

# FCC eyes push vs. owner rule

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Another battle is brewing over whether a company can own both a newspaper and broadcast radio or television station in the same market - including in Boston.

The Federal Communications Commission is expected within the next few months to renew a push for an overhaul of the current "cross ownership" rule that for decades has barred dual ownership of newspapers and stations within the same city.

Last week, the FCC's office in Washington was bombarded with e-mails from both opponents and proponents of the proposal, only hours after published reports said FCC Chairman Kevin Martin was preparing to push for a fast-track debate over the issue.

But U.S. Rep. Edward Markey (D-Malden), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, warned that changes should not be rushed.

"I think the FCC should act on any revisions to media ownership rules in a way that safeguards diversity and localism and gives the public and the Congress an opportunity to fully review and weigh any proposed changes," Markey said in a statement.

Markey said the issue is not "simply a question of supporting or removing a current rule," but rather a complicated matter that requires a "carefully calibrated approach, market by market."

But the debate is indeed turning into a support-or-remove showdown.

Supporters of the "cross ownership" rule say that it prevents media monopolies from forming and controlling news outlets in individual cities.

Opponents of the rule say it's an outdated regulation in an age of the Internet, cable TV, satellite radio and satellite television.

"Today's media is totally different than it was 25 years ago," said John Sturm, president of the Newspaper Association of America, a big proponent of striking down the rule.

Newspapers in general have long wanted to ax the rule, saying it unfairly prevents newspapers from expanding into other media businesses at a time when the industry has been financially suffering.

Media mogul Rupert Murdoch has battled for years against the rule, primarily so he can maintain ownership of his New York Post and his Fox station in the Big Apple. In 1994, Murdoch was forced to sell the Boston Herald in order to purchase the local Fox-affiliated station, WFXT (Channel 25).

Other newspaper companies, some of them reeling from competition from the Internet, also want the rule changed so they can get into broadcasting as a way to diversify their holdings.

But Andrew Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project, said it's simply wrong to say the rule is outdated due to new technologies.

He said newspapers and television stations "remain by far" the most powerful news distributors in any given city - and relaxing the rule will make media companies that much more powerful.

He predicted a sustained and "very hostile" opposition to changing the rule.

In 2003, the FCC was taken to court after it moved to change the ownership rule.

The FCC's plan was legally reversed in 2004, but some believe a new carefully drafted proposal could pass legal muster next time around.

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