



## FCC Chair Kevin Martin Proposes Rules to Allow for Greater Media Consolidation

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Martin has backed a series of studies criticized for an alleged bias towards media consolidation. In 2003, Martin voted with the then-FCC chairman to lift the same media ownership rules, but the effort was overturned by the landmark *Prometheus v. FCC* decision. The FCC was ordered to justify the changes and their impact on diversity and localism.

- **Eric Klinenberg**, author of "Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media." He is an Associate Professor of Sociology at NYU and joins us now from the Stanford University studio in Palo Alto, California.

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### RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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**AMY GOODMAN:** The Chair of the Federal Communications Commission, Kevin Martin, is proposing to do away with media ownership rules that bar companies from owning both a newspaper and television or radio station in the same city. Martin's push to rewrite existing rules was revealed by North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan during a Commerce Committee hearing on Wednesday. If approved, the new rules could take effect as early as this December. But Senator Dorgan vowed to put up a fight and said, "If the chairman intends to do something by the end of the year, then there will be a firestorm of protest, and I am going to be carrying the wood," he said.

Martin has backed a series of studies criticized for an alleged bias towards media consolidation. In 2003, he voted with the then-FCC chair to lift the same media ownership rules, but the effort was overturned by the landmark *Prometheus v. FCC* decision. The FCC was ordered to justify the changes and their impact on diversity and localism.

Eric Klinenberg is author of *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media*. He's an Associate Professor of Sociology at NYU. He joins us now from Stanford University's studio in Palo Alto, California. Welcome to *Democracy Now!*, Eric Klinenberg.

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** Good morning. It's good to be back.

**AMY GOODMAN:** It's good to have you with us, Eric. Can you start off by explaining what it is that Kevin Martin is pushing for right now?

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** Yeah, well, it's probably familiar, because we're at it again. This is something the FCC tried to do in 2003 but failed to do, because it couldn't justify it legally. Essentially, Chairman Martin wants to get rid of the cross-ownership ban, which we've had on the books in this country since 1975. It's a rule that prevents any one company from owning and operating both a newspaper and a broadcast television station. The idea that we've had in this country for thirty-some years is it would be unhealthy for one corporation to control the two most popular outlets for news and information. That would be bad for democracy. Apparently Kevin Martin doesn't think that way.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Eric Klinenberg, explain who would immediately benefit.

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** Well, there's a couple companies that have been pushing for this for a long time. One is the Tribune Company, which is the only corporation to own a newspaper and a broadcast television station in the three major markets: LA, New York and Chicago. And, of course, we all know how great journalism is at the *LA Times* now that the Tribune has a TV station there, as well. The other company is Media General, which is a Southeast powerhouse, again has these convergence news operations, where they have television reporters and newspaper reporters working together on various projects, and they've been pushing hard for this.

**AMY GOODMAN:** In looking at the *New York Times* piece on Friday, they talk about the fact that Tribune Company has had a waiver, but Samuel Zell is the Chicago investor who wants to complete a buyout of the Tribune Company, and he wouldn't necessarily get that waiver; and also, of course, Rupert Murdoch, who has lobbied against the rule for years so that he can continue controlling the *New York Post* and Fox Television in New York.

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** That's right. And this is the kind of law that makes it possible for the Rupert Murdochs of the world to go into any American market of their choosing and essentially take over the most

vital parts of the communications infrastructure. I mean, let's remember, we are talking here about the vital organs of American democracy. Newspaper reporting, television news programs, these two sources of information remain, by far, more popular than anything else. And I think now we should all be asking whether we would like someone like Rupert Murdoch or Sam Zell -- or you name your corporation -- to control all of those outlets in the place where you live.

