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Past Commentaries

If you've wondered why we have kept returning to the story of big media on this broadcast, we have some answers this week. It's because the big media companies keep getting bigger — with more and more power over our politics and our lives. This week's deal between General Electric and Vivendi for example means that GE's NBC has just picked up not only Universal Studios but the USA, Trio and Sci-fi cable channels to go with CNBC and MSNBC, all part now of a \$43 billion dollar empire.

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Bill Moyers
on Big Media

And look what's happening to radio. The non-profit Center for Public Integrity is out with a new study showing that in each of 43 different cities a third of the stations are owned by a single company.

No company's supposed to own more than eight in any market, but companies thumb their nose at the rules all the time. In 34 of those 43 markets, one company owns more than eight stations.

The big daddy of all is Clear Channel Communications — 12-hundred stations altogether. You folks in Mansfield, Ohio, Clear Channel owns 11 of the 17 radio stations in your town. If you live in Corvallis, Oregon, over half of what you hear is decided by Clear Channel — seven of thirteen radio stations.

Cumulus Media is the second biggest radio empire, remember Cumulus, they are the ones who banned the Dixie Chicks. Cumulus owns eight of the fifteen radio stations in Albany, Georgia.

If that doesn't get your goat, let's turn to television. No single company is supposed to control more than one television station per city, except in some big markets. But look at what happened in Wilmington, North Carolina, where there are three network affiliate stations: Fox, NBC and ABC. This year, the Fox station changed hands. On paper, the new owner was Southeastern Media Holdings. But then Southeastern Media announced that Raycom Media would help manage the company. Raycom already owns the NBC station, so it combined the two news departments and laid off much of the staff.

But hold on — Raycom and Southeastern Media holdings turn out to be part of the same company. So there's not only one less independent news operation in Wilmington, there's also one less media company.

The flimflam-ery goes on. In 33 other cities, stations that are supposed to be competitors have found clever ways to undermine the existing rules, including mergers and takeovers. Remember when Viacom married CBS and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp ponied up for the television stations owned by Chris-Craft? Those deals put both conglomerates in violation of the rule that no one company can control stations reaching more than thirty five percent of the total audience.

But so what? The FCC just rolled over, winked, and gave both conglomerates temporary waivers of the rule. A little time passed and this summer the FCC raised the limit to give the big guys what they had wanted all along. But that giveaway brought protests by mail and e-mail from over two million citizens, turning the FCC into a Bastille on the Potomac. Such indignation from the grass roots caused even the United States Senate to say "Whoa, something's going on — people really care about this." And the Senate stopped the FCC in its tracks. There are enough votes to do the same in the House.

But then... General Electric, owner of NBC; News Corp, owner of Fox; Viacom, owner of CBS; and Walt Disney, owner of ABC, brought on the hired guns — the lobbyists — to wage a Trojan War on Congress. A passel of former insiders moved through the revolving door, Rolodexes in hand, trading their influence for cash — top aides of the Senate Majority Leader, the House Majority Whip and of John Ashcroft himself.

Now the most powerful Republican in Congress — Tom Delay, the House Majority Leader — won't allow a vote to happen. The effort to reverse the FCC is dead in the water — taking democracy with it.

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