

Mignon Clyburn
"Community Media Is the Future"
Portland, OR 5 October 2018

Good evening everyone. Those of us who are from the south, I always say that we're the warmest people on the earth. I might, please don't tell them, I might have to disagree tonight for whatever part of the earth all of you are from, you have been extremely warm, and embracing for that, and more, I thank you.

What a pleasure it is for me to take part in your 2018 Community Radio Conference. Very seldom do policy influencers, past or present, have the opportunity to interact with those of you who unapologetically identify yourselves as radio activists, but, honestly, if you truly love this medium, and I do, and the communities that are served by it, there is no other label that truly matters.

So, my sincere thanks go to all of you, but specifically Becky Meiers, [Reina 00:01:09] Roche, Betty McArdle, if I said your name correctly, Marty Jones, for the invitation, for the introduction, for the hospitality shown to this jet lag, a little soggy, but never discouraged, former FCC commissioner who recognizes that the agency she truly loves the most, one is, that is uniquely in a position to really to do some amazing things, has not often shown a love for the platforms you represent.

I find that especially troubling, because to me radio is the purest form of media, and as much as we fan over new, and shiny technologies, and services, and apps, radio is tangible. It is always available. It is present. It informs you in time of crisis, and it spreads the love when you want to celebrate. It never goes out of style. It will never go out of style no matter what, how many obituaries you will read, you will always be here.

And, that is especially true and critical when it comes to non-commercial stations, because you represent the sharpest, purest, most reflective areas of the communities that you serve. You go over, and beyond to reach, and speak for the too often ignored, and that in this day and time, regardless of how you feel, or what's been going on, in front and center, and what that vote is on tomorrow. These communities need you more today, and tomorrow than ever before, because regardless of how you feel, who you believe, that's secondary right this moment.

It is how the communities feel, what they need to say, and the question is, and you've got the answer, what platforms will allow them to say it? Yours will, and they're gonna need you, we're gonna need you more than ever before, because to me the only constructive way, and means to say what's on our minds, to release whatever frustrations, or euphoria that we have at this juncture, it is best done over your platforms, because I think from where I sit, and I don't know if this is a function of age, or I don't know what it is, but the older I get, the more I know, and see that the challenges that we have in our society can be pointed, targeted, and really when you zone in on them, they're because we don't listen to each other.

We don't use the platforms before us to hear each other, and to do those too, which is really one, it doesn't mean that we will agree with each other, but we need a means, and a platform, and opportunities to understand each other, because if we are able to do that, then honestly all the rest of the particulars are secondary. Now, I bring this up in part, because I think about who I am, and what I am to you.

I started out in this media Ecosystem as a manager of a small weekly African-American oriented, a weekly newspaper in Charleston, South Carolina as you heard Marty say. Around that time when I got into year two and a half, the owner, and manager of WPAL(AM) radio station, which is no longer formatted in the same way, allowed this not so ready for prime time, or anytime adult to speak her mind, and contribute to the discourse of the day on a certain Saturday afternoon during a live radio segment back in late, like I said, like the late '80s.

Before then, I always listened, and appreciated radio, but on that day, I actually fell in love. That station, and that program allowed, and enabled someone like me to be my pure self. Unapologetically, my pure self. It wasn't all pretty, it wasn't all coherent, but it did allow me to be me. I didn't have to dress up, apply makeup, or worry about all the other external, so you know, I really fell in love then. All I needed were those headphones, even if there were some tape on them, a mic, even though it looked like it wasn't gonna withstand my interview, and a broadcast signal which offered the ability to reach others often miles away.

We addressed key issues in our communities that the other outlets ignored, and we gave listeners the opportunity to call in, agree with us, or challenge us, and challenge us they did. I grew more, and more each time I appeared on that program, and what was made clear during those segments, it is at, its very best, radio through innovative content, awesome programming. When it reaches us in real time, it entertains, it informs, it challenges, it educates, it inspires, it uplifts, it heals, and it makes us more whole. You are here supported by other members of the grassroots communities, because you know what is too painfully true. That too often in the communities in which you serve, not enough civic leaders acknowledge, support or recognizes how essential your platform is, how critical you are to those who are often invisible in plain sight.

You have the potential to not only share their stories, allow them to be seen, allow them to be heard, but you have the ability to be the most perfect first informers, and, even more perfect, first enablers.

The lonely, the home bound, the overworked, the underpaid, they still wanna be informed. The disconnected from what should be your [inaudible 00:08:59] broadband enabled platforms at all of our disposals. You are the backstop, the information conduits when those 40 plus million people don't have broadband, the ability to have broadband at home. You're there for the physically, educationally, and information challenge. They need you. They need you now more than ever before, and what we heard today to me was most telling, if you were here at midday.

