

Community radio: Democratizing the airwaves

by [William F. Fore](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

Since Congress and the Federal Communication Commission deregulated broadcasting in the early 1980s, control of radio and TV stations has moved steadily into a handful of multinational corporations. During that same period, ownership of newspapers shifted from families to media giants, so that now there is almost no local ownership of papers in major markets.

But the FCC has taken an action that holds considerable promise to open up communication in local communities. In January it issued a “Report and Order” creating low-power FM radio service whose purpose is “to create broadcasting opportunities for locally based organizations to serve their communities.” The proposal makes licenses available for more than 1,000 low-power FM radio stations—licenses that can be held only by local, community-based nonprofit entities; no commercial groups need apply. This is a landmark decision, one which can result in a significant democratizing of communication.

The FCC is creating two kinds of FM stations: ten-watt, which can reach a diameter of two to four miles, and 100-watt, which will reach a diameter of seven miles. Reception of these stations will be just as good as for commercial stations. The air time can be used for the discussion of community issues, to offer church services for shut-ins, to offer broadcasting in languages not otherwise available, to provide information about libraries, art centers, labor unions and other community organizations, and for nontraditional programs featuring, for example, political commentary or poetry or jazz. No money may be solicited on these stations. Owners must be local and must meet minimum requirements, such as operating the station at least five hours a day and 36 hours per week. The cost of putting an all-volunteer station on the air for one year is estimated at about \$35,000 for the 100-watt station, and half that for the ten-watt station.

Unfortunately, broadcasters have fought hard against even this minimal opening of the marketplace of ideas, and in April Congress tried to completely derail the process. In July the *New York Times* noted that about half of the first batch of applicants came from religious organizations, mostly conservative—thus placing the Republican leaders who were blocking the proposal in a squeeze between Big Broadcasting and the Religious Right. One of the ironies is that there had been almost no stories about the FCC action in the national press—until the matter became mixed with politics. The conflict of interest among media outlets and their failure even to mention the issue is a perfect example of why the new licenses are so badly needed.

The FCC recently announced that a registration window will open on August 28 and close September 1 for applications from Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Puerto Rico, Virginia and Wyoming. Future applications, chosen by lottery, will open approximately every three months.

The community radio project offers churches and synagogues a way to expand their presence in their communities. Not that the creation of “religious stations” is the object. The FCC favors applicants with the widest community representation. But religious groups could become the catalysts in bringing together many churches, libraries, schools, labor unions, art groups, performance organizations, and language and ethnic groups to create a broad community sponsorship of a station.

Already there have been thousands of hits on the FCC Web site (www.fcc.gov) about the offer, and the commission will allow applications by e-mail. Competition will be fierce in some localities. An excellent free Low Power FM Resource Guide is available from the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council, 3636 16th Street, N.W., Suite BG-54, Washington, D.C. 20010.