

Big Media Still Dominate Local News

The Federal Communications Commission wants to change media ownership rules so that giant corporations can swallow up more newspapers and radio and television stations in local communities across the country. To convince the FCC to gut these longstanding protections, Big Media companies are claiming the Internet has changed the media marketplace to the point where local ownership rules are no longer necessary.

Free Press researched specific claims made by Chicago's Tribune Co. in an October filing with the FCC, in which the company claimed that local Web sites represent viable competition to their cross-owned outlets — WGN-TV, the *Chicago Tribune*, WGN-AM, CLTV and *Chicago Magazine*.

Our study analyzed the content from 13 independent, Chicago-specific Web sites (such as *Chicagoist* and *Gapers Block*), many of which were listed in Tribune's filing — sampling from two separate seven-day periods. The audience and traffic of these Web sites were compared to Web sites controlled by traditional media companies operating in the Chicago area.

Free Press found that Chicago's independent Web sites do not produce enough original news or have a large enough audience to compete with or replace traditional news media. Chicago residents still overwhelmingly rely on traditional media outlets — like the *Chicago Tribune* and WGN-TV — for their local news and information. And the Web sites owned by traditional media companies like Tribune still dominate the local market. Local independent Web sites don't provide the diversity of viewpoints and information needed by Chicago citizens. They certainly don't offer any justification for further weakening of media ownership rules.

Original News

Independent, Chicago-focused Web sites do not have enough original, local news to substitute for reporting done by traditional media. Close review reveals that these Web sites rely heavily on traditional outlets, with many of their "stories" linking to content hosted on the Web sites of traditional media. Among the stories studied:

- Only 13.7 percent of the stories on these sites contained original reporting of any kind — and the bulk were on topics such as concert and entertainment reviews.
- Only 5.5 percent of the stories contained original reporting on "hard" news topics such as crime, education and local government or politics.
- More than half of the stories on "hard" news topics linked to stories on Web sites owned by traditional media.
- Close to 60 percent of the stories were "soft" news or entertainment stories.

Small Online Audience

The independent, Chicago-focused Web sites have very small audiences which do not stay very long or visit very often — especially when compared to Big Media Web sites.

- The average number of unique visitors in a single month to the independent Web sites was about 14,000. The average number of unique monthly visitors to the Web sites of the two major Chicago-area newspapers is nearly 80 times as large.
- Only 12 percent of the visitors to the independent Web sites viewed the site between two and 30 times per month. However, 28 percent of the visitors to the Web sites of local newspapers were frequent users, viewing the sites between two and 30 times in a month.

The results of this study demonstrate that although the Internet provides another medium for local news, it does not yet truly compete with or diminish the influence of the traditional newspaper and broadcast outlets. Whether it's online or over-the-air, the bottom line is that the majority of our news and information is still dominated by a few corporations.