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Media consolidation vs. democracy

CHRIS SPERRY / GUEST COLUMNIST

Imagine a society where all the media outlets are controlled by one small group of men, where dissent is drowned out by a deluge of homogeneous thought, where a nation's understanding of current events is shaped by one opinion.

Our country took a significant step toward this Orwellian vision on Monday when the Federal Communication Commission lifted



The founders of our nation envisioned free and public disagreement on critical issues as a cornerstone of real democracy. In the name of deregulation the FCC is abdicating its mandate to protect diversity and dissenting voices on the public airwaves.

WTOK, WYXL, WHCU, and WONY, are now owned by the same company, Eagle Broadcasting.

Monday's decision will open the way for one company to own newspapers, TV and radio stations in the same market. One company will now be able to own nearly half of all the TV stations in the country, this in a nation where 65 percent of the population gets 100 percent of its news from television.

As a smaller and smaller number of corporations construct the ceaseless barrage of media messages that saturate our culture, democracy suffers. Twenty-five years ago more than 50 companies controlled the bulk of the world's media outlets. Today that number is five (AOL, Time Warner, Viacom, Bertelsman, Disney and Vivendi).

These huge, mega-corporations have promoted the trivialization of news and the dumbing-down of our citizen-

ship. Their primary goal is not education or advocacy but profits.

Local radio news programming has been decimated over the last decade as regional reporters have been replaced by national feeds.

The business interests of these corporations influence and even distort the news we receive. For example, in May 1996 Time magazine ran its cover story, "On the Trail of Twisters," at the same time that Warner Brothers released its movie, "Twisters."

Time Magazine's news was constructed to benefit the interests of the parent company, Time-Warner (now AOL Time Warner, the world's largest media company).

NBC's coverage of the war in Iraq this writer was undoubtedly swayed by the interests of its parent company, General Electric, a major arms manufacturer.

The giant media companies have lobbied hard for

deregulation at the same time that this critical issue has been absent from most mainstream news. Gannett Corporation, which owns the Ithaca Journal, was one of those corporations that lobbied for deregulation, yet the Ithaca Journal had scant coverage of this critical issue prior to Monday's vote.

As citizens we are dependent upon the media to both inform us and to set the agenda of what is newsworthy.

When the financial interests of a small number of media corporations conflict with the public interest and when those corporations control the mainstream media, democracy suffers.

The founders of our nation envisioned free and public disagreement on critical issues as a cornerstone of real democracy. In the name of deregulation the FCC is abdicating its mandate to protect diversity and dissenting voices on the public airwaves. If the

last decade is any indication, continued deregulation will promote the homogenization of public opinion and entertainment instead of critical thinking and consumption for the citizenship.

Despite the fact that public comment leading up to Monday's decision was almost unanimously opposed to deregulation, three unelected FCC chairman made these historic changes.

Maurice Hinchey (D-22nd Dist.) is sponsoring legislation to roll back the FCC decision and reinstate regulations that guarantee all our information and entertainment will not be constructed by a handful of corporate executives. We cannot count on the media to keep this issue on the front pages and in the nightly news. Instead we must raise our concerns with friends, neighbors and our elected representatives. Democracy in the 21st century requires a critically thinking citizenship that understands the role of the media in constructing our understanding of the world. But democracy in a media age also requires public access to diverse news sources, which will encourage us to recognize and struggle with the most pressing issues of our times.

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