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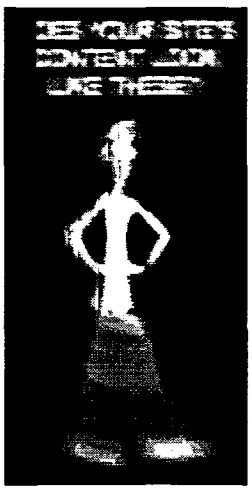

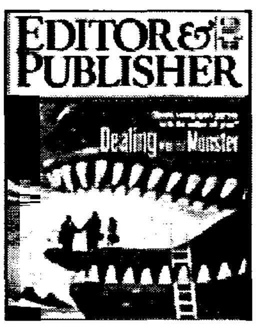

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MARCH 18, 2002

A Voice In the Wilderness

Publisher Blasts Industry View On Cross-ownership

By Frank A. Blethen

Guest Commentary

Most media-industry observers believe the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will soon repeal its rule prohibiting single ownership of a broadcast TV station and a newspaper in the same community.

This is a dangerous moment for American democracy.

Repeal will dramatically accelerate the country's already narrow concentration of media control, as well as the channels of information distribution, into the hands of an elite few. It will lead directly to the loss of an independent press and the diversity of voices essential to the survival of a democracy.

The very fact the FCC is considering repealing the cross-ownership ban is a reflection of the increasing concentration of media ownership and the market-driven demand to grow profits. Advocates of repeal are the largest conglomerates, who see lifting of the ban as their ticket to grow profits through new acquisitions and monopolistic market control. Not only are their business arguments questionable and speculative, they do not include any discussion of the social value of an independent press and a diversity of voices.

History shows us that democracy depends on a free press. The Constitution granted special protections for the press not to insure its profitability but to guarantee that a government of and for the people can be held accountable by the people. This accountability extends to all powerful individuals and institutions in our country, including Big Business.

And make no mistake: Most media today are Big Business. Consolidation of ownership has already eroded accountability of both government and Big Business.

There is no ambiguity about the public financial markets. They are driven solely by bottom-line financial performance. Investment in public service and news at both the local and national levels is in direct conflict with maximizing short-term profits. The unintended consequence of concentrated media control, combined with faceless stock-market ownership, has been less investment in news coverage and opinion. For this reason, the concentration of media ownership is bad in and of itself, but now it is combined with an element that makes this concentration even more dangerous: the increasing ownership by financial institutions.

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This kind of institutional ownership of newspapers took off about 30 years ago. Consider for a moment what has transpired in that short period. What I call "financial play" newspapers now control more than 40% of America's daily circulation and more than 50% of its Sunday circulation. Add the large private chains and this handful of companies now controls more than 75% of the country's newspaper circulation.

Thank goodness for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and their respective Sulzberger and Graham families, who have figured out how to maintain family control and who set the standard for journalistic stewardship even though their companies are publicly traded.

I have the privilege of being part of a family committed to a public trust by maintaining a fiercely independent press in the few communities we are privileged to serve. Our operation is 106 years old and in its fourth and fifth generations of family stewardship. Our flagship newspaper, *The Seattle Times*, is one of the last privately held, family-run metros in the country.

We are known in the communities we serve, as well as in the newspaper industry, for our passion for and investment in quality independent journalism. We believe our approach is also the best business strategy for the long run.

From a purely business perspective, we would love to own a TV station in Seattle. And, yes, it would significantly increase the value of our company. But we don't believe we need it to survive and compete. Indeed, we believe it would be bad public policy if we were allowed to do so.

It is no longer feasible for metropolitan areas to support competing metro newspapers. This makes the separation of TV and newspaper ownership in local communities vital to preserve multiple sources of news and a diversity of community voices.

Before it is too late, all of us who care about the role quality journalism plays in ensuring a healthy and free society need to start a vigorous dialog about what steps are necessary to save an independent press and a diversity of opinions.

We should start by insisting that the FCC keep its cross-ownership ban. And then we need to start talking about what the FCC, the Justice Department, and Congress can do to stimulate investment in quality journalism and to protect an independent press. We need to wake up to the dangers of concentration and stop taking or allowing actions that further accelerate it.

If we don't, we put 225 years of democracy at risk.

Frank A. Blethen is CEO and publisher of The Seattle Times.

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