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The 'local' in local TV is in danger

By Martin Kaplan

LOS ANGELES - You would think that the first thing the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) would do before rewriting the rules of media ownership in America, would be to find out how well the rules are working. But you'd be wrong.

This data vacuum is especially alarming in local news. Since most Americans get most of their news from local TV stations, the kind of attention those stations give to campaigns and elections - not in paid ads, but in journalism - is a measure of the health of our democracy. It's a way to assess how close we are to having the quality information that Thomas Jefferson said we need to be good citizens. But when it comes to informing the voting public, the FCC hasn't a clue how local TV news is doing. Without that data, further deregulation can be no more than a riverboat gamble.

The FCC did commission 12 "Media Ownership Working Group Papers" to get ready for its scheduled big vote Monday on whether to relax restrictions on ownership. They're all very interesting. Unfortunately, not one of them analyzes the content of local TV news to find out how local it really is. Not one of them compares the content aired by one television ownership group with the content aired by another. For an agency charged with promoting "diversity" and "localism," wouldn't it be nice to define what those words mean and then go out and actually measure local TV stations against them?

This wouldn't be particularly expensive to do. All it would take is a set of objective criteria for localism and diversity, enough VCRs in enough cities capturing enough hours of programming from enough ownership groups, and enough analysts to clock the tapes and crunch the numbers.

Imagine what those studies could tell us. They could examine the cities where media duopolies exist, and compare the diversity of news content in those cities with cities without duopolies. Wouldn't it be helpful to the FCC to have that information before it opens the national floodgates to duopolies and even triopolies?

Another study could compare how much local news aired is truly filled with stories about that community (rather than with promotions for network entertainment or canned news feeds from corporate headquarters). Before the

FCC permits more distant owners to take over more local stations, wouldn't it be useful to know where things stand now?

The closest anyone has come to answering objective questions like these is a study my collaborators and I have done of 122 of the top-rated stations in the top 50 US media markets (www.localnewsarchive.org). Our focus was local-news coverage of the 2002 midterm election; we taped and analyzed more than 8,000 half-hours of the country's top-rated early- and late-evening news broadcasts during the last seven weeks of the campaign season.

Anyone who thinks that TV stations have a public-interest obligation to perform in exchange for their free licenses will be dispirited by our results. On almost half the evening-news programs we taped, there was no coverage of the campaign - of any campaign - at all. When campaign stories did air, they mostly were less than 90 seconds, contained no sound bites from candidates, and came in the last two weeks before the election. They focused on strategy and polls nearly half the time; aired statewide races over local elections by almost 7 to 1, and were outnumbered by paid political ads by nearly 4 to 1. In other words, most Americans probably saw more prime-time entertainment on a single night than election coverage over an entire campaign season of watching local news.

Our study didn't set out to examine the relationship between station ownership and station performance. Even so, our 122-station sample contains 45 stations owned by large owners (with nationwide audience reach of more than 20 percent), 54 by mid-sized owners, and 23 by small owners, so we can use our findings to speculate on what a true ownership study - the kind the FCC should have done - might show.

For example, how much coverage was given to local races by local news? The stations in our sample with small and mid-sized owners offered more coverage than the national average, while stations with large owners did less. That same pattern seems true in individual media markets: In 16 of the 22 markets in our sample, stations owned by small or mid-sized owners aired more local campaign coverage.

These findings are of potential importance. If a full-scale national study designed to correlate ownership with localism and diversity came up with similar numbers, it would have inescapable implications for the rule changes now under consideration. It's too late to conduct those studies before Monday's vote. But it's not too late for Congress and the public to demand that the Commission find out what results the current system is giving us. Nor should these results, which have been shared with the FCC, be ignored by the courts if the FCC's decision is appealed.

Unless the FCC goes out and measures the local news that owners are providing under Monday's policies, it would be a roll of the dice to overthrow those policies.

It would be hard to imagine Thomas Jefferson entrusting the future of democracy to a crapshoot.

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