problems with bias.

The *Washington Post*’s Deborah Howell admitted that candidate Obama had been featured on the front page twice as many times as Senator McCain, and after the election she noted that coverage by the *Post* did seem to favor Senator Obama. The same was noted with reference to the general media’s favoritism toward then-Senator Obama in studies by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, and the Center for Media and Public

Affairs of George Mason University. And you may not like Bernie Goldberg's book on bias inside CBS, but at least we have to admit that it contains some powerful evidence that major league broadcasting networks have, from time to time, had lapses in objectivity.

Now as for whether Christian "journalism" is actually possible, in the traditional sense, I give you my friend, Dan Wooding, formerly a Fleet Street reporter for a London tabloid, who became a Christian and started his own media organization, ASSIST News Service (ANS). Since then he interviewed Mother Teresa in Calcutta before she became a world figure. Just days after the exit of Idi Amin from Uganda, Dan was there interviewing survivors of this bloody regime. He was one of the first Christian reporters allowed into North Korea and permitted to broadcast live from its capital. And Dan covered the historic Billy Graham crusade in Moscow in 1991.

Solutions

One solution for the distrust that I think exists between secular and Christian media organizations is a simple one. We need to talk together both about the common, as well as the dissimilar, challenges that we face. I appreciate Steve Waldman's invitation for me to speak today. Perhaps this is a kind of modest beginning.

Second, there are practical ways that non-commercial broadcasters can be appropriately supported. Much of the conversation among communications pundits seems to revolve around additional funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as some kind of antidote for what ails American journalism. Respectfully, I do not believe that is the answer. I think the impulse to super-subsidize public broadcasting ignores the Founders' vision that the media should have a horizontal relationship with, and among, the people; not a vertical relationship as

a federal functionary with federal dollars. Public broadcasting is a reality, however, and the breadth of its coverage and the production values of its broadcast programming is notably superb.

Rather, my concern is that non-commercial broadcasters are being left to languish. At NRB we have two suggestions. First, the current FCC rules regarding the ability of non-coms to raise funds for other charity groups need to be changed. For all practical purposes, absent a national or global catastrophe, non-coms are prohibited from raising funds for other organizations. NRB supports a rule change, that is currently on circulation in the FCC, whereby every non-com could spend up to 1% of its annual on-air time raising funds for third-party non-profit groups recognized under IRS code section 501(c)(3). This would increase the synergy between non-commercial broadcasters and other non-profit groups, and would meet public needs at the same time.

Second, NRB urges the FCC to both clarify, and to relax, the current rules that permit non-commercial broadcasters to give very short sponsorship mentions on the air as long as they “identify” the sponsor but do not “promote” the sponsor. The line-drawing here is confusing and inconsistent. Non-commercial broadcasters are not asking for the federal government to subsidize their activities. But we are asking the government to fertilize the media landscape to facilitate growth. We think that these two rule changes would go a long way toward helping non-commercial broadcasters to do an even better job to meet the news and information needs of the American public.