

Fairness doctrine should remain on history's scrap heap

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Cable television offers dozens of news-analysis channels. The last-minute financial rescue of Sirius XM satellite radio leaves at least 20 talk shows on the air. Beyond that, countless blogs written by individuals bombard the Internet. Never before has such a sweeping selection of political commentary been available to the public.

Nevertheless, the bad penny of the airwaves — the discredited Fairness Doctrine - has again turned up.

An odious invention of the Federal Communications Commission in the 1940s — before TV, cable channels, personal computers, the Internet, Blackberries — the Fairness Doctrine required radio broadcasters to give equal time to conservative and liberal viewpoints. More than 20 years ago, the commission scrapped the Fairness Doctrine in acknowledgment of the growing array of political news sources with diverse points of view.

It could stay on the scrap heap except for liberal Democrats who seem to believe the nation would be liberal if liberal hosts were as plentiful as conservatives on commercial radio. Conservatives are more plentiful, of course, because they draw far larger audiences, which attract advertisers, whose payments keep radio station owners in business. Liberal radio talk shows have struggled to draw listeners enough to stay on the air. Enter the Fairness Doctrine as a means of allowing liberal hosts to piggyback on the popularity of conservatives like the leviathan of talk radio, Rush Limbaugh.

Commendably, President Barack Obama weighed in recently against the doctrine. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., moved ahead with his measure to prohibit the FCC from reinstating the doctrine and it passed. But so did an amendment by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., reminding the FCC of its legislative charge to promote ownership of communications media by women and minorities, the stereotype expected to drop the conservative Limbaughs for the liberal Rachel Maddows.

Some Republican legislators, too, see Durbin's amendment as a back-door substitute for the Fairness Doctrine and a similar threat to conservative media. Not so, as long as women and minority owners want their businesses to thrive. Not so, either, if women and minority owners agree to be banked by stereotypically white males rolling in dough and uninterested in losing it.

Both DeMint and Durbin are overwrought. In a country our size with our history and inventiveness, the housing market, the stock market, the flea market can all collapse into government control. But no way can they take the market for ideas and iPhones down with them.

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