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From the Los Angeles Times

## MEDIA

# Copps, a liberal voice on the FCC, knows how to get his message out

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November 5, 2007

WASHINGTON — His dark suits. His wing-tipped shoes. The nearly four decades he's toiled in the nation's capital, including the last six years on the Federal Communications Commission.

Everything about Michael J. Copps screams bureaucrat -- until he opens his mouth.

Copps, a Democrat whose crusade against media consolidation has helped make him Hollywood's public-policy enemy No. 1, is more proselytizer than pencil pusher.

The public airwaves, he says, are filled with "too much baloney passed off as news." The Republican-led FCC is so lax that "unless you're a child abuser or a wife beater, it's a slam-dunk" to renew a TV station license. "Our country is paying a dreadful cost for this quarter-century fling with government abdication and media irresponsibility," he said this year.

Copps' ability to distill the complexities of media ownership into plain English and fire up crowds like a revivalist preacher helped derail an industry push in 2003 to loosen restrictions on owning broadcast stations.

Now, as the FCC prepares to tackle the volatile issue again, with Chairman Kevin J. Martin proposing a vote on new rules by the end of the year, the 67-year-old former history professor is reemerging as a hero to the firebrands fighting media consolidation.

In a city where officials speak in bland pronouncements, blurring their message with acronyms and jargon, Copps stands out like high-definition TV.

"He's the first FCC commissioner-rock star," said Andrew Jay Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project, a public policy law firm that has fought media consolidation.

Combining his historian's skill of framing an issue with political acumen he learned on Capitol Hill, Copps is regarded by supporters and critics as perhaps the most effective FCC commissioner ever from the minority party. If a Democrat wins the White House next year, FCC observers said, Copps would be on the list of potential chairmen, although the 2005 retirement of his top political backer, former Sen. Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.), lengthens the odds. At the least, Copps could serve as temporary head for several months until a new chairman is selected and confirmed.

The prospect worries media executives. While liberal activists laud Copps as a visionary who wants broadcasters to better serve the public in exchange for free use of the airwaves, industry lobbyists complain he's stuck in the past.

The days when broadcasters and newspapers ruled the media are history, they say, overrun by new technologies such as cable and satellite TV and the Internet. In their view, permitting additional consolidation by letting companies own a broadcast station and a newspaper in the same city is crucial to cutting costs and surviving in the 21st century.

Copps' opposition to major mergers and his strong support for FCC crackdowns on coarse language and violence on the airwaves put him at odds with Hollywood. Media industry lobbyists envy his effectiveness and praise him for always

courteously hearing them out. But on their issues, they said, Copps is a lost cause and a potential threat should he become chairman.

"It's 'Ozzie and Harriet,' " said one lobbyist, who did not want to be named because of business before the FCC. "He's mired in the 1950s."

Copps readily admits that some practices from the early days of TV appeal to him, often referring to the role broadcasters played in educating the public during the 1952 presidential contest between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson.

"I remember two or three times a week in September and October, you'd have a half-hour for each of those candidates on television. Eisenhower would get up and talk about an issue. Stevenson would get up and talk about an issue," Copps said. "Maybe it wasn't the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but it was a hell of a lot better than what passes for campaign coverage now."

Although he's nostalgic, Copps denies living in the past.

"I think I'm Commissioner Up-to-Date. I'm a fellow who's thinking about how to use this new technology," he said. "The Internet is a wonderful complement right now to broadcast . . . but it's not a substitute, it's not a replacement. It's not going to be for a long, long time."

Copps' office on the eighth floor of the FCC's Washington headquarters is a bit of a time warp. The walls are covered with campaign posters from the early 20th century -- Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge and Copps' hero, Franklin Roosevelt.

"I believe in government," Copps proudly declared.

In his view, the public and private sectors must work together to build high-speed data lines as they did throughout U.S. history to build other vital networks, such as canals, railroads and interstate highways. Market forces alone aren't enough to ensure the public's interest will be served -- particularly when it comes to broadcasters that are allowed to use the airwaves for free, Copps said.

