



[Not] Sleeping through a Revolution: What the FCC Can Do to “Stay Woke” and Build a Legacy of Advancing Civil Rights in the Digital Age

By Maurita Coley Flippin, Acting President and CEO, MMTC
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In recognition of the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, MMTC calls upon the Federal Communications Commission to close the digital divide in all its manifestations and act now to ensure equal opportunity in employment and ownership, and in access to essential communications for the most dispossessed.

On this day, April 4, 1968, Dr. King's assassination shook the world.

Fifty years later, we remember Dr. King for his fearless leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, his campaign for economic justice, his opposition to war, and his unwavering and fearless support for decent pay and working conditions for all Americans.

But we ought to remember Dr. King every day, because the wisdom that he shared then is just as relevant today as it was 50 years ago.

Similar to the mantras of today's young social justice leaders urging us to “stay woke,” in his 1968 address dedicated to “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” Dr. King said:

“...one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.”

In 1963, long before the digital age, Dr. King fully recognized – and utilized – the power of broadcasting and its role in the civil rights movement. Dr. King's strategic use of media is detailed in the recent NBC News documentary: *Hope and Fury: MLK, the Movement, and the Media*. But despite his media savvy, MMTC's co-founder and President Emeritus David Honig, who knew Dr. King personally and who led one of the Southern Christian Leadership Council's (SCLC) youth chapters over 50 years ago, recalls that technology did not impress Dr. King in the least. Dr. King wrote that technology “brought us neither peace of mind nor serenity of spirit,” and that powerful forces like electricity are

“amoral and can be used for either good or evil....We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers.”

Racial Inequality Has Marked the Advent of New Technologies

Fast forward to the present, to the digital age in which a tech industry – led largely by white males – has been allowed to expand – largely without accountability and without regulations that govern its business or employment practices, or even its algorithms, despite the visible existence of a diverse global population. This homogeneity and digitally codified bias is having sweeping negative impacts on communities of color and other marginalized communities across the nation, as examined by MMTC in our Big Data and Algorithm Discrimination White Paper that will be released later this month.

It may be hard to believe, but the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had embarrassingly similar racially discriminatory beginnings, as an agency that assigned broadcast licenses on the basis of

race – from 1920 to 1949, the FCC and its predecessors gave broadcast licenses to White Americans only. Minorities owned no television stations until 1973, and were awarded no radio licenses in comparative contests until 1975. But on July 3, 1968, just two months after Dr. King’s assassination, the FCC transformed itself from a backwater agency that perpetuated racial injustice to become the first federal agency to require its licensees to practice equal opportunity in employment. By a unanimous vote, FCC Chairman Rosel Hyde cited a letter by the Chief of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, Stephen J. Pollak. The famous “Pollak Letter,” which is probably well-known only among communications practitioners, could have been written yesterday:

"Because of the enormous impact which television and radio have upon American life, the employment practices of the broadcasting industry have an importance greater than that suggested by the number of its employees. The provision of equal opportunity in employment in that industry could therefore contribute significantly toward reducing and ending discrimination in other industries."

Still, there is much to do; minority broadcast ownership did not exceed 1% of the number of stations until 1982, and even today it stands at less than 1% of industry asset value – and is in decline. Today, minorities are similarly underrepresented in tech ownership, employment diversity, and adoption even as ever-evolving technology continues to present new opportunities and become increasingly enmeshed in our everyday lives.

FCC’s Opportunity to Create Digital Equality: A Call to Action on A Day of Reflection

With the creation of the Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee on Diversity and Digital Empowerment, on which MMTC and other national civil rights and public interest advocacy organizations serve, today’s FCC has created important opportunities to hear the concerns of our nation’s most vulnerable communities, and to draw from that understanding to close the digital and socio-economic gaps plaguing our nation.

As we remember the 50th Anniversary of the silencing of Dr. King’s dream; as we **March for Our Lives** to end the senseless violence that continues to silence the dreams of so many; and as we continue to fight for justice and equality in social, economic, and digital treatment; **we urge the FCC to take its rightful place in history by mirroring Dr. King’s legacy of compassion, equality, and opportunity**. A good start would be for the FCC to act on several imperatives that will help to close the digital divide:

- ❖ **Regulate by Compassion**—Rethink the FCC’s Inmate Calling, Lifeline, and Katrina Rulings that urgently are needed to protect the incarcerated, the poor, and the dispossessed.
- ❖ **Ensure Equality**—Finish the job of ensuring equal employment opportunity by preventing word-of-mouth recruitment from homogeneous workplaces; guarantee equal access to broadband by preventing redlining of lower income and ethnic neighborhoods; and encourage other regulators to follow its lead.
- ❖ **Champion Opportunity**—Revitalize dormant FCC policies that promote diverse ownership of media, infrastructure, and the dissemination of spectrum licenses; extend the cable procurement opportunity rules to all industries regulated by the FCC; use the agency as a bully pulpit to promote apprenticeship and workforce development in the wired and wireless industries that it regulates.

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About Maurita Coley Flippin:



Maurita Coley Flippin, Acting President and CEO of Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC) is a senior executive with over 20 years of experience in the media, telecommunications, and entertainment industries. She is a former partner with the Davis, Wright Tremaine and Cole Raywid and Braverman law firms, and a former executive at Black Entertainment Television, and the former Executive Director of the Capital Area Asset Builders. She serves as a member of the FCC’s Advisory Committee on Diversity and Digital Empowerment, and as MMTC’s senior subject matter expert for a U.S. Department of Labor contract led by the National Urban League,

in partnership with the Wireless Infrastructure Association and MMTC, to create and diversify Registered Apprenticeship programs in telecommunications and other industries.

About MMTC:

The Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC) is a non-partisan, national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and preserving equal opportunity and civil rights in the mass media, telecommunications and broadband industries, and closing the digital divide. MMTC is generally recognized as the nation's leading advocate for minority advancement in communications.