

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FOUR FREEDOMS AWARDS CEREMONY
HYDE PARK, NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 17, 2011**

To receive this medal today—inspired by my hero Franklin Roosevelt, on this hallowed ground, alongside four Americans who have contributed so much to advancing the Four Freedoms, in the company of my wonderful family (each of whom is entitled to a share of this award), and surrounded by so many friends—is, for me, the honor of all honors. You give me a truly moving moment, and I thank the Roosevelt Institute for something I will cherish so long as I live.

More even than honor, this award confers challenge—challenge to me, challenge to you, challenge to our nation. The challenge is to guarantee Freedom of Speech and Expression which, translated into Twenty-first century American terms, means that no citizen should be denied the news and information he or she needs to participate responsibly in our democracy any place in the land.

Freedom of Speech and Expression is inextricably linked with Freedom of the Press, with an uninhibited, competitive and vibrant marketplace of ideas, and with the absence of consolidated control in that marketplace. That is what the First Amendment and the first of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms are all about. These have been the premise of our system of self-government since the beginning. A shining goal—but never fully achieved and every day threatened.

In our own generation, in our own country, these Freedoms have been pushed back by special interests that have ravaged the diversity of local journalism and left in their path of destruction a diminished and too often dumbed-down civic dialogue. Freedom of Speech and Expression suffers from the excesses of financial speculators who are more interested in the bottom line on the quarterly report than in quality news on the front page or the evening news. Freedom of Speech and Expression is further impaired by a federal government absent without leave for more than 30 years from its responsibility to protect the public interest. Instead, government—and I speak specifically of the Federal Communications Commission where I work—has abetted the decline of our small “d” democratic dialogue by, for example, failing to insist that the people's airwaves serve the people's interest.

Building news and information infrastructure that digs more deeply, gathers facts before shouting opinions, and affords expression to the many voices of this nation's wondrous diversity may be our greatest calling now. Our country confronts challenges to its viability in some ways reminiscent of the 1930s, making it a national imperative that every American be empowered with the news and information essential for knowledgeable decision-making. Without that, the challenges go misunderstood, untended, unresolved. When our media, our press and our journalism catch cold, democracy catches pneumonia. Dr. New Deal prescribed strong cures for the challenges of his time; now we need the restorative medicine of reform in ours.

Now, as then, powerful forces combine against needed reform. We can cower before their money and their lobbies in unreasoning, unjustified fear—or, in true Rooseveltian fashion, we can take them on, relish the battle, mobilize the American people, and do democracy's work. Time and again, We the People have come together to renew our Freedoms. Citizen action can still work, even in this era when so few wield so much outrageous influence. Organized citizen action is how America overcomes. Generations of reformers proved it—abolitionists, civil rights crusaders, women's rights champions, consumer advocates, disabilities activists, labor unions, media rights defenders—committing to a cause, challenging powers grown too strong, making a difference and moving America forward. Franklin Roosevelt achieved his victories because such groups were there, helping him, sometimes even prodding him, and together they redeemed the promise of America. Now Freedom of Speech and Expression summons us to action again. Seek no farther for *this* generation of Americans' rendezvous with destiny.