There are too many in our communities that are mislabeled, misunderstood, people make assumptions when you walk in the room, you will allow them to be defined properly. That is an awesome responsibility. Your stations meet people where they are just like a connected community should. You're there to hold their hand when they need it, to guide them to where they desire to be, because alone, most of us are unable to take the necessary steps we need to be full contributors to our communities. That is the power of community radio. Like with you, like you, I took a victory lap when the FCC returned more local voices to the airwaves by more fulfilling our obligation to the local Community Radio Act of 2010, but there're challenges that remain.

There're challenges that, you know if interference issues are not properly dealt with, from some of the translators, I hope I'm not stepping on any toes, but if they're not properly

addressed with, we're all at risk. If financial support from franchise fees, if they dry up, then we're all at risk, and what does it mean? What will it mean for these local voices, this programming, these unique opportunities for those of us who don't have a voice? We've got to ask, answer, and challenge those who have the ability to shift those paradigms. When I listened at lunch today, I who, I thought I was pretty informed about hip hop.

I learned a lot today, I really did. When you talk about what you do, and what that station pointed out, it did not make assumptions, or ignore the youth. It included them in their programming, and their makeup. It allowed those who sometimes act out because there's no one interacting with them to be heard. We all listened, and learned today, and it reinforced what our values, what our objectives, and what our potential is. Not everybody in this country is connected to broadband, but they have the capacity to be connected to you. Like, though, some of the technology giants who might be 35 and 40 years old with billion plus dollar funds. Yes, I'm a little jealous. You have one of the most critical characteristics that they often brag about. You're disruptive, you are disruptive.

You target in unconventional ways, you're unapologetically, sometimes narrow in your programming and objectives. You don't care about what the commercial stations are doing, you're doing what your community needs you to do, and for that, I'm gonna move on. I thank you. Now, I wanna give us a chance, I don't know if I'm breaking protocols, which I don't really care, because again, this is a non-commercial, non-conforming. I was told by one person, and if I said it wrong, that we have an opportunity to ask questions.

I didn't wanna make this a long speech. I just wanted to reinforce to you that when the FCC doesn't get it all right, when our local officials, when they don't get it all right, when the companies that have those franchise agreements, when they don't get it all right, you are there to not only pick up the pieces, but to remind us of what is right. When we fall short, you were there to hopefully embrace, and nurture us to get us to a better place, so that all of the problems we seem to be able to properly enumerate, so eloquently enumerate, you not only address them, but you provide the platform for us to discuss how to get over, and past them.

You are the ones who challenge, and make us not so passive, and accepting of what is. You do that every day, and while I no longer have a vote at the FCC for anybody who is willing to listen, I will always say the reason why I came here to see you, to meet you, to be with you is, because I believe in you. Thank you very much. You're very kind, you're very kind, so I don't know if I'm getting the proverbial hook, I think they're welcome, so I don't know if anybody

... I know there were a couple of people we had the opportunity, and I think it was streamed for those who couldn't get in the room, there were some questions that we weren't able to address, and for that, I'm sorry. Those of you who've done a little research on me know I'm a PK, a politician's kid, and politicians kids have a tendency to be a little verbose, so we didn't have a lot of time for questions, so I just want to give you an opportunity to do that if you care to. I know I'm standing between you, and libations, and whatever else you do on a rainy Friday night, I don't want to know, because I wanna look at you in a way that I see you now, and I don't, but seriously, if you wanted to take this opportunity to either make a statement that you couldn't make today, or ask some questions, I'll be glad to, and if you wanna help navigating ...

Brenda: Okay, so I'm just curious what you're doing now, and I understand that you left the FCC under duress] and wondering, if would you would have stayed there, who could you have fought?

Clyburn: Well, I like to think that, on matters that are critical that I had a reputation fighting for those who weren't heard, those individuals. Right now, I am taking advantage of a fellowship at the Open Society Foundations, which is based in New York, and the thing that we did not do, an incredible job handling at the FCC is really bringing just, and reasonable, and fair rates to inmates, and their families when it comes to making phone calls, and so, that is a project that I'm working with some of the activists, and those interested on, who really recognize that true criminal justice reform includes the ability to keep in touch with their loved ones, so that's my primary focus right now.