I think many people right now, millions of people, are concerned that this is a terrible project for American democracy. In 2003, when Michael Powell tried to do pretty much the same thing, millions of Americans mobilized, wrote letters to Congress and the FCC to do something about it, and there's this landmark lawsuit that you mentioned, *Prometheus v. FCC*, that blocked it. Now is prime time to do this again, because we are seeing the last gasps of the Bush administration trying to push through legislation that could be enormously dangerous and very unpopular, too.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Why is Kevin Martin attempting to do this now? He knows the pushback that Michael Powell, the former FCC chair, son of Colin Powell, got, which ultimately pushed him out, the resistance. It's also an election year.

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** It's quite puzzling, actually. This is a program, a project that's just enormously unpopular. And we should note that it's not just Senator Dorgan who has opposed this. His partner on the letter that he wrote to the FCC was none other than Trent Lott. Now, Trent Lott is probably not a hero for most viewers and listeners of this program, but he and most other Republicans have been on what I view as the right side of this issue, saying, "Enough of this media consolidation. Our constituents don't want it, overwhelmingly so." So it's very hard not to be cynical about this.

You know, on your news segment, you told us the story of some lobbying by the telecommunications industry to try to get policies they want from Senator Rockefeller. Anyone who's observed the FCC over the last decade has seen the enormous amount of lobbying and corporate influence that's gone into setting a policy agenda and, sadly, a paltry level of respect and appreciation for what the public is interested in. And again, you know, we have now seen a year of public hearings that the chairman did organize in cities around the country, at which you get hundreds of people overwhelmingly opposing a project like this. Sadly, it seems that this is a process that's been for show, rather than for real. And it's just puzzling.

**AMY GOODMAN:** If they get a chance, that's the question. Will they get a chance? Is he trying to fast-track this? How much public input will be allowed?

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** There's no question that he's trying to fast-track this. I mean, we could see, as you mentioned, new media legislation as early as December that will radically transform American communications systems. The FCC, we have to remember, is a little organization with five individuals whose votes can determine future media policy. This is a non-democratic process. It is not responding to the public interest; it's not responding to the public opinion.

And so, now I think there's two things going on. We'll probably see in the next few months, as news about the legislation hits, we'll begin to see, I believe, a grassroots mobilization like we saw in 2003 with groups on the left and on the right coming together to say, "Enough of this media consolidation. It's been a terrible experiment. It's time to put it to an end." The other thing I think we'll start to see is more congressional officials line up to oppose this bill from the FCC in the same way that we saw that in 2003 and 2004, because congressional officials, after all, need to be elected, and they know how unpopular this can be. What we need to do now, I think, is to try to make sure that FCC members recognize how strongly

Americans and people of the world oppose this kind of transformation.

**AMY GOODMAN:** It's not only politicians who join forces across the aisle. I mean, you've got groups like -- well, when Michael Powell attempted to do this, you had the National Organization for Women, you had the National Rifle Association, you had the US Conference of Catholic Bishops joining forces.

**ERIC KLINENBERG:** Absolutely. And I write the story of this social movement in *Fighting for Air*, because it's such a remarkable thing. I mean, how many realms of American politics can you think of where you have the NRA and MoveOn working together with the ACLU and Christian conservatives? This is an area that I think is a kind of no-brainer for most Americans. If you ask anyone, "Do you want someone like Rupert Murdoch to be able to come in and control your newspaper, three of your television stations, eight of your radio stations?" I think it's pretty clear that that's something that does not serve democracy well.

Remember, our media policy historically has always said that diversity of content and intense local content will serve the public interest best. It's hard to make the case for how allowing more media consolidation at this point will further those interests. And I think that's what's so worrisome about the way that Martin is proceeding. It's not just that he's rushing through this process, and he clearly is, and Commissioners Copps and Adelstein in the FCC have noted that, but he's also clearly ignoring the articulated public interest at this point. So we've now had these road shows where the FCC goes and asks people what they think. People have said, "Enough!" You know, we do not want more consolidation." And this seems to be exactly what Chairman Martin is going to serve us.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Eric Klinenberg, I want to thank you for being with us, Associate Professor of Sociology at New York University, now teaching at Stanford, author of the book *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media*.

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