It is an honor to be with you this morning in this historic place to deliver the 30th annual Everett C. Parker Ethics in Telecommunications Lecture in this, Rev. Dr. Parker’s centennial year.

Every movement has thousands of individuals, whose names we never know, forming its backbone. The Civil Rights Movement, for instance, was the product of countless individuals standing and working together throughout the South and across the country. But there are always those individuals who emerge to give a face to a movement---provide leadership, vision and moral authority. In the area of media reform, it was Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker.

He’s been honored and described in many ways. Henry Rivera called him “the conscience of the broadcast industry and the Federal Communications Commission.” When Dr. Parker retired in 1983, Broadcasting Magazine described him as “the founder of the citizen movement in broadcasting” who spent “some two decades irritating and worrying the broadcast establishment.” I could go on, but most often, and particularly for those of us who are deeply familiar with his work, he is known simply as the “Father of the Media Reform Movement”.

His commitment to the public interest, his tenacity in addressing injustice, and his courage in standing up to entrenched interests…be they racist social structures in the South or discriminatory corporate structures in New York and across the country…led to a career full of accomplishments that we marvel at today.
As Sam Simon has observed, “Ascertainment, broadcaster-citizen agreements, equal employment opportunity, personal attack response time, minority ownership, fairness doctrine, equal time, diversity of ownership, license renewal, localism and other crucial public interest safety-net concepts all have their roots in the initial work of Everett Parker.”

Thousands of women and minorities working in media today owe their careers to the work he did.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Media Reform Movement share the same backbone. The Media Reform Movement grew out of the broader social justice movement of the time. While Parker had been an effective activist and advocate for the public interest long before the ferment of the 60s, it was a meeting Rev. Parker and others had with Dr. King during the Montgomery Bus Boycott that put him on the path to his most noteworthy and transformational accomplishment, the license challenge against WLBT-TV in Jackson, Mississippi.

At the meeting, Dr. King complained about how blacks were being treated on radio and television stations in the South. King’s concerns meshed with ideas that Parker was shaping on how to bring about change in a system that was closed to those it was licensed to serve. Dr. Parker decided to do something about it. And in so doing, he transformed the American broadcasting industry.

The story of the WLBT license challenge has been told many times. It was a lengthy, multi-year battle that resulted in the landmark court decision that gave the public standing before the FCC, led to the revocation of WLBT’s license---the first time a station had ever been punished for failing to “serve the public interest”, ultimately led to an ownership group that reflected the Jackson community which was 40% African American at the time, and, nationally, changed the way broadcasters did business.
WLBT-TV was an example of what Dr. King talked about. One of many. Discrimination in hiring. Discrimination in programming practices. Discrimination in news coverage. You all know the stories---blacking out program segments that featured African American performers or news items that challenged the racial status quo. There was even a white supremacist bookstore on the station premises.

So Parker’s WLBT battle was not about abstract legal principles. It was about core principles of justice, equality and fairness in our primary medium of mass communication---the medium through which we tell our stories, determine what’s important, get our news, and express our values.

Parker’s core idea was so simple: The airwaves belong to the people, so the people should have considerable say about how they’re used and managed. And the court agreed.

But between that simple idea and the final court decision was years of hard work in the field and in the office---researching, organizing, strategizing and fundraising---which Dr. Parker pursued with his characteristic tenacity. And why? Because he was driven by a sense of justice and morality.

It was not easy to do organizing work in the South. The possibility of violence against Parker, his staff and the brave community volunteers who gathered the evidence of discrimination and racism in WLBT’s operations was very real. And there were threats and harassment. But they persevered. And because they did, citizens gained access to the FCC---legal standing---which unleashed a wave of grass roots, public interest initiatives across the country, the birth of the Media Reform Movement.

Dr. Parker pursued the WLBT case through his role as founding director of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, an organization that continues to be at the forefront of media reform efforts today. And we must recognize the role of the UCC
in both media reform and the broader Civil Rights Movement. The denomination was active in the very early stages of the movement and was a strong ally to those of us engaged in the work every day.

Beyond WLBT, Dr. Parker, through the Office of Communication, brought a moral perspective to the key media policy debates of the time and was always in the thick of the fray.

He spearheaded the effort to open up employment opportunities in broadcasting for women and people of color. The Office of Communication petitioned the FCC to take action and the Commission issued a Report and Order on Equal Employment Opportunity in 1971, creating policy that began to open up the industry and create a richer and more diverse media environment.

He worked with leading media companies to establish training programs for minority young people and secured commitments to hire them.

