

Destroyed Reports and Hidden Information

How Both Corporate and Indie Media Manipulated Reports to Support Their Personal Interests

FCC chairman Kevin Martin's reconfirmation hearing started out in typical fashion. Both Republican and Democratic senators bombarded Martin with questions about the Universal Service Fund and the recent media ownership proceedings.¹ Although the questioning was intense, Martin seemed prepared for the Senators' questions and accusations. Then, it was Senator Barbara Boxer's (D) turn to interrogate Martin.

Boxer started by asking about the FCC's Localism Task Force, which was started in 2003 but had yet to release any type of report or policy recommendations. Martin immediately went on the defensive stating that this was a project started by the previous chairman that was never finished. He also told Boxer that he had just asked his staff to go back and draft the report that they were supposed to complete in 2004.

Boxer then surprised Martin by pulling out a draft of an FCC study titled "Do Local Owners Deliver More Localism?" dated June 2004. She said that this report found that locally owned stations "add almost five and one half minutes of local news."² Martin seemed shocked and repeatedly stated that he had never seen this report nor heard orders to stifle the study.³ The following day, a former lawyer from the FCC who worked closely with the study in question, told the press that in 2004 senior managers at the FCC had ordered that this report be destroyed.⁴

Over the course of the next week the story was reported, manipulated and ignored by variety of major news sources. However, the story never became "top news," even though it had all the makings of a juicy political story. The coverage of the "deep-sixed" report provides an interesting case study of how the media (both big and small) covers stories about the media.

Initial Coverage: TV Newsday and Free Press

A couple hours after *C-SPAN* aired the hearing, *TV Newsday*, a news site for the television broadcasting industry, published an article about Boxer's discovery. The article was basically a recap of what happened between Boxer and Martin at the hearing that morning. Later that day, the article was reposted at *Free Press*, a group that works for policies that support local media.

What is interesting about this chain of events is the differences between the audiences for *TV Newsday* and *Free Press*. Although *TV Newsday* aims to serve all types of broadcasters, they must cater towards the interests of the large media corporations. These corporations employ far more people than local broadcasters, which is very important to *TV Newsday* because the only way it makes money is by selling ad space.⁵ On the other hand, *Free Press* caters to local broadcasters and media activists who are opposed to the consolidation of media ownership.⁶

So, why would *Free Press* post this story if it was catered towards the “bad guys”? Well, as mentioned above, the article just seemed like a summary of quotes from Senator Boxer. So, it did not seem biased in how it was written, rather it was biased in what was omitted from the story. The quotes used in the story focused on the FCC suppressing the report, rather than the implications of this study which according to Boxer “[came] out with a very clear response to the question of consolidation vs. localism.”

Also, this omission was of little importance to *Free Press* because just the act of posting this story on the *Free Press* website invites the reader to consider the implications of this study. *Free Press*'s core audience consists of local media activists and owners. Their readers come to the site looking for news about media ownership. In this context, the connection between this story and the FCC's recent plans to loosen media ownership regulations becomes very clear to their pro-local media audience.

Media Activist Coverage: StopBigMedia.com

The following day, September 13th, according to my research there was little to no coverage of the story except for one local media activist site: *StopBigMedia.com*. The site's article set the tone for how this story would be covered by other local media activists, in the next couple of days. The article cast the FCC in a negative light, making it seem like the FCC ordered the destruction of this study because the FCC is against local media ownership.

One of the key tactics used to portray the FCC in this way was to make the FCC look evil and deceptive in comparison to the activists who were reporting this story. Since the story was about the FCC hiding information, *StopBigMedia.com* made sure that their coverage of the story seemed completely transparent. Instead of just summarizing what was said, the article also contained links to the actual FCC report on localism, as well as, *C-SPAN*'s video of the hearing.⁷ The subtext of this article was very clear: “the FCC is hiding information from you, and we are giving you every thing we know.”

However, it is not shocking that a site titled, *StopBigMedia.com* would be biased against the FCC, given the commission's recent plans to loosen ownership regulations. But, what *is* surprising is that although the website presented itself as a trustworthy news source, it manipulated the story by presenting speculation as fact. For example, in the paragraph that summarized the history of the localism study, the article stated:

“The report was originally commissioned in 2004 by former Chairman Michael Powell – who hoped to show that media concentration didn't impact localism. But when his own researchers found the opposite result, he buried the results.”⁸

Other media activist sites followed suit and used speculative headlines like, “Read the study that Michael Powell didn't want you to see.”⁹ However, all this was being reported even though there was no hard evidence that Powell had ordered that the study be destroyed. This language was clearly propaganda used by activists to diminish Powell and the work he did as chairman (like loosen media ownership regulations).

The Associated Press

On September 14, two days after the controversial hearing, the *Associated Press* (AP) published a story on the suppressed FCC report. However, this time the story was even more exciting: Adam Candeub, a former lawyer in the FCC, told reporters, “senior managers at the agency ordered that ‘every last piece’ of the report be destroyed.”¹⁰ Now the story finally had a chance to get the distribution it deserved, because many newspapers and websites rely on AP stories as filler because of their “just-the-facts” style and content.

