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FCC Gets Earful on Media Ownership

Testimony from Across the Industry Urges Federal Communications Commission Action vs. Consolidation

By [John Eggerton](#) -- *Broadcasting & Cable*, 10/31/2007 12:24:00 PM

The Federal Communications Commission got an earful on the effects of media consolidation on broadcast localism at a [public hearing Wednesday](#), including from its two Democratic commissioners.

According to the [Parents Television Council](#), media consolidation has led to the "destruction of the concept of community standards." [Andrew J. Schwartzman](#) of [Media Access Project](#) said most TV



stations aren't operated in the public interest, and radio has abandoned public service altogether. A familiar radio voice, former National Public Radio host and [American Federation of Television & Radio Artists](#) officer [Bob Edwards](#), told the FCC not to "fast-track" its consideration of the effects of consolidation.

That was a reference to FCC chairman [Kevin Martin](#)'s decision to fold a separate localism inquiry into the general reconsideration of primarily deregulatory ownership rules sent back to the FCC in 2004 by a federal court asking for better justification. Martin wants to vote on those new rules by mid-December, according to FCC sources, although that timetable could be pushed back given the pushback from legislators and others on that timetable. [Hill Democrats](#), at least [one Republican](#) and numerous activist groups have complained that Martin is rushing the vote.

When Democratic commissioner [Michael Copps](#) said he wanted a sense of what the outcome of the localism inquiry would be, Martin responded, "Both a notice of proposed rulemaking with specific recommendations and a timetable for actions are the kind of things that I think we are going to be committed to end up doing." It was not immediately clear whether or not that would include Copps' proposal for a 90-day comment period on any proposals, which would push it into next year.

"Mark my words," Edwards said in testimony prepared for the hearing. "If you further deregulate media in this country, networks, broadcast stations and newspapers will continue to consolidate, resulting in fewer voices heard by citizens ... If commercial media are given the unfettered right to abandon their obligation to serve the public interest, they will do just that. Please do not let this happen."

PTC director of corporate and government affairs [Dan Isett](#) said consolidation has led to a coarsening of content, as well as irresponsible news media that ignore news that doesn't favor their parent corporations.

Although the hearing was about local broadcasting TV and radio, the PTC took a shot at cable, describing it in an advisory on its testimony as, effectively, "a cartel, forcing consumers and families to buy enormous amounts of unwanted programming just to get access to the family programming they actually want." The PTC has been one of Martin's strongest backers in his push for cable a la carte.

Schwartzman proposed a host of fixes, including reducing the terms of TV licenses from seven to three years, doubling the number of minority-owned stations, requiring stations to more fully demonstrate why they deserve renewals and requiring home shopping stations to do public-interest programming. Such stations are currently considered to be, de facto, in the public interest because they provide a unique home shopping service for seniors, shut-ins and others, but critics argued that the rise of the Internet has changed the equation.

Schwartzman also made a pitch not just for local programming, but for local ownership and ties to the community. "Effective local service requires institutional and personal attachments to the community," he said in prepared testimony. "It requires a diverse work force that is capable of conveying the many different perspectives found in each community. There is no way to document the qualitative impact of having a station operated locally by individual citizens who live in the community and expect to remain there."

Democratic commissioners Copps and [Jonathan Adelstein](#)

said consolidation had wreaked havoc on localism and public service and that the FCC needed to address that issue through a task force and specific actions before voting on any general revise of media-ownership rules. Otherwise, said Copps, the process has been only window dressing -- "a chore to get done," echoed Adelstein, "so media giants will have their way."

[Marcellus Alexander](#) of the [National Association of Broadcasters](#) said localism was in broadcasters' financial interest because broadcasters had to compete for local eyeballs that can and will go elsewhere.

But Alexander added that it was broadcasters' service during times of crisis that was at the heart of their service to the community, pointing to the recent [California wildfires](#). As their own communities burned, he said, broadcasters were constantly vigilant.

He then aired a promotional video from [KABC-TV Los Angeles](#)

with footage of fire coverage that pointed out that the station had canceled regular programming and commercials, and which outlined its money-raising efforts for victims. Alexander suggested that this service was the product of a vibrant, competitive marketplace.

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