

Declining Black media ownership pitiful

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (NNPA) - The level of Black ownership of broadcast media, which has fallen by 30 percent over the past nine years, is a "national disgrace" and reflects overall retrenchment in the march toward justice and equality, a member of the Federal Communications Commission has charged. The commissioner, Michael J. Copps, made that assertion at a forum held at the 10th annual Wall Street Project conference of Rainbow/PUSH.

"The facts are downright chilling," Copps stated. "While people of color make up over 30 percent of our country's population, a study from Free Press last fall tells us that they own only 3.26 percent of all broadcast television stations. Unpack these numbers a little further and you'll find that African-Americans own only 1.3 percent of all stations. And it's sad to say, we're not making progress."

"There has been no improvement in the level of minority ownership since 1998, even as the total universe of stations has increased by 12 percent. Truth is that there has been a sharp drop in the total numbers of African-American stations since 1998 — by 30 percent. This isn't just a problem. It's a national disgrace."

In his presentation last week, Copps described how African-Americans are being ill-served.

"Today, we gather to talk about equality and justice in our broadcast media," he began. "Neither equality nor justice exists there yet. We're not even moving in the right direction toward equality and justice. Minority issues don't get decent coverage. Minorities don't own enough media. At its core, this issue is about civil rights, and one of those rights is accessible media that reflect and nourish the diverse genius of our nation."

A second commissioner, Jonathan S. Adelstein, generally agreed with Copps, noting that the FCC regulates the airways because they belong to the public, not profit-driven media conglomerates.

"It's something that affects everybody's lives, the lives of not just minority communities, but everybody in this country — how they perceive minorities and how minorities are treated, both in terms of ownership and the way they are portrayed," ex-

plained Adelstein.

Jesse L. Jackson Sr., president and CEO of Rainbow/PUSH, invited the commissioners to a follow-up meeting he plans to hold in Chicago within the next two months to draw more attention to the issue.

Complaining about television news and talk show programs that are "all day, all night — all White," Jackson agreed with the commission-

ers that the public must become more aggressive in insisting that the airwaves become more diverse.

"We must make media access a mass movement," Jackson told those attending the session. "For too long, this has been a small movement. One hundred people at an FCC hearing may be more important than 50,000 marching at HHS [the Department of Health and Hu-

man Services]."

Copps said the FCC has been under pressure from the industry and federal officials to relax its rules limiting how many media outlets a company can own in a community.

"I think for the last three years, we've played defense on media consolidation and media ownership," he said. "We've been successful, we've checked those rules.

But now is the time to move beyond the damage control and to really come up with a proactive plan for America's media to create media democracy for this country."

He explained, "It's not just a question of preventing bad rules now, it's going back and revisiting bad old rules that got us in this... mess in the first place. And that's the problem of reinvigorating the public interest obligations of

broadcasters. Every single one of them has gone by the boards since 1980. There's nothing left but a hollow, hollow shell."

Four years ago, in a move widely viewed as allowing media conglomerates to expand their power in local markets, the FCC passed new rules that would allow one corporation the right to own up to three television sta-
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