

THE GROWTH OF SINCLAIR'S CONSERVATIVE MEDIA EMPIRE

The company has achieved formidable reach by focussing on small markets where its TV stations can have a big influence.

By Sheelah Kolhatkar



Sinclair has largely evaded the kind of public scrutiny given to its more famous competitor, Fox News.

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Lauren Hills knew that she wanted to be a news broadcaster in the fourth grade, when a veteran television anchor came to speak at her school's career day. "Any broadcast journalist will tell you something very similar," Hills said recently, when I met her. "For a majority of us, we knew at a very young age." She became a sports editor at her high-school newspaper, in Wellington, Florida, near Palm Beach, and then attended the journalism program at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. Before graduation, she began sending résumé tapes to dozens of TV stations in small markets, hoping for an offer. Hills showed me the list she had used in her search. Written in pen in the margin was a note to herself: "You can do it!!!!"

Hills was hired as a general-assignment reporter at a channel in West Virginia, in 2005, and began covering what she called "typical small-market news"—city-council meetings and local football games. "I remember calling my parents multiple times in the first six months. I was just overwhelmed," Hills told me. "My first live shot, my knees were shaking." She often covered three or four stories a day and was responsible for doing the interviews and the camerawork, lugging the heavy equipment from one location to the next. "There's extreme highs with the job, and sometimes extreme lows," Hills said. "The highs are what really hook you."

In 2012, Hills was offered a job as an on-air reporter at WPEC, the CBS affiliate in West Palm Beach. WPEC was one of the stations she'd watched with her parents as a child; it was, she told me, a "legendary" market for national stories, from major weather catastrophes to the vote recount in the 2000 Presidential election. "I grew up in this area," Hills said. "And now it was, Oh, my gosh, I am working here on a daily basis."

There's little glamour to working in local news. The broadcasts use green screens liberally, giving them a low-budget-movie look. On camera, the anchors, who select their own clothes and do their own hair, generally work in male-

female pairs, and can seem like they are on an awkward date, during which they just happen to be talking about neighborhood shootings and bears wandering down Main Street.

Hills found her work as a reporter rewarding, but, by the time she moved back to Florida, television stations were struggling to compete with digital media. WPEC was owned by Freedom Communications, a medium-sized, family-run company that also owned the *Orange County Register*, in California. Freedom had declared bankruptcy in 2009 and, not long after Hills began working at WPEC, Freedom sold its eight television stations to a company that Hills wasn't familiar with: Sinclair Broadcast Group. It was the beginning of troubling changes at the station.

Sinclair is the largest owner of television stations in the United States, with a hundred and ninety-two stations in eighty-nine markets. It reaches thirty-nine per cent of American viewers. The company's executive chairman, David D. Smith, is a conservative whose views combine a suspicion of government, an aversion to political correctness, and strong libertarian leanings. Smith, who is sixty-eight, has a thick neck, deep under-eye bags, and a head of silvery hair. He is an enthusiast of fine food and has owned farm-to-table restaurants in Harbor East, an upscale neighborhood in Baltimore. An ardent supporter of Donald Trump, he has not been shy about using his stations to advance his political ideology. Sinclair employees say that the company orders them to air biased political segments produced by the corporate news division, including editorials by the conservative commentator Mark Hyman, and that it feeds interviewers questions intended to favor Republicans.

In some cases, anchors have been compelled to read from scripts prepared by Sinclair. In April, 2018, dozens of newscasters across the country parroted Trump's invectives about "fake news," saying, "Some members of the media use their platforms to push their own personal bias and agenda to control exactly what people think. This is extremely dangerous to our democracy." In response, Dan Rather, the former anchor of "CBS Evening News," wrote, on Twitter, "News anchors looking into camera and reading a script handed down by a corporate overlord, words meant to obscure the truth not elucidate it, isn't journalism. It's propaganda. It's Orwellian. A slippery slope to how despots wrest power, silence dissent, and oppress the masses."

It's unclear whether Sinclair is attempting to influence the politics of its viewers or simply appealing to positions that viewers may already have—or both. Andrew Schwartzman, a telecommunications lecturer at Georgetown Law School, told me, “I don't know where their personal philosophy ends and their business goals begin. They're not the Koch brothers, but they reflect a deep-seated conservatism and generations of libertarian philosophy that also happen to help their business.”

In the past decade, consolidation in the media industry has reduced the number of outlets producing news. With advertising siphoned away by online platforms, dozens of newspapers have closed, leaving many towns with limited or no local coverage. The changing landscape has expanded the influence of companies like Sinclair, with profound political implications. According to the Pew Research Center, fifty per cent of Americans get their news from television. At a time when President Trump has undermined trust in the national media, and online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have spread misinformation created by Russian agents, seventy-six per cent of Americans say that they still trust their local news stations—more than the percentage professing to trust their family or friends.