In terms of diversity, there is still a long way to go, particularly in the area of ownership. But Dr. Parker recognized early on that the most powerful tools for communication in a democracy must reflect the diversity that comprises that democracy.

All voices must be heard. All people must have equal opportunity to participate at all levels of the media industry.

Dr. Parker was a willing mentor to anyone who shared his vision for justice and fairness, something many in this room can attest to. He inspired generations of young people, clergy, activists and professionals with his tenacious belief that we can change things. That media can serve the public interest and be more than producers of vast profits for a handful of corporations.
In our democracy, mass media must be open to an array of values, lifestyles, and ideas. It must be a real reflection of America and a place where all groups and ideas are represented. That’s what Rev. Parker’s fight was about. Establishing a media system that truly serves all Americans—not just narrow ideologies or corporate interests—but all Americans.

Dr. Parker could not be with us today, but he may very well be watching us online. Let’s express our appreciation right now to Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker, the “Father of the Media Reform Movement”, our colleague, mentor and friend.

Dr. Parker’s friend and associate Ralph Jennings said, “Parker advocated examining the needs of society before dancing to the broadcasters’ tune”.

As we look at the issues facing us today in terms of media and telecommunications policy, it’s important that we examine the needs of society and make decisions based on the public good, not the corporate demand.

When we look at things that way, it becomes clear that communications issues are civil rights issues. Ownership for instance.

Media outlets are business opportunities. But they are so much more. They provide access to the American conversation. They direct attention and shape consciousness. They are windows to the world.

For the last thirty years, we have witnessed unabashed media consolidation facilitated by the FCC. The effect has been a reduction in unique voices, a reduction in opportunities to participate in the American debate, and a loss of diversity of ideas for the American people, as well as a loss of business opportunities for women and people of color.
The effects have perhaps been felt most severely in radio. If you’ve ever visited one of those urban, what we can only call “radio factories”, you’ll get my point. Usually a nondescript building, isolated from the community, with a long hallway with many doors….and behind each door is a radio station. Five, six, seven or more stations in one building, often with one sales staff, one news team, and always one owner.

Five, six, seven or more stations in a market that carry different programming, but ultimately speak with one voice, that of the owner—often a corporate giant with headquarters far from the city of service.

Tell me, how can it possibly be in the public interest to have 9 radio stations with one owner in a market the size of Modesto, California?

For minorities, local politics are critical. Everyday, battles are being fought over budget allocations, school issues, public services and scores of matters that affect the local quality of life. Local media is critical to this process. And very little of that media is controlled by women and minorities.

The minority ownership that does exist has been rapidly shrinking over the past few years.

Looking at the past decade, data shows that from October 2006 to October 2007, the number of minority-owned commercial TV stations decreased by 8.5 percent---and African American TV station ownership dropped by 60%.

Today, minorities make up about 37% of the US population, and data shows minority media ownership of commercial television stations is around 3%. Women, 51 percent of the population, own around 6% of television stations. Radio ownership for these groups is only slightly higher.
Are minority audiences being served? Are minority voices being heard?

Recent studies claim that African American-owned stations reach just 5.3 percent of African American households in the United States. Hispanic or Latino-owned stations reach just 21.7 percent of Latino households. Asian American-owned stations reach just 24 percent of Asian American households. I suspect the numbers regarding African American ownership may have gotten worse since these numbers came out.

So, it should come as no surprise that content on local stations rarely serves the needs of minority audiences and their communities. Diverse voices are not heard. Issues are covered from one perspective.

The FCC facilitated this level of media consolidation and they can make changes that will encourage diversity and open up the system.

There was a brief period of time when policies were implemented that promoted minority ownership. In 1978, the FCC adopted two policies, distress sales and tax certificates. Distress sales permitted broadcasters to escape a hearing by selling their stations to minorities for a 25% discount.

Tax certificates enabled broadcasters selling stations to minorities to postpone capital gains taxes. These policies took minority station ownership from 60 stations in 1978 to over 300 by 1995.

That sounds like a big number. But as David Honig has pointed out, those 300 stations represented just 1% of the broadcasting industry’s asset value. And in 1995, Congress repealed the tax certificate option.

The tax certificate program was effective in expanding minority ownership. It is certainly worth considering again today.
In these difficult times, with record poverty and unemployment numbers, healthcare battles, a crisis in education, and so many structural problems facing us, the channels of communication need to be opened up. We need more diversity of ideas and voices. More people need more access to our mainstream channels of communication.

