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Abstract:

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Full text:

REP. LOUISE M. SLAUGHTER

GUEST ESSAYIST

What if one person controlled all the information in the newspaper you are reading, on your favorite radio station and on the TV channel you watch nightly?

It could begin to happen today, when a five-member panel at the Federal Communications Commission votes on relaxing regulations governing media ownership in this nation.

Sixty years ago, when television was just a fledgling invention, the FCC was created to ensure that our airwaves - which the American public owns - would not be dominated by a few large corporations that could control information and news.

Our government rightly recognized that the free flow of ideas, opinions and information is central to the ongoing national dialogue that drives this great democracy. Protecting local and minority ownership of media outlets is also crucial to guaranteeing coverage of local issues and diverse viewpoints.

As time passed, a few large corporations began to acquire more newspapers, radio and TV stations across our nation. Thirty years ago, there were 1,500 locally or regionally owned newspapers. Now, there are only 281 such independent papers. Six large companies control most of the media in this nation, while three corporations control all the cable news.

After 1996, when the FCC relaxed ownership limits for radio stations, 90 percent of radio stations were bought or sold within five years. Hundreds of stations have been consolidated since then: Clear Channel now owns more than 1,200 radio stations. Before, they could own only 40.

In Rochester alone, six of our radio stations are owned by Clear Channel. Four more are owned by Infinity Broadcasting. Thus the information and music aired on 10 stations in Rochester are controlled by two conglomerates that are based nowhere near here and have little concern for our local issues.

The FCC is now considering relaxing its regulations even further, which will certainly lead to a dangerous concentration of media ownership. The proposed changes would allow networks to own stations reaching as much as 90 percent of the country, allow companies to own three television stations in some markets and would do away with a 28-year ban on companies owning both a newspaper and a TV station in the same market.

What is perhaps more egregious is the secretive process through which these changes have been considered. The FCC tried to keep the plan's details secret and refused to have more than one, barely publicized hearing on the issue. FCC Chairman Michael Powell has rejected requests from two of his own commission members to delay the vote for more public comment.

Fortunately, even though this issue got relatively little media coverage, the American public has taken action. Progressive and conservative interest groups, artists and 200 communications academics have protested the new rules. Of the 9,000 e-mails the FCC has received on the issue, only 11 supported relaxing the rules. I, along with 100 of my colleagues in Congress, recently wrote to Chairman Powell expressing our opposition to the proposed rules. Unfortunately, the FCC is not listening.

Owners of media outlets are obliged to serve the public interest - not just their own financial interests. Our Founding Fathers created this democracy to give us the right to debate ideas openly and make informed choices. If these changes go into effect, a few huge, powerful corporations could gobble up even more media outlets to control most of the news we get.

Be grateful that today you had the opportunity to read about these proposed changes, supported by the powerful media conglomerates. If they have their way, the next time the FCC decides to change the rules, you may not be informed at all.

Slaughter, D-Fairport, represents the 28th District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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