Sinclair is especially well positioned to capitalize on this trust. It owns more stations in swing states than any other company. Since Trump began his Presidential campaign, many of Sinclair's political messages have hewed closely to his talking points. David Smith even met with Trump during the campaign, reportedly telling him, “We are here to deliver your message. Period.” In the election, voters in areas with a high concentration of Sinclair stations chose Trump over Hillary Clinton by an average of nineteen points.

There are regulations that prevent any single company from controlling too large a share of the press, in order to protect competition and the free exchange of ideas. Sinclair has achieved its formidable reach by exploiting loopholes in these regulations. During the past few decades, it has bought small and mid-sized television-station operators and then circumvented regulations by setting up shell companies that on paper appear to be separate entities but over which Sinclair exerts almost total control. Sinclair's stations—there are often several in the same broadcast area, branded as local ABC, CBS, NBC, or Fox affiliates—enjoy the trust of viewers because they appear independent, even though much of the content is dictated at a national level. A former news director at a Sinclair-owned station

told me that Smith “purposely went in and bought a whole bunch of stations in mid-America—i.e., Trump kinds of towns. Places where they could have a big influence.” She added, “I don’t care what your politics are—the bottom line is, they hatched a plan to have an effect on the majority of this country. And, when you look at it, I’m positive the right-wing commentaries, in small markets, had an effect on the election.”

Sinclair has even greater ambitions for expansion. In May, 2017, the company announced a proposed \$3.9-billion merger between Sinclair and Tribune Media Company, which owns forty-two television stations. The merger would make Sinclair far larger than any other broadcaster in the country, with stations beaming into seventy per cent of American households. The proposal alarmed regulatory and free-speech experts. Michael Copps, a former official at the Federal Communications Commission, told me, “One of the goals of the First Amendment is to make sure the American people have the news and information they need to make intelligent decisions about our democracy, and I think we’re pretty close to a situation where the population lacks the ability to do that. That’s the whole premise of self-government.” He went on, “There are a lot of problems facing our country, but I don’t know one as important as this. When you start dismantling our news-and-information infrastructure, that’s poison to self-government and poison to democracy.”

Sinclair has largely evaded the kind of public scrutiny given to its more famous competitor, Fox News, and David Smith sometimes expresses frustration that his business doesn’t command as much respect as Rupert Murdoch’s company, 21st Century Fox, which owns the channel. Fox News is the highest-rated cable property, with 2.5 million viewers during prime time. But twenty million or so U.S. households don’t have cable or streaming television, and therefore rely on local stations such as Sinclair’s. A Republican operative who has worked with Smith told me, “He has a shtick that he does not deviate from: ‘People watch broadcast television, and there’s a shitload of people in this country who do not have cable.’ And he’s right. Local TV is still where a significant cross-section of the population gets their news, and a lot of what’s going on in cable television is just totally irrelevant. It’s not a sexy business, but he’s laughing all the way to the bank.”

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Sinclair was founded by Smith's father, Julian Sinclair Smith, who worked in aerospace engineering before applying to the F.C.C., in 1965, for a license to operate a television station in Baltimore. In 1971, Julian Smith launched Channel 45, also known as WBFF. The airwaves are considered a publicly owned resource, and broadcasters must agree to devote a portion of their programming to serving the public interest. Julian's four sons—Fredrick, Duncan, Robert, and David—grew up watching the family's channel, known as “the BFF,” for Baltimore's Family Features, which showed old movies and children's shows. The Smith family ate dinner with the TV on, so that they could keep an eye out for technical problems. Julian encouraged his sons to help at the WBFF offices by hauling out garbage.

David was the most entrepreneurial of the boys. In the nineteen-seventies, when he was in his twenties, he became a partner in a company called Ciné Processors, which produced copies of pornographic films, including “Deep Throat.” (Smith's colleague in the enterprise told the *Los Angeles Times* that Ciné Processors later went out of business after a police raid.) David also founded, and then sold, a company that made television transmitters. In the nineteen-eighties, as Julian's health declined, the Smith sons began to take a more active role in running Sinclair. In 1991, the *Baltimore Sun* portrayed the brothers as role models in the business community. “Listen as they gather in the stately Roland Park home of the parents to talk about themselves and the station, the sons joking and wisecracking and chiding one another as if they are at some sort of bawdy class reunion, adding to each other's thoughts, and ultimately deferring almost solemnly to the father,” the reporter wrote.

