Protests target media consolidation

Groups urge keeping ban on cross-ownership

By Associated Press, 5/30/2003

LOS ANGELES -- Protesters in more than a dozen cities urged federal regulators yesterday to reject changes that would allow large media companies to own television and radio stations and newspapers in the same cities.

The demonstrations were staged just four days before the Federal Communications Commission is scheduled to consider eliminating a 28-year ban on cross-ownership of local media.

Another proposal would raise an existing market cap that prevents any one company from owning a combination of TV stations that reach more than 35 percent of US households.

In Los Angeles, about 60 people marched outside Clear Channel talk radio station KFI with signs reading, "No Choice, No Voice: Reclaim Our Airwaves."

"We're frozen out," said Karen Pomer, a member of the group Code Pink, which organized the protest and also rallied for peace during the war in Iraq. "All of this is benefiting conservative voices."

Protests were planned at Clear Channel stations in 14 cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco.

Protesters say Clear Channel stifles diverse points of view by programming local stations with national shows.

A Clear Channel spokesman said the media coverage of the protests is evidence that diverse viewpoints are not ignored.

"Americans today have more diverse choices for entertainment, news and information than ever before," said Andrew Levin, Clear Channel's senior vice president for government affairs. "Radio is the only medium I know where the customer can switch providers at 60 m.p.h."
The San Antonio group has become a favorite target for those who oppose deregulation. The company now owns 1,200 stations nationwide, including nine in Los Angeles.

FCC chairman Michael Powell has said the regulatory changes are needed to reflect a market altered by cable TV, satellite broadcasts and the Internet. If the FCC fails to act, outdated rules will be swept away by court challenges, he said.

A protest in New York was organized by United for Peace and Justice NY, an antiwar group. About 150 people picketed outside station WWPR and carried signs that read, "Farewell Free Speech, We'll Miss You" and "The Airwaves Belong to the People, not Clear Channel."

Protester Sherry Bender, 45, a physical therapist, said democracy was at risk with consolidation.

"We'll have only one parent company preprogramming everything we read and see and hear across the United States, and it will be one-sided," she said.

Relaxing restrictions on media ownership is opposed by the two Democrats on the FCC and backed by the three Republicans, including Powell. The FCC hearing was set for Monday in Washington.

Opposition to relaxed rules has brought together a wide variety of groups, from celebrities such as actor Richard Dreyfuss to the National Rifle Association.

Proponents include large media companies such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., which owns television stations, the Fox network and newspapers including the New York Post. Murdoch is also seeking regulatory approval for his purchase of a controlling share of the satellite television service DirecTV.

Murdoch has been the target of ads taken by Common Cause and other organizations. A full-page ad that ran recently in The New York Times shows a photo of a scowling Murdoch with the headline: "This man wants to control the news in America. The FCC wants to help him."