

## THE RELAXATION OF MEDIA CROSS-OWNERSHIP RULES: RAISING THE “SHUSH” IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY TO A DEAFENING ROAR

Karen J. Bond

Executive Director

National Black Coalition for Media Justice

To say that further ownership consolidation of broadcast stations and newspapers would not harm the black community flies in the face of logic. Below is a personal story which is but one illustration of this harm:

I was one of three panelists on a radio program exploring the topic “Can Black Radio Survive?”. The program aired on a radio station owned by one of the largest corporate owners of radio stations in the United States. The programming on that station targeted the black community. Two out of the three panelists (myself included) planned to focus on how concentration of media ownership had muffled the voice of the black community and severely compromised certain efforts aimed at addressing our social and political needs. (Put simply - whenever our needs differed from the needs of the large multinational corporate media owners, we did not stand a chance.)

Minutes before we went on air, the host of the program made a startling announcement to the panel. She said some people “very high in corporate management” told her that during our discussion, panelists are not to criticize the large multinational corporate owner of the station. We asked who specifically had made this request. She said she was not at liberty to share that information, but that this point had been made to her “with great emphasis”.

Before I had a chance to gather my thoughts, the host was announcing my name and asking me to introduce myself. At one point later in the program, as I was answering a question and coming dangerously close to criticizing the station's corporate owner, the host silenced her microphone, put her index finger to her mouth and said “Shush” - letting me know I could not continue with the point I was making. Then she started talking over me and went on to another panelist.

After the broadcast, one of the panelists and I discussed how shocked and dismayed we were to be invited to speak on the topic of black radio and then to be censored. We were surprised because we were on the “black station”. Yes, it was known far and wide as the “black station” but it was not black owned, and what we had just experienced was a grim reminder of that fact.

This type of censorship is happening to black people across the country at media outlets owned by the corporations that engineered this country's massive media ownership consolidation. The more consolidated the corporate ownership, the more chilling the effect of the “Shush”. And allowing

cross-ownership of broadcast stations and newspapers multiplies the volume of the "Shush" exponentially. Studies done thus far on media ownership consolidation have not accurately detected the extent of this harm to the black community because they have not been properly designed to do so.

What happened on that radio program made us so angry that we wanted to go directly to a black-owned radio station and tell the black community what had transpired, but there were no black-owned radio stations in that city. In an area with more than a million black people, one might expect to see multiple black-owned radio and television stations, all constantly improving their service to the black community in a frenzied competition for our business. But there is no such competition. No constantly improving level of service. No satisfactory alternatives when something like this happens.

There are three other radio stations in that city targeting the black community, but they are all owned by that same multinational corporation. Let's suppose cross-ownership rules were relaxed, and then the radio station, the television station and newspaper that had been most helpful to the black community eventually all became owned by the same multinational corporation. We as a community would now be automatically beholden to that multinational corporation. And if a new owner comes in who is not sympathetic to our community, then our radio, television and newspaper alliances are all gone in an instant. The scenario described here is a major reason to maintain the cross-ownership bans. Because of the way these media alliances play themselves out in the black community, the barriers to cross-ownership serve our community well.

What do we hear when we complain about losing the political power that black radio has historically fostered in our community? We are told that radio is old technology and therefore we should not worry so much about losing it. Then we watch as the Rush Limbaugh/Sean Hannity/Michael Savage radio juggernaut literally move the political pendulum of the country to a place where a significant percentage of the population now actually believes that Saddam Hussein was involved in attacking us on 9-11, that global warming does not exist, and that President Obama is a Muslim who faked his birth certificate. Yes, there are other media through which we are being heard, but why are we the ones being asked to cede that which continues to be such a powerful tool for other communities?

What do we hear when we complain about losing the political power that independent newspapers fostered in our community? We are told it's just fine to allow newsrooms to save money by consolidating and getting rid of things like multiple, truly INDEPENDENT fact checking mechanisms. We are told that what's important is the mere SURVIVAL of the newspaper industry. Even if what survives serves the corporation's needs rather than our community's needs. And even if what survives is an industry that bears no resemblance to the press guaranteed to us by the first amendment, a press designed to ensure that an informed population can adequately perform the task of self-governance.

Most importantly, we are expected to IGNORE the fact that this echo-chambered monstrosity of consolidated, cross-owned, interdependent broadcast stations and newspapers will, by definition, need to be even MORE committed to it's own corporate goals rather than to our first amendment rights.

We ask that before any further consolidation is allowed, a more comprehensive study be done on how media ownership consolidation has specifically harmed the black community. We challenge the validity of many studies that have been done because they have not adequately recognized how the problem of ownership consolidation manifests itself in our community. We believe a critical part of the data gathering process should be hearings. We seek the opportunity to partner with the FCC in the creation of such a study.

Significant ground has been lost in the black community due to media ownership consolidation. As bad as things are now, if we allow further consolidation I fear we will look back on these as the halcyon days.

Karen J. Bond

Executive Director

National Black Coalition for Media Justice (NBCMJ)

Phone: (847) 328-4849

Email Address: [karenbond@nbcnj.org](mailto:karenbond@nbcnj.org)

Website (currently under construction): [www.nbcnj.org](http://www.nbcnj.org)