

Breaux, Tauzin criticize curbs on media ownership

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By Bruce Alpert

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WASHINGTON -- Two influential Louisiana lawmakers have signed onto a letter urging the Federal Communications Commission to move forward with proposals to either eliminate or relax rules that limit how many media outlets a parent company can own.

"In our view the commission's ownership restrictions are outdated," said the letter from Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-Clackbay, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and Sen. John Breaux, a top Democrat on the Senate Commerce Committee, along with 11 other members of Congress. "It is time for the commission to amend all of its broadcast ownership rules and bring them into alignment with the realities of today's media marketplace."

Opponents of the deregulation have urged a delay, saying the changes would further reduce choices for radio listeners and TV viewers. The FCC is tentatively scheduled to take up broadcast ownership rules at a June meeting.

At issue are a series of rules, some of them more than 60 years old, that limit media concentration.

The regulations include rules that bar a company from owning a daily newspaper and television

station in the same market, restrict major TV networks from owning local affiliates that reach more than 35 percent of the broadcast audience, and that allow a company to own up to two TV stations, but only if there are eight other "independent voices" available in the market.

"Existing rules have been put in place to ensure that local communities have access to varying viewpoints on local issues," said Rep. Janice Schakowsky, D-Ill., a top Democrat on Tauzin's committee. "These rules must be maintained and should be strengthened, instead of weakened."

Downplaying concerns

Tauzin said he isn't recommending specific steps that the FCC should take, but generally believes that restrictions on ownership aren't needed, partly because of the growth of the Internet and cable TV. To those who argue that stations will become increasingly national in content, he said that viewers will demand a certain amount of local programming and color and will bypass stations that don't provide it.

He also said a change in rules would give media corporations more certainty about future revenue opportunities, making them more willing to invest in enhancements such as digital and high-definition television broadcasts.

But critics point to 1996 telecommunications legislation that eliminated national ownership mandates for radio.

A group of New Orleans-area musicians said the increased concentration of ownership by national firms with "approved playlists" has made it harder for them to get local stations to play their music.

Schakowsky accused the largest owner of radio stations, Clear Channel Communications, of barring ads opposing the war in Iraq, while promoting rallies for the war and the military and limiting news coverage of antiwar protests. It wouldn't be so important, she said, if it weren't for the fact that Clear Channel now owns 20 percent of radio stations nationwide, including seven

in the New Orleans area.

A Clear Channel spokeswoman said that the company leaves decisions about what songs to play, and the kind of news coverage offered, to local managers.

FCC Chairman Michael Powell said he doesn't buy the argument that bigger national firms are always worse than smaller local owners.

"It is increasingly imperative to have a larger perspective on matters of public interest, whether it be health issues, political issues, economic matters or terrorism and military threats," Powell said in a recent speech. "And news events now move at a sweeping pace, breaking faster and spreading farther than ever before. This complex world requires ever more sophisticated news gathering and delivery capability."

That national and international news coverage can be better accomplished by larger companies with deeper pockets, he said.

Defending local news

But Andrew Jay Schwartzman of the Media Access Project, which opposes the kind of deregulation advocated by Powell, said the experience with radio concentration shows that big and wealthy corporate owners don't necessarily mean better news coverage.

"It's quite the contrary," Schwartzman said. He said some big national companies have eliminated, or substantially reduced local radio news operations.