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Probe Called for in FCC's Quashing of Local News Study

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Two days after a senator unveiled an unreleased Federal Communications Commission report saying locally owned stations delivered more news, a new allegation that the report was purposely quashed at a time the FCC was easing media ownership rules is prompting calls for an independent probe.

Story continues below...

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., unveiled the draft and unreleased report Tuesday at a Senate Commerce Committee hearing, and questioned FCC Chairman Kevin Martin about it.

The report, which Mr. Martin said he had never seen, was produced in 2004 under former chairman Michael Powell, as part of a planned FCC look into "localism" that was never completed. It said that locally owned stations average 5.5 more minutes of local news per half-hour of news than other stations.

It was produced as the FCC studied the impact of ownership on local stations and was moving ahead with new ownership rules that would have resulted in more out-of-town ownership.

Today Adam Candeub, a law professor at Michigan State University and at the time a lawyer in the FCC Media Bureau, said officials of the FCC Media Bureau came into the office one day and told the two researchers who were working on the study to halt.

"They said that the project was dead, and to delete computer records," he told TelevisionWeek. He said the request was made even though the researchers had spent considerable time going through tapes of TV station news broadcasts to analyze their content.

Mr. Candeub's suggestion that the project has been killed and "every last piece" of the study destroyed was first reported today by the Associated Press.

Sen. Boxer yesterday asked Mr. Martin to investigate what happened to the study and whether it was "shelved because the outcome was not to the liking of some of the commissioners and/or any outside powerful interests."

"I am very concerned that this report would never have seen the light of day had someone not brought it to my attention," she wrote. "It is entirely inappropriate for the FCC to suppress facts in order to obtain the outcome it wishes."

An aide said today the senator will seek an independent probe by the FCC's Office of Inspector General if she isn't satisfied with Mr. Martin's answer.

Mr. Martin tonight released a letter saying that neither he nor other current FCC commissioners were aware of the report before seeing it at the hearing.

"I am attempting to determine why [it was never released] but the senior management of the Media Bureau and the chairman of the commission at the time [Mr. Powell] are no longer at the commission."

He also said he has now incorporated the report into the current FCC examining of "localism."

Consumer groups today asked an Inspector General probe begin immediately.

Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, Free Press and Media Access Project, in a letter to Mr. Martin, asked for the probe to "determine the circumstances under which the public was denied access to this important, taxpayer-funded research, the parties involved and the processes that may allowed any record of its existence to be destroyed."