

Our Media, Our Democracy

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Rupert Murdoch is riding high these days. His Fox News channel has taken a commanding lead over CNN in the U.S. and his recently won agreement to acquire DirecTV from GM will bring his satellite services to the American television market for the first time, adding more than a million U.S. homes to his international TV subscriber base. He owns The New York Post, The Times of London and a number of other important newspapers. The Weekly Standard, which he also owns, is widely read.

Murdoch's purchase of DirecTV will pose new challenges for both broadcast and cable TV providers and bring competition that could give consumers more choice and perhaps better prices. But continued consolidation of media ownership in the hands of individuals and firms who already control significant media outlets – even in the same market – should give us pause. Consolidation is often portrayed as a more economically efficient way of providing information to the public in a timely manner and in some cases it may be the only way to do so. But excessive consolidation may, instead, produce a situation where the public will be denied access to complete and unbiased information because those who control the media are unwilling to make available information not in their own interests. Rupert Murdoch takes care that his vast media empire reflects his views.

The vital importance of information and a free press in a democratic society is a point well made by Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, in their new book, [Our Media, Not Theirs](#). McChesney and Nichols cite the words of James Madison: "A popular Government without popular information or the means of

acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives."

To illustrate the present need to guard against excessive consolidation, take Fox News, MSNBC, and Clear Channel Communications. Murdoch's Fox News cable network and MSNBC cable TV have apparently discovered that it can be more lucrative to cater to current political views, instead of providing informed factual coverage of current events. Such coverage would give their viewers greater understanding and clearer insights into on world news, but might not always be politically correct.

Some MSNBC commentators have taken to dismissing minority opinions with disparaging remarks and rather routinely interjecting personal commentary in news reports. Jim Rutenberg, writing in the April 16, 2003, *New York Times*, cites MSNBC's president, Erik Sorenson, as saying that his cable network is trying to differentiate its report from a mainstream style of automatic questioning of the government. So, if our government is, "of the people, by the people and for the people," and if a free press is an indispensable source of information and our voice, is questioning of government not a primary role for the press?

Clear Channel Communications, which operates the largest radio broadcast network in the nation, with more than a thousand stations, has withheld some songs and songwriters from the air because of their antiwar sentiments. Radio stations in Texas and elsewhere have boycotted the Grammy-winning Dixie Chicks, because of antiwar comments of their lead singer.

Major newspaper, radio and TV operators seem to have forgotten that the free press envisioned

at the founding of this democracy operates at leave of the public, *not incidentally* to provide information objectively for and on behalf of the public, and that role must not be casually or in the name of sustainable profit margins be subordinated to taking first place in the “sweeps” this go-around.

Consolidation of media ownership is of particular importance now, because the FCC is currently reviewing its consolidation rules – which date back as far as 1975 and which were put in place to protect localism, competition and diversity in the media. These rules are to “...ensure the multiplicity of voices and viewpoints that undergird our marketplace of ideas and sustain our democracy,” as FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein said earlier this year. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 brought relaxation of many FCC ownership rules, but important limits remain in place today.

The Commission began rulemaking proceedings on two of the rules governing consolidation in 2001 and on four others in September of last year. In late 2001, FCC Chairman Michael Powell created a Media Ownership Working Group to develop a factual foundation for re-evaluating existing rules. At a public hearing in Seattle in March of this year, the chairman noted that the Commission had defended its cross-ownership rules in court five times over the past two years and lost every time. Mr. Powell said that the Commission must produce evidence that a rule is still necessary or eliminate it. He noted that,

“...we all agree that some broadcast ownership limits are critical if we are to maintain a robust marketplace of ideas. The public interest is all about promoting diversity, localism, and competition. We can achieve these goals – and the courts will agree with us – if we do it the right way.”

Toward the end of March of this year, the chairman told the Media Institute, “It’s hard to see how a complete ban on newspapers’ owning TV stations serves the public interest.” In a letter addressed to eight members of Congress on Wednesday, April 16, Mr. Powell said that the Commission has received more than 18,000 comments and is moving forward to complete its review. The chairman rejected a proposal for a further notice of rulemaking. Barring the need for additional comments, which he does not anticipate, he said expects the FCC to conclude its rulemaking by early June, 2003.

In comments on the cross-ownership rules at a hearing in Richmond this past February, FCC Commissioner Michael Copps said that after the FCC made changes on cross-ownership rules in radio seven years ago, consolidation may have created some economies and efficiencies, including some that kept some stations from “going dark and depriving communities of service”.

“But the consolidation went far beyond what anyone expected,” Commissioner Copps continued. “Conglomerates now own dozens, even hundreds – and, in one case, more than a thousand – stations all

across the country. More and more of their programming seems to originate hundreds of miles removed from listeners and their communities. And we know there are 34 percent fewer radio station owners in February 2003, than there were before these protections were eliminated.”

As it deliberates on cross-ownership limits over the next month, the FCC certainly should be mindful that our government must not interfere unnecessarily in free enterprise, but the Commissioners should be mindful as well of the public good and public interest entrusted to the media in our democracy. The courts, in turn, should recognize these fundamental privileges and responsibilities as well.

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