Media experts split on ramifications of FCC ruling

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NEW YORK: Two distinct visions of the future of American media emerged in the days since the Federal Communications Commission made media consolidation substantially easier by relaxing key ownership laws.

The first and more common was a bleak landscape where a precious few multimedia empires exact a tight control over the flow of information, quashing individuality and threatening the freedoms of expression so fundamental to democracy.

The second, though far from utopian, was much sunnier. It had media outlets, benefiting from the vast resources of the conglomerates that own them, proliferating, thus offering consumers a bounty of choice.

In evaluating how the increasingly lax regulatory environment will trickle down into the practice of journalism and, consequently, how they do their own jobs, media relations experts were split between these dramatically different views. Some foresaw a severe fall-off in the quality of journalism as the ranks of newsrooms are further slashed and remaining reporters become more burdened than ever. They saw communities dominated by single media companies that gobble up independent voices.

Others, in sharp contrast, thought the future would resemble a present that's been structured by deregulation and that, for all its shortcomings, was still far from Orwellian.

Much of the issue boiled down to the numbers, particularly the number of news outlets and the number of journalists who staff them.

"The question is whether consolidation means that the owners will reduce the size of the news force and make journalists more susceptible to making mistakes," said Peter Himler, MD at Burson-Marsteller. "The state of the advertising business has meant layoffs at major ad-supported news organizations, but whether consolidation will mean that is still a TBD."

In fact, much of the future is up in the air. Barbara Kalunian, SVP of Ketchum's communications and media strategy group, said she can imagine at this point a "host of what-if scenarios in which PR wins and loses" from deregulation. The outcome will depend in large part on whether changes in ownership are accompanied by editorial changes.
At issue isn't only how reporters do their jobs under increased pressures. PR people are also concerned about the amount and quality of outlets available for their stories.

The FCC's vote, which fell along party lines, allows TV networks to reach as much as 45% of the nation's viewers. It also allows companies to own newspapers and broadcast outlets in the same town, and allows companies to own up to three TV stations in the same market.
One possible effect of these changes is that some markets will be dominated by a single company and see the merging of newsrooms across media.

In terms of tactical media relations, this could be a double-edged sword. A story placement in a paper that's part of a converged news operation could blossom into radio and television news stories.

"It would be a great thing to see a piece re-purposed multiple times," Kalunian said. But the same set-up could make it much harder to penetrate a news-gathering operation if all the media outlets are working under the same editorial sensibilities and values.

"The flow of information is tightened when it comes down to it, plain and simple," said Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department, a Farmington, CT-based agency. The opposing view is that past decades have seen an explosion of new media despite a concurrent trend toward consolidation.

"The FCC ruling is really more about economy of scale, and not about economy of choice," said Gary Wells, MD of media relations and global communications for Dix & Eaton. "There's still a proliferation of media whose leaders see a need and fill it - the classic marketing success."

"There's still a huge array of choice for consumers, and there always will be," he added. "What I'm reminded of is that ten or 15 years ago there were many fewer options in terms of outlets," Himler said. "Cable hadn't exploded yet. The web hadn't exploded yet."

While his view of the FCC vote and its possible implications was darker than Himler's, Rob Gelphman, president of San Jose, CA-based Gelphman & Associates, agreed that media consolidation could prove to be beneficial by fostering the growth of "alternative viewpoints, like blogs."

"This could lead to the expansion of the web, which is a good thing," he said.

For the most part, though, most media relations experts said a pitch will remain a pitch. "I don't think there will be a practical change in how we go about media relations," Himler said. "Clearly anyone concerned with there being a variety of voices has to be wary. In terms of the practice of PR, the same tenets hold."

In certain ways, journalism's loss could be PR's gain, especially if reporters will rely more on pitches for their stories. But, some said, PR people must be willing to work with journalists in tailoring pitches to the differing sets of needs that may result from ownership changes.

"It's as important now as it has ever been for a newsroom where there have been cutbacks to build relationships with those who remain," said Wells. "And that means asking questions of those who remain - what are they looking for, what trends are they looking for, what kinds of ideas do they want - and then offering up story ideas based on what they're looking for. I think that's more pronounced now then it's ever been."

Aftermath of the FCC vote

The FCC's vote has three main effects:

1. It allows a single company to own stations that reach 45% of the American viewing audience

2. It allows companies to own newspapers and broadcast outlets in the same market

3. It allows companies to own up to three television stations in the largest cities