



**Unreality TV and Yellow Journalism:
What the Media Execs—including Media General— Won't Tell You at Today's
Richmond Hearing**

The nation's largest media conglomerates are seeking to overturn the remaining federal "checks and balances" on media ownership. If successful, one major TV network will be able to buy another, merge with cable giants, and swallow up newspapers and additional radio and TV stations. There will be fewer owners of media outlets in a community, and meaningful "freedom of speech" will rest in the hands of a few—with tremendous political and commercial power. Since these same companies provide the public with news and information, they will be largely unaccountable, failing to cover their own political activities.

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Take, for example, Media General—owner of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and 24 other daily newspapers, 26 TV stations, and 50 online services. Its readers and viewers are unaware that over the last 60 days the company has filed almost 600 pages of documents with the FCC asking that ownership rules be eliminated—including any limits on the number of TV stations they can own in a town. Nor have they been forthcoming in how their Washington lawyers have lobbied Commissioners Abernathy, Adelstein, and Martin. Not a word about how they arranged a special trip for the FCC chief of Policy and Plans to see their new "convergence" news center in Tampa, Florida (where they also presented the official with a videotape promoting their efforts). But more disturbingly, Media General hasn't felt compelled to spend any **ink** or airtime informing the *public* about all the promises made on their behalf if the federal rules are axed.

Fox, NBC, and Viacom/CBS have already told Michael Powell's FCC that there shouldn't be any safeguards at all. At today's hearing, industry execs will undoubtedly speak from the same tired script that works so well in Washington, DC, where money and power too often triumph over the needs of the public.

Claim: The networks say they can't compete without overturning the ownership rules

Fact: The broadcast networks have already used their political power in Congress to win hundreds of billions of dollars worth of cable channels and digital spectrum for free! The future of Viacom/CBS, News Corp/Fox, GE/NBC, and Disney/ABC is already secure because of their private "pork barrel" lobbying efforts.

Claim: The networks say that the nation's anti-trust laws can protect the public and that the FCC should no longer worry about the "public interest, convenience and necessity."

Fact: The networks lie. They know that media anti-trust policy as conducted by the Department of Justice and the FTC is a joke. Media mergers are routinely approved by these agencies. Only when a media giant with White House clout mobilizes to oppose a deal—such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.—do the regulators pay attention. Otherwise deals sail through, like Comcast's recent buy-out of AT&T cable.

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Claim: The networks' hired economic and legal experts say that the Internet will protect us from undue media conglomerate control, so there are no reasons for any safeguards.

Fact: The networks know well that the Internet as an open medium is now threatened because of recent Bush FCC rules that will allow cable and phone companies to control more of the Net's broadband architecture. That's why these networks are now lobbying the FCC and the Hill for preferential distribution for their interactive content via cable.

Claim: The media companies have told the courts that any safeguard limiting their ability to own any outlet violates the First Amendment.

Fact: These companies distort the meaning of the First Amendment, which is also designed to ensure that public has access to a wide range of diverse sources of information.¹ While cloaking themselves behind the First Amendment to eliminate rules they oppose, these same interests vehemently claim that because of their special status as "public trustees" they should receive a host of publicly endowed goodies, like cable must-carry, retransmission consent, digital spectrum, and the like.

Claim: Michael Powell and the networks claim that the court has overturned the ownership rules and they must revise them. They also say Congress requires the end of all rules as a result of the 1996 Telecommunications Act.

Fact: This is perhaps Michael Powell's and the industry's biggest lie. The court has not overturned all the rules. Rather, they have asked for more documentation of what the limits should be. Powell *could* inform the court that the current rules are necessary and even need to be strengthened. He *could* appeal the Appeals court decision in this matter. Powell *could* remind the court that the 1996 Act made it very clear that the public interest was to prevail. But because Powell is fixated on a deregulatory market approach, he prefers to distort the legal record to suit his own ideological beliefs.

Claim: The big companies will win and the public is powerless.

Fact: The new programming capacity that digital television will bring, along with the incorporation of streaming Internet media by the cable industry, should provide plenty of room for creativity, controversy, and content that is truly reflective of our diverse society. But this will only happen if members of the public join with allies from journalism, Hollywood, and the public interest community to fight for the democratic "soul" of the US media system. Support a media-reform movement that seizes upon the digital revolution and stakes a new claim for the public interest.

For more information on media ownership issues, including how this affects the Internet, visit the Center for Digital Democracy's web site: <http://www.democraticmedia.org>

¹ *Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1, 20 (1945).