

Media consolidation? What media consolidation?

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The last week of May, only days before the Federal Communications Commission was to vote on deregulating media-ownership rules, ABC's "Nightline" finally got around to running an episode on the subject.

"It's a big step that has received relatively little attention - and almost no national debate," host Ted Koppel admitted.

Yet, having ignored the debate all along, the normally intrepid nightly issues program was too late to jump-start any sort of debate. "Nightline" also made little mention of the major broadcast networks' obligation to operate in the public interest, being as they operate on the public airwaves. And, at the end of the program, Koppel didn't add his own thoughts on the subject, but instead plugged the following day's ABC programs "Good Morning America" and "World News Tonight" on subjects that had nothing to do with the FCC.

That's exactly the sort of behavior on the part of the media - serving its own interests first and the public interest later, if at all - that so worries U.S. citizens after the FCC voted along party

lines, 3-2, to deregulate the media last week. Networks can now own more local TV stations - and even local cable servers. They can own multiple stations in the same city. And newspapers can now own TV and radio stations - and vice versa.

This all means the many media outlets that have multiplied in cable TV, radio and the Internet in recent decades will be owned by fewer global conglomerates, and critics fear they will use that increased power to limit debate and control the cultural environment.

Well, wake up, America. That's already the case, and the way the media covered the FCC giveaway proves it. It's only going to get worse given the unchecked power the FCC granted big media last week.

The Tribune, which had a major stake in the newspaper-TV/radio cross-ownership debate, barely covered the issue. It ran only one front-page story on it in the days, weeks and months leading up to the FCC vote - and that below the fold. But when that vote went through, it was suddenly the most important news in the world and the top story in the next day's paper.

In early April, Democratic FCC Commissioner Michael Copps attended a public forum on the issue here in Chicago. Of all the major local media - TV, radio and newspapers - only the Daily Herald covered it. In town for the forum, Common Cause President Chellie Pingree offered to be a guest on many local radio talk shows to discuss the issue; no one took her up on it.

In mid-May, U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky and 100 other Democratic members of the House held a news conference on media consolidation; no major media covered it.

In the days leading up to the vote, Common Cause and MoveOn.org put together a TV ad pointing to Rupert Murdoch and his News Corp. conglomerate, including the Fox TV network, as the poster boy for what they were fighting against; the Fox affiliate in Washington, D.C., refused to run it, then belatedly agreed when it was too late for it to have any impact.

The media disgraced itself with the way it covered the FCC giveaway - that is, didn't cover it. It turned out, in fact, that as much as the media tried to ignore the debate, pooh-poohing that it

was of no public interest, public response was actually quite intense - and almost unanimously against media consolidation.

Groups from the left-wing Common Cause and MoveOn.org to the right-wing National Rifle Association and the Parents Television Council lined up against it. The FCC received 750,000 comments on the issue - more than on any other piece of business in its history - and 99.9 percent of them were opposed to deregulation. Yet the three Republicans on the FCC, led by Bush-appointed Chairman Michael Powell, ignored them.

That means the Bush administration disgraced itself even more than the media. Its FCC, backed by Commerce Secretary Donald Evans, went against the expressed preferences of the vast majority of U.S. citizens to side with lobbyists from the major media conglomerates.

Many people spoke out against the vote, including strange Senate bedfellows Trent Lott and Ernest Hollings. But my favorite response came from reader Marie Harris in an e-mail from Bartlett.

"The potential abuse of power allowed in this ruling is frightening," she wrote. "I learned I was among hundreds of thousands who communicated with their legislators and the FCC directly, and that was simultaneously encouraging and dismaying. It was encouraging that so many Americans realize the seriousness of this issue and actually wrote to the authorities, and it is dismaying to realize the commission has chosen to overlook them."

On Thursday, in the second half of this column, I'll address the consequences - intended and unintended - for all concerned.

Ted Cox's column runs Tuesday and Thursday in Suburban Living, Friday in sports and Friday in Time out!