FCC Future of Media Workshop: Public and other Noncommercial Media in the Digital Age

Testimony of Lee C. Bollinger, President of Columbia University (taken from the transcript of the workshop)

Thank you, Steve. Very quickly, the idea goes like this: I think we've reached an important moment in the historical evolution of communications and information. And I think one way to capture that is to say we're moving from a world in which we have a national public forum with some international news connected to it to a global public forum. And that global public forum is being aided by new technologies in communication, especially the Internet, of course, but also the developments in satellite television and broadcasting. But it's also facilitated by the opening of free markets around the world and all of the incredible exchange in goods and services and the cultural intermixing that goes with that. So when we refer to globalization there is a real significant underlying reality to it and it needs -- it has a compelling need for new information and ideas, more. We have to have a movement in ideas and information that matches the movement in goods and services and movement in cultural interchange and so on.

This poses a number of problems for us. One is censorship. We're beginning to see that censorship anywhere becomes censorship everywhere because you start to feel as if you say something in one place, you now will be subject to censorship at other places. It also is problematic for us because the financial problems of the media in America especially are causing a withdrawal from the international news and foreign news space: Closing of foreign bureaus, decline in foreign correspondents. It's a very serious crisis. It's also the case that other countries are moving into this global public forum to try to influence global debates about whatever major issues we want to talk about: Climate change, financial regulation, and so on. CCTV from China has a massive plan for expansion. Al Jazeera we know has created a global network. There are a number of other countries that have moved into this very important new space.

Now, that poses a problem for this country and it poses a set of issues and it also poses issues for the world generally. This is not something we're completely unfamiliar with because it took us most of the 20th century in this country, through constitutional law, public policy, the norms of journalism, and the free market, to create the best -- one of the best free press and information flows in the world on a national scale. We did that. Great decisions like New York Times v. Sullivan saw that reality and responded to it. Now we have to do it on this global scale. There are many things to say about this.

How do we combat and deal with censorship around the world? How do we try to break down borders between flows of information? But one key idea, I think, is to take what is the anachronistic system we now have, really a Cold War system, of public broadcasting and to change that. And in particular, I would say we should think about something I call American World Service, which is obviously analogous to the British BBC World Service or the BBC World. And the idea -- the problem is that we're facing a system that

we've set up after the Cold War with a domestic public broadcasting system that has extremely high-quality journalism -- we should be very proud of it -- and then a global or international broadcasting system that was set up as a propaganda arm of the U.S. Government -- Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, Alhurra, and so on -- which has in it significant journalism to be sure, but it will always be thought of as the propaganda arm or the government position on world events.

There's even a law, the Smith-Mundt Act that forbids those broadcasts from coming back into the United States on a theory that we will not allow government propaganda instruments to try to influence U.S. public. That's, of course, nonsense in today's interconnected web world. But beyond that, we really need to begin thinking about America's voice and about the kind of journalism that the American journalistic community can create, and put it into the world debate. We have to think about that very seriously because it is a marketplace of ideas and we have, of course, some private institutions out there, but we very much need public institutions created for this purpose.