

KEYNOTE REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER BRENDAN CARR

AT THE MEDIA INSTITUTE FREE SPEECH AMERICA GALA

“A VOICE FOR EVERYONE”

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Thank you, Chairman Wiley, for the kind introduction. And thank you Rick and the entire Media Institute team for asking me to help honor your two awardees tonight—my former FCC colleague Mignon Clyburn and David Cohen. Over the last six months, I think we’ve all become accustomed to these virtual events. They are a chance to feel a little more normal, even if for just 15 minutes at a time. We dust off our “Zoom shirts,” maybe find a jacket, and if you’re lucky enough to have hair perhaps run a comb through it. Needless to say, I can skip that last step. Hopefully, the video team can insert a laugh track right about now so it appears that this joke landed.

But in all seriousness, this is a special honor for me because I get to share this virtual stage with two former bosses. Some of you may recall that my legal career began in earnest at Wiley. I have memories (some fond ones even) of working long days, and longer nights, and even longer weekends at Wiley as a young lawyer. Joking aside, I can say without hesitation that Chairman Wiley’s insights, his mentorship, and his guidance were invaluable to me as my career developed—a story that many of you can certainly relate to.

I also had the privilege to serve in 2013 under then-Chairwoman Clyburn when I worked as a staff attorney in the FCC’s Office of the General Counsel. As both FCC Chair and Commissioner, Mignon worked tirelessly to advance the FCC’s core mission of ensuring that every American has access to world-leading communications services—from high-speed Internet to a diverse and competitive media landscape.

And not to be overlooked, tonight’s second honoree, David Cohen, is being recognized for his work in the private sector to extend the Internet’s reach to millions of Americans. David spearheaded Comcast’s Internet Essentials program, which has delivered Internet connectivity to more than 8 million low-income Americans since 2011.

When I reflect on tonight’s awardees and on their accomplishments, I think about how far we have come as a country in building out high-speed Internet connections and why that work is so important. So much of the conversation these days—be it current events, sports, politics—is happening online. If you can’t connect, you can’t contribute.

But as we’ve seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, connectivity means so much more. As stay at home orders washed across the country, our daily routines—driving to work, going to the doctor, sending the kids off to school, even catching up with friends—were upended overnight. Staying at home prompted us to recreate these routines online in an instant. That sudden, massive transition made our Internet connections more important than ever. And it also added additional urgency to the efforts to ensure that *everyone* is connected.

I’d like to focus on one area, in particular, where I believe the FCC’s efforts have met the moment and made a real difference in the lives of countless Americans, particularly those in vulnerable populations—telehealth. And I think it’s particularly fitting to discuss this topic because it builds on so

much of the work Commissioner Clyburn achieved in her time at the agency. She has long been a believer in the potential of telehealth. Indeed, in 2014, at her urging the FCC launched a Connect2Health Task Force. The Task Force has now played an invaluable role in examining the relationship between high-speed Internet connections and health care outcomes.

We are continuing to build on the telehealth work that Commissioner Clyburn pioneered. Indeed, for years now, the FCC has played a key role in supporting the build out of high-speed Internet services to health care facilities. But we're now seeing a new trend. The delivery of high-tech, high-quality care is no longer limited to the confines of connected, brick-and-mortar facilities. With remote patient monitoring and mobile health applications that can be accessed right on a smartphone or tablet, we now have the technology to deliver high-quality care directly to patients, regardless of where they are located. You can think of this as the health care equivalent of shifting from Blockbuster to Netflix.

My first experience with this new technology came several years ago while visiting the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC). That's when UMMC professionals explained how they launched a pilot program in the Mississippi Delta to improve the lives of patients with diabetes. That program showed great results for the patients and significant cost savings compared to traditional care methods. So we started the process of standing up a new FCC initiative to support this trend towards connected care.

Back then, we had no idea how important providing care at a distance would be in today's pandemic. But because of all the leg work we had been putting in—from Chairwoman Clyburn's time forward—the FCC was able to stand up a COVID-19 telehealth program in record time; it was a matter of days from the time President Trump signed the CARES Act to an FCC order. That program has made an impact in a very short time. All told, the FCC approved \$200 million in support to 539 health care providers located in communities throughout the country. I have had the chance to visit with many of these health care providers and see firsthand the benefits of this truly life-changing (and often times, lifesaving) technology.

Of course, years before my own visit to the Mississippi Delta, Commissioner Clyburn spent time in that same small town, Ruleville, and recognized the potential impact of telemedicine, particularly for those in rural communities. As she said at the time, "Connectivity is critical to healthcare." She was absolutely correct, and her tireless efforts to connect those most in need are a big reason why we are honoring her tonight.

