

For Immediate Release
October 31, 2002

Contact:
Mark Cooper (301) 384-2204
or mcooper@consumerfed.org

**FCC Proposals To Weaken Media Ownership Rules Will
Undermine Media Diversity, Democracy**
Citizen Groups Nationwide Urge FCC To Hold Field Hearings

(October 31, 2002 – Washington, DC) Charging that the recently announced Federal Communications Commission proceeding to relax media ownership rules threatens media diversity and democracy and is not supported by public opinion, more than 40 national and local consumer, civil rights and media advocacy organizations called upon the FCC to hold field hearings in order to gain meaningful public input. The groups join an earlier request for hearings by FCC Commissioner Michael Copps.

The FCC is considering eliminating or weakening rules designed to ensure diversity of media voices. The rules limit a broadcaster from owning TV stations that reach more than 35% of U.S. homes; restrict a company from owning both a TV station and a newspaper or radio station in the same market; cap the number of TV or radio stations that can be owned in a single market; and prevent companies from owning more than one of the four major broadcast networks.

Mark Cooper, Director of Research for Consumer Federation of America noted, "Pencil and paper proceedings in Washington cannot do justice to the issues raised by these proposals. This is especially true in light of surveys showing that the FCC is out of step with public opinion."

A report released today by Consumer Federation of America shows that public opinion surveys over the past several years demonstrate that the public's view of media concentration and the control of digital communication networks stands in sharp contrast to the policies being pushed by the FCC.

- 70% of respondents to a recent survey believe that media companies are becoming too large.
- By a three-to-one margin, (49% to 17%) respondents felt that cross-media mergers, i.e. mergers between local broadcast and newspaper outlets were bad for the country.
- Respondents felt that cross-media mergers would create less diversity in editorial points of view (49% to 18%) and that diversity in points of view in covering local news would decrease (39% to 21%).
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents believe that broadcasters will just maximize profits if not directed to air public interest programming.

"In a democratic society that relies on media companies to distribute news and information, the government should not base its decisions to allow media consolidation on the views of the media companies themselves," said Gene Kimmelman, director of Consumers Union's Washington DC Office.

“Without this kind of outreach, we believe that the FCC’s regulatory review process could be perceived as flawed, accessible only to the special interests who will spend whatever it takes to influence the outcome of this procedure.” said Paul E. Almeida, President of the AFL-CIO’s Department for Professional Employees. The DPE, represents 24 affiliated unions including all of the major unions in the media, entertainment, journalism and communications sectors.

Ed Mierzwinski, Consumer Program Director at U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) added, “field hearings would provide access to the rulemaking process for average citizens and would enable the Commission to hear from those individuals whose access to the media are most directly affected by these decisions.”

“Recent comments by the Chief of the FCC Media Bureau characterizing field hearings as ‘an exercise in foot-stomping’ demonstrate an alarmingly cynical disregard for the kind of robust public debate that this issue deserves,” noted Cooper.

“The real question here is whether Chairman Powell is committed to an open and honest proceeding”, said Jeff Chester, Executive Director of the Center for Digital Democracy. “If the Commission won’t agree to hearings, they clearly aren’t interested in having a meaningful debate on these very serious issues.”

The report, “Public Support For Media Diversity and Democracy In The Digital Age” can be viewed online at www.consumerfed.org/MediaSurvey10.31.02.pdf

The coalition letter to FCC Chairman, Michael Powell can be viewed online at www.consumerfed.org/PowellLetter10.31.02.pdf

Groups signing the letter include:

Alliance for Community Media	Massachusetts Consumers Coalition
Arizona Consumers Council	Media Alliance
Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers	Media Tank
California PIRG	Michigan Consumer Federation
Center for Digital Democracy	Montana PIRG
Center for Public Representation (WI)	National Lawyers Guild Center for Democratic Communicatio
Citizen Action/Illinois	New Jersey Citizen Action
Colorado PIRG	North Carolina PIRG
Columbia Consumer Education Council (SC)	Ohio PIRG
Consumer Action (CA)	Oregon PIRG
Consumer Assistance Council (MA)	Prometheus Radio Project
Consumer Federation of America	Texas Consumer Association
Consumer World (MA)	The Consumers' Voice (IL)
Consumers' Union	The Praxis Project
Deep Dish Television	U.S. PIRG
Democratic Processes Center (AZ)	Utility Consumer Action Network (CA)
Empire State Consumer Association (NY)	Vermont PIRG
Florida Consumer Action Network	Washington PIRG
Florida PIRG	Wisconsin Consumers League
Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Georgia	Wisconsin PIRG
Harlem Consumer Education Council	Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press
Leadership Conference On Civil Rights	

