

# What's at stake in FCC rule changes

● Will a few big companies control what we see, hear and read?

By **TOM ALLEN**

On June 2, the Federal Communications Commission is expected to adopt rules placing the airwaves, newspapers and digital wires even more firmly in the hands of a few media giants. At stake is a future in which what you hear, see and read are the same whether you are in Houston or Hollis, Biloxi or Bangor.

In such a world, citizens will have a hard time making the informed choices that democracy demands.

## MAINE VOICES

Officially, the FCC proposal remains secret, but the sketchy outlines already revealed are scary enough. For starters, the FCC would allow a single owner's TV stations to reach 45 percent of the national audience — up from the present limit of 35 percent.

Second, the ban on a company owning both a newspaper and radio or TV station in the same locality would be lifted. Another change would permit television companies to own three stations in the largest markets (instead of the present two).

These revisions will make a poor situation worse. In Maine and the rest of the country, local media ownership is already under siege. Almost all TV affiliates in Maine are now controlled "from away."

Nationally, the five conglomerates that now dominate the TV market own networks and affiliates, radio stations, cable systems, and Internet service providers, and produce most prime time TV programming.

Likewise, radio stations are

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**U.S. Rep. Tom Allen**, a Democrat, represents Maine's 1st Congressional District.

increasingly controlled by mega-companies. Almost one-third of all Maine stations are now owned by either Clear Channel Communications or Citadel Communications, leaving less and less choice for listeners. In Presque Isle, for example, Citadel owns three out of six stations.

Nationally, the top 25 radio ownership groups control about a quarter of the nation's commercial stations, and take in more than half of all advertising revenues.

While Maine is fortunate that its largest-circulation newspapers — the Portland Press Herald, Bangor Daily News, and Sun Journal — are still family-owned businesses with historic Maine ties, the rest of the country has not fared as well.

Most metropolitan areas now have only one newspaper owned by a chain headquartered elsewhere. Today, out of 1,500 daily newspapers in the United States, only 281 remain independent, and most are in small towns. The three largest publishers account for 25 percent of all daily newspaper circulation.

Not surprisingly, existing media powerhouses — Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., Clear Channel, Viacom, Disney and AOL/Time Warner — are pushing hard for these changes which will allow them to gobble up even more of the market.

On the other side are nearly all of the 18,000 or so people and organizations that filed comments on the planned changes. Opposition spans the political spectrum, and includes conservative individuals and groups such as columnist William Safire, Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, and the

National Rifle Association. They are rightfully wary of concentrations of power, be it political, corporate, media or cultural.

The impact of media concentration on the availability and objectivity of news is already becoming evident. At Fox News, editorial comment has come to replace news reporting. One Fox anchor, for example, opined after the fall of Baghdad that opponents of the war were "sickening then; you are sickening now."

Many Americans turned to the BBC for news during the war in Iraq because they concluded that American news coverage was, as MSNBC's own correspondent, Ashleigh Banfield, bravely pointed out, one-sided.

The tendency of owners to self-censor in an effort to curry favor with rule-makers also extends to entertainment. A Colorado station, for example, recently suspended two disc jockeys for playing songs by the anti-war Dixie Chicks.

**IF THE FCC RULE** revisions are adopted, matters will only get worse. That is why I joined almost 100 other House members in urging the FCC Chairman, Michael Powell (son of the secretary of state), to delay the vote until the commission "demonstrates how changes in media ownership limits will benefit the public interest and not jeopardize the democratic goals of diversity, competition, and localism."

Citizens form their opinions about major national issues, who should sit on the town council or in the governor's office, and what values to emulate not only from information from newspapers, but also from the modern wonders of television, radio, and digital sources.

The paramount need of democracy, however, remains the same: the free flow of abundant, independent and diverse information.

— *Special to the Press Herald*