

A Reflection on the FCC's relaxation of standards for ownership of television stations by media companies.

I'm usually an upbeat, positive thinking, glass-half-*full* kind of guy. I look for the best in people, and give most people the benefit of the doubt. If I get let down from time to time, it's a small price for the joy that predominates.

But all this business about the FCC's new regulations allowing greater ownership of television stations by media companies is bothering me. I'm not worried that it may never be possible to hide from reruns of *Murder She Wrote*. Rather, I'm concerned that consolidation of ownership of media outlets by fewer companies is a step in the direction of a less open and democratic society.

Am I being too simplistic? Perhaps so. But insight and prescience frequently come in the ability to connect seemingly unrelated factors. Here's my case:

- For some time, America's interest in in-depth coverage and analysis of the news has been declining.
- The majority of Americans now say they get most of their news from broadcast media, particularly television. Yet the amount of time devoted by broadcasters to serious news coverage, particularly at the local level, has not changed. It may have even declined when you factor in the use of video news releases, increased cross-station promotion and other fillers.
- As consumers of news, we've bartered careful analysis for the immediacy and short-term thrill of live television. We don't care if what we see is accurate or put into proper context. Ranting has taken the place of informed debate.
- The news media have responded by playing to our baser instincts rather than leading us with news, analysis, investigative journalism that elevate the level of civic engagement. They tease us with fearsome headlines and titillate us with sensational sound and video. They bombard us with opportunistic "expert opinions" that more often than not do more to raise our blood pressure than add to our understanding of complex issues and events.

- Many Americans have become so unwilling to trust the voices of media that do not cater to their own agendas that they have essentially stopped listening. Even cable news channels that play to this discontent regularly compromise their own credibility with ratings-seeking “gotcha” moments, stage whispers presented with the legitimacy of fact, and hyperbole.

Do you suppose there is any connection between the fact that broadcast news media seem more intent on holding our attention until the next ad and the fact that voter dissatisfaction is high and voter participation in elections is embarrassingly low?

The bottom line here is that the medium in which we’ve elected to put our greatest dependence is doing us no favors. All politics may be local. But increasingly, the media that provide news and information about our communities and politics are not. Even before the FCC expanded the opportunities for media companies to own more television stations, media consolidation has already been occurring in a way that deprives local citizens of access to and accountability by local broadcast media:

- Fewer and fewer radio stations use music play lists and create local programming that reflect local tastes. Some function as little more than a local distribution points for national satellite programming and advertising services. If the kids from *American Graffiti* went in search of today’s Wolfman Jack, they surely wouldn’t find him in a local radio booth.
- Fewer and fewer companies control more and more television and radio stations.
- There is already at least one media company that broadcasts the “local” television news and weather for its various affiliates around the country from a single studio using the same newscaster, thousands of miles away from the local communities.

Do you think the TV station in Michigan whose “local” news is actually broadcast from Baltimore is going to give local citizens much input? Will it know enough about the local market to give time and attention to all of the disparate voices that deserve to be heard? Or will it be more interested in packaging that market for advertising purposes?

The final bit of this story—the part that gives me the greatest concern—is that the public seems content to let this all happen. Even when the FCC recently visited Richmond as a token gesture to citizen involvement in media policing making, the relatively small level of comment that did occur came from activist groups, not “we the people.”

And this is why a normally happy guy is worried. I don’t like the tone of cynics who say we deserve whatever erosion of democracy we allow to occur. But when we allow the very media we count on most to become dominated by a small number of corporations, one cannot but wonder whether the information we receive will also become dominated by just a few voices and viewpoints.

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