

When big media gets bigger

“The effort to reverse the FCC is dead in the water, sinking the democratic process with it.”

By Bill Moyers

Big Media companies keep getting bigger—with more and more power over our lives. This week’s deal between General Electric (GE) and Vivendi means that GE’s NBC, which helped elect Arnold Schwarzenegger governor of California, has just picked up not only Universal Studios, but the USA, Trio and Sci-fi cable channels to go with CNBC and MSNBC, all part now of a \$43 billion empire.

Then, there’s radio. The nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity is out with a new study showing that in each of 43 different cities a third of the radio stations are owned by a single company. No company’s supposed to own more than eight in any market, but the media giants thumb their nose at the rules all the time. In 34 of those 43 markets, one company owns more than eight stations.

The big daddy of all is Clear Channel Communications—1,200 stations altogether. In Mansfield, Ohio, Clear Channel owns 11 of the 17 radio stations in your town. In Corvallis, Ore., over half of what people hear is decided by Clear Channel—seven of 13 radio stations.

Cumulus Media is the second biggest radio empire. Cumulus, remember, banned the Dixie Chicks. Cumulus owns eight of the 15 radio stations in Albany, Ga.

It’s a similar story in television. No single company is supposed to control more than one television station per city, except in some big markets. But look at what’s happened in Wilmington, North Carolina, where there are three network affiliate stations—Fox, NBC and ABC. This year, the Fox station changed hands. On paper, the new owner was Southeastern Media Holdings. But then Southeastern Media announced that Raycom Media would help manage the company. Raycom already owns the NBC station, so it combined the two news departments and laid off much of the staff.

But hold on to your hat—Raycom and Southeastern Media Holdings turn out to be part of the same company. Now there’s not only one less independent news operation in Wilmington, there’s also one less media company.

The flimflam-ery goes on. In 33 other cities, stations that are supposed to be competitors have found clever ways to undermine the existing rules, mergers and takeovers, for example. Remember when Viacom married CBS and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp ponied up for the television stations owned by Chris-Craft? Those deals put both conglomerates in violation of the rule that no one company can control stations that reach more than 35 percent of the total audience. But so what? The FCC just rolled over, winked, and gave both conglomerates temporary waivers of the rule. A little time passed and this summer the FCC raised the limit to give the big guys what they wanted, anyway.

That giveaway brought protests from over 2 million citizens; they turned the FCC into a besieged Bastille on the Potomac. Such indignation from the grass roots caused even the Senate to say, “Whoa, something’s going on. People really care about this issue.” And the Senate stopped the FCC in its tracks. There are enough votes to do the same in the House. But then, General Electric, owner of NBC; News Corp, owner of Fox; Viacom, owner of CBS; and Walt Disney, owner of ABC, brought on the hired guns—the lobbyists—to wage a Trojan War on Congress. A passel of former insiders moved through the revolving door, Rolodex in tow, trading their influence for cash—top aides of the Senate majority leader, the House majority whip and of John Ashcroft himself.

Now the most powerful Republican in Congress, Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, won’t let a vote happen. The effort to reverse the FCC is dead in the water, sinking the democratic process with it.