

Keynote Remarks of FCC Commissioner Anna M. Gomez
Featured Speaker at The Media Institute's
2024 'Free Speech America' Gala
October 29, 2024

Good evening. Thank you to The Media Institute for hosting this event and thank you, Rick, for the kind introduction.

We are just one week away from a critical election, and I am thinking a lot about the challenges that Americans are facing in navigating the news media environment and understanding what's happening in their local communities and across the country as they prepare to make important decisions at the ballot box. Though we live in a time when news is at our fingertips, being a properly informed member of civil society can be an elusive goal. Mis- and disinformation cloud our view of reality and inhibit our ability to discern the truth. I am not exaggerating when I say concern about mis- and disinformation is one of the issues raised most often with me since I became an FCC Commissioner. And I think it's a concern we all share.

We are here tonight to celebrate those who have worked to preserve freedom of speech, so it is imperative that I flag at the outset that, when it comes to mis- and disinformation, regulatory options are limited, as they should be. The Commission is not in the business of regulating content. Full stop. The criticality of the First Amendment cannot be overstated. Freedom of speech is a pillar of American democracy, and our country needs a press free from interference from regulators like me. There is no denying, however, that technological changes to the communications and media ecosystem over the last 30 years have transformed how we get our news. And still, media, in its various forms, has long had a powerful influence on our society.

A timely and famous illustration of this influence was the 1938 adaption of the book *The War of the Worlds* into a Halloween episode on the CBS "Mercury Theatre on the Air" radio series featuring a fictional news bulletin about Martians invading New Jersey. The program aired on October 30 and included disclaimers of its fictional content, and it is clear that those involved in the program's development and production never intended to mislead anyone.

Nonetheless, some listeners, missing the disclaimers and sometimes confusing the "facts," mistook the program for a real news report about either a natural disaster or an invasion, with some confusion as to whether the invaders were Germans or Martians. The result was anxiety, fear, and outreach to the police and the press. In addition to being a great story and launching Orson Welles's legendary career, this episode in history provides a lesson on the importance of context and evidence of the power that media holds over us, especially when the content presented to us elicits an emotional, fear-based response.

In this case, the "War of the Worlds" broadcast had limited listenership and an even smaller subset of people who believed what they heard. But one can only imagine how far and wide a false story about a foreign threat could travel with the powerful media platforms we have today.

Media today is more diverse and decentralized than it ever has been. Digital platforms have democratized content creation, allowing individuals and small organizations to publish far-reaching content. They provide a space for voices of all kinds, including those that have historically been marginalized or otherwise excluded by traditional media. This is a huge win for free speech.

However, the democratization of media comes with its challenges as well. While journalistic integrity serves as the backbone for traditional news media, the same ethical standard is not always followed by social media content creators and sharers. This means that trustworthy content is dispersed into a sea of information with varying levels of reliability, making it difficult for its audience to know what to believe.

When I spoke at a Media Institute luncheon earlier this year, I highlighted a February *New York Times* story that detailed the fallout from a rumor propagated on social media about a #ARkStorm [Hashtag Arc-Storm]. One viral post from an emergency preparedness enthusiast claimed that a rare atmospheric onslaught with catastrophic state-wide flooding was headed for California. Despite the lack of scientific evidence, the story gained momentum, fueled by the fear and panic of those re-sharing the post.

I mused in my remarks that, rather than promoting a fake storm, the story could have easily been a false narrative downplaying the threat of a real, imminent storm. I said that we couldn't afford to have a falsehood like that sow distrust in the systems that ensure the public's safety. Well, earlier this month, to my disappointment but not surprise, we saw just such a dangerous scenario play out, first with Hurricane Helene, and then again with Hurricane Milton. Untrustworthy news sources shared hoaxes and conspiracy theories to spark chaos and sow skepticism about our government's disaster response. The swirl of harmful rumors dissuaded survivors from seeking help and weakened morale among the first responders, particularly as they became the subject of threats.

During times of crisis especially, local news keeps Americans informed. While the news of an impending storm might reach people through social media first, local broadcasters stand at the ready, providing timely updates and community-specific information in an easy-to-access, reliable format. As our nation contends with a growing frequency in weather-related disasters, it is imperative that we make preserving local media a priority.

Preserving localism in broadcast media has long been one of the FCC's key pillars of media policy. Localism is rooted in the belief that broadcast stations should serve the needs and interests of their local communities. Over the past year, I have met with numerous broadcasters, from KSAT-12 in San Antonio, Texas, to Telemundo 51 in South Florida, to New Mexico PBS in Albuquerque, and WTTG Fox5 just up the road in Bethesda, which I visited this afternoon. It is clear to me that local broadcasters have a unique ability to connect with their viewers. They provide Americans with the information they need, for making simple day-to-day decisions like what to wear based on the weather to making big-picture decisions, such as who should be the next mayor of their town.

With mis- and disinformation on the rise, localism in media is as important as ever. Thus, as new forms of media are disrupting the media marketplace, our challenge is to strike a balance between preserving the local news we so desperately need and embracing the benefits of new media forms, all while combating misinformation. Regardless of where changes in the media ecosystem take us, we must continue to view localism as a key pillar of media policy in America. Local media is one of the most powerful defenses we have against mis- and disinformation, and I strongly believe it will continue to serve us well.

Congratulations to Floyd Abrams, Patrick Butler, and Dick Wiley. We are all grateful for your contributions to media policy and the preservation of free speech. Finally, thank you to The Media Institute for having me here tonight – and Happy Halloween to you all.