Having been a member of the broadcast news media community for over 28 years, I would like to add my comments on proposed rule changes that would allow even greater media ownership consolidation, and consequently less diversity, in the broadcast media.

Before I began my career with an FFC RadioTelephone Operators Permit in 1979, I have been conscious of local radio news coverage since the early 1960's. Stories of local people and events abounded on radio then, as did programming geared toward issues important to local communities. Such is certainly not the case in the radio landscape now.

As recently as the early 1990's, broacast owners were forced, by regulation, to offer local news and public affairs programming, and news broadcasters such as myself seized the opportunity to explore such important issues as racial tension, housing discrimination, environmental issues, unemployment retraining, political corruption, and more. Single- and small-ownership groups were best at this presentation, as they had an interest in the local community, since that was where their economic support came from. Then came consolidation.

Since 1996, I have seen a sea change in the way news and public affairs are presented, both as a radio consumer, and as an insider at ClearChannel Communications (from 1998-2006). With a shift in focus from serving the public interest to serving the bottom line, and the relaxation of media ownership rules, large corporations are free to focus on only one aspect of radio broadcasting: profits.

Yes, local radio stations owned by large corporations are still broadcasting news and public affairs, with a time allotment of perhaps 25% of what they did only ten years ago. Some stations have dropped news altogether. The news stories that are covered chiefly revolve around shootings, stabbings, fires, and other easily-coverable public events. You almost never hear investigative reporting on radio. Television reporting is similarly geared toward the sensational, the "Anna Nicole Smith" news at the expense of coverage of local politics, the environment, racial issues, etc, etc.

From the inside, the corporate broadcaster used to have Rule Number One: Protect the License. To do this, they performed the bare minimum required, via an interpretation of Commission rules by their expensive attorneys. However, now their attitude has changed to one of doing even less than the minimum, since the current laissez faire attitude about news and public affairs allows them to claim that syndicated network talk shows are actually public affairs programs. With the Commission's main focus on protecting 13-year-olds from hearing words they hear every day on the streets (and probably at home), broadcasters are focussed on keeping programming as inoffensive (and inexpensive) as possible.

It is a sorry state of affairs. Radio is a critical medium in a modern democracy, as people like Ed Murrow and Fred Friendly proved in the 1940's and 50's. People of all ages use radio while commuting. working, and relaxing, in a way that television cannot compete with. American radio broadcasters, with the large orporations leading the way, have now, with the FCC's tacit blessing, largely abandoned any pretense to a mission of educating the consumers, taxpayers, and voters of the communities they serve. Consolidation of a great number of broadcast facilities in the smallest numbers of hands has enormously accelerated this process.

Eugene Lisansky
WBMJ-AM 1968-69
WERD-AM, now WMNJ-FM 1975-77
WCBN-FM/WJJX-AM 1979-1985
WAAM-AM 1982-85
WOOD AM/FM 1985-87
WFAS AM/FM 1987-1995
WHNZ-AM 1996-2006