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# Media ownership issue stirs industry concerns

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Andrew Jay Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project, said that “the number of good broadcasters is diminishing, and the number of mediocre broadcasters is increasing.”

An ambitious plan by FCC chairman Kevin Martin to push through looser media ownership rules before the holiday is meeting tough opposition.

Last week at a public hearing attended by more than 250 people in the FCC’s hearing room, there were increasing calls for the agency to first finish work on a much-delayed study concerning what broadcasters do or don’t do in the way of public service for their communities.

Martin held his last public hearing on broadcast localism last week, attempting to put a cap on a proceeding that began in 2003. He is trying to wrap the localism issue into a package that also deals with media ownership. “The issues around ownership and the issues around localism are interrelated,” Martin said.

However, just as Michael Powell, his predecessor, found, media consolidation is a hot button issue. Advocates ranging from the Rev. Jesse Jackson to the conservative Parents Television Council called on the FCC to slow down on further media consolidation.

S. Derek Turner, research director of Free Press, used the FCC's own data to demonstrate that allowing a single company to own both the major daily newspaper and broadcast outlets in the same market diminishes local news coverage.

FCC commissioner Michael Copps, an opponent of loosening the ownership rules, called Turner's findings on news coverage "a bombshell."

Andrew Jay Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project, said that in the wake of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, "the number of good broadcasters is diminishing, and the number of mediocre broadcasters is increasing."

Of these broadcasters, Schwartzman told the FCC, "they should be asked how they merit a free license for exclusive use of scarce publicly owned spectrum when they don't provide something — anything — designed to serve the public interest, as opposed to their own private interests."

The FCC's Copps and Jonathan S. Adelstein said they doubted the localism study could be completed to fit Martin's aggressive timetable. "I don't see how that gets done between now and the end of the year if you're going to do it right," Copps said.

Since the beginning of the Bush administration, media ownership has divided the FCC along partisan lines. With time running out for Martin to push through his agenda, he has accelerated the timetable. "A rush to judgment to clear the way for more big media mergers? No way," Copps said at the beginning of the hearing.

Tribune, which owns the "Los Angeles Times" and KTLA-TV Channel 5, needs the ownership ban lifted or FCC waivers in Los Angeles and four other markets to close an \$8.2 billion deal to take the company private. Tribune faces financial penalties if the deal doesn't close by Dec. 31.

In Congress, Sens. Byron L. Dorgan, D-ND, and Trent Lott, R-MS, told Martin last week that the localism study should be completed, formal policies proposed and the public given 90 days to comment on them before other media ownership issues are considered.


The lawmakers, both senior members of the Senate Commerce Committee, may propose a "resolution of disapproval" that would enable Congress to veto any changes to the media ownership restrictions. Also under consideration is separate legislation to prevent FCC action on an expedited basis.

A hearing on the issue by the commerce committee has been scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 8.

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