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Expand Low Power Radio Stations

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OP ED

While the number of radio stations is growing, ownership is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands due to widespread media consolidation. This means today's radio often offers national playlists, syndicated programming and other piped-in content that threatens localism and the diversity of voices on the public airwaves.

When I was a member of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), we established low power radio service in 2000 as a partial antidote to the negative effects of consolidation.

Low power radio (LPFM) makes new licenses available for nonprofit community organizations, churches, schools and local governments.

Low power radio informs people about what is going on in their neighborhood or town; features local musicians and unique programming that reflects the local culture; and breaks from the same homogenized content that have pushed radio listeners away.

When LPFM was created, it was intended to reach across the whole country from rural areas, to towns and cities; only excluding the most congested urban markets like New York and Los Angeles. These ambitions were halted when Congress placed unfair restrictions on the service due to existing broadcasters' exaggerated charges of interference. Congress directed the FCC to commission a study to investigate these claims.

In 2003, MITRE, a not-for-profit engineering and consulting firm, concluded its report and found, as the FCC had from the beginning, that this service would not cause harmful interference to existing radio stations. There are currently 800 existing LPFMs, but there is space for hundreds, potentially thousands more if Congress acts to remove the unnecessary restrictions placed on this service.

There are wonderful examples of LPFM in rural areas, playing an important part in bringing communities together. Clay, West Virginia is an Appalachian coal town just north of Charleston and is home to one of the only local radio stations in Clay County. WYAP-LP is run by a handful of dedicated volunteers and the programming ranges from bluegrass music, to coverage of local sports games -- and on Friday they only play West Virginia artists, giving a boost to many old-time musicians throughout the area.

WQRZ-LP in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi brought national attention to the life-saving potential of LPFM when station manager Bryce Phillips waded through Katrina's flood water with a battery-pack strapped to his back in order to keep the station on air-broadcasting important emergency information-in the face of the deadly storm.

In the fields of Southwest Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers immigrant farmworkers who pick tomatoes for the largest fast-food companies and suppliers in the country, have carved out their slice of the airwaves with Radio Conciencia. WCIW-LP, carries programming in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and a number of indigenous Mayan languages spoken by the workers who are currently battling against sub-poverty wages and in extreme cases, modern-day slavery in Florida's tomato fields.

With the repeal of Congressional restrictions on LPFM, there could be more stations like WYAP, WQRZ, or WCIW not only in rural but also in suburban and urban America.

Low power radio promotes localism and diversity, not by limiting the rights of existing voices, but by adding new voices to the mix. Congress must enhance the statutory obligation to "encourage the larger and more effective use of radio in the public interest" by allowing this service to expand.

Bipartisan members of Congress have recently introduced a proposal to do so. President Obama's past support of similar legislation; and his pledge to encourage diversity in the ownership of broadcast media and to promote the development of new media outlets for expression of diverse viewpoints demonstrate his commitment to expanding low power radio.

Moreover, the issue of expanding low power radio is ultimately a popular demand from community and civil rights groups, churches, schools, immigrants and average citizens. When I served as FCC Commissioner, we received scores of calls and letters from people across the country who wanted to use the public airwaves to reach out to their communities or who wanted to hear more diversity and local content that reflects their community. These people's voices have been ignored for far too long. It's time we hear these voices. We can do so by expanding low power radio.

Tristani is a former FCC Commissioner.

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