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Public Interest Groups Call for Media Diversity and Localism in FCC Meeting

FCC should make consistent policies across cable and broadcast rules to promote public interest principles.

A coalition of organizations called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) at its November 27th meeting to make consistent policies promoting media diversity and localism across broadcast and cable rules. The Coalition praised the Commission's efforts to clear the way for limits on cable ownership and the promotion of diverse and local content. However, the Coalition warned that the community radio rules on the agenda must promote, not limit, the expansion of the very low-power radio service they purport to promote. Further, the Coalition also called the localism and minority ownership proposals to be considered by the FCC grossly inadequate.

"The American people have clearly expressed our preference for limits on both cable and broadcast ownership, expansion of community radio, and new policies to promote minority ownership and local media accountability," said Jonathan Lawson of Reclaim the Media. "While FCC Chairman Martin's new cable rules are a good step forward, his proposal on broadcast ownership gets the idea of 'public interest' exactly backwards."

The FCC will vote on whether or not to find that cable systems reach 70% of television households, and that 70% of those households subscribe to cable services. If approved, this finding would clear the way for greater oversight of the cable industry, such as restrictions on cable ownership. "When Congress deregulated cable in 1984, it wisely put in a safety valve for when cable became the dominant means of watching TV," said Harold Feld, Senior Vice President Media Access Project. "Cable passed the 70% penetration threshold years ago. It's time the FCC recognized this reality."

"Cable TV is a leading source of national news and entertainment for most Americans—we need oversight to break this market open to more competition," added Gene Kimmelman, Consumers Union's Vice President for Federal and International Affairs.

The FCC will also be considering proposals that would preserve the availability of frequencies for low-power FM radio stations. If these issues are not adequately addressed, "repeater" stations run by national chains will be permitted to gobble up hundreds of frequencies across the nation, shutting out local community groups. "The FCC should preserve opportunities for LPFMs, or at least not decide against future LPFM availability in this meeting," said Pete Tridish, Founder of the Prometheus Radio Project.

LPFM stations are community-based, noncommercial radio stations that offer local news, information, emergency services and entertainment that are specifically tailored to small geographic areas, such as neighborhoods or small towns. Some organizations have abused the

availability of low power frequencies by setting up translator stations that rebroadcast content nationwide. In one case, a single radio station has 792 translators repeating its signal. The proposal before the FCC on Tuesday threatens to crowd out community stations with local programming in favor of stations that simply rebroadcast out-of-area content.

“Will the FCC make room for local groups in America's cities on the FM dial? Or will schools, churches, and community organizations only get the chance to apply after the national networks have taken every frequency worth having? If the FCC doesn't fix these fundamental problems and make room for low power FM radio, the agency proves it cares little about localism,” added Tridish.

“That the FCC is considering greater oversight of the cable industry is welcome news,” said Michael Bracy, Policy Director for Future of Music Coalition. “But the Commission still needs to demonstrate its commitment to localism and diversity across the radio spectrum, and not allow important community broadcasters to be squeezed out. Ensuring the availability of low-power frequencies would offer communities across the country access to important and meaningful broadcasting in their cities and towns. If the FCC is serious about localism and diversity, they must preserve community radio.”

The FCC will also consider several policies on minority ownership and localism that would do little to promote either. Chairman Martin has come under fire from civil rights leaders, members of Congress and dozens of public interest groups for his failure to address minority ownership and localism. In response, the Chairman offered a set of proposals for consideration that do not address the overarching question of media consolidation's impact on minority owners.

“The Commission is set to vote on minority ownership rules without bothering to address the most important question—the role of media consolidation,” said Cheryl Leanza, Managing Director, Office of Communication Inc., United Church of Christ. “Policy statements and guidelines that support minority owners are great, but they will do no good if media concentration crowds out any opportunity for minority owners to enter the market.”

The Coalition called for the Commission to recognize that the items on the agenda are linked by a common set of public interest values.

“The commitment to diversity and localism for cable should also be applied to broadcasting when the Commission addresses broadcast rules,” said Josh Silver, Executive Director of Free Press. “The Commission should uphold public interest values on each of the items coming up for a vote.”

The Media and Democracy Coalition is a collaboration of more than two-dozen organizations united to amplify the voices of the public in debates over media and telecommunications policies. Members include Alliance for Community Media; CCTV – Center for Media and Democracy; Center for Creative Voices in Media; Center for Digital Democracy; Common Cause; Consumer Federation of America; Consumers Union; Media Access Project; Prometheus Radio Project; Media Tank; Free Press; Future of Music Coalition; Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; National Hispanic Media Coalition; National Alliance for Media, Arts, and Culture; New America Foundation; Media Alliance; Office of Communications and Media Empowerment Project, United Church of Christ; Reclaim the Media; US Conference of Catholic Bishops; US Public Interest Research Group; and Youth Media Council.

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