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## On Media Giantism

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**W**ASHINGTON

You won't find a movie nominated for an Oscar with the heroine — fighting to expose the dominance of media conglomerates in the distribution of entertainment — crushed by the giant corporation that controls film financing, distribution and media criticism.

You won't find television magazine programs fearlessly exposing the broadcast lobby's pressure on Congress and the courts to allow station owners to gobble up more stations and cross-own local newspapers, thereby to determine what information residents of a local market receive.

Nor will you find many newspaper chains assigning reporters to reveal the effect of media giantism on local coverage or cover the way publishers induce coverage-hungry politicians to loosen antitrust restraints.

Should we totally deregulate the public airwaves and permit the dwindling of major media down to a precious few? Should we reduce choices available to cantankerous individualists who do not want their information and entertainment limited by increasingly massive mass media?

"Luddite nonsense," answer many merging movie mogul and media magnates, as they point to the seemingly fierce competition from the Internet and the proliferation of cable channels.

Tell that to the purchasers of political advertising: the big bucks go into broadcast TV, with its unmatched cost per thousand viewers. And stop to examine the highly hyped "competition" that consolidating media profess to fear: the leading 20 Internet sites and biggest cable channels are already owned by the expansive likes of G.E.-NBC, Disney, Fox, Gannett, AOL Time Warner, Hearst, Microsoft, Cox, Dow Jones, The Washington Post and The New York Times. (Is there anyone I haven't offended?)

Ah, counter the trust-trusters, but most people want the conglomerates they trust to provide the content they watch and read. As for diversity — don't 16,000 local radio stations provide much of the vaunted diversity of views and tastes that Americans want?

Take a listen to what's happened to local radio in one short wave of deregulation: the great cacophony of different sounds and voices is being amalgamated and homogenized. (The following figures were published by Gannett's USA Today, which kind of blunts my point about big-media squeamishness, but its account of the F.C.C.'s ruination of independent radio is damning.)

Back in 1996, the two largest radio chains owned 115 stations; today, those two own more than 1,400. A handful of leading owners used to generate only a fifth of industry revenue; now these top five rake in

55 percent of all money spent on local radio. The number of station owners has plummeted by a third. Yesterday's programming diversity on the public's airwaves has degenerated to the Top 40, as today's consolidating commodores borrowing public property say "the public interest be damned."

Granted, Rush Limbaugh's views differ from those heard on liberal NPR, just as an indie movie producer can make money for a cookie-cutter conglomerate with a film going against the grain. But while political paranoids accuse each other of vast conspiracies, the truth is that media mergers have narrowed the range of information and entertainment available to people of all ideologies.

Does this make me (gasp!) pro-regulation? Michael Powell, appointed by Bush to be F.C.C. chairman, likes to say "the market is my religion." My conservative economic religion is founded on the rock of competition, which — since Teddy Roosevelt's day — has protected small business and consumers against predatory pricing leading to market monopolization.

One of the Democrats on the F.C.C., Michael Copps, is concerned that "we're relying on institutions to cover this debate which have interests in the outcome of the debate." That inherent conflict of interest is why I have long been banging my spoon against the highchair.

Republicans in the House, intimidated by the powerful broadcast lobby, don't admit that some regulation can be pro-business; neither does the D.C. Court of Appeals, which wants further "granulating of evidence" that endless merging harms competition. In the Senate, Kay Bailey Hutchison, Republican of Texas, grasps this. Perhaps Commerce Chairman John McCain will see T.R.'s trust-busting light and start heavy granulating in hearings — before merger mania afflicts TV and film the way it is debilitating local radio.

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