"I like the broadcasting industry. I think there's some really neat folks. But more and more it is difficult, almost impossible, for those folks to be the captains of their own fate," he said in an interview. "They're the captives of this new mentality. They're captives of combination. They're captives of the expectations of Wall Street."

Copps' New Deal-style view of government regulation contrasts with the perspective of the Republicans who have controlled the FCC since his appointment. He clashed often with former Chairman Michael K. Powell. Bolstered by his higher profile, Copps has developed a good relationship with Martin, who took over as chairman in 2005.

"While we have different regulatory philosophies, I think we actually share a lot of the same concerns," Martin said.

Copps grew up in a Republican family in Milwaukee but became a Democrat in college. He was teaching U.S. history at Loyola University New Orleans in 1970 when he caught the eye of Hollings through a mutual friend and was offered a job.

Copps planned to go to Washington for a couple of years "to get politics out of my system."

He never left.

After 15 years in Hollings' office, rising to chief of staff, Copps worked as a lobbyist and then at the Commerce Department.

"No matter how thin the pancake, there's always two sides," said Hollings, who pushed for Copps' appointment to the FCC in 2001. "He'd learn how to analyze them and get to the point."

Copps is one of the few former Capitol Hill staffers to serve on the FCC, and his experience in that crucible of partisan politics came into play when Powell began pushing for an overhaul of media ownership rules in 2001. Copps decided the public needed to know the stakes and reached out to consumer and public interest advocates.

"He offered himself up as someone who would go on the road and talk to groups all around the country. That really galvanized activists," said Gene Kimmelman of the Consumers Union.

Copps wanted the FCC to hold a series of public hearings, but Powell agreed to only one. So Copps tapped his own travel budget. Copps and fellow Democrat Jonathan S. Adelstein, who joined the FCC in late 2002, hit the road, participating in 13 unofficial hearings.

"He's really tireless in his willingness to hear out people and to try to understand their concerns, which is very rare in the history of the FCC," Adelstein said. "We hear from the Gucci-loafed lobbyists that ply the halls here . . . but he ultimately listens to consumers first."

With his grass-roots outreach and fiery rhetoric, delivered in a deep, forceful voice, Copps whipped up opposition to loosening several rules. Among them was the ban on a company's owning a TV station and newspaper in the same market. Tribune Co., owner of The Times and KTLA-TV Channel 5, strongly urged an end to that prohibition.

"The stakes are enormous," he told a USC forum in early 2003. "We are talking about fundamental values and democratic virtues -- things like localism, diversity, competition and maintaining the multiplicity of voices and choices."

Powell derided Copps for conducting a "19th century whistle-stop tour." But Copps' road show dramatically boosted the issue's profile outside Washington and helped torpedo the changes after protests from ordinary people flooded in.

Powell pushed the revisions through on a partisan 3-2 vote in 2003. But Congress quickly scaled back the major change -- the percentage of the country a single broadcaster could reach. Federal judges halted the rest, sending them back to the FCC for reconsideration.

Martin, who when he was a commissioner voted with Powell on media ownership, has approached the issue more cautiously. He agreed to hold six public hearings across the country, though that was only half the number Copps wanted. The last is scheduled for Friday in Seattle.

Copps, who again is traveling with Adelstein to raise awareness, wants to return the length of broadcast station licenses from eight years back to three and make owners provide more evidence that they are serving their communities. Broadcasters complain that the paperwork was onerous before the FCC lengthened the licenses in 1997.

Copps had criticized Martin for moving at a "leisurely pace" on media ownership, which seemed sure to stretch the issue into 2008. But now that Martin is trying to accelerate the schedule and put media ownership rules to a vote Dec. 18, Copps hasn't hesitated to blast away.

"The commission always seems to be on the fast break to help big media, but it's slow as molasses when the topic is the public interest," he said. "I will fight against any efforts to short-circuit the process."

Media lobbyists privately complain that Copps' congressional background has led him to politicize media ownership, mobilizing support like a candidate on the campaign trail.

"He's got the sound bites. He's activated the base. Those are all very Capitol Hill-type of things," said a lobbyist who also declined to be named. "He's good. He's darned good."

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