

November 13, 2007

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## The Daily Show

By KEVIN J. MARTIN

Washington

IN many towns and cities, the newspaper is an endangered species. At least 300 daily papers have stopped publishing over the past 30 years. Those newspapers that have survived are struggling financially. Newspaper circulation has declined steadily for more than 10 years. Average daily circulation is down 2.6 percent in the last six months alone.

Newspapers have also been hurt by significant cuts in advertising revenue, which accounts for at least 75 percent of their revenue. Their share of the advertising market has fallen every year for the past decade, while online advertising has increased greatly.

At the heart of all of these facts and figures is the undeniable reality that the media marketplace has changed considerably over the last three decades. In 1975, cable television served fewer than 15 percent of television households. Satellite TV did not exist. Today, by contrast, fewer than 15 percent of homes do not subscribe to cable or satellite television. And the Internet as we know it today did not even exist in 1975. Now, nearly one-third of all Americans regularly receive news through the Internet.

If we don't act to improve the health of the newspaper industry, we will see newspapers wither and die. Without newspapers, we would be less informed about our communities and have fewer outlets for the expression of independent thinking and a diversity of viewpoints. The challenge is to restore the viability of newspapers while preserving the core values of a diversity of voices and a commitment to localism in the media marketplace.

Eighteen months ago, the Federal Communications Commission began a review, ordered by Congress and the courts, of its media ownership rules. After six public hearings, 10 economic studies and hundreds of thousands of comments, the commission should move forward. The commission should modify only one of the four rules under review — the one that bars ownership of both a newspaper and a broadcast TV or radio station in a single market. And the rule should be modified only for the largest markets.

A company that owns a newspaper in one of the 20 largest cities in the country should be permitted to purchase a broadcast TV or radio station in the same market. But a newspaper should be prohibited from buying one of the top four TV stations in its community. In addition, each part of the combined entity would need to maintain its editorial independence.

Beyond giving newspapers in large markets the chance to buy one local TV or radio station, no other ownership rule would be altered. Other companies would not be allowed to own any more radio or television

stations, either in a single market or nationally, than they already do.

This relatively minor loosening of the ban on cross-ownership of newspapers and TV stations in markets where there are many voices and sufficient competition to allow for new entrants would help strike a balance between ensuring the quality of local news while guarding against too much concentration.

The cross-ownership rule is the only media ownership rule that has never been modified since its inception in the mid-1970s. For the last decade, F.C.C. chairmen — Democrats and Republicans alike — have said this rule needs to be revised.

The ban on newspapers owning a broadcast station in their local markets may end up hurting the quality of news and the commitment of news organizations to their local communities. Newspapers in financial difficulty often have little choice but to scale back news gathering to cut costs. Allowing cross-ownership may help to forestall the erosion in local news coverage by enabling companies that own both newspapers and broadcast stations to share some costs.

Since 2003, when the courts told the commission to change its media ownership rules, the news media industry has operated in a climate of uncertainty. Many newspapers and broadcast stations are operating under waivers of the ban on cross-ownership. The F.C.C. needs to address these issues in a coherent and consistent fashion rather than considering them case by case, making policy by waiver.

I confess that in my public role, I feel that the press is not on my side. But it is for this very reason that I believe this controversial step is worth taking. In their role as watchdog and informer of the citizenry, newspapers are crucial to our democracy.

A colleague on the commission, Michael Copps, for whom I have the utmost respect, has argued that our very democracy is at stake in the decisions we make regarding media ownership. I do not disagree. But if we believe that newspaper journalism plays a unique role in the functioning of our democracy, then we cannot turn a blind eye to the financial condition in which these companies find themselves.

*Kevin J. Martin is the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission.*

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

-