More media properties for owners

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

For a handful of Americans, their first glimpse of a new thing called television occurred in 1939. They witnessed its unveiling by RCA at the New York World Exposition. Despite widespread excitement, the event marked a journalistic embarrassment for The New York Times.

A Times reporter covering the event wrote accurately of the new technology, whose development would be slowed by the onset of World War II. But he couldn't see a promising economic future for TV.

"A typical American family seems unlikely to devote much time just looking at a little box," he predicted.

Ridiculous as we now know that forecast to have been, the television industry did not thrive in the immediate aftermath of war. Indeed, the Federal Communications Commission was unable to persuade all but a few radio broadcasters to risk the considerable additional investment required for TV transmission. Receiving sets were not yet more than a toy for the very rich. And so, in order to get the new medium moving, the FCC approached big newspapers - mainly in eastern cities - to apply for TV licenses almost as a public service.

In ensuing years, the question of cross-ownership of print and broadcast entities has posed endless problems - the latest of which is scheduled to be hassled out by the FCC seven days before Christmas. But more of that anon.

Publishers who went for the TV licenses were to discover they had made the most fortuitous investment since Arab emirates first extracted oil from beneath their sandy wastes in the Persian Gulf. Television's built-in formula for success, vis-a-vis printing a newspaper, proved simple enough. Increased over-the-air audience comes without extra cost. A million viewers will attract advertisers, but reaching that huge audience requires no more electric power or production money than if no one were watching.

Newspaper publishers aren't so lucky. For them, new subscribers require more newsprint, more ink, more carriers.

Within a decade, many publishers began showing profits off the TV stations to rival their newspapers. In a post-election tizzy of 1972, President Nixon showed he well knew how he could hurt The Washington Post - by challenging renewal of its broadcast licenses.

Like government's other regulatory agencies, the FCC supposedly is immune from White House pressure.

But the president designates its chairman, and two of the four fellow commissioners, by law, are selected by his party. Because television was shortly vying with print media in the influence it wields over public opinion, the government eventually moved to limit its possible misuse. Congress banned any publisher from "cross-ownership" - continued ownership of a broadcast property within the same market area. An individual or company thereafter was free to own both print and broadcasting outlets - but not in the same city. The intent was to prevent any community's domination by a single point of view - political, economic or possibly religious.

Although newspapers are beyond reach of government thanks to the First Amendment, all over-the-air broadcasting - occupying, as it does, the public airwaves - is subject to ownership controls. Most large cities by now have enough broadcast outlets to assure that no single publisher-owner is likely to dominate public opinion. But a recent surge in mergers and consolidations raises new questions. Abandonment of a long-held limit on the number of radio licenses a single applicant might acquire means that in several cities the group owner Clear Channel Communications Inc. may operate more stations than previous licensees were permitted nationwide.

And now commission Chairman Kevin J. Martin has fashioned a proposed rule that would move toward abandonment of almost any limits on cross-ownership. He'd permit one owner to operate a newspaper, a TV outlet and three radio stations, all within the same community.

"It's to bolster journalism," Martin asks us to believe. Just how, he doesn't say. Are all these singly owned properties expected to exchange news tips and echo the same editorial line? Or is the chairman so confident of their eager independence that readers, viewers and an undiscerning radio crowd will be treated to a donnybrook of competitive reporting?

Martin dismisses criticism of his proposal, saying it would affect no more than the 20 top markets in the land.

A mere bagatelle? America's 20 top markets serve close to 45 percent of our entire population. That's only about 140 million of us.

And why does the chairman want this resolved Dec. 18?

That one's easy. It's the Christmas season, and this could be the administration's gift to a bunch of very big-time operators.

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years. As chairman of the House

Subcommittee on Communications, he encouraged competition in the telecommunications industry and conducted hearings that led to the breakup of AT&T.