

**Gender-and-Race-Conscious Research
Toward Egalitarian Broadcast Ownership Regulation**

Carolyn M. Byerly, PhD
Department of Journalism, JHJ School of Communication, Howard University
Statement to participants and audience
Media Ownership Workshop on Diversity Issues
Federal Communications Commission, Washington, DC
January 27, 2010

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you all this morning, particularly since I seem to be the only non-attorney in the line-up. My training is in social science research. For two decades I have been concerned with examining the dynamic relationship of women and people of color to the news and other media. With me today are two of my colleagues, Professor Reggie Miles and Dr. Yong Jin Park. We are part of a research collaborative called the Howard Media Group, and, thus, my comments represent our shared concern, hope, and suggestions for how the Commission might proceed toward its quadrennial review of women's and minorities' media ownership. We will leave it for our legal scholars today to speak to the finer points of the policies and laws regarding constitutional issues, while we try to identify some related social questions that we believe research needs to address. My remarks today focus specifically on broadcast stations.

Media ownership in the United States today divides along the historical fault lines of gender and race. The low single-digit ownership rates for women and people of color in broadcast say quite loudly that the nation is faced with both a women's rights and civil rights crisis in policy. The seriousness of the situation must be understood within the context of a nation moving rapidly toward racial and ethnic plurality, with no group having a majority. The media today do not and cannot serve the public interest as long as this skewed media ownership pattern continues, and the situation could actually worsen without policy changes.

We suggest several studies that we believe will help the Commission to consider both the impact of these policies, as well as possible remedies.

1. Research to establish (a) impact of deregulation on loss of minority-related public affairs programming, and (b) impact of such loss on minority communities.

First is the matter of how Black and other minority communities are affected by declining numbers of stations under the ownership of those in their communities. Scholars like Oberholser-Gee and Waldfogel have found that there are higher voting rates in minority communities where radio station owners are of the same ethnicity. Squires (2002) found that African Americans in Chicago trusted information from Black-owned stations more than they did those with White ownership. Byerly, Langmia and Cupid (2006) found similar statements from African-American participants in their audience study in DC neighborhoods. These researchers' participants said that Black-owned stations "tell us the truth," and "are more trustworthy," and that White majority-owned stations "don't understand our issues" and that reporters "only come here when something bad has happened." My colleagues and I are also concerned about the decline of local news and public affairs programming in broadcast – a phenomenon that the work of Lawrence Redd (1991) has shown is the outgrowth of deregulation. Redd (1991) found that in the Black community, the loss of news and public service

announcements lessened the amount of important information about local health, safety and well-being available to Black families who used that information.

In reconsidering ownership with respect to minorities, we suggest taking Redd's research as a starting point, and commissioning a two-part study that would compare the amount of news and affairs programming before and since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and then using those findings to determine the more specific impacts on minority populations today. Such a study would employ a mixed methodology of quantitative content analysis, and targeted audience research.

2. Research to establish clear criteria for determining public interest in relation to minority communities.

Second is the matter of defining the term "public interest." In 1960, the FCC adopted a *Report and Statement of Policy re: Commission En Banc Programming Inquiry* (popularly referred to as the "1960 Programming Policy Statement"). The policy statement included a set of 14 criteria for determining whether the "public interest, necessity or convenience" were being served by broadcast stations. The 1960 Statement also concluded that broadcasters should determine the tastes, needs and desires of the community and design programming to meet those needs. The FCC was thus led to the adoption of formal ascertainment requirements, which compelled applicants for broadcast licenses to detail the results of interviews conducted by the applicant with community "leaders." The Commission later abandoned the 14 criteria and then also eliminated the requirement that stations keep program logs and other information once used to determine whether community problems and issues were being covered. The lack of specific standards, together with the lack of documentation as to station performance, was worsened by the effects of conglomeration that accompanied the Telecommunications Act of 1996 Act. Today, we have the homogenization of program content, which emanates from national or regional corporate headquarters, with virtually no concrete way for such content to be evaluated in relation to public interest.

