

Statement for Patric M. Verrone
President, Writers Guild of America, West
United States Senate
Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
Washington, DC
Tuesday April 22, 2008

THANK YOU CHAIRMAN INOUE, VICE CHAIRMAN STEVENS, AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE.

MY NAME IS PATRIC M. VERRONE, AND I AM THE PRESIDENT OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, WEST. WE REPRESENT NEARLY 8,000 WRITERS OF MOTION PICTURES, BROADCAST AND CABLE TELEVISION SHOWS, AND, AS OF A FEW WEEKS AGO, NEW MEDIA.

THANK YOU FOR INVITING ME TO SPEAK ON THE SUBJECT OF "THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET." AS YOU KNOW, WE RECENTLY COMPLETED A 100-DAY STRIKE OVER THE PLACE OF ENTERTAINMENT WRITERS IN THAT FUTURE. ALSO, I BELIEVE I AM THE ONLY PANELIST TO HAVE WRITTEN A FILM ABOUT A ROBOT POKER TOURNAMENT IN SPACE VEGAS IN THE YEAR 3009 SO I THINK MY EXPERTISE IN THE AREA IS UNQUESTIONABLE.

THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET IS A CAUTIONARY TALE. I BEGIN BY INVOKING THE GHOST OF NEW MEDIA PAST. A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, THAT WAS MOTION PICTURES. FIFTY YEARS AGO, IT WAS BROADCAST TELEVISION.

I STARTED WORKING IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY 22 YEARS AGO. ALMOST THIRTY SEPARATE COMPANIES INDEPENDENTLY PRODUCED AND DISTRIBUTED TELEVISION ON THE "NEW MEDIA" OF CABLE TV. TODAY WE ARE DOWN TO ABOUT SEVEN VERTICALLY INTEGRATED CONGLOMERATES, CONTROLLING NOT ONLY CABLE TV, BUT ALSO BROADCAST, FILM, AND EVEN NEWS.

THIS CONCENTRATION OF POWER WAS TRIGGERED BY A POLICY CHOICE. ABOUT 15 YEARS AGO, THE FCC BEGAN THE PROCESS OF UNRAVELING THE FINANCIAL AND SYNDICATION RULES (OR FIN-SYN) ALLOWING PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION TO BE JOINTLY OWNED.

AS A RESULT, MEDIA COMPANIES CONSOLIDATED, CONGLOMERATED, AND CONGEALED INTO THE HANDFUL OF MULTINATIONAL ENTITIES THAT TODAY EMPLOY NEARLY EVERYONE WORKING IN OUR INDUSTRY AND DECIMATING INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION AND CONTENT DIVERSITY.

THE AXIOM IN HOLLYWOOD IS THAT "CONTENT IS KING" BUT THOSE WHO CONTROL ACCESS TO THE KING, CONTROL THE KINGDOM. BECAUSE OF FEDERAL REGULATIONS - OR LACK THEREOF - THAT CONTROL IS IN THE HANDS OF NEITHER THE CONSUMER NOR THE CONTENT CREATORS, BUT THE DISTRIBUTORS.

THIS BRINGS US TO NEW MEDIA PRESENT - NAMELY, THE INTERNET.

JURISDICTION AND COMPENSATION FOR OUR CONTENT ON THE INTERNET WAS WHAT WE FOUGHT FOR - AND WON - IN OUR STRIKE. WHAT WAS MOST NOTABLE ABOUT OUR STRIKE WAS NOT WHAT WE WON, BUT HOW WE WON.

WE USED THE INTERNET TO WIN THE INTERNET.

WHEN TRADITIONAL MEDIA IS IN THE HANDS OF THE SAME CORPORATIONS THAT EMPLOY YOU, IT'S HARD TO GET YOUR MESSAGE OUT. WE HAD FOUR THOUSAND ATTEND RALLIES THAT GOT LESS - AND LATER - COVERAGE ON THE LOCAL NEWS THAN A DOG WEDDING.

AS SUCH, THE INTERNET PROVED TO BE A POWERFUL TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION. E-MAILS, BLOGS, WEBSITES, PODCASTS, AND VIDEO CLIPS WERE PASSED ALONG ON THE NET, GIVING OUR MEMBERS UPDATES AND INFORMING THE WORLD ABOUT OUR CAUSE.

THROUGH THE "SPEECHLESS" CAMPAIGN, A SERIES OF ONLINE VIDEOS IN WHICH NO WORDS WERE SPOKEN, THE PUBLIC SAW THE CRUCIAL ROLE WRITERS PLAY IN MEDIA CREATION.

IN AN ERA OF SO-CALLED REALITY TELEVISION AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT, THE STUDIOS HOPED TO SHOW THAT THEY COULD CREATE PROGRAMMING WITHOUT WRITERS, BUT THE STRIKE PROVED ONLY THE OPPOSITE: THAT WRITERS COULD CREATE PROGRAMMING WITHOUT STUDIOS.

THE INTERNET HOLDS INCREDIBLE POTENTIAL TO RESURRECT A VIBRANT INDUSTRY OF INDEPENDENT CREATORS WITH FREE ACCESS TO, AND DISTRIBUTION OF, DEMOCRATIC (WITH A SMALL D) CONTENT.

AND SO WE LOOK TO THE NEW MEDIA OF THE FUTURE.

WILL THE INTERNET'S OPEN AND FREE SPEECH FORUM BE TURNED IT INTO A WALLED GARDEN OF CONTENT CONTROL? WILL ENTERTAINMENT, INFORMATION, AND MARKETING PLATFORMS BE AVAILABLE TO ALL OR JUST THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD TO PAY FOR THEM? WILL THE NEW MEDIA BE DOMINATED BY THE GATE KEEPERS THAT DOMINATE THE OLD MEDIA (BE THEY MULTINATIONAL MONOPSONIES OF TV AND FILM OR REGIONAL DUOPOLIES OF CABLE AND TELEPHONE SERVICE)?

THANKFULLY, THERE IS A HAPPIER ENDING. ONE WHICH IS OPEN TO DIVERSE, INDEPENDENT, AND ORIGINAL VOICES AND VISIONS. WHERE CONSUMERS CAN PICK AND CHOOSE FOR THEMSELVES THE CONTENT AND SERVICES THEY WANT. WHERE CONTENT IS KING, AND THE KING ROAMS FREE.

BUT THIS FUTURE RELIES ON "NET NEUTRALITY."

THE POLICY DECISION THAT TRIGGERED THE CONSOLIDATION OF OLD MEDIA HAS NOT YET BEEN MADE FOR NEW MEDIA. THERE IS STILL TIME TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF CONTENT PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS. WE NEED TO ESTABLISH CLEAR NET NEUTRALITY RULES TO ENSURE THAT THE INTERNET REMAINS A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD FOR ALL. WE DETHRONE THE GATEKEEPERS AND ONCE MORE MAKE CONTENT KING.

WE AT THE WRITERS GUILD WEST BELIEVE THAT THE INTERNET FREEDOM AND PRESERVATION ACT ENSURES THAT FUTURE AND WE SUPPORT IT.

IN AN INDUSTRY FILLED WITH OXYMORONS FROM JUMBO SHRIMP TO HOLLYWOOD ACCOUNTING, WE MUST WIN THE "FIGHT FOR NEUTRALITY."