June 26, 2003

Big Media's Silence

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

WASHINGTON

Over the protests of 750,000 viewers and readers, three appointees to the Federal Communications Commission last month voted to permit the takeover of America's local press, television and radio by a handful of mega-corporations.

If allowed to stand, this surrender to media giantism would concentrate the power to decide what we read and see — in both entertainment and news — in the hands of an ever-shrinking establishment elite.

To the F.C.C.'s amazement, the Senate Commerce Committee said no. A bill put forward by Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, president pro tem of the Senate and defender of local control, would reinstate the limit of 35 percent of market penetration by any one company. A Democratic amendment reasserted the limitation on "cross-ownership" by stations and newspapers. The rollback bill, with bipartisan support, is likely to pass the full Senate this summer.

This first step toward stopping the takeover of both content and distribution of information was taken because enough of the audience got sore and made it an issue. I'm proud of the part played by The New York Times, which not only ran my diatribes but front-paged the illuminating coverage by Stephen Labaton, including his note that the Times Company was lobbying for cross-ownership.

No thanks go to the biggest media, where CBS's "60 Minutes," NBC's "Dateline" and ABC's "20/20" found the rip-off of the public interest by their parent companies too hot to handle. Most network newscasts dutifully covered the scandalous story as briefly and coolly as possible, failing to disclose how much it meant to their parent companies, which were lobbying furiously for gobble-up rights.

Unencumbered by such a conflict of interest, public television's liberal Bill Moyers inveighed for months against the power grab, and Consumers Union is on the job. The conservative Joe Scarborough blew the whistle on media giantism on cable's MSNBC, which included an interview with the New York Daily News publisher (and mini-mogul) Mort Zuckerman, outspoken foe of the conglomeration crowd.

Much of the credit for the public reaction goes to such right-wing outfits as the National Rifle Association, concerned about getting its voice squelched by homogenized media; by the Family Research Council; and by the Parents Television Council, whose Brent Bozell slammed the F.C.C. for "blatantly pandering to a few rich TV moguls" and "opening a Pandora's box of indecency and violence on the airwaves." (Rightie Grover Norquist is too close to Rupert Murdoch, but Phyllis Schlafly and Beverly LaHaye — where are you?)

The F.C.C. chairman, Michael Powell, mocked his opponents' efforts yesterday by saying they had used a wide variety of media "to get out their message that media consolidation doesn't allow them to get out their message." But our message is getting through to Congress only because his media consolidation has not yet taken effect to muffle debate.

Media moguls profess not to worry about the Senate's threatened rollback because they think they own Billy Tauzin, chairman of the relevant committee in the House. But Richard Burr, Republican of North Carolina, has introduced a rollback bill similar to Stevens's in the Senate, and already has a majority of co-sponsors on Tauzin's committee.

An old G.O.P. hand tells me Tauzin has "no interest" in stopping media mergers anywhere, but "always leaves himself wiggle room if there's heat from home." No heat is coming from the White House, where Karl Rove has not awakened to this "sleeper issue."
Burr should be of considerable interest to the G.O.P., however. He will be the challenger to Senator John Edwards next year unless Edwards resigns to run for president. National exposure as the congressman who stopped the power grab would help Burr pick up a Senate seat for the G.O.P., central to Bush hopes for a successful second term.

That prospect should get White House attention. In the House, co-sponsorship by half the members gets Tom DeLay's attention, and the bill already has 146 of the 218, one-third Republican.

"There has to be a clear perception of public outrage," says Burr. And to move Bush and DeLay, that expression of snail mail and e-mail outrage must come from the right — from believers in strong local say about the means and content of communication, acting while there is still time.