Unlike the article on *TV Newsday*, AP’s article focused on both the destruction of the study *and* the implications of the study, as seen in the opening paragraph:

“The Federal Communications Commission ordered its staff to destroy all copies of a draft study that suggested greater concentration of media ownership would hurt local TV news coverage, a former lawyer at the agency says.”¹¹

However, there was something very peculiar about the article: it did not have any details from the actual report. In fact, the title of the study was never mentioned, and even though the FCC report had gone into the public record on Tuesday, the only quotes that were used were the ones previously mentioned by Senator Boxer. Did this 25-page report really only have two interesting/newsworthy sentences? Or was this “just-the-facts” article hiding something?

Contrary to how it was portrayed in the article, the study “Do Local Owners Deliver More Localism?” *does* list a number of serious consequences of local television ownership. In particular, it says that one reason a locally owned station might cover more local news is because “a local owner may have additional local interests that drive their local news coverage. For example, if the local owner also develops real estate locally, they may cover the local zoning board in a way that favors the owner’s real estate interests.”¹²

The study also found that “a local owner that owns a...radio station increases the number of total news second by almost 15 seconds [for] each additional [area] in which they own a radio station.” This implies that although cross-media ownership may not help local news, it can improve the news broadcasting in general, which is very important to many media analysts.¹³ Given these findings, it does not seem like local media activists would really want to heavily publicize this report. Instead, they would rather only stress the findings that Senator Boxer mentioned at Tuesday’s hearing.

This could potentially explain why all the details from the report, including the title, were omitted from the AP story. Perhaps the author, John Dunbar, wanted to portray the FCC report as unquestionable proof that local ownership increases the quality of television news, as Senator Boxer had done on Tuesday. In any case, instead of presenting “just-the-facts,” AP presented Boxer’s perspective to its readers and clients,

many of which print/post AP stories automatically, which explains why big corporations like Fox News' site would run the story.

The New York Times

While most major news sources had reported the story by Friday, September 15, the *New York Times* made no mention of the story until Tuesday, September 19. And, the article that they finally did post (at 11: 01 am, too late to be printed) was just a republished *Reuters* report that combined the story of the suppressed localism study, with the story of a newly discovered report on radio consolidation. The *Reuters* article quickly summarized the localism study with the following (obvious) statement, “[it] suggested television stations owned locally produced more coverage of local issues.”¹⁴

So, why did the *New York Times* not cover the story? One hypothesis would be that the *New York Times* is biased towards the interests of large corporations. This theory, developed by Noam Chomsky, claims that since much of the *New York Times*' advertisements come from some of the largest media conglomerates (Viacom, News Corps, Time Warner, Disney, Clear Channel) and the companies that they own, the news they report is filtered by the interests of these companies.¹⁵ So according to the theory, since these corporations are hoping that the FCC will soon repeal certain media ownership regulations, the *New York Times* chose not to cover a story that could cause the public to react negatively to these policy changes. However, this theory does not hold up, since most of the companies' news sites were already hosting the *Associated Press* report of the story.

Another theory is that the *New York Times* did not want to make any reference to the report because contains certain statements about the *New York Times*. In the introduction of the report, it references a study that found “that an increase in local penetration of the *New York Times* decreases local penetration by the local newspaper, reducing local news content.”¹⁶ The results may be from an old report (2002) but combined with Boxer's statements about the importance of local news, it could make the *New York Times* look like one of the bad guys. But, could the *New York Times*, the paper of record, really be so petty?

Why It Never Became a Top News Story

The story of the FCC's suppressed study on localism is a great example of the different ways that the same story can be reported, or not reported, by different sources. The coverage was made even more interesting because the story contained information that either supported or conflicted with the interests of each news source. Throughout the course of one week, each news source that choose to cover the story, manipulated the story in a different way usually in order to support the author's and publisher's interests. Perhaps this is why it never became a big news story: no one could agree on what to report.

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- ¹ Lasar, Matthew. "Inside the 'Deep-Sixed' FCC TV Localism Paper." Lasar's Letter on the Federal Communications Commission. 15 Sept. 2006 <<http://lasarletter.com/>>.
- ² Brown, Keith, and Alexandar, Peter. Do Local Owners Deliver More Localism? Federal Communications Commission. Washington D.C., 2006. p.1
- ³ See Boxer's section of the hearing here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT0AIJkO-aM>
- ⁴ Dunbar, John. "Media Ownership Study Ordered Destroyed." Associated Press 14 Sept. 2006.
- ⁵ TVNewsday Homepage. 18 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.tvnewsday.com/>>.
- ⁶ FreePress.net Homepage. 18 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.freepress.net/>>.
- ⁷ "FCC Buries Report Showing Local Owners Do More Local News." Stop Big Media. 13 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.stopbigmedia.com/>>.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ DFA-Link. 15 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.dfalink.com/>>.
- ¹⁰ Dunbar, John. "Media Ownership Study Ordered Destroyed." Associated Press 14 Sept. 2006.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Brown and Alexandar. op. cit., p.2-13
- ¹³ Lasar, Matthew. "Inside the "Deep-Sixed" FCC TV Localism Paper." Lasar's Letter on the Federal Communications Commission. 15 Sept. 2006. <<http://lasarletter.com/freepage.php?id=200609151>>.
- ¹⁴ Pelofsky, Jeremy. "U.S. FCC Chief Seeks Probe Into Draft Media Studies." Reuters 19 Sept. 2006. 19 Sept. 2006 <<http://www.reuters.com/>>.
- ¹⁵ Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. Manufacturing Consent. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
- ¹⁶ Brown and Alexandar, op. cit., p. 3