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The Death of Local News

By **Paul Schmelzer**, [AlterNet](#)

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Tune into the evening news on Madison, Wisconsin's Fox TV affiliate and behold the future of local news. In the program's concluding segment, "The Point," Mark Hyman rants against peace activists ("wack-jobs"), the French ("cheese-eating surrender monkeys"), progressives ("loony left") and the so-called liberal media, usually referred to as the "hate-America crowd" or the "Axis of Drivel." Colorful, if creatively anemic, this is TV's version of talk radio, with the precisely tanned Hyman playing a second-string Limbaugh.

Fox 47's right-wing rants may be the future of hometown news, but – believe it or not – it's not the program's blatant ideological bias that is most worrisome. Here's the real problem: Hyman isn't the station manager, a local crank, or even a journalist. He is the Vice President of Corporate Communications for the station's owner, the [Sinclair Broadcast Group](#). And this segment of the local news isn't exactly local. Hyman's commentary is piped in from the home office in Baltimore, MD, and mixed in with locally-produced news. Sinclair aptly calls its innovative strategy "[NewsCentral](#)" - it is very likely to spell the demise of local news as we know it.

The Rise of Sinclair Broadcasting

Like many a media empire, Sinclair grew through a combination of acquisitions, clever manipulations of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules, and considerable lobbying campaigns. Starting out as a single UHF station in Baltimore in 1971, the company started its frenzied expansion in 1991 when it began using "local marketing agreements" as a way to circumvent FCC rules that bar a company from controlling two stations in a single market. These "LMAs" allow Sinclair to buy one station outright and control another by acquiring not its license but its assets. Today, Sinclair touts itself as "the nation's largest commercial television broadcasting company not owned by a network." You've probably never heard of them because the 62 stations they run – garnering 24 percent of the national TV audience – fly the flags of the networks they broadcast: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and the WB.

TV Barn's Mark Jeffries calls Sinclair the "Clear Channel of local news," a reference to the San Antonio, Texas, media giant that owns around 50 percent of all U.S. stations – growing from 40 to more than 1,200 stations today thanks to the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which relaxed radio

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ownership rules. But the parallels extend beyond their growth strategies. Jeffries describes Sinclair as having a "fiercely right-wing approach that makes Fox News Channel look like a model of objectivity," while Clear Channel is best known for sponsoring pro-war "Rallies for America" during the Iraq conflict. And like Clear Channel's CEO L. Lowry Mays – a major Republican donor and onetime business associate of George W. Bush – the Sinclair family, board, and executives ply the GOP with big money. Since 1997, they have donated well over \$200,000 to Republican candidates.

Sinclair's news department also takes a page out of Clear Channel's book of non-localized programming. According to Sinclair's website, NewsCentral is a "revolutionary news model" that introduces "local news in programming in markets that otherwise could not support news." Begun in 2002, it's being tested in five not-so-small markets: Minneapolis, Flint (MI), Oklahoma City (OK), Raleigh (NC), and Rochester (NY). (Hyman's segment, "The Point," however, is aired on all 62 of its stations.) In these five cities, the hour-long newscast combines local broadcasting with prepackaged news. To maintain the appearance of local news, the Baltimore on-air staff is coached on the intricacies of correct local pronunciations. Or the weatherman, safely removed from the thunderstorms in, say, Minneapolis, will often engage in scripted banter with the local anchor to maintain the pretense: "Should I bring an umbrella tomorrow, Don?" "You bet, Hal, it looks pretty ugly out there..."

Journalists have been pondering the specter of centralized news operations for some time, both because it affects the quality of news and because it could put them out of a job. "We should all be conscious of the dangers that are present when you have one newsroom producing the news," says John Nichols, associate editor at The Capital Times in Madison and co-author with Robert McChesney of the books "Our Media, Not Theirs," and "It's the Media, Stupid." "That's a real possibility. It's a very dangerous future, but Sinclair is already living in the dangerous future."

One Giant Newsroom

And that future's getting pretty crowded with media mega-empires jostling to "synergize" their operations. The Tribune Company is already cross-training reporters. Under the label of journalistic "synergy," the company owns most of Chicago's media outlets: The Chicago Tribune, WGN's TV and AM radio stations, Chicago Magazine, the AOL project Digital City Chicago, plus the Chicago Cubs (not to mention its 22 TV stations nationwide, 25 percent stake in the WB network, 14 newspapers, the syndication service Tribune Media Services, and 14 online publications including cars.com and apartments.com). A Tribune reporter – variously called a "multimedia reporter," a "backpack journalist," or merely a "content provider" – might attend a mayoral press conference, for example, armed with a digital audio recorder, a camera, and a notebook to provide stories for radio, print, online, and television news. While the debate rages over whether such journalists can consistently produce high quality news, the real fear is that only one voice will frame and tell a news story. It's a chilling thought when that lone perspective is shaped by a Sinclair or Fox worldview.

"Thomas Jefferson and James Madison believed that, in order to sustain

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democracy, media needed to be cacophonous and diverse," Nichols says. "Today we don't have that. Our range of debate is getting incredibly narrow: The mainstream discourse runs from right-wing to far right-wing."

This sentiment was [echoed](#) by David Croteau, Virginia Commonwealth University professor and author of "The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest," during one of only two public hearings on the Federal Communications Commission's plan to radically relax rules governing media ownership. "We cannot, therefore, treat the media like any other industry. Its products are not widgets or toasters; they are culture, information, ideas, and viewpoints," he said.

Indeed, the issue of centralized news will be exacerbated after the FCC's June 2 vote on ownership. On the chopping block are six regulations that attempt to preserve a diversity of voices and local control of media – from the ban on owning both a TV station and newspaper in the same market to limits on how many radio stations one group can own in a given area.

Should the FCC vote to weaken these protections – as expected – more of our airwaves will be concentrated in the hands of a few corporations. Currently six companies control most of the country's media: AOL Time Warner, Disney, General Electric, News Corporation (Fox), Viacom, and Vivendi Universal. A [study](#) released in February by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Crunching data from 172 stations and 23,000 stories over five years, the report determined – to the ire of major media industry groups – that "smaller station groups tended to produce a higher quality of newscasts than networks owned by larger companies – by a significant margin." It also found that "local ownership offered some protection against newscasts being very poor."

When talking about media deregulation, Nichols takes issue with the word "deregulation." He sees it as a term used by conservatives to project a false image of free-market values and small government. In fact, he says, the recent FCC decisions do not eliminate regulations. They instead are "dismantled and then reassembled in a form that allows a handful of companies – like Sinclair – to get bigger and bigger and bigger." He says, "We still have a highly regulated media. The only thing that is changing is that it's now being regulated in the interests not of democracy or the people, but larger corporations."

The cooptation of words that accompanies the handover of the airwaves to corporations is proving effective. Only a third of all Americans realize that the public owns the airwaves, and about a tenth are aware that the FCC gives stations licenses for free, [according](#) to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Equally alarming are the results from the Project for Excellence in Journalism survey: 72 percent of Americans say they have "heard nothing at all" about the upcoming FCC vote on relaxing ownership rules.

Chances are that the public will not become better informed before the June 2 vote. Over the protests of Democrats, Powell decided that there will only be two public hearings. His decision is hardly surprising, since Powell himself sees the airwaves not as conveyors of culture but as a commodity.

When asked in 2001 what he thought the term "public interest" meant in the FCC's mission, Powell replied, "I have no idea ... I try to make the best judgment I can in ways that benefit consumers. Beyond that I don't know."

Paul Schmelzer is a Minneapolis-based writer and edits the Web site [Eyeteeth: A Journal of Incisive Ideas](#).

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