

June 25, 2012

The Honorable Julius Genachowski
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 Twelfth Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Genachowski:

There has been a great deal of discussion about the state of black radio following the format change of a top-rated New York City station that had long served the market's black community.

For nearly three decades, adult urban radio stations WBLS (107.5) and WRKS (98.7, KISS-FM) were fierce competitors, battling for listeners in our nation's largest media market. But that rivalry ended when Disney took over programming for 98.7 FM several weeks ago and immediately changed the station's format to sports talk.

This abrupt format change shocked New York City's African American community and its larger urban radio audience. The most populous city in the country is now left with just one urban adult contemporary station. And two of the nation's most popular African American radio talk show programs, the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* and the *Michael Baisden Show*, will no longer be broadcast in the New York City market due to the departure of KISS-FM.¹

While KISS-FM listeners lament the sudden loss of a popular station, we believe what happened in New York City speaks to a much larger crisis plaguing black radio and the radio industry.

We call on the FCC to study the state of black radio ownership and programming diversity, and to adopt rules that finally address our nation's media inequality.

Like the rest of the radio industry, black radio has been devastated by media consolidation. The passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act lifted the ban on the number of stations a company could own nationwide, allowing a few large companies to control the radio landscape. Companies like Clear Channel went from owning 40 stations to as many as 1,200 in just a few years. The number of independent radio station owners declined by 39 percent in the decade following the passage of the Telecommunications Act.²

Greater consolidation in the radio industry created large radio conglomerates that are less responsive to the information and entertainment needs of the communities they serve. And perhaps no other community has been as negatively impacted by this growing media inequality as the African American community.

Many black radio stations have historically provided the community with a voice in the fight for greater equality. African American DJs not only provided the community with the latest news and information, but they played records by local black artists that served as the soundtrack for African American empowerment.

But today, with few exceptions, local radio has abandoned serving the needs of these communities — and at a time when many of them face enormous suffering. Unemployment among African Americans has often reached a figure twice as high as the national average. As of 2007, African Americans were six times more likely to be in prison than whites. And as of 2010, the median family income earned by black and Latino families was 57 cents to every dollar earned by a white family.³

These social and economic disparities are one major reason that the African American community depends on local black radio stations now more than ever for news and entertainment.

But media consolidation has made it harder for people of color to own radio outlets. African Americans own just 3 percent of all full-power commercial radio stations. And many urban radio stations that purport to serve black audiences air little local programming and are seldom responsive to the needs of their communities. Indeed, the advocacy group Industry Ears has often raised concerns about the amount of syndicated music programming targeting adult African Americans.

Media corporations have a long history of profiting off the suffering of African Americans, starting with the use of offensive stereotypes in radio programs like *Amos 'n Andy* during the early years of commercial radio. This shameful tradition continues. Today many radio stations play music that too often denigrates African Americans. It is rare to hear records from independent black artists or musicians who use their music to uplift and inform.

As Industry Ears has long stated, the public remains largely unaware that major record labels and radio corporations too often control what music is played on local stations. We are concerned that payola could remain a major issue throughout the industry, including in black radio, despite an FCC payola investigation a few years ago.

Media inequality persists as a result of government policy that places control of media and the public airwaves in the hands of corporations that prioritize profit over their responsibility to serve the public interest.

This history of inequality began with the government distributing our country's first commercial radio licenses almost exclusively to white males. This free, government-granted, exclusive use of the public airwaves enabled those early licensees to amass wealth and control practically all of our nation's media outlets, leaving people of color with few broadcast ownership opportunities and virtually no say over how they are depicted in the media.

The FCC must take proactive steps to expand ownership opportunities for people of color and other marginalized communities, and must examine fully the impact on diversity of any media ownership rule changes the FCC proposes.

We also call on the FCC to adopt rules ensuring that local broadcasters are held accountable to the communities they are licensed to serve. Such changes could include shortening the length of a broadcast license, a position that former FCC Commissioner Michael Copps often advocated.

Finally, we call on the FCC to do a thorough study of the state of black radio that examines who owns urban-formatted radio stations. This should occur as part of a much-needed effort to compile trustworthy data on broadcast ownership and the identity of broadcast license holders. And we also call on the FCC to investigate whether payola continues to play a major role in determining what airs on these outlets.

Sincerely,

Paul Porter, co-founder, Industry Ears

Joseph Torres, senior external affairs director, Free Press

Rashad Robinson, executive director, ColorofChange.org

Steven Renderos, national organizer, Center for Media Justice

Brandy Doyle, policy director, Prometheus Radio Project

Maxie C. Jackson III, president, National Federation of Community Broadcasters

Casey Rae, deputy director, Future of Music Coalition

Paul Billings, general manager, WUVS Muskegon LPFM

Dr. Jared Ball, associate professor, Communication Studies, Morgan State University

Dave 'Davey D' Cook, San Francisco State and Pacifica Radio

Todd Steven Burroughs, Ph.D., author, journalist and lecturer, Communication Studies, Morgan State University

cc: Commissioners Robert McDowell, Mignon Clyburn, Jessica Rosenworcel, Ajit Pai

¹ Richard Prince, *Civic-Minded Jocks Out as KISS Folds into WBLS*, Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, April 30, 2012.

² George Williams, "Review of the Radio Industry, 2007," Federal Communications Commission, August 2007.

³ Tim Sullivan, Wanjiku Mwangi, Brian Miller, Dedrick Muhammad, Colin Harris, *State of the Dream 2012: The Emerging Majority*, United for A Fair Economy, January 12, 2012.