Mega Mediasaurus

The dinosaur that devoured democracy.


MICHAEL FORD

FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein (seated, far left), U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter (seated next to Adelstein), and other panelists meet media-savvy citizens at a March 8 forum.

To grasp bigness, sometimes you have to take out the magnifying glass. That's what media observers are doing retrospectively with a story that came out of Minot, N.D., in January 2002. The small town was hit with a rail-car leak of anhydrous ammonia, an irritant that can cause serious injuries.

The story had a special media hook: When emergency officials contacted the town's radio stations to get warnings aired, they reportedly found five of six stations were running on taped feeds and couldn't take the call. The five stations were properties of mammoth Clear Channel Communications, which now owns 1,200-plus radio stations nationwide (and much else). Later, Clear Channel said Minot staffers did respond "beyond their professional responsibilities." The company put the blame on "local authorities' failure to install their Emergency Alert System equipment."

Either way, the assumption is that if Minot had more locally owned stations, the public would have been better warned. And beneath this assumption is a rock-bottom belief that federal policy has grown too friendly to media empires.

And that belief explains why we're seeing moves everywhere — across the whole political spectrum — to put the reins on media ownership.

A New Dinosaur

The best indication of this trend came a year after Minot, when organizations and ordinary people across the country took a hard look at Washington, D.C. Specifically, they put their magnifying glass to some business before the Federal Communications Commission, which oversees radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable. What they found was something like a new species of dinosaur.

By way of background, the five-member FCC is bipartisan by definition — no more than three members can be from the same political party. But as you'd expect, the commission has its own internal dynamics. The most-often heard voice is that of Michael Powell, a conservative who was appointed by Bill Clinton and made FCC chair by George Bush. Commissioners Kathleen Abernathy and Kevin Martin gravitate to Powell's side. Commissioners Michael Copps and Jonathan Adelstein are often a minority of two.

Normally a quiet presence, the FCC made headlines last June. Following provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the commission had been debating whether to relax federal limits on media ownership. On the other hand, pressure was building to keep the old rules in place. But on June 2, the commissioners voted 3-2 to adopt new rules that partially deregulated big chunks of the media industry.

Here are the most important changes, as summarized by the Poynter Institute:

• The decision OK'd "cross-ownership" of broadcast and print media in markets with more than three TV stations. Cross-ownership was previously banned.

• It said the four national TV networks could buy enough stations to reach 45 percent of the U.S. audience. The old cutoff was 35 percent. (The big companies failed to get a total repeal of the limit.)

• It boosted the number of TV stations a single broadcaster can own in a single market. (The number varies with the size of the market.)

Even before the full impact of this was felt, an outraged public turned up the volume. The FCC received around 2.5 million responses, 99 percent of them opposing the changes.

Public outrage at media policy is still high-pitched. But as the months go by, this outrage is being channeled into a national debate about "indecency," "values," and moral policing.

You don't need more details here on l'affaire Janet Jackson, or l'affront Howard Stern. Suffice it to say, we're now watching the FCC, which so recently gave away the store, going after big media corporations on a morals charge.

The talk revolves around penalties: a 10-fold increase in the fine for each on-air indecency, for example. (One proposal in the House of Representatives would increase it 20-fold.)

What will this amount to? "It's still a drop in a bucket," says Russell Newman, research director with the Media Reform/Free Press Network, a not-for-profit based in Northampton, Mass. "Whether it's $27,500 or $275,000, it's just another business expense" for the big companies, he says.

Newman adds the obvious: Large fines will burden small independents disproportionately — and thus tilt the playing field even more to mega-corporate advantage.

Democracy at Risk?

A more well-founded fear is stalking the land, though. The fear that monster media will put democracy itself at risk.

"A core value in a free society is that control over media should be widespread and diverse," says a statement from the Media Reform/Free Press Network. "In a capitalist society, this value is constantly challenged by the strong desire of businesses to dominate their markets as much as possible."

We the people must understand our controlling interest, so to speak. "Nearly all media markets are based on government-granted and -enforced monopoly privileges and subsidies," says Media Reform, citing "copyright, postal subsidies, monopoly radio and TV licenses, cable TV and satellite TV franchises."

"One can say the media is big business, but one can say truly that media is the biggest business," Newman says. "Ownership of the media has become incredibly consolidated. We're entering an age when a media giant owns not just channels but controls the distribution of those channels." He points to Comcast's recent $50 billion-plus bid to take over the Walt Disney Company — a move he believes has "dire implications."

Even if that bid goes nowhere, the top corporate players will be thunder lizards indeed. According to a Media Reform chart, based on information from the *Columbia Journalism Review*, these are some of the dominant corporations: Disney, with $25 billion in revenues in 2002; Viacom, with $25 billion that year; Time-Warner, with $41 billion; and Vivendi Universal, with more than $57 billion. Champ of the revenuers: General Electric, with $132 billion in 2002.

GE has immense holdings in energy, transportation, weapons production and much more besides media. But look at the holdings of even a company like Comcast, which folds a mere sports team or two into its corporate pie.

'If one huge corporation controlled both the production and the dissemination of most of our news and entertainment, couldn't it rule the world?' – *William Safire*