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Technology Daily

FCC Begins Media Ownership Review

By Drew Clark

(Wednesday, June 21) The FCC began the contentious process of revisiting media ownership issues, launching a review of which broadcast ownership rules need to be changed when considering advancing technologies.

The agency must decide if the same company within a given market can own a certain number of television and radio stations, and it must determine how to treat rules for the combination of broadcast stations and newspapers.

"Today, the commission opens a process to review its media ownership rules, a topic of vital importance to our democracy," agency Chairman Kevin Martin said. "We begin this dialog in a neutral and even-handed fashion."

Martin said the commission plans to hold six public hearings on the topic and has adopted an extended comment period of 120 days. The review was necessary because the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected most of a prior agency decision from June 2003. The FCC is required to review the matter this year.

Although the agency's Democratic commissioners said they wanted to proceed on the matter, they dissented in part because they did not agree with the ground rules for the debate.

"The process does not commit to giving the public an opportunity to comment on specific proposals before any changes to the rules are finalized," Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein said. "It does not commit to making any final decision in a comprehensive manner. Given the history of this proceeding, these failings are astonishing."

Commissioner Michael Copps sought more public hearings and



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**FCC Begins Prickly
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studies. "I believe that Americans need to know what the FCC is doing and that we have a solemn obligation to encourage public participation in the decision."

Adelstein also criticized the agency for not agreeing to first finalize a related proceeding on "broadcast localism" -- whether broadcasters are airing enough locally produced content.

Martin and Media Bureau Chief **Donna Gregg** said the localism proceeding would be included. "The commission will make sure that we have full comments and incorporate the issue of localism on media ownership, and of media ownership on localism, and that people have the opportunity to comment on it," Martin said.

He added: "I would actually have to say that I think it could be my dissenting colleagues who are the ones who are rushing to make judgments today. I think they want to grade our performance and give us an F, but it is only the first day of class."

Martin said most of the criticisms "were about the history of what was going on connected with the previous chairman. I didn't hear very many objections to any of the specific questions that we were asking today."

Nonprofit groups were critical. "Chairman Martin continues to ignore public and congressional requests that he complete the FCC's long delayed localism inquiry," said **Andrew Schwartzman**, chief executive officer of the Media Access Project.

"The public remains uncertain about whether the FCC intends to change its ways and truly commit to involving them in these crucial media ownership decisions," Common Cause President **Chellie Pingree** said.



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