In the next couple of months, I might have to end up, because, two mortgages, you know, I'm kidding, but now, I'm doing what I'd love, and as long as I can afford to do that, that will be my single focus. Oh, the other, the FCC, I don't know, I just realized the ... I did voluntarily leave, and this is no real secret that it got to the point where I thought I would be more effective, a more effective messenger on the outside than in. I'm pretty tough, and can take being on the not winning side, but, again, I just felt that I would be a better service to my community on the outside, because of what I just said.

So, that is very interesting, because that needs to be reasonable too, and let me make a quick example. I don't know if you're aware of some of the communities that are allowing for some access, but what they're doing, let me back up and say, I love technology. Technology is a neutral platform. It can be, can enable us positively or hard wire some of our most negative characteristics, and this is an example where it's not so rosy. What is happening now in many of those facilities, you can no longer send a letter, or card, or pictures in the mail. They're getting rid of that, and they are saying you need to use the internet to do so, but they're charging you for each page, and they're not charging you a penny, or two, or three for each page.

Also, when it comes to technology, and being connected with inmates to, keeping in touch with their families, they've got this thing called video conferencing or calling, and that sounds lovely, especially if you live miles away, but if it costs you 1.50 or \$2 a minute, and the quality is horrible, then we're has technology really taken you? And, the credit card behind that is where a lot of these facilities have instituted this video calling, they are getting rid of in-person visits. So, you can live two blocks away from the facility, and you can't, and you have to pay to see them from the neck up if you're lucky, if you're five, two and a half for me, like me, it's probably from the nose up, because they don't adjust it, so these are the types of things, so it's coming, but at a severe cost, and we're still not addressing the issue of affordability when it comes to keeping in touch.

Michael: There are many reasons that younger people are not really drawn to radio, some of them are technological, maybe others. One of them is that it's, that radio has this anachronistic list of words that can be said, that you hear in every other aspect of society except on broadcast media, and I'm just curious if you think that is ever, that boundary is ever gonna break out?

Clyburn: So, that if I'm following, and I think I am following what you're saying, that bar has moved considerably. I've listened to radio, and I've heard some three, and four, and five letter words during the day. I'm sorry?

Michael: Examples?

Clyburn: I'm a lady at least on stage, and so, again, those norms, and what we hear, and what's considered reasonable, you know that's gonna change as we do. I don't know how they answer, like I said, I'm trying to think other than the F bomb, you know what? I really don't hear on radio, that I don't hear walking up the street. Maybe you guys are cleaner, bless you, than what I'm hearing on commercial radio, but I don't know if I'm probably answering your question. I don't see much of a societal difference.

I don't know if my niece, and nephews, the nieces, the older ones are in their 20s. I've never heard about them listening to radio, so there is a sort of a generational challenge, but on the other side, we all become parents eventually some of us sooner than others, and that's why I know this platform, particularly that same station that I mentioned to you in Charleston, that was the only station on the air during Hurricane Hugo, the only station for miles. That FM signal carried through a 100 something miles. There is always going to be, you know always going to be the communications backstop.

It is up to the FCC, and those of us who care about all of you to make sure that you're a financially viable communications backstop, and that's a topic for another series of conversations. Yes sir.

Joe Richey: Is net neutrality on life support? And, what is its prognosis?

Clyburn: Yeah, I should have known I wasn't gonna walk out of here without that, that would be an ass. I will say that I'm troubled at this point. I'm troubled in part, because of what was laid down in a lot of the state preemption issues, and that is to me insignificant, because if that part is left to stand, not only would the net neutrality principles be compromised, but all of the other planning and infrastructure issues in terms of state, and local communities will be not, will be disadvantaged.

This is a battle of the titans. We talked earlier, this is a battle of the owners and users of these platforms. That's what it boils down to, and it really depends, it's not gonna come down necessarily that who has the most money, it's who can prove their case before a certain panel of judges, and so, I can't predict it, because I'm a generally positive person, but I'll tell you, we're gonna have to have a lot of oxygen tanks in order to sustain ourselves over the next couple of years.

But, I'm heartened, I'm uplifted by California, and other states that are challenging the FCC, they know what their communities need. I don't know if that part is gonna be upheld, but it's worth the investment. There is no other platform, and I'll put yours on a level plane field with the internet, and there's no other most democratic platform I know. It is the most equalizing, and enabling infrastructure that we have. It meets you where you are. You're hearing the themes in my speech when I'm speaking about you, and for, to do anything that will give an advantage to the owners over the users, I find problematic, so if the goal is to make sure that the platforms that we have particularly that one is enabling, then the proponents of net neutrality rules will win.

Thank you. Thank you so much.