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FCC Scandal Explodes with Second Revelation of Suppressed Media Ownership Research

by Robert W. McChesney

Last week, Sen. Barbara Boxer rocked the re-confirmation hearings for Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin when she released a suppressed FCC study from 2004 – leaked to her by an FCC whistleblower – that indicated locally owned television stations did far more local news programming than TV stations owned by big conglomerates. A former FCC lawyer acknowledged that agency officials ordered the report and all supporting material be destroyed.

Martin, who was on the FCC in 2004 but not yet its Chairman, said he had no idea the report had been done in the first place and knew nothing about its disappearance. Then-FCC Chairman Michael Powell also claims he knew nothing about it, and, in classic Bush-era fashion, he took no responsibility for what transpired under his command.

In their minds, this was some sort of clerical error -- and the sooner everyone forgot about it, the better. The FCC could go back to its time-honored job of doling out tens of billions of dollars in monopoly privileges to massive media and communication firms in relative anonymity.

That PR approach collapsed this week on Monday, Sept. 18, when another repressed FCC study was leaked to Senator Boxer by an FCC whistleblower. This study demonstrated that independent radio ownership plummeted after the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, even though the number of commercial radio stations actually increased. As with the first study, by all accounts it was grade-A empirical research of the highest quality. Apparently that was the problem.

Martin finally agreed to an independent investigation on Monday night, though no timetable has been set. But -- and this is crucial --he apparently does not intend to delay his mad rush to relax ownership rules until the investigation has been completed and steps have been implemented to address the problem. It is full speed ahead. So right now this looks more like a PR stunt than a genuine effort to get at the truth and deal with its implications for policy making. In view of Martin's and the FCC's record, skepticism is not only justified, but warranted.

Let me explain. This scandal could not have hit the FCC at a worse time from Martin's vantage point. Right now, the FCC is formally reviewing its local media ownership rules and is prepared to vote on relaxing or eliminating them as soon as the end of the year.

In 2003, when Powell tried to eliminate any restrictions on local media ownership, the public revolted, with an extraordinary left-right coalition that generated nearly 3 million letters to the FCC and Congress. Powell announced plans for numerous public hearings on media localism across the country as he tried to persuade Congress he was actually listening to the people. The federal courts eventually rejected Powell's plan to relax media ownership rules in 2004, and he resigned as a failure in 2005.

Powell's plans for hearings on localism were quietly dropped after Powell learned in no uncertain terms at the tumultuous hearings he attended that the public wanted more locally owned broadcast media and wanted rules to reverse media consolidation, not permit it.

Kevin Martin now has been tasked by the Bush administration to do the job his predecessor couldn't: Eliminate the restrictions on local media ownership so the big media firms, like Tribune, Sinclair, News Corp., Clear Channel, Gannett, Belo and Media General, -- which have been so supportive of the Bush administration -- could build local monopolies by gobbling up most of the media in communities around America.

Their vision is of owning an empire of company media towns with one monopoly newsroom servicing all the outlets in a town, and a massive reliance on inexpensive syndicated fare. A dream for the company that holds the monopoly – and for the politicians it supports – but a nightmare for everyone else.

Martin has promised to hold as many as six official public hearings but has so far only committed to one in Los Angeles on October 3. He and the Republican majority are unequivocally in favor of scrapping rules limiting local media

monopolies, but they have to at least make it look like they care about the public and due process – because that's what the law requires – to get their gift to big media approved by the courts.

But this scandal has thrown a monkey wrench into Martin's and the Bush administration's best-laid plans. Core research that undermines the argument for relaxing media ownership rules has been suppressed by the agency that is legally obligated to serve the public interest. Something is utterly rotten here, and the logical question facing everyone is how extensive has this pattern of corruption and suppression been?

It is imperative that the FCC slow down its mad dash to implement sweeping media ownership rules changes this year. It must wait until the independent investigation has been completed. It must fulfill Martin's promise to hold at least six official public hearings around the nation. It must pay attention to what the research indicates and, every bit as important, what the people of the nation tell the FCC in their filings with the commission and at its public hearings.

This can happen, but only if enough Americans contact the FCC and get their names on the record demanding fairness and integrity.

Fortunately a coalition of some 40 consumer, labor, civil rights and public interest groups have formed a coalition, www.StopBigMedia.com, to rally public involvement and opposition to corrupt FCC procedures on media ownership. Go to the Web site and send a message to the FCC demanding full accountability:

<http://www.stopbigmedia.com/coverup.php>

If we know one thing from the past four years of activism in the burgeoning media reform movement, it is that organized people can defeat organized money. In fact, it is the only thing that does. But it takes a lot of people because we are talking about a lot of money, so please get on the bus. And bring your friends.

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