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Why the FCC's rules are important

Media outlets are the lifeblood of the body politic. Extensive circulation of ideas, information, analysis and debate must exist – not just once in a while, but all the time – or the consequences are severe, even catastrophic.

You can gauge our society's political and social health by checking some vital media signs: Scrutinize the programming of stations that fall under the purview of the Federal Communications Commission. Watch a few dozen TV channels. Listen to all the radio stations on the AM and FM bands. If the dominant content doesn't make you feel sick, then you're probably not paying close attention.

By any measure, since the 1980s, media ownership in the United States has steadily moved in only one direction – toward greater concentration in fewer and fewer corporate hands.

That ominous trend is likely to get another powerful shove forward in early June, when the FCC is scheduled to vote on a revision of media ownership rules. Around the country, grassroots activists have been challenging the move to further loosen regulations. But clearly the interests of huge media conglomerates are getting a big boost from the FCC chair, Michael Powell, son of the secretary of state.

For a long time, the situation has been grim. Two decades ago, former Washington Post assistant managing editor Ben Bagdikian sketched out the nation's terrain of media ownership. In 1983, when his book "The Media Monopoly" first appeared, "50 corporations dominated most of every mass medium." With each new edition of the book, that number kept dropping – to 29 media firms in 1987, 23 in 1990, 14 in 1992 and 10 in 1997.

Published in 2000, the sixth edition of "The Media Monopoly" documented that just a half-dozen corporations were supplying most of the USA's media fare. "It is the overwhelming collective power of these firms, with their corporate interlocks and unified cultural and political values, that raises troubling questions about the individual's role in the American democracy," Bagdikian wrote.

Overall, the news coverage of the latest FCC proposal has been badly skewed, with

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radio and TV networks opting to tread lightly on the matter. That's not surprising. Billions of dollars in revenues are at stake for mega-media owners.

A few prominent journalists, such as New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, have raised an alarm this spring. And some newspaper stories have laid out basic facts. But – as part of a classic pattern – news coverage of the FCC controversy has been largely relegated to business sections, as though the FCC decision were merely a financial matter.

"Most people in this country have no idea what's about to happen to them," says dissenting FCC commissioner Jonathan Adelstein, "even though their very democracy is at stake."

One of the impending rule changes would allow a single company to own TV stations reaching 45 percent of the nationwide audience (instead of the current on-paper limit of 35 percent). But that understates the impact, as Andrew Schwartzman of the Media Access Project points out: "The 45 percent number that has been floated is a fake number. It will realistically be much much higher."

Another FCC change would end the ban on a single firm's cross-ownership of daily newspapers and TV stations in four-fifths of the country's media markets. And the limits on ownership of television stations in large metropolitan areas would also be eased, so that one company could own three TV stations.

Appearing on Bill Moyers' program "Now" on PBS in early May, FCC commissioner Michael Copps warned: "This is not just some little mechanical thing about numbers or a little decision about numbers of stations. This is something that has very widespread and profound implications."

Said Copps: "I understand they (broadcasters) live in a commercial culture and a business culture. But this is a special industry with a special charge — administering the public airwaves. Nobody owns these airwaves. There's no TV company or radio company that owns the airwaves. The people of the United States of America own the airwaves."

Yes, in theory, the airwaves belong to you and me. But one political action after another in Washington has been stealing those airwaves from us. And the Republican majority on the FCC is about to pull off another massive heist.

All the signs indicate that early June will bring another triumph for the corporate forces that have hijacked the public airwaves for private gain. And they call it democracy. ■