

Kerry comes out against Big Media . . . sort of

By Timothy Karr

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What a difference a year makes. Media consolidation, an issue that galvanized millions of Americans in 2003 is nowhere to be found on the election map of 2004. That was until Sunday, when Senator John Kerry ventured forth on CSPAN to confirm that, had he been around to vote on last year's proposal to loosen rules against media ownership, he would have voted against it.

"I wasn't there for the vote, but I was 100 percent in favor of overturning his rule," Kerry told CSPAN executive vice president Susan Swain during an interview taped earlier in the week. The "his" Kerry was referring to is Federal Communications Commission Chairman Michael Powell. And the "rule" in question was the FCC's ill-fated effort to allow media companies to buy up more local media outlets by raising an ownership cap from a 35 to a 45 percent reach of the national audience.

Responding to the surprise groundswell of public opposition to the FCC proposal, Congress-minus-Kerry struck a compromise in November, setting the national cap at around 39 percent. That was good enough for giants News Corp. and Viacom Inc to slide under the new compromise cap without having to sell off extensive local media holdings that would have been hit by the lower limit.

"I think that too much media in the hands of one powerful entity or one individual is a mistake," Kerry told CSPAN. "I think it runs counter to the foundation of our country. I think it runs counter to the need for Americans to know that they are getting news and information from multiple sources that are not singularly controlled."

Does this mean that Kerry's campaign will take up the fight against media consolidation in 2004? Well, as with everything political this season, it depends.

Other than his CSPAN comment, the Kerry campaign has yet to publicize their candidate's position on media ownership. A review of all of Kerry's 2004 campaign speeches prior to Sunday finds no mention of the ownership issue. Repeated phone requests to Kerry's senior domestic policy advisor, Sarah Bianchi, for clarification went unanswered

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until two hours before publication of this story, when a staffer at Kerry for President emailed a letter the Senator addressed to Michael Powell in May 2003. In the letter, Kerry urges the FCC “to maintain the National Television Ownership Rule at 35 percent and to protect local and independent voices in television.” (Read Kerry’s letter to Powell)

The Kerry campaign would not clarify whether the Senator’s 2003 position would become a meaningful part of his 2004 presidential bid, nor would they explain why Kerry subsequently failed to vote on this issue when it came before the Senate later in the year.

Despite his comments on Sunday, Kerry -- like his opponent in the White House -- has consistently flown well beneath the radar on this issue.

“Kerry’s never been out there on media reform,” said Robert McChesney, a leading author and scholar on the issue of media reform. “He strikes me as an inside-the-beltway, conventional political thinker for whom the idea of going after mainstream media in an election year is not a good thing.”

The risk, according to many media experts who were surveyed for this report, is in crossing a media establishment that exerts considerable force inside Washington. From 1999 through the end of 2003, Washington lobbyists pocketed \$160 million in big media money to support dismantling rules against conglomerates owning more outlets in more markets, according to new numbers released yesterday by Common Cause. In the last eight years, big media has tipped more than \$30 million into the war chests of federal candidates, with the larger share (62 percent) ending up in the hands of regulation-hostile Republicans. (See Common Cause’s survey)

Democrats have received their share as well. According to figures released earlier this year by the Federal Elections Commission, Kerry’s campaign is being bankrolled by key executives within News Corporation, Viacom Inc. and Sony, who have pledged to raise close to \$200,000 from individual donors for the Democratic candidate.

The Bush-Cheney camp, which receives even more money from big media, including News Corp, General Electric and Clear Channel Communications, has released no election-year position on media ownership other than to reiterate their support for the industry-friendly stance taken during the president’s first term by FCC Chairman Powell, a Bush appointee.

A senior Bush-Cheney ‘04 policy advisor would speak only off the record on media ownership – an indication that the president’s campaign prefers it not be an issue this election year. Another Bush-Cheney staffer said that the campaign plans to speak to issues that “concerned Americans much more, such as national security, the economy and education.”

“Before last year, it was political suicide for a politician to attack commercial media

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interests,” McChesney said.

In 2003, however, this political wisdom seems to have been shifted by the surprising grassroots response to the FCC’s June decision to loosen ownership restrictions. Over the summer and fall, nearly three million Americans wrote letters to Washington protesting the rule change, which allowed bigger media companies to control more local media outlets across the country.

Public opposition to media consolidation came from every corner of the political landscape. Groups as disparate as the National Rifle Association, the Family Research Council, the American Civil Liberties Union and Moveon.org mobilized their ranks in opposition to extended big media control.

Such a broad-based response is a rarity in the run-up to an election year, especially one in which undecided and swing-state voters reputedly hold the key to victory.

A Pew Research Center survey in July 2003 found that 70 percent of those Americans familiar with the issue, overwhelmingly felt that more media ownership was a negative thing for the country, against only 6 percent who believed it was a positive development. “You don’t get that kind of spread very often,” Carroll Doherty, editor for the Pew Research Center, said.

While surprised by the size of public opposition to media consolidation, Doherty conceded that it probably wouldn’t factor very large in 2004. “Politics this year have been dominated by public concern over the war in Iraq,” Doherty said. He added that media ownership reform has “soft support” from the public. That is, people will tell pollsters that they’re against the idea of big media -- and they’ll even submit pre-formatted letters to Washington to that effect -- but it is only a “second tier issue” in determining the way they will vote, Doherty stated.

Others assert that media reform casts a longer political shadow this year than many would expect.

“Of course everything pales in comparison to the war in Iraq. Even the economy as an issue is secondary in determining the way people vote,” said Meredith McGehee, executive director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns. “But the candidate that is best able to articulate the problems of media consolidation will find that the issue resonates in very meaningful ways with many Americans.”

“Most people know in their gut that media consolidation is not a good thing, that widespread control of the media by a handful of corporations results in bad product,” McGehee said. “Elections provide a candidate with the unique opportunity to open up a national dialogue, sensitize Americans around the media ownership issue and create real momentum for change.”

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While it's evident that the Bush campaign intends to steer clear of a national debate on media reform, the American public still has the opportunity to push the issue to the forefront of Kerry's platform.

In May, the Democratic National Platform Drafting Committee kicked off a series of five public hearings on what the party should stand for in the election. The Committee, headed by U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, has already made stops in Oregon and Louisiana to discuss homeland security. Next on the tour are Ohio (June 11), New Mexico (June 18) and Florida (July 9), where, according to the party, Iraq, the economy and health care are on the agenda.

Public comments from these hearings will factor into the writing of the party platform to be presented late July at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. These final hearings may be the last, best chance for Senator Kerry to test public sentiment on media reform before his campaign enters the home stretch.

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