

Publisher fights easing media rules

Seattle exec slams Spokesman in testimony on FCC proposal

From staff and wire reports

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The publisher of The Seattle Times warned Tuesday that a federal proposal to relax media ownership rules could lead to a handful of companies controlling what people see, hear and read.

Frank Blethen, whose family has run the Times for more than a century, said a proposal by the Federal Communications Commission to allow large companies to own more newspapers and TV stations in the same market could have dire consequences.

"I don't want to be overly dramatic," he told a Senate panel, "but I think we would see the beginning of the end of our democracy."

Media consolidation means less local autonomy, fewer voices, less access for the public and higher advertising and subscription rates, Blethen said.

Blethen testified Tuesday before the Commerce panel, which held a hearing in advance of an expected June 2 vote by the FCC on new media ownership rules.

A plan by the commission's staff has not been released to the public, but two government officials who

saw it described the contents to The Associated Press.

One proposal would relax so-called "cross-ownership" rules, which prevent a company from owning a newspaper and broadcast station in the same city. Cross-ownership would be allowed in large and medium markets, but would face restrictions or bans in small markets.

The Newspaper Association of America and media companies such as Tribune Co. and Gannett Inc. have sought the repeal of the cross-ownership rule, saying it limits combinations that can improve the quality and quantity of news and local information.

But Blethen said the rule guards against the threat of media domination by a handful of companies.

Blethen, in his testimony, did not mention an effort by the Times to dissolve a publishing agreement it shares with its crosstown competitor, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. If successful, the effort could lead to the P-I's closure.

Ultimately, Seattle's size and economic conditions dictate that it will become a one-newspaper town, Blethen said. "So the question becomes: Is (the surviving paper) going to be owned by Hearst out of New York or by the Blethen family out of Seattle?"

Under questioning from Sen. John Sununu, R-N.H., Blethen said his family owns six newspapers — three each in Washington state and Maine.

Since the Blethen family owns six papers — not one — shouldn't it be considered a media conglomerate and therefore a threat to democracy? Sununu asked. Blethen said no.

Sununu challenged him to name examples where ownership by a single company of a newspaper and TV station had caused harm.

"Spokane, Washington," Blethen said. Asked to elaborate, Blethen said Cowles Publishing Co., which owns The Spokesman-Review and a local TV station, developed a downtown shopping mall that has become a focus of controversy.

Coverage of the mall issue has been led by a weekly newspaper — not The Spokesman-Review, Blethen said.

Spokesman-Review Editor Steven A. Smith said, "Frank Blethen has expressed his views on this subject before. The Spokesman-Review respectfully disagrees with his perception. We've printed literally hundreds of stories on the River Park Square controversy and our journalism has been consistently comprehensive and ethical."