

According to Media Reform, Comcast, “the nation’s largest cable television company” with “a presence in 22 of the 25 largest markets,” also owns the Golf Channel, the Style Network, E! Entertainment Television, and more.

The scale of things hasn’t paralyzed Newman and his group. For one thing, they sponsored a National Conference on Media Reform last November in Madison, Wisc. The conference drew unexpectedly large numbers of activists — and some members of Congress, as well.

Bipartisan Concern

Conservatives have been hopping on this train, too. Last year, for example, *New York Times* columnist William Safire decried the FCC rules changes. He amplified his worries this February, asking: “If one huge corporation controlled both the production and the dissemination of most of our news and entertainment, couldn’t it rule the world?”

Wayne LaPierre, the National Rifle Association’s top gun, said last year that the changes would harm “diversity of political opinion.” NRA spokespeople didn’t follow through on a promise to comment for this article, however.

An energetic populism — under the buzzword “localism” — has hit the road, too. It blossomed, for example, at a March 8 public forum in Rochester, N.Y., convened by Congresswoman Louise Slaughter, who’d attended the Madison conference.

Rochester is the old hometown of the now Virginia-based Gannett Company (101 daily newspapers, 22 TV stations, etc.). On the Rochester stage was a panel including owners and directors of independent Rochester media.

The main attraction, though, was FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein, who last June cast one of the two dissenting votes against relaxing the ownership rules.

Outside the forum, Adelstein parses the issues. Last year’s national response, he says, “was unprecedented in the 70-plus years of the agency.” Moreover, he says, opponents of the new rules included “huge numbers of people from the right and left, the NRA, the Catholic Conference of Bishops. Everybody thought this was a bad idea.”

Adelstein says growing concentration will bring “ever less diversity at ever higher prices.” He makes some quality judgments, too. “We’re concerned about the homogenization of radio,” he says. Individual stations “don’t have their own news, their own reporters. Very little in-depth coverage. There used to be a lot more of that, but it’s expensive.” He turns to many small newspapers’ prime domestic competitor, Gannett. “They’ve supported cross-ownership,” he says. They got what they wanted, he says.

More Nods to Big Media

Significant cases keep coming before the FCC. Adelstein mentions a recent decision: the commission’s nod this January to the merger of News Corp and DirecTV. “I dissented,” he says. “Certainly [the deal] is in the shareholders’ interest, but we have a broad responsibility to serve the public interest.”

Yet the FCC today is construing the public interest more narrowly. It seems the commission is more concerned about Janet Jackson’s breast exposure or Bono’s f-wording than almost anything else.

Part of this is the law. Adelstein explains that the commission’s statutory authority over content extends only to what’s considered indecent, profane, or obscene. “I think the FCC is getting serious about enforcing rules that are on the books, to be sure they don’t step over the line,” he says.

But is this just a distraction, or even a move backward? “It’s a good development,” Adelstein says — a proper response to “increasing coarseness over the airwaves.”

Some observers take strong exception. For example, liberal commentator and cartoonist Ted Rall recently charged the decency crusade is merely “a new version of the Red Scare.” He

said “new McCarthyites” have resorted to “censoring their opponents.” He also slammed *The New York Times* for dumping his editorial cartoons from its website.

In regard to media monsters, the decency crusade may end up demonstrating the old Nietzschean principle dear to radio host G. Gordon Liddy: *Whatever doesn’t kill them makes them stronger*. But dinosaurs of any sort co-exist with pesky critters in the underbrush — and eventually the more adaptable life forms have their day. Certainly the internet and web-based populist efforts like indymedia.org are carving out space for themselves.

The FCC is looking at such a critter: low-

power FM radio. In 2000, the commission gave the go-ahead to noncommercial stations of 100 watts or less. Then broadcasters complained LPFM would cause too much interference with their signals. “We were forced by Congress to ratchet back,” Adelstein says. He adds the FCC studied the potential for interference and found there wasn’t much.

Of course, that’s no comment on the political interference that could hamper LPFM for some time. But here again, a mobilized public, aware the airwaves legally belong to everyone, could make the difference. **EW**

Jack Spula of City Newspaper, Rochester, N.Y., wrote this story for the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies.

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