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**The Ronald H. Brown Center for
Civil Rights and Economic Development**

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**FCC Media Ownership Hearing
Belmont University/Nashville, TN
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Civil Rights and Economic Development
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I would like to thank the Commissioners for coming to Nashville, TN to discuss these important issues of media ownership. I would like to submit, as part of the media ownership record the Post-Conference Report entitled: "From Habermas to "Get Rich or Die Tryin." Hip Hop, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and the Black Public Sphere.

The existing tiered numerical limits, set forth in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, were not "in the public interest," led to corporate conglomeration in radio, and did not encourage economic competition, or diversity in radio station ownership or in content. For the Hip Hop community, corporate take over of the radio has had a deadening effect on the much needed discourse that was occurring among America's younger generation prior to consolidation, particularly among its young, urban, Black men, through Rap.

Historically, young urban Black men, through Hip Hop and Rap's radio air play, attained visibility from an otherwise marginalized existence in America. Hip Hop arose, in the late 1970's, out of the ruins of a post-industrial and ravaged South Bronx, as a cultural expression of urban Black and Latino youth, who were primarily male and who politicians and the dominant public and political discourse had written off, and, for all intent and purposes, abandoned. Rendered invisible by both White and Black politicians alike, and isolated and ignored, in what was categorized by most as a dying city, these youth decided to celebrate and live through Hip Hop and Rap.

Soon Rap would be proclaimed by some as the Black CNN, with many different Rappers, giving voice to what would have otherwise remained unseen by the larger dominant American public, such as police brutality, poverty, and the conditions in America's urban centers. Moreover, some scholars contend that rap would successfully form new allegiances with counter-culture white youth who found genuine pleasure in Rap, as a forbidden narrative and a symbol of rebellion, much like punk rock. Rap would defy both Black and White middle class norms with its confrontational style. Rappers, who were primarily urban Black male youth, would speak in their own voice and on their own terms, as members of a historically marginalized segment of America's population living in America's blighted urban areas.

Today, Gangsta Rap currently dominates the nation's radio airwaves with messages of misogyny, violence, and excessive consumer consumption. It is largely corporate driven, heavily marketed, and commercialized by corporate media in a way that more socially conscious Rap cannot be. Gangster Rappers promote anything from sneakers, jeans, iPods, cellphones, colognes, and sports drinks. By solidifying corporate control of the nation's radio air waves, the Telecommunications Act has stifled the social commentary and diverse views in Rap that were once heard over the radio, and has encouraged the proliferation of Gangsta Rap and the creation of the Gangsta image that has become the defacto voice of contemporary Hip Hop culture. The image and the message are clear: consume, consume, consume! Overlooked for radio air play, are female rappers, and non-Gangsta Rap songs that might appeal to niche audiences or to audiences with smaller buying power.

Given the hyper-commercialization of the gangsta image and its heavily marketed message of consumer consumption, radio station owners have clamored to attract the urban music listening audience—which studies have shown, is a listening and consuming audience who is primarily white, male, and suburban. Even in Nashville, media giants Clear Channel and Cumulus, with competing FM stations 101.1 and 106.7, have engaged in various promotional tactics to attract and retain the listening (and consuming) demographic of the urban format. Radio stations in these formats, like 101.1 and 106.7, tend to play what is being heavily marketed by record companies at the time. As a result, Rap that is not heavily marketed, like Gangsta Rap, rarely gets played, due to station owner's fear of losing advertising revenue.

Although non-Gangsta Rappers find other outlets (like the Internet or satellite radio) to distribute their lyrics, such Rap does not attain the same level of visibility because those other media fail to provide inexpensive access like over-the-air radio. In addition, several studies have established that there is still a Digital Divide between Blacks and whites as to access to home computers and the Internet. There is also a racial gap in access to broadband technologies, while access to satellite radio and cable comes at a price.

Moreover, with regard to the importance of radio, the court in Prometheus found that the Internet did not serve as a sufficient substitute of the radio for the dissemination of information. As radio relates to the Black community, historically, radio played an important role in providing the Black community with a forum for Black culture and political expression. The same was true with the advent of Hip Hop. Prior to the passage of the Telecommunications Act, local radio stations played more of a diverse sound in Rap. In addition, such stations played more community programming, local political news and activism, and advertisements of businesses and events in the area. Local DJs, who were deemed to be the pulse of the Hip Hop community, were regularly featured, as was new talent that was often discovered by such DJs as they mingled in the community. After the passage of the Telecommunications Act and the resulting rapid buy-out of local radio stations by larger media conglomerates, however, community programming disappeared on such stations, as did the local radio station managers. They were replaced by national managers who were further removed from the community and sat in distant regional offices of the station owner.

In addition, local DJs were fired and replaced by advanced technology that allowed shows to be pre-recorded at one of the owner's radio stations and distributed to its other sister stations for radio airplay. Moreover, new Rap talent, that may have catered more to the tastes of the local community than that approved for play by national managers, was rarely exposed on the radio. National executives were either too removed from and disconnected with local tastes to know and appreciate them or were not interested in playing a new undiscovered sound that had not already been heavily marketed and approved by record companies.

What was once a cultural and political expression of survival of a historically marginalized group has been hampered in a large way by limited access to the nation's

radio air waves. Black male youth have historically had to navigate America's public space to become visible and assert a voice of their own, and have done so, through Hip Hop and Rap, in the face of considerable odds. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, has contributed to stifling the diversity of viewpoints in the Hip Hop community, to proliferating a very racialized and sexualized image of the Gangsta Rapper, and has served to further marginalize Black male youth who have been, and continue to be, given recent U.S. census data and studies by scholars at Columbia, Georgetown, and Princeton Universities, invisible to the American political and economic discourse.

In order to achieve the participatory democracy by the airing of diverse viewpoints on the radio, the FCC should encourage, rather than limit, such discourse, particularly as it relates to a segment of the population that continues to be marginalized by society. The numerical limits set forth in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 do not promote competition or a diversity of viewpoints. They have instead fostered a discussion that seems to circulate around the interests of a handful of media conglomerates who own a majority of the radio air waves, and for all intent and purposes, control access to them. The discussion on the radio is not balanced, and more space needs to be made for a diversity of viewpoints and cannot turn, as it has with respect to Hip Hop, on corporate backed marketing and visibility or the consumption habits of a particular buying demographic.