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With Elizabeth Tulis

Proposed FCC rules risk more national control of newspapers and TV. But without local media, communities die.

In recent weeks, public discussion of the Federal Communications Commission's media ownership rules has often begun with this illuminating anecdote: On Jan. 18, 2002, a train carrying ammonia fertilizer derailed near Minot, N.D., sending up a cloud of toxic ammonia gas. When local police learned of the accident, they called the area's six radio stations to request that the stations warn people to stay away. But no one at any of the stations picked up the phone, and no warning was broadcast. Hundreds of people grew ill from exposure to ammonia gas; one died.

Why was nobody around to answer the phone at the local radio stations? All six are run by Clear Channel Communications, a national corporation. The programs broadcast by the stations are recorded in some far-off studio and then sent to the Minot outlets. The six radio outlets had, in fact, ceased to be local stations.

Ten years ago, Clear Channel's ownership of all six Minot stations would have been prohibited by the FCC. In 1996, though, the regulations governing ownership of radio stations were relaxed. Companies like Clear Channel jumped at the chance to expand their presence. Over the next six years, the number of radio station owners nationally fell by 34 percent. With the shift away from local ownership, communities like Minot lost a major source of information about local emergencies and other news, and they lost call-in shows in which citizens could debate community issues and values.

FCC Chairman Michael Powell and his allies have proposed further loosening the regulations governing media ownership. If they have their way, national corporations will be able to buy up not only local radio, but also local television stations and newspapers. After much debate, a final vote is expected on June 2.

ADDING UP

The specific FCC regulations that would be relaxed are the national television ownership rule, the daily newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule, and the duopoly rule, which limits the number of TV stations controlled by a single company in a given city.

The national television ownership rule, perhaps the most important of these provisions, caps TV station ownership by one corporation at 35 percent of television households. In other words, the stations owned by a single entity may collectively reach no more than 35 percent of the country's television viewers. The new rules drafted by the FCC would raise this cap to 45 percent.

Perhaps a 10 percent rise seems like a minor adjustment. But Chairman Powell also wants to retain a decades-old proviso that, for the purpose of cap calculations, discounts the estimated number of people who view UHF stations by 50 percent. Once this made some sense: Before the advent of cable, only people with rabbit-ear antennae on their TV sets could tune in to UHF stations. Now, because so many Americans have cable, UHF stations are almost as accessible as VHF stations. These days the actual number of UHF viewers is probably twice the official FCC estimate.

Put the UHF discount together with the raised cap, and a company that acquired a lot of UHF stations could actually control access to something closer to 90 percent - not 45 percent - of television households.

Also reportedly under the gun, the newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule prevents companies from owning both a broadcast radio or TV station and a daily newspaper within a single local market. If the proposed change goes through, in practically all local markets, one company could own both a broadcast station and a daily newspaper.

According to the duopoly rule, a company may own two (and no more) TV stations in a single market if certain conditions are met - for instance, if there are at least eight other stations in the market. A third proposed change would permit companies to own three TV stations in larger markets.

VIEWED NATIONALLY

One may argue that the dangers of media monopolization that would follow these changes reflect yesterday's concerns: that people will have access to only one viewpoint, that the news will be too biased, and that suddenly, on the eve of an election, all media will endorse the same candidate. Supporters of the proposed changes argue that, given the existence of the Internet, Fox, and CNN, among other news sources, there is no way to monopolize the media to which a community is exposed.

But none of these national outlets, worthy though they may be, provide a truly local forum. Arguments that the Internet offers the opportunity for local forums ignores a major counter-criticism - that the Internet, in fact, promotes grouping according to national special interests. So concerns that the suggested regulatory changes would be community killers still stand.

Some public leaders have spoken out against the proposed changes, and the opposition is bipartisan. True, within the FCC, the main opposition has come from Democrats: Commissioners Michael Copps and Jonathan Adelstein have criticized the closed-door nature of the review leading up to the proposed revisions and the FCC chairman's refusal to hold more than one public hearing on the issue. But in Congress, distinguished Republicans are also expressing doubts.

Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) has joined with Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) to introduce legislation to keep the TV ownership cap at its current 35 percent of households. Reps. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) and John Dingell (D-Mich.) have introduced similar legislation in the House.

Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) is concerned about how the FCC proposal will affect diversity, competition, and local communities. Former Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) thinks we should leave the media ownership rules as they are. Lott and Snowe join Democrats such as Sen. Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, who, at a hearing in January, expressed skepticism about whether the new rules would, as the FCC chairman claims, preserve media diversity. "When you talk about more voices, are you talking about more voices by one ventriloquist?" Dorgan asked.

Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) has raised similar misgivings about downgrading the newspaper/television cross-ownership rule. He is troubled by the idea that local newspapers and local television stations will speak with one voice.

EAGER MONOPOLISTS

Such fears are not unfounded. Viacom, NBC, and other national corporations have admitted that they plan on buying additional local stations once the proposed changes take effect. Anticipating the lifting of the ban on cross-ownership, the Tribune Co. two years ago acquired Times Mirror, which gave Tribune newspaper/TV combinations in New York, Los Angeles, Hartford, and South Florida.

Pat Mullen, president of Tribune Broadcasting, has stated that a key issue for the company is getting those combinations permanently aligned, which presumably will happen as soon as the FCC changes become official. Mullen admits that his company likes monopolies. According to all available information, the proposed FCC changes would give executives like Mullen more of what they like - and take away the limits that support community-based media.

This is precisely what regulators must not allow. Local communities are the mainstay of a civil society. It is here that human beings actually join together. It is here that voluntary associations, the bedrock of American democracy, weave their web. It is in local communities that people truly care for and listen to one another. As Rep. David Price (D-N.C.) put it, the potential FCC decision "won't just affect our local TV news coverage.... It will jeopardize democracy as we know it."

Our towns and villages and neighborhoods have been weakened too much already. They need to be shored up, not further undermined by national control of the few remaining outlets for spreading local values and culture.

Amitai Etzioni is University Professor at George Washington University, director of the GWU Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies, and author, most recently, of *My Brother's Keeper*. Elizabeth Tulis is a research assistant at the institute. For additional information, see www.amitai-notes.com/blog.