

May 15, 2018

The Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communication Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

I am writing to share my concern that the Commission's recent decisions and proposed orders risk exacerbating media consolidation, reducing the diversity of viewpoints essential to an informed public. Media consolidation poses a particular risk to rural communities, which lack the population needed to attract the time and attention of media organizations that focus their resources instead on regional and urban markets.

The Commission has recently undertaken several rulemakings that I fear will reduce the quality of local news, especially in rural areas. For example, in the past year the Commission has:

- Eliminated the newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule
- Eliminated the radio/television cross-ownership rule
- Eliminated the "eight voices" test and the top four prohibition for local television ownership
- Eliminated the main studio rule, and
- Reinstated the UHF discount.

Taken together, the Commission's actions greatly increase the forces that are driving media consolidation, and will result in diminished competition and diversity in local media markets. The change in cross-ownership rules will make it far more likely that newspapers, radio stations, and television stations in the same market can be owned by the same company. This change, combined with the change in the main studio rule, will encourage media companies to close studios, consolidate newsrooms, cut reporting on local news, and substitute homogenized content produced from a centralized location. The reinstatement of the UHF discount likewise favors media consolidation.

History demonstrates the risks presented by media consolidation. Not too many years ago, most Americans could rely on radio stations in their communities for local news and information. In many rural areas of our country, this local content has been lost as a result of the consolidation in broadcast radio two decades ago. We cannot allow the error made in the radio industry to be repeated today across all media channels nationwide.

I do not share the Commission's confidence that the effects of media consolidation can be overcome through the emergence of new, Internet-based sources of information. The fact is, few

Internet sites provide local content comparable to local news broadcasts. Furthermore, rural areas generally lag behind in the deployment of video streaming capacity needed to support broadcast-quality content.

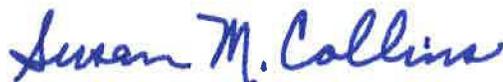
It is always more difficult and expensive to deploy technologies in rural areas because rural populations are smaller and more spread-out. The cost of serving rural areas is both a reason why they are more likely to be harmed by media consolidation, and a reason why they are less likely to be helped by new technologies. The Commission ought to factor-in this economic bias and help to overcome it through-well-crafted policies. Instead, the Commission's recent actions threaten to amplify the bias facing rural America. While not related to media consolidation, the Commission's proposal to bar resellers from the Universal Service Fund's Lifeline program reflects a similar lack of understanding of how its policies will have a negative impact on rural areas.

I am also concerned that the Commission's NPRM expanding the national television ownership cap will, if adopted, further accelerate the trend toward centrally-produced content that favors regional and national coverage over local news. Fifteen years ago, I was an original cosponsor of a Senate resolution disapproving of the Commission's ill-advised decision to lift the National Ownership Cap from 35 percent to 45 percent, a resolution which passed the Senate with a strong bipartisan majority. Shortly thereafter, Congress codified the National Ownership Cap at 39 percent. Until and unless changed by Congress, the Commission should adhere to it.

Our country depends upon the free and open exchange of ideas, and a media diverse enough to give voice to the 325 million Americans who make up this great nation. Media consolidation threatens to silence the diversity of views essential to a healthy democracy. I strongly encourage the Commission to engage with stakeholders and with Congress to fully vet the impact of its recent decisions on the media landscape before taking any action that would solidify these changes in precedent or rule.

Thank you for your attention to my request.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator