

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
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Good morning. It is a treat to join you for my first set of remarks since returning to the Federal Communications Commission. As some of you may know, I had an earlier stint serving as a Commissioner at the agency which came to an end at the start of the year. I had more than a few months off. Then I was reconfirmed and given the unusual honor of heading back. In my time away I did nothing fancy—but everything important. I had the sweet privilege of attending every school performance and every little league game. I had the opportunity to reacquaint myself with the world through my children’s eyes and experience as digital natives.

It’s trite but true that a little distance provides perspective. Because in my time away, one thing became abundantly clear: The future belongs to the connected. No matter who you are or where you live in this country, you need access to modern communications for a fair shot at 21st century success.

So I return to the agency with these things front of mind. I return with a deep conviction that digital access is essential for opportunity. I return with an unwavering commitment to making sure that opportunity is available to everyone, everywhere. I return an impatient optimist, because I believe it is possible to build a better digital future for all of us.

I think the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops knows a thing or two about this. Because I know you are not just stewards of pastoral tradition, you are spirited advocates for a more just future. I know because I see your advocacy in everything from education to social welfare to immigration to civil rights to, of course, communications. Though we do not share the same faith tradition, I think we share something fundamental—the desire to speak up in service of what is just and right. We share the belief, common to both Catholic Social Teaching and the Jewish tradition of Tikkun Olam, that a little ruckus in service of human dignity and the common good is a good thing.

So let me make a little ruckus today. I’ll start—and get right into it—with net neutrality.

The United States Internet economy is the envy of the world. We invented it. The applications economy began here on our shores. The broadband below us and the airwaves all around us deliver its collective might to our homes, businesses, and civic institutions in communities across the country. What produced this dynamic engine of entrepreneurship, experimentation, and opportunity is a foundation of openness.

That openness is revolutionary. It means creating without permission, building community beyond geography, organizing without physical constraints, consuming content you want when and where you want it, and cultivating markets for goods and ideas not just around the corner but around the world.

I believe it is essential that we sustain this foundation of openness—and that is why I support net neutrality.

Net neutrality preserves our right to communicate freely online. It is the principle that Internet service providers must provide access to all lawful content and applications regardless of source, without blocking or favoring certain products or web sites. As Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web suggests, net neutrality is the right to access what is online without discrimination.

It took ten years of policymaking and three trips to court, but the Commission found a home for net neutrality in the Communications Act. Last year, in a 184-page opinion, the agency’s net neutrality policies were clearly and unequivocally upheld. As a result, we now have rules in place that prevent Internet blocking, throttling, and paid prioritization.

If only the story ended here.

Even though our net neutrality policies are now legally viable and wildly popular, the leadership at the Commission wants to revisit Internet openness. It has started a proceeding that tears at the legal foundation of net neutrality. It has proposed cutting the rules we have and instead offering our broadband providers the power to favor sites, content, and ideas; the power to discriminate with our traffic; and the power to become censors and gatekeepers for all that is online.

This is worrisome. I know you understand. Because the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has expressed concern about the Commission dismantling net neutrality. You have made clear that “[w]ithout protections to prohibit Internet providers from tampering with content delivery . . . the fundamental attributes of the Internet, in which users have unfettered access to content and capacity to provide content to others, are jeopardized.” Moreover, you have eloquently made the case that the stakes for faith communities are especially high, as online platforms have become an essential way “to convey views on matters of public concerns and religious teachings.”

At the 50th World Communications Day, Pope Francis noted that “the digital world is a public square.” I agree. I also believe that square offers more opportunity when we all have access. So keep speaking up. Find allies—in the faith community and elsewhere—and keep pressing your case. Make noise in service of the common good—because that is the way to make change.

Next, I want to move from the power of the Internet to the broader state of the media and media ownership.

There was a time when we waited in the morning for the news to hit the front stoop in paper form. Then we waited at night, huddled around the glow of a single television screen, for the evening news. Those days are long gone. My children will never know a world where news and information are available in such a limited way. Because now we look for content at any time, in any place, and on any screen handy.

This is exciting. But, let's be honest, it's also challenging. The economic models that sustained traditional newsgathering have been forever changed by digitization—and while new platforms are multiplying, what is viral is not always verifiable.

If you need an object lesson in why this is true, look no further than the aftermath of last week's unthinkable evil in Las Vegas. Frothy stuff took hold online. Disinformation squeezed out real information. Filter bubbles emerged that verified what some of us wanted to believe, rather than what all of us needed to know—that at least 58 souls were lost and more than 500 individuals were injured.

This is troubling. How do we advance journalism when algorithms are ascendant? How do we advance trust in real facts instead of dismissing them as fake news? This is hard. I don't have all the answers. But I do know this: The solution doesn't come with the Commission scrapping its policies to prevent media concentration.

For decades, at the direction of Congress, the Commission has maintained limits on the number of broadcast stations that a single company can own. These limits were designed to help sustain media diversity, localism, and competition. Those values may not be especially trendy, but I think they are solid. I think they play a critical role in advancing the mix of facts we all need to make decisions about our lives, our communities, and our country.

I fear we are on the cusp of dismantling those values. I am concerned the Commission is gearing up to approve a transaction that will hand a single broadcast company the unprecedented ability to reach more than 70 percent of American households. It hasn't happened yet. But there are disconcerting signs. Before I returned to the Commission, the agency inexplicably resurrected an outdated and scientifically inaccurate system for tallying station ownership, known as the UHF discount. It also reversed an effort to investigate joint sales agreements. Both steps helped speed the way for this transaction—which would combine two broadcasting giants: Tribune and Sinclair.

I'm not alone in my concerns about the concentration that will result from this proposed transaction. I'm not alone in my fear that it will do harm to the time-tested principles of diversity, localism, and competition. There is opposition across the political spectrum. In fact, I can't put it better than the Newsmax Group, which has warned that a "a free and diverse press, a bedrock principle of American democracy," will be irreparably harmed by this merger.

The bottom line is we are not going to remedy what ails our media with a rush of new consolidation. We are not going to fix our inability to ferret fact from fiction by doubling down on a single company owning ever more of our public airwaves.

Beyond concentration, other complexities loom on the broadcast horizon. The Commission is exploring a new television standard—known as ATSC 3.0. There is a lot to be excited about with this new standard—Ultra High Definition picture quality and immersive audio, advanced emergency alerts, and innovative interactive services. But I fear the agency is about to rush this standard to market without understanding the consequences for consumers.

This new standard is not backwards-compatible with current television devices. In the near term, with the standard voluntary, the cost of implementing it will be added to consumer cable and satellite bills. In the longer term, it means everyone will need to buy a new television set.

This is not a great boon for consumers, it's a tax on every household with a television. So it's time for the Commission to go back to the drawing board and find a way to smooth the transition to this new standard in a way that better serves the public interest.

I have one final issue of access to discuss with you today—and it's what I call the Homework Gap.

School has changed. The teaching tools my kids know are no longer limited to bulky textbooks and dusty chalkboards. Digital devices, coding classes, and online literacy are all now an essential part of learning—and preparation for the modern world.

The Commission has helped prepare so many schools—including Archdiocese schools—by supporting their broadband connections through the E-Rate program. This program does extraordinary good to ensure every child—no matter who they are or where they go to school—has access to the teaching tools of the digital age. I appreciate that you have long been champions of E-Rate.

However the challenge to stay connected is not confined to the classroom. Today, as many as 7 in 10 teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data from the Commission show that one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service. Where those numbers overlap is a new digital divide. Call it the Homework Gap.

There is evidence all around us that the Homework Gap is real. According to the Pew Research Center, there are 5 million households in this country with school-aged children that lack Internet service at home. According to the Senate Joint Economic Committee 12 million children live in homes that lack a broadband connection.

But statistics alone do not capture the magnitude of the problem. Without Internet access at home we have students in Alabama hunkering down in fast food restaurants with Wi-Fi and sitting in parking lots in Michigan where they can get a free signal and get their homework done. We have kids pleading with parents to juggle their schedules around in New Mexico, to get rides to the homes of friends and relatives with broadband service.

These students are inspiring. They've got grit in spades. They are cobbling together whatever connectivity they can find to simply get their homework done.

But it shouldn't be this hard.

While there is no single answer or quick fix, this is one problem we need to solve.

There is a wide range of things we can do that can make a big difference. The Commission should study all of its broadband efforts to identify how it can help close the Homework Gap. The agency should clear our skies for more unlicensed spectrum—which will mean more Wi-Fi in more places and more places to do schoolwork. We can turn ride time into connected time for homework with wireless routers on school buses. We can equip our libraries with hotspots available for loan. Companies can pitch in, too, with discounted plans and low-cost computers for households with school-aged kids.

We also can encourage our community institutions—including places of worship—to become safe places for schoolwork. We can have them take a cue from communities like Athens, Georgia; Topeka, Kansas; and others that have developed directories and maps to indicate where students in town can safely do their schoolwork. Some places are predictable—like the library and municipal buildings. But businesses of all stripes and sizes have pitched in to do their part. In Athens, for instance, insurance offices, hotels like Howard Johnson, and stores like Walmart have all stepped up to help out. Every entity that does gets a colorful decal to put in the window announcing that they are safe spaces for homework. Now imagine those decals multiplying around a town, and imagine the statement that makes to students. Every one of those decals says your schoolwork matters and your community supports you.

I hope you will consider the role you can play bridging the Homework Gap, because I think it is the cruelest part of our new digital divide. But I think it is also within our power to fix it—and make a real difference.

So that's my little bit of ruckus for you today. I think all three issues I've discussed—net neutrality, media ownership, and the Homework Gap—are vital for the future of communications. I think getting them right means expanding access and opportunity. I think speaking up about them is essential. Because I believe in the end you get the future you speak up for and fight for—and it's time to make that future work for all of us.