As Americans ramped up their use of telehealth and many other online connections during COVID-19, traffic on our communications infrastructure spiked. I'm proud to report that throughout this surge in traffic, America's networks fared exceptionally well. While our networks delivered high quality service despite elevated traffic levels, our friends in other advanced economies were not so fortunate. Their networks strained to maintain quality and speed, yet our networks showed no significant reduction in speed or increase in latency. In fact, U.S. wireless networks saw speed increases despite the significant jump in data usage

America's networks performed because of the private sector's massive investment in our Internet infrastructure over the past few years. For example, in 2019, telecom crews built out more miles of high-speed fiber than ever before and the U.S. wireless industry invested \$29.1 billion—that's a four-year high and number one in the world. And we won't stop there. In the first half of this year alone, the pace of wireless builds and upgrades doubled and the number of communities benefiting from small cell builds recently increased from three- to four-fold depending on the provider. All of these new builds and

investments have increased speeds and connected more families. This benefits all of us whether or not we're in a sudden pandemic.

The investment in networks and their performance under stress don't happen by chance. They are fostered by a light-touch regulatory approach to infrastructure.

At the Commission, we've taken several concrete steps to modernize our infrastructure rules over the past few years. We updated the federal historic and environmental rules that were needlessly delaying the build out of high-speed cell sites. We accelerated the construction of small cells by building on the commonsense reforms adopted by the states. We streamlined the process for swapping out utility poles to add wireless equipment. We worked with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation on a process that expedites review for wireless infrastructure builds that are essential for immediate, COVID-19 response efforts. And we recently expedited the upgrade of thousands of existing wireless towers to 5G by clarifying the rules surrounding Section 6409. This will make a particular difference in rural and remote communities.

The FCC's work to modernize our infrastructure rules enabled the private sector to make America home to the strongest 5G platform in the world. 5G is live today, not just in places like New York or San Francisco, but in Defiance County, Ohio, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I am proud of the results our reforms have delivered. And I look forward to continuing to build on these efforts.

While wireless towers across the country are being upgraded to 5G, there's another great wave of upgrades happening on broadcast towers and across the media landscape—the upgrade to ATSC 3.0. It's a new standard that allows broadcasters to do more with their signals by transmitting in Internet Protocol, or IP. Much of the attention on ATSC 3.0 has focused on how it will transform broadcast television, including transmitting Ultra HD video and allowing content to be personalized to a household. But focusing solely on the television applications misses the technology's full potential. By transmitting the data as IP and remembering that broadcast channels are spectrum, we can reconceptualize what this technology can be used for. This technology looks less strictly like refined broadcast TV and begins to look more like Broadcast Internet. Every broadcast channel using this standard has about enough spectrum to transmit 25 Mbps over the entire coverage footprint of its transmission facilities. That's the equivalent of a new broadband link down to every household that station serves.

What could we do with this new Broadcast Internet pipe? For telemedicine applications, IoT, and smart ag, Broadcast Internet's broad coverage could push data over a large area. For autonomous vehicles, the service could send targeted map and traffic data or provide fleet-wide software updates. And for many families, it could mean another option for high-speed downloads—from movies to applications—delivered over the same spectrum that they've long used for over-the-air television.

Given all of this potential, I was pleased that the Commission unanimously approved an order over the summer to ensure that Broadcast Internet services are not weighed down by legacy media regulations. Our decision makes clear that broadcasters and other innovators can offer Broadcast Internet services nationwide without triggering the FCC's TV station ownership rules. That certainty should encourage further investment and development of this technology.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to address a critical impediment to The Media Institute's goals of encouraging competition in the media marketplace and promoting excellence in journalism—the FCC's media ownership regulations.

If you'd like to see these regulations in action, I'd invite you to visit Powell, Wyoming. That's where I stopped by a local radio station, only to find its doors locked. After we were finally able to contact someone to let us inside, I got a good look at their operations—effectively a Dell laptop playing music pumped in from some big city somewhere else.

A couple of miles away, there is a local broadcast company that is investing in their community and the types of local news and entertainment programming that are attuned to the needs of their listeners. This company wanted to invest in the Powell station and originate live and local programming for this underserved community. But they can't. Not because they lack the capital or a willing seller, but because the FCC won't let them. Our ownership rules—which are supposed to promote competition, a diversity of viewpoints, and localism—are keeping that laptop powered up while preventing actual investment in local newsgathering and the local jobs that come with it.

This doesn't make much sense to me. In a diverse and growing media marketplace, we need to do everything we can to promote investment in local content. Instead, our rules often frustrate these efforts. Sadly, our latest attempt to modernize these ownership rules is stalled in the courts. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the need for common sense reforms to help promote competition and increase access to the local news and information that is so vital, yet is too often out of reach for those in rural and other underserved communities.

So with that, I will again thank Rick and The Media Institute for inviting me to speak tonight. And to the honorees, congratulations and thank you for all you do.