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AT ISSUE: MEDIA OWNERSHIP

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Abstract:

Handing media reins to a few grabs power from the public MICHAEL SAFFRAN GUEST ESSAYIST Urgency over the impending relaxation of media cross-ownership restrictions by the Federal Communications Commission, particularly following the pernicious effects on radio from consolidation spurred by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, is not misplaced.

Full text:

Handing media reins to a few grabs power from the public

MICHAEL SAFFRAN

GUEST ESSAYIST

Urgency over the impending relaxation of media cross-ownership restrictions by the Federal Communications Commission, particularly following the pernicious effects on radio from consolidation spurred by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, is not misplaced. U.S. Sen. Russell Feingold, D-Wis., warns: "The lesson of radio over the last seven years is a critical one for this debate, and we ignore it at great risk to the country."

One such lesson may be gleaned from Rochester.

A real-life game of Monopoly involving radio station ownership concentration played out here in 1997. In a precedent-setting decision, a U.S. District Court blocked the sale of a group of stations "to assure that competition is not substantially lessened."

Local radio broadcaster Jack Palvino was president of The Lincoln Group, one of the litigants. In published remarks in the Democrat and Chronicle, he likened the ruling to "getting a speeding ticket while driving down an unmarked highway." But there were "speed bumps" - more than 80 years of federal regulation and court decrees on U.S. media control.

Although the United States opted for a predominantly commercial broadcasting structure, from the start the airwaves were regarded as public property subject to governmental oversight to ensure service in the public interest. Ownership restrictions, affirmed by the courts, mandated against "undue concentration of control."

Beyond antitrust concerns, a concentration of power within the mass media threatens the American principle of a distribution of authority in a representative democracy. Opponents of further media consolidation hail from across the political spectrum. Conservative columnist William Safire wrote (May 25), "The concentration of power - political, corporate, media, cultural - should be anathema to conservatives."

Others contend that today's proliferous media, including the Internet and cable TV, negates the need for the promotion of ownership diversity. However, most Americans rely on only a few media sources controlled by a small group of conglomerates.

As regulators now consider the effects on the media industry and society of loosening of ownership restrictions, they have the benefit of hindsight. Due to consolidation sparked by the telecom act, today there are about one-third - or more than 1,000 - fewer radio station owners in America than in 1996.

Despite the 1997 court ruling on local radio station ownership concentration, Rochester is typical of many U.S. cities where control over radio airwaves and ad revenue is dominated by a handful of conglomerates that make up a nationwide oligopoly.

In 1990, eight companies owned 12 local radio stations. Today, the same dozen stations are operated by only five companies, which collectively control 17 local stations. Clear Channel Communications Inc., Entercom Communications Corp. and Infinity Broadcasting Corp., a subsidiary of media giant Viacom, control almost two-thirds of the local radio audience.

The telecom bill was meant to foster competition and open access in the radio and telecommunications industries. Instead, Robert McChesney, author of Rich Media, Poor Democracy, charges that it is "perhaps one of the most corrupt pieces of legislation in U.S. history . . . effectively written by and for business." The planned curtailment of cross-ownership restrictions is no less.

Having abrogated its exclusive public stewardship obligation, the FCC is expected on Monday to foist upon society untoward media consolidation. It will represent a complicitous surrender of power over public assets to non-representative and publicly unaccountable private interests, thus weakening competition, diminishing the free marketplace of ideas and corroding participatory democracy.

Saffran, of Brighton, covers radio for Business Strategies magazine. He is a senior news specialist and graduate student at Rochester Institute of Technology. He worked for 18 years at radio stations in New York state.

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