But perhaps more importantly, we need to get to know one another. That’s what Dr. King and Dr. Parker were about. Dr. King spoke of the Beloved Community, the possibility of a society where justice, fairness and compassion is a way of life for all regardless of race, religion, or economic status. We can only get to know each other, get past the stereotypes and fear, when all voices can be heard. When all are part of the conversation.

Bringing more diversity to ownership will facilitate this process. The FCC should make it a priority to find ways to open up the system

Broadband is a civil rights issue. In fact, MMTC has called it the top civil rights issue of the 21st century, “precisely because this technology is being positioned as a primary driver of economic opportunity and as a catalyst for social change.”

The world is moving online and, once again, poor, African American and Hispanic households are being left behind. The Digital Divide continues to be real.

Everyday, more and more basic functions are moving online---business, education, medical---even social services. The threat of falling through the cracks---being left behind, outside the reaches of even the “safety net”, is as real as it’s ever been.

As MMTC puts it, “the digital “haves” are first class digital citizens with a passport to explore all that the Internet has to offer, while the digital “have-nots” are second-class citizens trapped in poverty without access to the opportunities offered in the digital economy.”
The data tell us that more than half of all African American and Hispanic households have yet to adopt broadband at home.

The situation is serious for adults, but even more so for our children. If we don’t deal with this divide, we run the risk or relegating a whole generation of young people to the fringe of society.

It’s true, 64% of African Americans use mobile applications to go online, and African American teens are at the forefront of that group; but there are limits to what can be accomplished on your i-phone or Droid. They’re great for playing Angry Birds, but not for doing research papers or filling out college applications.

Census Bureau data shows that African American and Hispanic children use the Internet at school much more regularly than other children, probably because they don’t have broadband at home.

There is already an education gap in America. Research shows that African American and Hispanic students lag two to three years behind white students of the same age, and only 55% of Latino students, 51% of African American students and half of Native American students earn a high school diploma, compared to over 75% of white and Asian students at all income levels.

Access to broadband at home and school is not the magic bullet that will solve this problem. But universal access will be an important step toward leveling the playing field. And it will assure that a generation will not be left behind.

Universal access is a difficult problem. Service and devices are expensive. Educating diverse and hard to reach groups on usage is a slow and complicated process. And convincing some that broadband access will make a difference in their lives, believe it or not, has proven to be a problem.
But solving these problems, reaching poor and minority communities with broadband, must continue to be a priority. Groups like One Economy and Broadband Opportunity Coalition have taken up the challenge and some business enterprises have joined in, offering discounted rates and hardware. And the FCC is about to launch a pilot Lifeline broadband program that will experiment with pricing, subsidies and outreach techniques. Expansion of the Lifeline program holds promise as a means of helping to close this Digital Divide.

Universal broadband connectivity is a difficult problem. We must bring our best thinking and deepest commitment to its implementation. The cost of failure is too high. Economic empowerment, education, civic engagement, healthcare---the basic social and business processes of life are moving online, and democracy demands that all can participate.

A word about Lifeline. Finding ways to make broadband affordable---covering service and equipment costs, and educating users, will take some time. Penetrating our inner cities and reaching those in rural, isolated settings present challenges that we are still in the process of working through. The answer is not right around the corner.

The Lifeline program may very well be part of the solution. Lifeline reform has recently been completed and there are efforts to begin moving some USF Low Income Fund dollars to broadband initiatives.

Part of the reform was focused on dealing with the recent growth in demand on the Low Income Fund. In this economic environment, growing demand is to be expected. With 46 million people officially in poverty, demands on the fund are naturally growing. That’s why Lifeline was created. To make sure those who are struggling can stay connected through basic phone service.
Lifeline participation, while rising, is still very low. Only around a third of those who qualify are participating. There is evidence that some of these recent reforms, though well intentioned, are actually leading to a loss of qualified Lifeline participants from the program due to the verification processes involved.

While it is necessary to root out any fraud, waste and abuse in the program, we must make sure that, while we look for broadband solutions, we maintain easy access to voice service for those who qualify and perhaps even expand availability beyond the one per household rule for cell phone subsidies.

Lifeline participants are folks who need basic voice for the daily chores of life…calling babysitters, doctors, work, checking on elderly relatives.

Broadband is coming and necessary, but we must make sure Lifeline assistance is readily available now for voice service for all who qualify. Broadband is needed. Funding must be found. But not at the expense of those who need basic phone service for daily survival.

Prison telephone service is a civil rights issue.

The American justice system has gone awry. We lead the world in imprisoned citizens. Two million Americans are in federal and state prisons and jails. The world’s leading democracy with the world’s largest prison population. And that population is overwhelmingly black and poor.