Sinclair had recently introduced its first hour-long newscast, after David pointed out that Baltimore was one of the only top television markets without a 10 P.M. national news program. Soon, under David's direction, Sinclair began

buying new stations. “I didn’t want to be a digit head; I wanted to be an entrepreneur,” David told *Forbes* in 1996. “My father was too much of a visionary to care about profits. What I wanted was purely to make money.”

At the time, F.C.C. rules prohibited a company from owning two stations in the same market, but Smith found a work-around. Sinclair bought a television station in Pittsburgh, WPGH, even though Sinclair already owned its main rival, WPTT. The first Iraq War had just started, and the stock market was dropping, but Smith paid a high price—fifty-five million dollars—for the station. “Everybody thought it was the end of the world,” Smith said. “I didn’t. I believed that certain things were going to happen in the television industry, the most important being consolidation.”

To comply with the F.C.C., Sinclair would have to divest one of the two stations to an independent owner. Instead, Smith sold WPTT to its manager, a Sinclair employee named Edwin Edwards, Sr., and then signed an agreement that gave Sinclair day-to-day control over the station. A few years later, Sinclair replicated this strategy in Baltimore, divesting one station to a company called Glencairn, which was jointly controlled by Edwards and Smith’s mother. These “duopolies” gave the company leverage in purchasing syndicated television shows like “Friends” and “Cheers.” The fact that Edwards is African-American meant that Sinclair qualified for tax benefits for companies selling to minority owners. Although Sinclair told the F.C.C. that the divested stations were independent, filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission indicated that they were Sinclair assets.

By 1998, *Forbes* reported, Sinclair had made twelve of these so-called sidecar purchases, with eight more pending. All were made through Glencairn, Smith family members, or Sinclair executives, allowing the company to circumvent another F.C.C. regulation: an ownership cap dictating that no corporation can control more than thirty-five per cent of the national market, a figure that has since been raised to thirty-nine per cent. When reached for comment, Sinclair said that the company “used these legally permissible operating efficiencies to continue to survive in a very competitive business landscape,” and added that the sidecar deals were “similar in all material respects to arrangements in which many other broadcasters frequently engage.”

None of this would have been possible without the willful blindness of the F.C.C. Andrew Schwartzman, who has been involved in litigation against Sinclair, told me that Sinclair “pushed the envelope and the rules aggressively, time after time after time,” and that the company had “an unparalleled track record of getting away with stuff.” Emboldened by the sidecar strategy, Sinclair made a flurry of new purchases. In 1998, it announced plans to buy Sullivan Broadcast Holdings, which owned thirteen stations in places like Oklahoma City, Nashville, and Dayton. Around the same time, the F.C.C., under pressure from lobbyists, modified the duopoly rule to be more lenient. Sinclair responded by buying all but two of the Glencairn stations, for a fraction of their market value.

Public-interest groups and media organizations complained to the F.C.C., arguing that Glencairn was a front for Sinclair, and that the situation had allowed the company to build a near-monopoly in many markets. In 2001, an F.C.C. investigation found that Sinclair had exercised de-facto control over Glencairn, but the commission fined the two companies a mere forty thousand dollars each. The pattern continued, with Sinclair buying back divested stations when regulations loosened. Glencairn changed its name to Cunningham Broadcasting, and promised that it would be under new management—which, it turned out, meant Sinclair’s former president Robert Simmons. Shortly afterward, Sinclair filed applications to acquire five stations licensed to Cunningham, at what critics said was a tenth of their true market value.

Around that time, David Smith was arrested for committing “an unnatural and perverted sex act” with a prostitute while riding around Baltimore in a company-owned Mercedes. According to a police report, the prostitute called him her “regular date.” Smith never spoke publicly about the episode, but, after a plea agreement, he found an unusual way of fulfilling his community-service obligation—by having WBFF produce anti-drug ads.

In subsequent years, Smith took measures to deepen Sinclair’s influence among policymakers, apparently recognizing that the company’s profits were dependent upon regulatory decisions made in Washington. One of Smith’s first notable forays into politics was his support for Robert Ehrlich, Jr., a Republican congressman who represented Maryland from 1995 until 2003. Sinclair became a top donor to Ehrlich and, in 2001, Ehrlich sent the first of several letters on Sinclair’s behalf to Michael Powell, who had recently become the chair of the F.C.C. The commission was

investigating a request from Sinclair to buy a new group of stations, and Ehrlich protested the “unnecessary delays on pending applications.” The F.C.C.’s assistant general counsel responded that Ehrlich’s communication had violated procedural rules. Ehrlich sent another message, alleging that the delays were politically motivated and threatening to “call for a congressional investigation into this matter.” He added, “Knowing that you have served as Chairman for a few short months, we would prefer to give you an opportunity to address these concerns.” The proposed acquisitions were approved.

