

# WVON: Minority Ownership Matters

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) will visit Chicago on September 20, 2007 to hear what the public thinks about weakening changes to media ownership rules. Weakening media ownership rules would make it harder for minorities and women to own media outlets, in turn silencing diverse points of view. The history of Chicago's WVON-AM and research by experts provides an example of how minority ownership matters.

## History of WVON

### 1963

Phil and Leonard Chess, owners of Chess Records, purchased WHFC-1450AM, a 1,000-watt station, and changed its call letters to WVON. This was the first time a Chicago station targeted African Americans around the clock. WVON consistently ranked in the top 5 "most listened to" stations in the market.

### 1969

Following the death of Leonard Chess, WVON was sold to George Gillette (heir to the shaving products company) and Potter Palmer (heir to Chicago's Palmer House). They formed Globetrotter Communications and moved WVON from 1450 frequency to the 5,000 watt 1390 signal, which would improve their coverage of Chicago. The 1450 frequency was left dormant.

### 1970's

In the mid 1970s, as the radio market in Chicago became more competitive and FM radio gained momentum, new management at Globetrotter Communications fired the entire on-air staff at WVON. In 1977, Globetrotter sold WVON to the Gannett Company, whose major holdings were in print media. Gannett had purchased an FM station in Chicago, which became known as WGCI.

### 1979

Two former WVON on-air personalities formed Midway Broadcasting Corp. and purchased the license for the 1450-AM frequency. Their station, WXOL, premiered in August 1979 and remains one of the few minority-owned stations in the market. In 1984, following Gannett's decision to drop the WVON call letters from its signal, WXOL's owners filed with the FCC to obtain the WVON call letters.

### 1980's

In 1986, at a high point of Black community political involvement in Chicago, which resulted in the election of Harold Washington, Chicago's first African-American mayor, Midway Broadcasting opted to change the station's format to talk, providing Chicago with its first Black-talk radio format.

## African Americans Value Black-Owned Radio

In the mid-1990s, researcher Catherine Squires surveyed WVON's audience in order to determine whether listeners were utilizing the information transmitted by the station in their political decision-making processes and in relation to their communities. Though not a news format, talk radio has had its place in public affairs programming for at least two decades. Many of the 232 people she surveyed said they believed the mainstream news framed stories in ways that blamed Black people for their problems, only covered the negative in Black communities, and tended to homogenize Black people and their experiences. By contrast, Black-owned media were, they said, "explicitly interested in Black issues and Black progress." WVON listeners, she learned, used that medium to voice their views, debate issues, and learn about things that were happening in which they might participate (e.g., marches and other events).

## Bias Perceived in Mainstream Media

Squires' research findings are similar to research filed in the FCC's current review of media ownership rules. Carolyn Byerly et al found that African-Americans who prefer to get news from local radio prefer minority-owned radio stations because "they give you the only accurate reporting." A significant number of the African-Americans surveyed (12 %) perceive widespread media bias against African American communities. Forty percent of the people surveyed said the news does not help them to understand the problems that are most important to them – safety, lack of income, and lack of affordable housing. And the problems of media bias are not limited to the African American community. As the National Association of Hispanic Journalists has reported, national television newscasts ignore Latinos and Latino-related issues.