



Media Diversity Matters:

A Media Justice Activist Toolkit

About the LCCREF Media and Communications Project

The Media and Communications Project was developed to help the national civil rights community play a central role in the policy debates shaping the nation's media and communications landscape. At its core, communications policy is about equal opportunity and equal access to important local and national resources, such as education, health care, and economic equality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	
3	Media Diversity & the FCC: Backgrounder
4	Media Diversity & the FCC: Why You Should Care
5-6	Frequently Asked Questions about Media Diversity
7	Sample Letter to the Editor
8	Online Resources
9	Be a media justice activist!

Media Diversity and the FCC: Background

Restraining media concentration is central to the mission of the FCC, the federal agency that regulates interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable; and media ownership, including how many stations one company can own in each market and the cross-ownership of different sectors, such as broadcast stations and daily newspapers.

Under the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC is charged with promoting “localism” in broadcast media and enhancing democracy by insuring that broadcasters “present those views and voices which are representative of [their] community and which would otherwise...be barred from the airwaves.” The civil rights community pushed the FCC to address this mandate and promote greater ownership and employment in broadcasting for women and minorities.

The Communications Act of 1996 substantially deregulated national radio ownership rules and eased national TV ownership limits. The law also forced the FCC to consider whether to revise local rules on how many media properties one company can operate in any one community. The 1996 Act also required the FCC to conduct biennial (now quadrennial) reviews of all remaining broadcast ownership rules “to determine whether any of such rules are necessary in the public interest as a result of competition.” These reviews have become the battleground for intense fights at the FCC, Congress, and the courts for the last several years.

For the biennial review in 2002, the FCC consolidated all of its pending broadcast ownership proceedings so that it could review every single broadcast ownership rule. Despite broad public opposition, in June 2003, the FCC voted 3-2 to lift broadcast cross-ownership restrictions, loosen limits on local broadcast ownership, and permit one company to own stations reaching 45 percent of the national audience.

In response to the public outcry, a bipartisan majority in the Senate voted to overturn the rule changes. Congress eventually reached a compromise -- limiting the number of stations one company could own to 39 percent of the national audience.

Then in June 2004, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit overturned the other changes to the media ownership limits and directed the FCC to conduct a new review. Among other things, the court directed the FCC to address the specific proposals for promoting diversity in ownership that had been presented to, but not considered by, the agency.

In June 2006, the FCC initiated a new media ownership proceeding. Many civil rights and public interest groups believe the agency is not being specific enough in its inquiry to generate relevant comments, nor is it devoting adequate resources to create a full record on the issue of minority and female ownership. Some members of Congress have requested that the Commission complete a consideration of the issues of minority and small business ownership before taking up the wider media ownership issue, but the FCC has not yet agreed to do so.

Media Diversity & the FCC: Why you should care

The way the public looks at issues - and whether or not the public is even aware of certain issues like fair housing and voter discrimination - is directly related to the way these issues are covered by media. The way that media covers these issues is directly related to who is employed by the media – the reporters, producers and anchors who tell the stories. Who is employed by the media is directly related to who *owns* the media. And who owns the media is directly related to policies that determine who gets a federal license to operate and who does not.

The FCC is poised to eliminate the rule on "newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership," which prevents companies from owning a television or radio station and the major daily newspaper in the same area. If the cross-ownership ban is removed, along with other FCC-proposed rule changes, a single company could potentially own the major daily newspaper, eight radio stations and three television stations, as well as the cable television system -- all within the same town.

The FCC may also change the local ownership caps that limit a company from owning more than one television station in most markets. Currently, a company can own two in larger markets as long as there are at least eight other competitors. The FCC may change the rule to allow a single company to own two TV stations in smaller markets (those areas with only 5 stations). And the FCC may allow a single owner to control three stations in the country's largest markets.

The struggle for a media that presents the breadth and diversity of the experience of all Americans is one of extremely high stakes:

- **If a company can buy a wide variety of media in the same community, it essentially provides one voice, not many. This means less diversity of viewpoints.**
- **If minorities, women, seniors, people with disabilities, are not employed at news operations at all levels of management, there is no one who can speak with some authority about their condition and the people who are like them in the community. This means less coverage of issues of importance to these constituencies.**
- **And if there isn't local integration in the management of a local news operation, issues important to local communities can be ignored. This means the public interest isn't being served.**

Media Diversity: Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is media diversity?

A. Our nation's media system, from broadcast television to local radio, should be fully representative of the communities that it serves. A diverse media is one that is inclusive of minorities and women in content (what we see and hear), employment (who writes, reports and produces what we see and hear), and, most importantly, ownership (who owns the companies that dictate what we see and hear) so that the stories of *all* Americans can be told, and the voices of *all* Americans can be heard.

Q. Is there a lack of media diversity today?

A. Absolutely. From the inaccurate, narrow representation of minorities and women on television to the homogenous voices on mainstream radio, our nation's media system is growing less and less diverse day by day. That's because of the disproportionate lack of women and minority reporters, producers, and owners.

Q. I see plenty of minorities on TV. Isn't *that* an example of media diversity?

A. Yes. However, not enough has been done to portray minorities accurately and fairly on television or within the media. While there has been some improvement, minorities are still not fully represented and as a result are stereotyped and caricatured. A truly diverse media allows for the voices of minorities, women, seniors, people with disabilities, and all Americans to be heard *and* accurately depicted. This means that all sectors of society must participate in media outlets through media ownership and employment.

