Localism's Last Stand

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

WASHINGTON

General managers of 75 stations owned and operated by the Big Four television networks swept into a meeting of the House Appropriations Committee yesterday. Big Media's lobbying purpose was to squelch the bipartisan movement in Congress to nullify the Federal Communications Commission's cave-in to the networks' lust to gobble up more independent stations.

Before the vote, the majority whip Roy Blunt, on Tom DeLay's orders, leaned on G.O.P. members to allow the F.C.C. cave-in to be financed. The National Association of Broadcasters, which had been supporting its many independent members against the networks' expansion, flip-flopped in panic because NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox threatened to bolt the lobby.

But to everyone's amazement, the networks' power play was foiled. Representative Frank Wolf of Virginia urged his G.O.P. colleagues to vote their consciences, and an amendment to hold the cap on a huge conglomerate's ownership to 35 percent of the national TV audience was passed by a vote of 40 to 25.

Here is what made this happen. Take the force of right-wingers upholding community standards who are determined to defend local control of the public airwaves; combine that with the force of lefties eager to maintain diversity of opinion in local media; add in the independent voters' mistrust of media manipulation; then let all these people have access to their representatives by e-mail and fax, and voilà! Congress awakens to slap down the power grab.

Or at least half of it. In Senator Ted Stevens's rollback-to-35-percent bill approved by the Senate Commerce Committee, an amendment protecting localism had been added to stop the growth of cross-ownership of TV stations and newspapers in single cities. But that amendment won't fly; as the Commerce chairman, John McCain, told me, "The fix is in on cross-ownership." Media General and The New York Times Company are becoming more influential nationally, and The Tribune Company dominates news coverage in Chicago, Los Angeles, Baltimore and Long Island.

I scorn all polls except those that support my views. According to this week's Pew Research poll about the F.C.C. plan to break the ownership barrier and permit media crossover, "By roughly 10 to one (70%-6%), those who have heard a lot about the rules change say its impact will be negative." Nearly half of those polled had heard about this issue, despite conflicted media coverage.

This growing grass-roots grumbling against giantism is getting through to legislators ordinarily cowed by network-owned station managers or wowed by big-media campaign contributions. Unfortunately, the any-merger-goes F.C.C. chairman, Michael Powell, has derided objections to his diktat as "garbage," and the White House strategist Karl Rove dismisses the depth of voter resentment that Democrats will be able to exploit next year.

Catch the way the liberal Representative David Obey of Wisconsin, who put forward the Appropriations measure that passed yesterday, reaches out to social conservatives. He complained about the way prime-time network programming forced local affiliates to air film of Victoria's Secret models in their less-than-full regalia, a sight he does not consider suitable for his 7-year-old. Obey & Co. is stealing traditionalist Republican clothes, scanties and all, and many G.O.P. candidates don't want to offend a core constituency.
Eco-cons as well as libertarians may snicker, but Republican Representative Richard Burr of North Carolina observed that 26 independent NBC affiliates had recently exercised their right to refuse to telecast "Maxim's Hot 100." If independents are gobbled up with the F.C.C.'s blessing, more decisions affecting local mores will be made in Rockefeller Center. Is that what George Bush stands for?

Yesterday's victory in a House committee was only a skirmish about half the battle, and that only about delaying the funds for the F.C.C.'s misbegotten action by a year. Speaker Dennis Hastert could shoot it down in Rules, or block an embarrassing vote on the more comprehensive Burr rollback on the House floor.

But public opinion is on the march. Some in-house pollster should awaken President Bush to a bipartisan sleeper issue that could blindside him next year.