We advocate returning to a defined public interest standard that arises from the development of markers that measure what the public says it needs for personal well-being and to participate actively in the community. We recommend refining and replicating Byerly, Langmia and Cupid's 2006 study, conducted in Washington, DC neighborhoods, which learned, among other things, that residents wanted information in the news and public affairs about things like job training, health services, and how to get involved in things that affected their neighborhood. Said one participant, "We know there are groups out there fighting crime and drugs, but we don't know how to find them." Local broadcast stations have traditionally circulated this information but they have mostly stopped under conglomeration. Carried on in multiple and diverse neighborhoods across the nation, we believe such a study could allow the FCC to re-establish clear standards by which to determine whether and to what extent the public interest is being met by broadcast stations.

3. Research to determine (a) market-entry barriers to women's ownership, and (b) ways that gender enters into programming for local community needs and interests.

Third is the problem of women's nearly non-existent ownership, and what that portends for 51% of the population. Women historically came to own stations through inheritance from fathers or husbands, or through family partnerships. Form 323 filings show that women own approximately 5% of television and 6% of radio stations, slightly lower than ownership for racial minorities. (I should note, as

well, that women of color own less than 1% of these stations – a frightening statistic given the approach to population parity between White and non-White people in the nation. It is well established in the literature that women’s programming needs are underserved. Concerned about women’s declining ownership in broadcast, I recently undertook a study that will soon be published, in which I surveyed women owners about their experiences in ownership, and interviewed an additional group of experts on their assessment of issues in ownership and gender. My research found that women face discrimination in acquiring and operating broadcast stations – what the FCC has framed as “market-entry barriers.” As we know, women’s ownership is concentrated in rural areas, where they also have difficulties obtaining financing and selling advertising – factors that virtually assure they will operate with marginal income, or that they will eventually fail, or both. Women owners actively involved in running their stations describe a strong commitment to community service, and to hiring staff with community orientation. One woman identified her greatest achievement in community service in relation to “staying true” to her ethnic community. She said, “My common bond is my Hispanic heritage. There is an energy and passion driven by making a spot commercial and seeing the business grow after they advertise with us.” Another woman said, “I have been able to add more educational programs through grants by partnering with non-profit organizations, and by adding more ethnic groups to our programming.”

Recent research by Sandoval (2009) cites scholarship showing that minority broadcast owners are very involved in their stations’ programming and other operations, and, as I noted above, communities benefit from such involvement. If women were similarly involved, the 23 owners and 17 experts in my study indicate that there may indeed be more programming with women’s needs, interests and perspectives in mind. My research suggests a need for further exploration as to how and under what circumstances women’s ownership of broadcast stations affects programming content and service to local communities and whether the FCC should do more to promote local ownership and direct involvement by those owners in station operation.

I look forward to talking with you more about these suggestions.

REFERENCES

- Byerly, C. M. (forthcoming). Behind the scenes of women’s broadcast ownership. (Under second review by a communications journal.)
- Byerly, C. M., Langmia, K., & Cupid, J. A. (2006). Ownership matters: Localism, the ethnic minority news audience, and community participation. . In *Does bigger media equal better media?* (Report) Social Science Research Council and Benton Foundation, 2006, <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/media>.
- Oberholzer-Gee, F. and Waldfogel, J. (2006). Media Markets and Localism: Does Local News *en Español* Boost Hispanic Voter Turnout? (Working Paper 12317) Cambridge, MA” National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved August 26, 2006, from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12317>.
- Oberholzer-Gee, F. and Waldfogel, J. (2005, April). Strength in numbers: Group size and political mobilization. *Journal of Law and Economics* 48, 73-91.

Sandoval, C. J. K. (2009, November). Minority commercial radio ownership in 2009: FCC Licensing and consolidation policies, entry windows, and the nexus between ownership, diversity and service in the public interest (Report).

Redd, L. N. (1991, December). Radio deregulation: The impact on Black families and nonprofit social agencies. *Journal of Black Studies* 22(2), 216-238.

Rivera, Commissioner. (adopted 1987, March 1). *Second report and order in the matter of the regulation of radio (FCC 84-67, BC Docket No 79-219)*. Washington, DC: Federal Communication Commission.

Squires, C. (2002). Black Audiences, Past and Present: Commonsense Media Critics and Activists. In R. R. Means Coleman (Ed.), *Say it Loud: African- American Audiences, Media and Identity* (pp. 45-76). NY: Routledge.