

Think Again: Media Concentration: The Repudiation of Mr. Powell

by [Eric Alterman](#)

July 8, 2004



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You've got to hand it to FCC Commissioner Michael Powell. Just like the guys who "planned" the Iraq war and occupation, he's screwed things up so bad in almost every direction at once with regard to his efforts to destroy media diversity, that he's handed his opponents a new lease on life.

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals handed Powell his most recent major defeat on June 22, shooting down his corporate-friendly plan to encourage even more consolidation in media ownership. The proposed rules would not only have allowed dual ownership of a daily newspaper and a television station in markets with more than four television stations, but would have also completely lifted the cross-ownership ban in markets with nine or more stations. Powell also wanted to grant companies the right to own up to three stations in markets with 18 or more stations, and allow a single company to own two stations in those markets with five or more stations.

While the court's reversal of this potential corporate media windfall is unquestionably a victory for the nascent movement for media democracy, it is merely one chapter in a still-to-be-completed saga. The Bush administration, together with Tom DeLay, remains committed to giving the major media corporations the key to the candy store at every opportunity. The FCC is currently deciding whether to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court or submit rewritten versions to the appeals court.

While the Bush administration is no stranger to strong-arm tactics designed to force its policy initiatives through the political system, Powell's attempt to do so stirred up a proverbial hornet's nest of resistance from virtually every point on the political spectrum. As Business Week Online reported in September 2003, "This isn't an antibusiness issue. The problem is Powell himself. At best, he has a tin ear for public relations, at worst; he seems to go out of his way to antagonize friend and foe alike. For instance, before the FCC passed the media consolidation changes on June 2, he refused to make public the 250-page FCC document that formed the justification for the move. He also held only one public hearing on the media rules changes." The Center for Public Integrity notes that during the months leading up to June 2, FCC commissioners held 71 off-the-record meetings with broadcast industry executives, while only meeting five times with consumer advocates.

As might be expected, the five members Republican-dominated FCC voted along party lines to approve the changes, 3-2, with the two Democrats on the commission slamming the plan in their dissents. Commissioner Michael J. Cops complained that the plan empowered "America's new Media Elite with unacceptable levels of influence over the media on which our society and our democracy so heavily depend." Fellow Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein joined him, noting that "the public stands little to gain and everything to lose by slashing the protections that have served them for decades. This plan is likely to damage the media landscape for generations to come. It threatens to degrade civil discourse and the quality of our society's intellectual, cultural and political life."

As Professor Robert McChesney notes in the essay that serves as the basis for a symposium on the topic in the current American Prospect, co-sponsored with the Center for American Progress, government and media are inextricably intertwined.

Our media system is the result of a wide range of explicit government policies, regulations, and subsidies. Each of the 20 or so giant media firms that dominate the entirety of our media system is the recipient of massive government largesse—that could be regarded as corporate welfare. They receive (for free) one or more of: monopoly licenses to scarce radio and television channels, monopoly franchises to cable and satellite TV systems, and copyright protection for their content. When the government sets up a firm with one of these monopoly licenses it is virtually impossible to fail

When one considers the near non-existent coverage these same media companies offered Americans with regard to the new FCC rules, the intensity and sophistication of the millions of Americans who came out to oppose the Commission's corporate giveaway, proved a heartening sight. By the end of 2003, many members of Congress were reporting that media ownership was the second most-discussed issue by their constituents – behind only the war. By September 2003, MoveOn.org gathered more than 340,000 signatures supporting a reversal of the consolidation plan, while another 300,000 missives were sent by members of the National Rifle Association to the FCC. On top of that, the FCC reported that it had received comments from over 2.3 million others criticizing the change in regulations.

And no wonder. Once attention is paid, the consequences are clear. Take a look at radio. Clear Channel already owns more than 1,200 major stations nationally, or roughly 970 more than its closest rival owns. It is Republican/conservative-dominated through-and through. The company censored artists who opposed the administration and staged a series of pro-war rallies around the country before the Iraq war. CEO, Lowry Mays, is almost as close to the Bush family as the bin Ladens. And the company's vice chairman Tom Hicks and George Bush worked together on a series of deals in Texas during the 1990s which generated millions of dollars in profits for both men. There's gold in them thar hills, if you're a Republican. According to a March 23 story in [USA Today](#), during the 2004 election cycle, the company has given \$42,200 to the Bush campaign, while contributing \$1,750 to John Kerry. Moreover, company executives and Clear Channel's PAC have given 77 percent of their \$334,501 in federal contributions to Republican candidates. The figures for the 2002 election cycle demonstrate a nearly ten-to-one preference for Republicans. And can it be a coincidence that Howard Stern is all of a sudden considered to be overly "indecent" for its programming now that he has become a die-hard opponent of President Bush?

The public groundswell that accompanied Powell's power play is a hopeful sign that the crucial importance of a diverse media has begun to dawn on the American public. But it is only a beginning. The Center for American Progress, the World Policy Institute and the American Prospect will sponsor an all-star panel discussion on this issue, preceding an airing of a new documentary by Robert Greenwald, "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism." The hope is to find some common ground for media activists, interested citizens, and journalists and intellectuals concerned about the future of a democratic and diverse media. The issue could hardly be more crucial than during an election year. As former FCC member Nicholas Johnson frequently notes, "Whatever your first issue of concern, media had better be your second, because without change in the media, progress in your primary area is far less likely."

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