The Great Media Gulp

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

WASHINGTON

The future formation of American public opinion has fallen into the lap of an ambitious 36-year-old lawyer whose name you never heard. On June 2, after deliberations conducted behind closed doors, he will decide the fate of media large and small, print and broadcast. No other decision made in Washington will more directly affect how you will be informed, persuaded and entertained.

His name is Kevin Martin. He and his wife, Catherine, now Vice President Dick Cheney's public affairs adviser, are the most puissant young "power couple" in the capital. He is one of three Republican members of the five-person Federal Communications Commission, and because he recently broke ranks with his chairman, Michael Powell (Colin's son), on a telecom controversy, this engaging North Carolinian has become the swing vote on the power play that has media moguls salivating.

The F.C.C. proposal remains officially secret to avoid public comment but was forced into the open by the two commission Democrats. It would end the ban in most cities of cross-ownership of television stations and newspapers, allowing such companies as The New York Times, Washington Post and Chicago Tribune to gobble up ever more electronic outlets. It would permit Viacom, Disney and AOL Time Warner to control TV stations with nearly half the national audience. In the largest cities, it would allow owners of "only" two TV stations to buy a third.

We've already seen what happened when the F.C.C. allowed the monopolization of local radio: today three companies own half the stations in America, delivering a homogenized product that neglects local news coverage and dictates music sales.

And the F.C.C. has abdicated enforcement of the "public interest" requirement in issuing licenses. Time was, broadcasters had to regularly reapply and show public-interest programming to earn continuance; now they mail the F.C.C. a postcard every eight years that nobody reads.

Ah, but aren't viewers and readers now blessed with a whole new world of hot competition through cable and the Internet? That's the shucks-we're-no-monopolists line that Rupert Murdoch will take today in testimony before the pussycats of John McCain's Senate Commerce Committee.
The answer is no. Many artists, consumers, musicians and journalists know that such protestations of cable and Internet competition by the huge dominators of content and communication are malarkey. The overwhelming amount of news and entertainment comes via broadcast and print. Putting those outlets in fewer and bigger hands profits the few at the cost of the many.

Does that sound un-conservative? Not to me. The concentration of power — political, corporate, media, cultural — should be anathema to conservatives. The diffusion of power through local control, thereby encouraging individual participation, is the essence of federalism and the greatest expression of democracy.

Why do we have more channels but fewer real choices today? Because the ownership of our means of communication is shrinking. Moguls glory in amalgamation, but more individuals than they realize resent the loss of local control and community identity.

We opponents of megamergers and cross-ownership are afflicted with what sociologists call "pluralistic ignorance." Libertarians pop off from what we assume to be the fringes of the left and right wings, but do not yet realize that we outnumber the exponents of the new collectivist efficiency.

That's why I march uncomfortably alongside CodePink Women for Peace and the National Rifle Association, between liberal Olympia Snowe and conservative Ted Stevens under the banner of "localism, competition and diversity of views." That's why, too, we resent the conflicted refusal of most networks, stations and their putative purchasers to report fully and in prime time on their owners' power grab scheduled for June 2.

Must broadcasters of news act only on behalf of the powerful broadcast lobby? Are they not obligated, in the long-forgotten "public interest," to call to the attention of viewers and readers the arrogance of a regulatory commission that will not hold extended public hearings on the most controversial decision in its history?

So much of our lives should not be in the hands of one swing-vote commissioner. Let's debate this out in the open, take polls, get the president on the record and turn up the heat.