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A Historian for the FCC

by

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Tom Wheeler, President Obama's nominee to be the next chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), has lots of experience in the communications policy arena. While some have suggested his long-ago leadership of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association and of CTIA (the trade association for wireless companies) somehow should be disqualifying, in my view, the knowledge he gained in these positions ought to be a plus.

Mr. Wheeler's more recent experience investing in communications, Internet, and high-tech companies with Core Capital Partners should be useful as well. What intrigues me more about Mr. Wheeler is his avocation as a historian, and a serious one at that.

Yes, a historian, with a particular interest in Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War. It is possible that Mr. Wheeler's appreciation for history's sweep could be as helpful to the new FCC chairman as his experience in the communications policy field.

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Mr. Wheeler's book, "Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails: How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War," was published in 2006. Michael Beschloss, one of my favorite historians, had this to say about the book: "Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails' is a fascinating, succinct and original history of how a great president used cutting-edge technology to save his country."

Telegrams as a "cutting-edge technology"? In 1844, Samuel F.B. Morse sent the first telegram in the United States from Washington to Baltimore, exclaiming: "What hath God wrought?" It was a fitting exclamation for the so-called cutting-edge technology of the day.

As we learn from Mr. Wheeler's interesting book, the telegraph — now surely a historical relic — was key to preserving the union. In contrast, in 'Mr. Lincoln's T-Mails,' Mr. Wheeler relates in the very first paragraph how he realized the Iraq war was the first "war by email."

From T-Mails to Gmails, not to mention Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and all the myriad data, voice and video services make up what today we call the "Internet ecosystem." The difference between the days of the telegraph and the telephone, and Western Union and Ma Bell — entities that possessed monopolistic power in their heyday — and today's multiplatform and multiscreen broadband Internet environment is akin to the difference between carrier pigeons and rocket ships.

What might Morse exclaim now if only he could behold "cable" operators, "telephone" companies, wireless and mobile carriers, online Internet video purveyors, fiber-optic providers such as Google and GigU, satellite operators and others, all competing against one another in an attempt to meet rapidly evolving consumer demand for high-speed broadband services.

I suspect a historian such as Mr. Wheeler, more than most of us, will appreciate the import of the dramatic technological and marketplace change from T-Mails to Gmails. Perhaps a historian, especially one with telecommunications policy experience, will appreciate that in light of these remarkable marketplace changes, our nation's communications policies should reflect today's competitive digital realities, rather than the realities of last century's monopolistic environment.

At least I hope Mr. Wheeler will bring such appreciation to the job of leading the FCC.

In his second message to Congress in 1862, President Lincoln uttered these immortal words: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew, and we act anew."

I do not wish for a moment to be misunderstood as equating the challenges that Lincoln confronted with those confronting Mr. Wheeler when he becomes chairman of the FCC. Of course, they are not.

However, it does not seem out of place to suggest that Mr. Wheeler, a Lincoln scholar and someone who has observed closely the dramatic changes in the increasingly competitive communications marketplace, may well draw inspiration from Lincoln's injunction to jettison past dogmas, and to think anew, and to act anew.

Certainly, the FCC could benefit from ridding itself of outdated regulatory dogmas developed in a bygone monopolistic era, and from thinking and acting anew.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, an independent, nonpartisan free market-oriented think tank located in Rockville, Maryland. *A Historian for the FCC: Tom Wheeler Would Grasp the Importance of Technology* appeared in *The Washington Times* on May 9, 2013.