

**THE BLOG****Your FCC At Work**

By Marty Kaplan

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In the most bizarre example yet of GOP corporate welfare, FCC Chairman Kevin Martin has taken to the op-ed page of the *New York Times* to propose that — in order to save the newspaper industry — big-city papers should now be permitted to purchase a television or radio station in their market.

His rationale is breathtaking. To appreciate it, you first have to set aside some inconvenient truths. Like the finding of one of the FCC's own studies of localism (a quality that the law mandates the FCC to encourage) — a study suppressed because they didn't like the results — that television stations with distant owners (like, say, corporations that own chains of newspapers) do a worse job at localism than locally-owned stations. Or the finding of another FCC study that radio-newspaper cross-ownership "is associated with significantly less news coverage" on the radio station. Or the analysis of the FCC's own data that shows that cross ownership leads to *less* total newsgathering in a market, because the other stations realize they can't compete on news, so they focus on sports, weather or something else, like freeway chases or celebrity crime. You also have to ignore the underlying economic facts of the newspaper industry, which totally undermine Chairman Martin's "endangered species" argument.

But just put all that out of your mind, and focus instead on the nub of his argument: the reason that newspapers should be allowed to own television or radio stations is that those broadcast outlets are cash cows. And just why are they so profitable? Chairman Martin doesn't connect these dots, but let's do it for him.

It's because the FCC doesn't require them to pay a penny in exchange for their licenses to broadcast over the public's airwaves.

It's because the FCC lets television stations renew their licenses every eight years by sending a postcard to Washington, rather than requiring them to demonstrate that they serve the public interest.

It's because television and radio stations can broadcast whatever they want on the public's airwaves, without regard to fair representation of diverse points of view.

It's because the FCC has allowed television and radio station ownership to become a white boys' club, without regard to the public interest that might be served by minority or women ownership.

It's because those stations not only have largely abandoned, with impunity, their obligation to cover local politics and public affairs — they have found in political advertising a gusher of revenue.

So let's put Chairman Martin's argument together.

The public has given away, for free, its airwaves, to stations that generally do a dreadful job covering politics in their news programming, but that reap big bucks from political candidates, who in turn get the billions they spend on political ads from the public, and now the public is being asked to cut the newspaper industry in on that extortion racket in order to save democracy.

Next thing you know, we'll be asked to give tax breaks to oil companies. Oh, wait.

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