

20th Anniversary of Telecommunications Act

Remarks by FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler

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Twenty years ago, I stood right there as President Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

It is a privilege to return to this special venue to salute the work of President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and the former Commerce Committee and subcommittee leaders – Senators Larry Pressler and Fritz Hollings, Representatives Tom Bliley and John Dingell, Senator Trent Lott, Representative Jack Fields and now-Senator Ed Markey – to produce a bipartisan, forward-looking revision of telecommunications policy.

We would be remiss if we also didn't celebrate the lives of Rep. Mike Oxley and Sen. Ted Stevens, and Sen. Daniel Inouye without whom we never would have reached this point.

The Telecommunications Act was a watershed between the era of analog networks and the competition-enhancing, converged networks of the digital era. Its authors had a vision – the vision to enact flexible and sensible policies that would allow the bounteous effects of digital networks to benefit consumers by stimulating competition and innovation. But of course, neither the authors of the legislation – nor anyone – could have imagined the digital communications cornucopia that was to come.

The Telecom Act of 1996 was a kick in the pants that focused and accelerated trends that had been percolating in both Congressional and FCC policy debates. With the Telecom Act, Congress moved from percolating to a full boil the shift in policy to encourage competition rather than the previous micromanagement of scarcity.

Then that boiling bucket was passed to Reed Hundt and the FCC to implement; a prodigious lift that led to 84 implementation decisions in 18 months.

Those of us today who operate in the shadow of the leaders who charted this new course have the incredible privilege of continuing what they started.

In the 21st Century, the Telecom Act commands us to re-orient our focus to the effects of digital networks on consumers, competition, and innovation.

It established ground rules whereby new entrants could challenge incumbents. We must continue these policies for, after all, the underlying concept of the American economy is competition, competition, competition as a means to achieve the greatest consumer benefits.

The Telecom Act of 1996 started us down the path of ever-expanding network connectivity. Today that path leads to high-speed broadband networks and the reallocation of spectrum as an increasingly important broadband pathway in the 21st Century.

The Telecom Act recognized the importance of access to networks. The establishment of E-Rate connected America's schools and libraries to the Internet.

The creation of a Universal Service Fund to support access by those in high-cost areas as well as low-income Americans established as national policy that broadband connectivity must reach all Americans, regardless of location, means, or ability. And, of course, access to networks goes hand-in-hand with access on open, fast and fair networks.

Here's the bottom line: In the past 20 years, we've gone from flip phones to fitbits, from VHS to HBONow. Looking down the road, we cannot predict what the new digital networks will deliver next. We are no more prescient about what's next than were those leaders 20 years ago. We are assembling a jigsaw without benefit of the picture on the top on the top of the box.

But we do have a set of instructions. Those of us following the instructions of the Telecom Act can – and must – encourage whatever that “next” is through good old American competition. We can – and must – enable whatever is “next” with new spectrum – including spectrum to assure American leadership in 5G. And those of us with responsibility today can – and must – harness the wisdom and the instructions in the Telecom Act of 1996 to put consumers first.

Thank you.