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Friday, June 23, 2006 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Ryan Blethen / Times editorial columnist

Demand an independent press



Communities across the United States should take note of what Kevin Martin is doing and tell him to stand up against the media conglomerates.

Martin is the spear tip of the big corporations pushing for media consolidation. As the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Martin disagrees with rules that ban a single company from owning all press

organizations in one market.

On Wednesday, the FCC started a re-examination of the rules that help ensure a diverse press. Consumers of news, and every other American, for that matter, should hope that Martin fails — just as his predecessor did — to make it easier for the behemoths to gobble up as many news outlets as possible.

In 2003, then-FCC chairman Michael Powell ignored a staggering amount of public input and pushed through a rule change to drop a cross-ownership ban that would have allowed companies to own a newspaper and television station in the same market. The number of television or radio stations a company could control in a market was also uncapped, and the number of television stations the networks could own went from 35 percent to 45 percent. That's no longer an issue because Congress passed a law locking the number at 39 percent.

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The rule changes never went into effect because of Andrew Schwartzman, another person Americans should get to know, and thank. Schwartzman, an attorney and head of the Media Access Project (www.mediaaccess.org/) challenged the FCC in court. The 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia sided with Schwartzman and tossed the FCC rules out. The Bush administration refused to take up the matter, and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case.

Unfortunately, the court ruling left wiggle room for huge companies such as Tribune Co. and MediaNews Group, which want to own television and newspapers in the same market. The court claimed the FCC was correct to drop the cross-ownership ban, but would not parse out sections of its ruling.

Fortunately for readers, viewers and journalists, much has changed since the FCC's foolish tinkering in 2003. The sale of Knight-Ridder, the nation's second-largest newspaper chain, and the Tribune's recent troubles show that Wall Street and journalism do not mix.

Newspapers will probably never be able to yield the monstrous profits that Wall Street demands but can comfortably provide the best newsgathering

operation and advertising package in a community.

So what would happen if the Biggies owned everything in a community? Advertisers would be the first to see rates go up. The public conglomerates have to feed the beast, and the giant private companies are probably so leveraged every dollar needs to be squeezed.

The situation would not be any better on the news side. Take what William Dean Singleton, chief executive of MediaNews Group, said in Thursday's Washington Post: "... you take the high cost of news gathering and spread it across multiple platforms and you get multiple revenue streams."

What I hear in this comment is that if a company can own a television station, radio station and a newspaper in the same market, then the staff can be diluted among the three news organizations.

In 2003, the Republican commissioners had the majority — 3 to 2 — and do again. The FCC is taking public comment for 120 days. Be heard. Write your congressmen. Write your senators. Go to the public meetings the FCC plans to hold around the country. Tell the FCC to ensure that your press stays independent. If your newspaper or TV station is not covering this issue, ask the editor or producer why not.

It is time to panic. Our democracy will only suffer if the bland, monolithic media machine is allowed to suck up more press outlets.

Ryan Blethen's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times. His e-mail address is rblethen@seattletimes.com

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