

F C C B A S I C S

What does the FCC do?

The Federal Communications Commission was established by the Communications Act of 1934. Congress empowered the FCC to manage the public airwaves and telecommunications services. The FCC regulates TV and radio, telephone, cable, cell phone, and satellite companies.

In the realm of broadcast television and radio, the FCC grants broadcast licenses — free of charge — to TV and radio stations in exchange for their commitment to serve community needs. The FCC has the power to fine stations or revoke licenses if the stations violate FCC rules. The FCC also regulates media ownership, including how many stations one company can own in each market and the cross-ownership of different sectors, such as broadcast stations and daily newspapers.

The FCC does not pass laws. The FCC issues regulations and enforces laws enacted by Congress. Congress can overrule an FCC regulation, but this is uncommon.

Who makes decisions at the FCC?

There are five FCC commissioners, all appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Only three commissioners can be members of the same political party. One of the commissioners is appointed by the president as chairman.

The current chairman is Kevin Martin. He is joined by Commissioners Michael Copps, Jonathan Adelstein, Deborah Taylor Tate, and Robert McDowell.

Chairman Kevin Martin, a Republican, has served as a commissioner since 2001. He was named chairman by President Bush in March 2005, following the departure of Michael Powell. As Chairman, Martin has lobbied to “update” the longstanding prohibition on newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership.

Commissioner Michael Copps, a Democrat, has served as a commissioner since 2001. Copps actively opposed the ownership rule changes in 2003.

Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein, a Democrat, has served as a commissioner since 2002. Adelstein opposed the attempts to weaken broadcast ownership rules in 2003.

Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate, a Republican, was sworn in as a commissioner in January 2006. Her position on ownership rules is not yet public.

Commissioner Robert McDowell, a Republican, was sworn in as a commissioner in June 2006. His position on media ownership is unknown.