For instance, the population of Georgia is 29% black while its prison population is 64% black. The population of Pennsylvania is 10% black while its prison population is 56% black. The ratios are similar across the 50 states.
These primarily young, black Americans are ripped from familiar surroundings and isolated from loved ones. If they are to return to society as productive citizens, they need the support of those who care about them. They need to communicate with those who love them. Yet, prison phone systems have been designed to exploit prisoners and their families.

This is not an accident. It didn’t just happen. It is a system designed to prey on one of our most vulnerable populations. Prison phone service is a civil rights issue. It is a moral issue. It is about how we respond to the “least of these”.

Visits to incarcerated family members are difficult for the poor. Transportation, accommodations---visits are an economic burden. The phone becomes the only way to maintain communication. Mothers and fathers with their children. Wives and husbands. Brothers and sisters.

Instead of recognizing the important role telephone service plays in shaping the lives of inmates, the role it plays in maintaining the few supportive relationships many inmates have, prison administrators and state legislators view it as a revenue source. And the folks paying are those who can least afford it.

Prisoners cannot choose their carrier. In many cases, telephone companies bid for the right to provide service to a prison and the company offering the best deal, for the prison—not the prisoners, gets the contract. Phone service becomes a profit center for the prison, and the families and friends of prisoners pay the burdensome bill.

In this day of pennies a minute phone rates and unlimited long distance plans, families can pay a connection charge of $3.00 or more plus per minute rates approaching $1.00, making a 15 minute collect call anywhere from $10 - $17.00 or more. A weekly one-hour call can cost families up to $300 a month. These rates are predatory. For families already struggling to make ends meet, this is an unconscionable burden. Imagine
having to choose between putting food on the table or accepting a call from a family member in prison. It's a choice no family should have to make.

For ten years now, the FCC has ignored pleas to fix this situation. Martha Wright, an elderly woman who had to choose between paying for medicine and calling her grandson in prison, petitioned the FCC to solve this problem almost a decade ago.

These high rates cannot be justified. Eight states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have already made changes. The men and women in our prisons need supportive networks when they’re released, and for that to happen, they must maintain communication with loved ones while they’re incarcerated. Strong, supportive networks help keep people from returning to prison.

The FCC can put an end to these predatory prison phone rates. The UCC Office of Communication and its allies have taken the lead on this issue, keeping it before the Commission.

We ask the Commission to grant the Wright petition. It’s a simple step that will have a profound impact on thousands of lives.

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Communications issues are civil rights issues.

In our media system, there are two models that are always in a state of tension with each other---the market model and the public interest model.

The market model says regulation is unnecessary. Hands off. The market will meet needs and serve the public.
The public interest model says our communication system is fundamental to our democracy. It must be open, diverse, and provide substance beyond just pure entertainment. It is too important to be left solely to the market.

It is too important to be left in the hands of a few powerful corporations that have a responsibility to their shareholders first, and see the rest of us as consumers, not citizens.

The market model, by its nature, is undemocratic. It serves money, not people. We are not all equal in the market model. Those with more money have a greater voice. They are served. They are targeted. They are sought out. Those without resources are neglected, and even sometimes exploited.

The market model does not necessarily meet social needs. While it is excellent at delivering goods and services, it is driven by profit, not need. That’s why there are still nearly 50 million without health insurance in this country. A problem many other countries solved long ago, but a problem the market model is not interested in. Where’s the profit?

The public interest model sees media as a public resource. It is our primary source of information. It plays a central role in defining our culture and shaping our democracy. It has a responsibility beyond generating profits. It must serve the public interest.

The corporate interests have the money and power. They hire their lobbyists. They fund the campaigns. They use their Influence.

But government belongs to us. Regulation is our tool. Really, the only tool we have against money and power. That’s why it’s attacked so vehemently by those who oppose us. When citizens organize and act, government responds.
The American vision is about inclusion. It's about diversity. It's about community. It is about each of us having a voice, not simply accepting what the “market” chooses to offer us.

The two models need each other. That’s the strength, genius and potential of our system….when the power of the market model is harnessed by a vision of the public good. When profit and service are in balance, our communication system will be at its best.

How do we fight back? The way Dr. King fought back. The way Dr. Parker fought back. The way millions around the world fight back everyday. We organize. We strategize. We act. Small individual actions everyday and larger actions, together, that clearly demonstrate our commitment to creating a communication system that is open, fair, and serves democracy.

We must keep the public interest model alive. We must keep a strong Media Reform Movement alive. We must Keep Hope Alive!