Ideologically Broad Coalition Assails F.C.C. Media Plan

By STEPHEN LABATON

WASHINGTON, May 27 — A broad coalition of both conservative and liberal organizations expressed deep criticism today of a plan by the Federal Communications Commission to relax the rules that have restricted the nation's largest media conglomerates from growing bigger.

The groups took part in a meeting convened by the two Democratic commissioners, Michael J. Copps and Jonathan S. Adelstein, who oppose the plan. But few, if any, of the participants expected that the meeting would change the outcome of next week's vote on the matter. The commission's three Republicans have already signaled their intention to support the changes.

The debate is likely to continue afterward in Congress — the five commissioners are expected to testify at a Senate hearing a few days after the vote. And some lawmakers have already begun to lay the groundwork to reverse the commission on some of the rules even before the agency has voted to change them.

Soon before going into this week's recess, several prominent members in the House and the Senate introduced legislation to preserve some of the rules. But it was unclear whether they would have the votes to overcome the agency's expected action.

The meeting today illustrated that no issue has created more of a furor at the commission in recent years than this proposal, which would allow conglomerates to...
enter more markets and control both newspapers and broadcasters in more than 100 cities. In recent weeks, the commissioners have received hundreds of thousands of comments urging them to delay their action.

The F.C.C. has scheduled a hearing for Monday at which the three Republican commissioners are expected to rewrite the rule that prevented a company from owning both a broadcast station and a newspaper in the same market. The commission is also expected to permit a company to own three television stations in the most competitive markets, and to relax the rule that has prohibited a network from owning television stations that reach more than 35 percent of the nation's viewers.

The groups criticizing the plan reflect an odd alliance. They include the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the National Rifle Association, the National Organization for Women, the Writers Guild of America, the Parents Television Council, Consumers Union and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Representatives from the organizations said the number of diverse groups opposed to the commission's action illustrated deep national discomfort with the F.C.C. proposal.

Mr. Copps and Mr. Adelstein have held meetings around the country on the proposal and have heard widespread opposition to the changes. They received support today from Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor who is running for president. Dr. Dean sent a letter to Michael K. Powell, the commission's chairman, urging him to postpone the vote.

Mr. Powell has already rejected similar requests, and officials said that the commission would not alter its schedule.

Supporters of the proposal, who are led by Mr. Powell and include the major broadcast networks and some large news conglomerates, say that technology and the proliferation of competition have rendered the current rules unnecessary. They say that free over-the-air television may be jeopardized without changes as more expensive programming migrates to subscription services offered by cable and satellite companies.

But critics say that while the number of pipelines into the home may have increased — cable and satellite broadcasters offer hundreds of channels, and Internet choices are virtually unlimited — a handful of large corporations dominate the production of content for those pipelines.

"Diversity of voices, not merely the variety of programming, is what matters," said Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. He said that in moving to change the rules, the commission had promoted "economic efficiency to the exclusion of diversity of voices and viewpoints."
The opponents contended that the changes would sharply reduce the
diversity of views on the airwaves, further limit opportunities for
women and minorities, discourage coverage of local issues and lead to
greater violence on television. In many cities, they say, the changes will
also give even fewer corporate interests control over news and
entertainment.

"People don't want a few big corporations controlling their access to
information and news," said Eli Pariser of MoveOn.org, an Internet
advocacy group founded by two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs that
presented the agency with 150,000 online comments opposed to the
changes.

They also said that the consolidation of the radio industry after it was
deregulated in 1996 was a harbinger for the television and newspaper
industries.

"Radio clearly is the coal mine canary," said Michael Bracy of the
Future of Music Coalition, a nonprofit group devoted to promoting
diversity on the airwaves. He said that after the consolidation, the
number of radio listeners was at the lowest point in 27 years and most
local markets were controlled by four or fewer companies.