

WHAT THE FCC IS GOING ON? by Martha Wallner.

MEDIA FILE Volume 22 #2, Fall 2003

Against widespread public opposition, including an unprecedented two million public comments, the Federal Communication's Commission (FCC) struck down three major media ownership restrictions, by a 3-2 vote, on June 2, 2003. This was not the first FCC proceeding to favor big business and media consolidation but it was the first, in many years, to be met by a massive grassroots response. According to Senator John McCain, Chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, which oversees the FCC, "this sparked more interest than any issue I've ever seen that wasn't organized by a huge lobby." Volume 22 #2, Fall 2003

The battle to reverse some of the damage continued in Congress through the summer, up until press time. Clearly, whatever happens there, the problem of corporate domination in determining media policy and the need to change this will continue. How did the challenge to big media get this far? To find out, we have to go beyond the mainstream media's frame of the current debate.

The Great Frame Robbery

In the months leading up to the vote, the mainstream media characterized the struggle over ownership rules as just "another bureaucratic dogfight," a "power struggle" between Commissioners, between those who want to "prevent change" and those who are committed to "overhauling decades-old rules." This frame insidiously echoes the broader neo-liberal agenda to "free markets" by weakening the power of regulatory agencies to act in the public interest.

This de-regulatory agenda gained momentum during the Reagan years, and in media policy, culminated in the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The mainstream media presented the '96 Act as legislation that favored competition and as such, would provide citizens with new technology and a surfeit of "consumer" choices. Scholar Oscar Gandy, has dubbed the shift in policy frame from citizens to consumers, the "great frame robbery" and traces its roots to the Progressive Movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Today, the equation, public interest = efficient marketplace, demonstrates a shrewd corporate strategy to hijack whatever political power the consumer identity has to contest corporate domination of the political process.

Reframing the Issues: The Grassroots Response

The unprecedented hearing on media consolidation held in San Francisco's City Hall on April 26, was organized by Media Alliance with the sponsorship of the Media Studies Department of USF, Berkeley's J-School, and several other Bay area academic institutions. Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein, who would later, with his counterpart Michael Copps, cast a dissenting vote on June 2, attended the hearing. With the exception of independent KRON TV, a former ABC affiliate, no commercial media covered the hearing. The non-commercial media was out in full

force however and community radio stations KPOO and KPFA carried the hearings live in the Bay Area and on KFCF in the Central Valley.

In striking contrast to D.C. hearings, which usually center the voices of industry spokespeople, the San Francisco hearing attracted an extraordinarily diverse range of panelists and audience members. Their comments and testimony broke the mainstream media's frame by connecting media policy to many other issues. In her testimony, Aimee Suzara of the Youth Media Council described their monitoring of the news coverage of the Bay Area's # 1 news station, Fox affiliate KTVU Channel 2. Their report found, a disproportionate focus on crime and that "despite a steady decline in national juvenile crime rates, two thirds of the public still believes that crime is rising. The disparity between coverage of youth and the real-life conditions of youth has resulted in a generation that has been killed, locked-up and locked-out."

Panelist Erin Poh of the MediaWorker's Guild, noting the presence of activists from many different movements stated "We're struggling for those very causes, because the cause of media diversity, even though it may not be the first and foremost cause, needs to be the second because we know the rules proposed by the FCC will impact us directly." Other media workers addressed the negative impacts deregulation has had on workplace conditions and women, people of color and immigrants testified on the difficulty in getting their opinions heard in a consolidated media environment. Local musicians described their inability to get radio play and others cited concerns with consolidation against the backdrop of increased government efforts to monitor and silence dissent under The Patriot Act.

Commissioner Copps' willingness to break ranks with the Republican members of the FCC and take these issues on the road played an important role in galvanizing public opinion. But this is only part of the story. The grassroots groups that organized the hearings have been educating and mobilizing the public on a number of different media policy issues for quite some time. Groups like Chicago Media Action, Reclaim the Media in Seattle, Media Tank and Prometheus Radio in Philadelphia and Media Alliance in San Francisco, have been campaigning against consolidation in the radio industry by challenging the practices of Clearchannel and fighting for the licensing of Low Power FM community broadcasters. They have also been building coalitions to fight media conglomerates like AT&T and Comcast for better cable franchises and more equitable access to broadband services.

The Liberal Frame and its Limits

On the radio program Commonwealth, Commissioner Copps confidently stated, "I think we can fix this system without drastic surgery to our rules. If we can enforce the rules we have, we'd be in pretty good shape." Expressing doubt that there were models for better policies in other countries, he stated that, "in this country we decided long ago that our media would be part of the capitalist system."

With all due respect for the Commissioner, his critique is problematic for two reasons. First, it fails to recognize the extent of the damage wreaked by two decades of deregulation, and that the "rules" have never been adequate. Second, it has only been by challenging a purely capitalist framework that public interest policies have been won. Policies that set-aside spectrum for non-

commercial broadcasters and guaranteed the disabled and low-income access to new technologies were never embraced by the corporate sector. If they have their way, these policies and many others, will be scrapped.

Can this juggernaut be stopped? Certainly, not just by focusing on one set of media policies at a time. We need to organize for the long haul: fight the individual battles, show the links between them, and at the same time, articulate visions for a more diverse, independent and democratic media. Big Media is on the march, but judging from the testimony at the public hearings and the tremendous groundswell the hearings sparked, many people are ready to fight back.