Q. Who is responsible for ensuring that our nation's media system is diverse and inclusive?

A. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the government agency that is directly charged with regulating interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable. Specifically, the FCC determines reviews policies related to media ownership, including how many stations one company can own in each market. But, especially in recent years, it has frequently failed to protect America's diverse voices. It is up to us to make the FCC do its job and better monitor and adjust current policy standards and impending changes to reflect the broad communities that it serves.

Q. If the FCC is responsible for making our nation’s media system diverse and inclusive, why does it seem as if media is getting less and less diverse?

The Communications Act of 1996 substantially deregulated national radio ownership rules and eased national TV ownership limits. This Act made it easier for large, white, male-owned corporations to own more media outlets nationwide, thus severely limiting the diversity of ownership, employment and content.

Q. Why should I care about media diversity? How does media diversity affect *my* community?

A. No matter what issues face *your* community— racial profiling, immigration reform, disability rights, GLBT equality - media and communications influence the perception and understanding of these issues for policymakers and us all. It is important for the voices of the civil rights community to be represented in the public dialogue, both locally and nationally. Media and communications policies influence the structures of our country’s communications systems that allow these messages to be seen and heard. When these structures are not diverse and reflective of your community’s perspectives, struggles and victories, we all lose.

Q. What can I do to join the fight for media justice and work for a more diverse media?

A. There are so many ways to get involved! From discussion groups, to media-monitoring parties to letter writing campaigns...the possibilities are endless. But first, you must be informed! Stay informed at www.civilrights.org/communication and start by paying attention to the media that you see and hear, from your local radio and public broadcasting stations to national news and media. Begin to identify ways in which the media can better serve your community.

Once you have begun to pay attention to your local media landscape, tell the FCC how you feel about the lack of diversity. You can file a public comment at www.civilrights.org/communication/tellthefcc.html . You can also write a letter to your local newspaper and spread the word in your community about the importance of media diversity.

Sample Letter to the Editor

<Date>

<Name>

<Organization>

<Address>

<City, State Zip>

To the Editor:

Our nation's media system is slipping away. Fewer and fewer people are controlling more and more of what we see and hear. And very little about the process or structure is democratic or diverse. The disproportionate lack of women and minority owners is a direct cause of the lack of diverse voices, images and viewpoints on our local television and radio stations.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the federal agency that regulates media ownership, is responsible for finding ways to promote greater ownership and employment for women and minorities. Instead, the FCC is considering changes that could make already low levels of female and minority ownership even worse.

I care about the crisis in minority and female media ownership and want to the FCC to do its job to make our media diverse. And Congress needs to exercise its oversight responsibilities and hold the FCC accountable for ensuring a diverse media. Without this responsibility and accountability, our media cannot serve in the true public interest – representing the diverse voices of all Americans.

Respectfully submitted,

<Name>

<Office held>

<Organization>

<Address>

<Phone>

***Please let us know if your letter is published!
Email LCCR/LCCREF at grassroots@civilrights.org***

Online Resources

Want to learn more? Visit the web sites below for other helpful tools and information to help educate yourself and others about the importance of media diversity.

www.civilrights.org/communication - The Media and Telecom page of the award-winning civilrights.org, a website of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, is a clearinghouse of reports, action alerts, news updates & other exciting information related to media ownership, content and employment.

www.fcc.gov – The homepage of the Federal Communications Commission, the government agency that regulates media ownership, houses detailed information on commissioners, rules, regulations, and hearings.

www.commoncause.org – Visit the “Media and Democracy” section of the Common Cause website for up-to-date news, resources and blogs that encourage holding the FCC accountable and making media more diverse and accessible.

<http://www.cwa-union.org/issues/communications-policy/> - The communication policy page of the Communication Workers of America website has several useful reports and legislative fact sheets that illustrate the impact of media diversity on our nation’s workforce.

www.freepress.net – The website of Free Press, a national, non-partisan organization working to reform the media, has news, activist handbooks and other tools related to advocating and organizing around media justice.

<http://www.ucc.org/media-justice/> - The Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ has long been a leader in the fight for media justice. Look to their website for helpful downloadable brochures that discuss the impact of a diverse media on different communities.

<http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/> - New America Media, a nationwide association of over 700 ethnic media organizations representing the development of a more inclusive journalism, showcases what a diverse media can and should look like. Find here an array of interesting news and information that represent people of color.

www.media-democracy.net – The Media and Democracy Coalition’s website, a product of the collaboration of local and national organizations committed to amplifying the voices of the public in shaping media and telecommunications policy, is a great place to read about the work of other organizations in the media justice movement.



**Want to be a media justice activist?
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- The Daily Buzz** is your best guide to civil rights and social justice-related headlines. This free service will keep you up to date on important civil rights developments and policy issues.
- Nominations in the News** is the periodic newsletter from SaveOurCourts.org, keeping you updated on nominations to the federal judiciary as well as the U.S. Supreme Court.
- Affirmative Action in the News** will give you the latest news and commentary on affirmative action from around the country. Published weekly.
- Student Activist Network** Join the Student Activist Network (www.studentactivistnetwork.org) and receive periodic updates about the latest news, information, and activity on campus and in the states around affirmative action and other civil rights issues.

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