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OPINION

Why minority-owned media matters

Sens. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., and Barack Obama, D-Ill.

The bedrock of America's greatest advances — the foundation of what we know today are defining values — was formed not by cheering on things as they were, but by taking them on and demanding change. The thoughtful exchange of diverse viewpoints not only helps guarantee our freedom as individuals, it ensures those in power can be held accountable for all that they do.

But to engage in the debates that have always made America stronger, it takes a stage and a platform for discussion — and never before have these platforms been more endangered.

In recent years, we have witnessed unprecedented consolidation in our traditional media outlets. Large mergers and corporate deals have reduced the number of voices and viewpoints in the media marketplace. At the same time, massive technological change and an explosion of Internet access have opened new avenues for information and new methods of discourse. One thing we can be sure of — change is upon us.

As we look toward the future, we must ensure that all voices in our diverse nation have the opportunity to be heard. One important way to do this is to expand the ownership stake of women-owned, minority-owned and small businesses in our media outlets.

History provides plenty of proof. Minority-owned radio stations, television stations and newspapers played an essential role in battling segregation during the civil rights movement. When Hurricane Katrina struck, minority-owned media outlets helped expose the true depth of poverty and inequality that others were content to ignore. Even today, while much of the media establishment has moved on, minority-owned media outlets continue to highlight these issues as the victims of that storm continue to struggle — two years later. Just last month, African American radio stations — together with coverage on the Internet — helped propel the injustice in Jena, La., into the national spotlight.

Providing opportunities for minority-owned businesses to own media outlets is fundamental to creating the diverse media environment that federal law requires and the country deserves and demands.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the agency charged with governing the media. The FCC has an obligation to promote the public interest, including diversity in media ownership. Unfortunately, the FCC has failed to adequately assess the state of minority-owned media, or develop constructive ways to encourage underrepresented entities to become larger players in the media landscape.

Now we understand the FCC may soon consider changes in the media ownership rules that only help big media get bigger, but do nothing to make media more responsive to minority viewpoints and local communities.

The FCC tried this once before, in 2003. At that time, the nation's top broadcasters met behind closed doors with FCC officials more than 70 times. But the public was not invited. After the proposed rules were announced, a major public backlash ensued.

Still smarting from that public reaction, it has taken the FCC four years to try again. This time, any changes to the media ownership rules must encourage new entrants into the market and prioritize the entry of small, women-owned and minority-owned businesses.

Last year, we urged FCC Chairman Kevin Martin to address the issue of diversity in media ownership. Several other leaders in Congress — including Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey, Rep. Hilda L. Solis of California and Rep. John Conyers Jr. of Michigan — have also pressed the FCC to stop allowing greater corporate consolidation and start promoting media diversity. But our questions went unanswered and our concerns continue to grow. If the FCC chairman chooses to reopen media ownership rules, he must take into consideration the needs of local or minority communities.

If this is done improperly, more radio stations, television stations and newspapers will fall into the hands of fewer owners and those owners are less likely to include minority firms. It means that fewer minority- and independently-owned stations and newspapers will be able to contribute to the national dialogue.

For too long now, the FCC has been putting corporate interests ahead of the people's interests. It's time for that to change. We need to not only create the opportunity for minority-owned businesses to participate in the market, but we also need to help the minority entrepreneur who wants to enter this business succeed. We will keep fighting until we have a free and open media that represents every American in our diverse nation.

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