

COMMENT: MCAVOY ON WASHINGTON

## ANTI-BIG MEDIA GROUPS MOBILIZE FOR FCC FIGHT

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*Public advocacy groups, with backing on Capitol Hill and at the FCC, hope to derail the FCC's plans to relax the broadcast ownership rules.*

**By Kim McAvoy**

Broadcasters will cheer this Wednesday if the FCC, as expected, launches a major review of its broadcast ownership rules with the intent of relaxing them.

But broadcasters ought not celebrate too much. Moving the FCC from initiating a proceeding to final rules will likely be a long and difficult battle. Forces opposed to any FCC action that would lead to more consolidation of media ownership have been mobilizing. They will be out in force this week, and will battle broadcasters and their political allies every step of the way.

FCC Chairman Kevin Martin wants to relax the newspaper/broadcast crossownership ban as well as rules that prohibit ownership of two stations in small markets. And he is believed to have the support of his two fellow Republicans, Deborah Taylor Tate and Robert McDowell.

Under then-Chairman Michael Powell, the FCC had adopted such changes in 2003, but the U.S. Court of Appeals in Philadelphia overturned the action and sent it back to the commission for another look.

Ready for Round Two, the anti-consolidation forces have coalesced and created their own Web site—[StopBigMedia.com](http://StopBigMedia.com)—and they are planning a press conference prior to the Wednesday FCC meeting to explain their opposition and rally support.

The coalition includes groups all too familiar to broadcast lobbyists: Free Press, Common Cause, Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, Center for Digital Democracy, Media Access Project, United Church of Christ, National Council of Churches and the Newspaper Guild.

"We would like to have some assurances that the commission will provide for public hearings and will give some specific proposals that we can address and chew on before it is done," says Andrew Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project.

The coalition wants the FCC to provide lengthy comment and reply periods and encourage significant public input, which means a series of public meetings on the matter. More important, these groups want any FCC action on media ownership to reaffirm, if not strengthen, broadcasters' public interest obligations.

The coalition has a counterpart on Capitol Hill. The Future of American Media Caucus is expected to call its own press briefing this week to make clear its objections to relaxation of the media ownership rules.

Led by New York Democratic Rep. Maurice Hinchey, the caucus has already registered its concerns with the FCC's Martin. "We hope the commission will strengthen existing rules, and not further damage an already weak structure intended to protect diversity in American broadcasting," they wrote earlier this month.

The Caucus will be extremely active during the FCC debate, promises Hinchey's chief of staff, Wendy Darwell. The Caucus was formed in response to the FCC's earlier media ownership rewrite in 2003.

Individual members of Congress have also begun to weigh in. Senator Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) wrote Martin last week urging him to look at minority, women and small-business ownership issues before acting. And Senator Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) says he plans to offer an amendment to Senate telecom reform legislation that would put the brakes on FCC action.

Those opposed to the rule changes have two sympathetic FCC commissioners, Democrats Michael Copps and Jonathan Adelstein. Just as they did in 2003, they have been pressing Martin to hold field hearings and would like the FCC to complete its localism proceeding and address the issue of broadcasters' DTV public interest obligations before tackling ownership.

Both Copps and Adelstein are slated to attend Free Press's Town Meeting on the Future of Media in Asheville, N.C., on June 28.

As anybody who was around in 2003 knows, the public advocacy groups with support from Capitol Hill and from inside the FCC can create a lot of mischief and, if nothing else, slow the ownership proceeding to a crawl.

"Unless our leaders hear from millions of concerned citizens," StopBigMedia.com says, "the FCC will give in to pressure from corporate media lobbyists, abandon the public interest and pursue policies that encourage even greater media concentration."

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