

Media & Democracy

Promises to Keep: The Challenges for the Next FCC Chair

*“Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe.”
--Abraham Lincoln*

There is increasing speculation that the current Chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Julius Genachowski, will step down in the coming months. That means President Barack Obama will have an opportunity to appoint a new Chair to a five-member commission that, by law, gives the party of the incumbent President the responsibility for nominating the Commission's Chair.

Background

When Barack Obama ran for his first term, he was stated many times his opposition to further media industry consolidation and his support for reasserting the public interest.

In his September 20, 2007 [statement for a Federal Communications Commission public hearing](#) in Chicago, then-Senator Obama said: “I believe that the nation's media ownership rules remain necessary and are critical to the public interest. We should be doing much more to encourage diversity in the ownership of broadcast media, promote the development of new media outlets for expression of diverse viewpoints, and establish greater clarity in the public interest obligations of broadcasters occupying the nation's spectrum.” In a [July 19, 2006 letter to the FCC](#), he and Senator John Kerry wrote: “We strongly believe that the FCC should address the issues of minority and small business media ownership before taking up the wider media ownership issue.”

Seven months later, on February 5, 2007, Illinois Senators Obama and Richard Durbin again wrote the Commission: “We are concerned that meaningful participation in the media marketplace is becoming increasingly dependent on the kind of access to capital that only large media conglomerates can generate.” They went on: “In the case of minority ownership of broadcast outlets, as Commissioner Copps has pointed out, there has been no improvement in the level of minority ownership.... The number of African-American stations since 1998 has fallen 30 percent.” They closed by emphasizing “that broadcast ownership rules directly implicate core American values such as diversity, localism, representation, and a competitive marketplace of ideas.”

On October 22, 2007, [Senator Obama wrote to then-FCC Chairman Kevin Martin](#): “I object to the agency moving forward to allow greater consolidation in the media market without first fully understanding how that would limit opportunities for minority, small business, and women owned firms.” He closed with a plea to the Commission to stop the mad rush, suggesting that instead of voting on Chairman Martin's proposal to dramatically loosen the newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership rule, the FCC should “complete a proceeding on the responsibilities that broadcasters have to the communities in which they operate.”

While during President Obama's first term important national priorities were tackled, reforming media policy was not among them. America's news and information has suffered the same kind of collapse as so much of America's physical infrastructure. Private sector consolidation has led to the closing of hundreds of newsrooms and the firing of thousands of investigative reporters who should be combing the beats to hold the powerful accountable. Instead journalism has been hollowed out as badly as those rustbelt steel mills. Investigative journalism hangs by a slender thread.

The public sector is at least equally culpable because government – especially the FCC – permitted almost every media merger and acquisition that came before it, while also eviscerating almost all of the specific public interest guidelines that had been put in place over many years to ensure that the people's airwaves actually serve the people.

Solution

President Obama is sure sometime in his second term to have the opportunity to nominate a new Chair of the FCC. While this position can fly under the public's radar, the Media and Democracy Reform Initiative is joining with a broad coalition of groups to ensure President Obama understands the critical nature of this appointment and the public support for a Chair who will stop the increase in media monopolies and more actively pursue efforts to put real meaningful in existing public interest obligations.

Action

- ***As the current FCC Chair prepares to exit, call on President Obama to nominate a new chair who will reconsider media consolidation proposals and will take a more activist approach in exercising existing FCC powers to improve disclosure and enact public interest obligations.***

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