

Free Press to FCC: Block the Gannett-Belo Merger

In the last few months, a wave of mergers has threatened to further erode the already sad state of local TV news around the country.

Well, we aren't standing for it. On Wednesday, Free Press [filed official paperwork](#) to block [Gannett's acquisition of 20 TV stations from Belo](#).

A vast majority of Americans [still relies on local TV](#) for essential information about their communities, and the Gannett-Belo deal would mean losing valuable voices and viewpoints in cities from St. Louis to Seattle to Portland, Ore., to Phoenix.

In fact, Gannett's acquisition of Belo stations in cities where it already owns the local newspaper would violate the Federal Communications Commission's newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership ban. This is the very rule that former FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski [tried to gut](#); his dangerous proposal was [temporarily put on hold](#) thanks to intense pressure from activists, civil rights groups and members of Congress.

Now companies like Gannett are exploiting loopholes in the existing rules to grow their empires. The day it announced the deal, Gannett [promised](#) it would use "covert consolidation" tactics — transferring stations in name only to a shell company while continuing to run them. These arrangements would allow Gannett to control multiple media outlets in the same market, leading to

job losses for journalists, less diversity on the airwaves and diminished competition.

Members of Free Press joined our petition to deny this deal. In Phoenix, one of the cities that will be hardest hit, Traci L. Morris wrote that “Gannett's ownership of the *Arizona Republic* and KPNX, as well as its intention to provide substantive services to KTVK and KASW, harms me by sharply reducing the number of independent voices and competitive news sources available to me.”

Even now, Morris noted, the coverage found on Phoenix stations doesn't reflect the city's diversity. “Phoenix has one of the highest urban American Indian populations in the country,” she wrote, “and the aforementioned stations are viewable in many of the surrounding tribal communities in the state, yet our stories are not covered.”

In other cities, Gannett would be in violation of the television duopoly rule that's supposed to prohibit a single owner from controlling two of the highest-rated TV stations in the same market. These rules are meant to ensure that broadcasters serve the public interest and don't entirely control how local stories are covered.

In St. Louis, Free Press member Erich Vieth said that KMOV and KSDK already show many times more political ads than political reports. “Consolidating the ownership of these two stations,” Vieth wrote, “would destroy much of what is left of competition in the St. Louis TV newsrooms.”

In some cities, Gannett doesn't even need the loopholes to skirt the FCC's rules, which have been weakened so significantly over the years. Sabrina Roach of Seattle told the FCC that this merger

would make a bad situation worse, noting that her city “already has minimal coverage of the arts and local government on our major networks.”

Gannett won't let such concerns or public interest obligations stand in the way of a business deal. So it's up to us to stand in Gannett's way.

Free Press joined a coalition of public interest, labor and faith-based groups in opposing this deal, including Common Cause, the Institute for Public Representation, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ Inc., NABET-CWA and The Newspaper Guide-CWA.

A coalition of some of the nation's biggest cable and satellite companies [also filed a petition to deny the merger](#). The American Cable Association, DIRECTV and Time Warner Cable argued that the deal would give Gannett too much power in fee negotiations and would lead to higher cable and satellite TV bills for customers.

In fact, Gannett and Belo are the only ones who think this deal makes sense. And you can be sure that other TV giants are watching this fight closely.

With Sinclair Broadcasting, the Tribune Company and other media giants looking to stock up on local TV stations — many of which proved to be [political ad cash cows](#) in the last election — we need to send the message that Americans don't want more media consolidation.

[Gannett-Belo Ownership Map](#)

