

FCC Takes Steps to Study

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FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski recently announced what the Commission is billing as an “agency-wide initiative to assess the state of media in these challenging economic times and make recommendations designed to ensure a vibrant media landscape.” The Chairman has appointed Steven Waldman to lead the effort. Waldman most recently served as President and Editor-in-Chief of Beliefnet.com, a faith-oriented website, and was a regular columnist for the online edition of the Wall Street Journal. According to an FCC News Release, Waldman will work with FCC bureaus to “lead an open, fact-finding process to craft recommendations to meet the traditional goals of serving the public interest and making sure that all Americans receive the information, educational content, and news they seek.”

In launching this initiative, the Commission is apparently responding to requests for FCC action by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy and a report on the “dire circumstances” of newspapers prepared by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. Chairman Genachowski declared this a “pivotal moment in the history of media and communications” because of the development of new technologies and the financial downturn. According to the Chairman, “it is important to ensure that our [policies] promote a vibrant media landscape that furthers long-standing goals of serving the information needs of communities.” However, Genachowski acknowledged that the agency must be “scrupulous” about adhering to First Amendment principles that prohibit the government from dictating content.

At this stage, it is too soon to tell the level of resources the FCC will devote to this endeavor and whether any formal action will result. It is also unclear if this effort to assess the “state of media” has any relationship to a “state of journalism” document that Commissioner Copps was reportedly circulating in July. We reported on that document here. (According to news reports, Commissioner Copps’s item “examines the decline of broadcast journalism . . . and tries to explain why traditional forms of journalism have declined while other, newer forms have been on the rise.” No action has been taken on that item.)

We will update you as this initiative continues to develop.