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The People's Airwaves Belong to Them

By JEREMY RIFKIN

Question: What is the single most valuable piece of property worth owning in the whole world in the Information Age?

AnsWER: The radio frequencies—the electromagnetic spectrum—over which an increasing amount of human communication and commercial activity will be broadcast in the era of wireless communications. Our PCs, Palm Pilots, wireless Internet, cellular phones, pagers, radios and television all rely on radio frequencies.

Most of us never give the spectrum as much as a passing thought. We regard it as free, like the oxygen we breathe. In reality, the spectrum is treated as a public good and is controlled and administered by governments that license the various radio frequencies to commercial and other institutions for broadcast.

But now powerful commercial media are seeking to gain total control over the airwaves. Imagine a world in which a handful of global media conglomerates like Vivendi Universal, AOL Time Warner, Sony, Telefonica, Viacom, AT&T, Disney, Fininvest, Deutsche Telekom and News Corp. own literally all the airwaves all over the planet and trade them back and forth as private electronic real estate.

On Feb. 7, 37 leading U.S. economists, including six formerly with the Federal Communications Commission, signed a joint letter asking the FCC to allow commercial licensees to lease unused spectrum to others. This is the opening salvo in a radical plan to wrest control of the entire spectrum from governments and make the radio frequencies of our planet a private preserve of global media giants. If they succeed, the nation-state will have lost one of its last remaining vestiges of real power—the ability to regulate access to broadcast communications within its own geographic borders.

But I'm getting slightly ahead of the story. Let's start from the beginning.

In 1995, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, a conservative think tank, published a report titled "The Telecom Revolution: an American Opportunity." The report's authors called for converting the electromagnetic spectrum from government ownership to private property. Under the plan, each broadcaster holding an existing license would be granted title to the spectrum it uses and would be able

to develop, sell and trade it. The remaining unused parts of the spectrum would be sold off to commercial enterprises and be reconstituted as private electronic real estate. The FCC would be abolished.

The architects of the study argued that government control of the radio frequencies led to inefficiencies in the utilization of the airwaves. If the spectrum were privatized, the study said, supply and demand would dictate the most innovative uses of those frequencies.

At that point, the notion of a one-time sell-off of U.S. airwaves to private commercial interests seemed a bit too ambitious even for the most experienced Washington insiders. So instead comes the

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letter to the FCC proposing that licensees be allowed to lease unused spectrum as an initial step that would open the door to privatization.

Granted, one could argue that allowing licensees to lease unused spectrum would help alleviate so-called spectrum drought. But if this surrender of government authority were then to be used as justification for further deregulation and ultimately the privatization of the spectrum, the political consequences would be profound and far-reaching:

- If the radio frequencies of the planet were owned and controlled by global media corporations, how would ordinary people guarantee their most basic right to communicate with one another in a wireless world? In an era when more and more of our daily communications takes place in cyberspace, access to the airwaves becomes critical. Of course, those who can pay will be connected. But what about the 62% of people who have never made a single telephone call and the 40% of our fellow human beings who have no electricity? How will they ever secure access to cyber-

space in a world where the admission fee is controlled by a few global media giants?

- If the flow of human communications is controlled by global media companies, how do we protect social and cultural points of view and political expressions that may differ from those of the companies that own the frequencies? We have seen what happens when totalitarian governments control the airwaves and repress the free expression of ideas that run contrary to the official government position. And when companies like AOL Time Warner, Disney and Vivendi Universal own the channels of communication as well as much of the content that flows through them, will the rich cultural diversity that has traditionally been created and nurtured in civil society dry up? Will we be left with only a few global media companies as the ultimate arbiters of human culture?

- How do we prevent these companies from exerting undue influence over commercial life itself? America's 19th century railway giants attempted to use their control over the transportation lines to control much of commercial life. Public anger led to the passage of antitrust legislation and the breakup of the rail monopolies. Today's communications networks are global in scale. Yet we have not even begun to entertain the prospect of establishing a worldwide antitrust mechanism to deal with the creation of global media oligopolies.

- How do we prevent corporate owners of the radio frequencies from exploiting the data on people's lives that flows through cyberspace? What safeguards will people have over their privacy when all aspects of their lives are accessible as data bits traveling over corporate-owned and -controlled communications channels?

It was a U.S. official more than a generation ago who made the prescient remark that trade doesn't follow the flag anymore, it follows the communication systems. When our very right to communicate is no longer assured or secured by government but rather controlled by powerful media conglomerates operating in the global commercial arena, can basic freedoms and real democracy continue to exist?

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