The following spring, Ehrlich announced that he would run for governor of Maryland, where a Republican hadn’t been elected in thirty-six years. According to a former employee of Sinclair’s station in Washington, D.C., Sinclair journalists were encouraged to broadcast stories critical of Ehrlich’s rival, Lieutenant Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend. “They went after her hard core. They put all the resources of the station into defeating her, and to electing Bob Ehrlich, because they wanted that kind of power in Maryland,” the former employee said. Ehrlich used a helicopter owned by Duncan Smith, David’s brother and the vice-president of Sinclair, to travel to campaign events, and to attend various functions in the week after he won the governor’s race, by four points. After the Baltimore *Sun* began reporting on the trips, the Ehrlich campaign said that it would reimburse the company for the flights.

In 2004, when Senator John Kerry challenged George W. Bush in his campaign for reelection, Sinclair generated more controversy. The company had created a corporate production center, where it put together news reports that were sent to stations across the country. Although it was unusual for local TV broadcasts to cover national news stories, Sinclair required its stations to air these segments. Some stations saw their ratings decline—it turned out that viewers often preferred local news—but the strategy was still economically attractive, since the company could employ fewer journalists. Sinclair also introduced the mandatory commentary segments, in which Mark Hyman complained about liberal bias in the media, criticized Kerry, warned that Christianity was under attack, and spoke admiringly of President Bush. In one segment, Hyman said that “terrorist leaders would dearly love to see President Bush replaced with Senator Kerry.” Sinclair described the editorials as “intended to stimulate public discourse,” boasting that “in an age of homogenized, bland, politically correct news, we are proud to deliver news and commentary that stimulates critical thinking and encourages viewers to get involved.”

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Sinclair strongly supported the second Iraq War, and that February Hyman travelled to Iraq, looking for stories to counteract negative media coverage. In April, 2004, Sinclair forbade its stations from airing a "Nightline" special produced by ABC News, called "The Fallen," in which Ted Koppel read the names of every member of the U.S. armed forces killed in the war. Senator John McCain published an open letter to David Smith. "I write to strongly protest your decision to instruct Sinclair's ABC affiliates to preempt this evening's Nightline program," McCain wrote. "Your decision to deny your viewers an opportunity to be reminded of war's terrible costs, in all their heartbreaking detail, is a gross disservice to the public, and to the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. It is, in short, sir, unpatriotic."

Not long afterward, Sinclair announced a plan to preempt its stations' regular prime-time programming to air a documentary called "Stolen Honor: Wounds That Never Heal." The film, which was scheduled to run two weeks before Election Day, regurgitated the claims of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, an attack group that had been buying ads in battleground states alleging that John Kerry, who had served in Vietnam, had contributed to the torture of American prisoners of war by testifying about atrocities committed during the conflict. The group's claims had

been largely discredited, and mainstream networks had rejected the film, but Hyman, who was also the vice-president for corporate relations, defended the company's decision. "This is a powerful story," he told the *Washington Post*. "The networks are acting like Holocaust deniers."

Sinclair's Washington-bureau chief, Jon Lieberman, told the *Baltimore Sun* that the film was "biased political propaganda, with clear intentions to sway this election." Federal regulations mandate that broadcast networks provide equal time to candidates on opposing sides, and Democrats in Congress threatened to block the renewal of Sinclair's licenses. In response, Sinclair reduced the length of the film and limited the number of stations on which it aired. The company also fired Lieberman, sued him for millions of dollars in damages, and attempted to prevent him from getting another job. The litigation, which dragged on for several years, ended in a settlement that forbade him from speaking publicly about Sinclair.

I met Lauren Hills in her apartment, in West Palm Beach. As we spoke, "NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt" flickered silently on a television in the corner of her living room. Hills, who has blue eyes, freckles, and curly strawberry-blond hair, told me that, when Sinclair took over WPEC, she knew little about the company. Around the country, hundreds of television stations were being bought and sold as the industry contracted. Sinclair acquired four other stations in Palm Beach around the same time, and nine others across Florida. At first, little at WPEC changed. Hills told me about covering the Delray Beach Jingle Bell Jog, a five-kilometre race, while wearing a Santa suit, and about her reporting on a drug epidemic in South Florida, work for which she won a Florida Associated Press Award. But there were worrying developments. Employees were required to sign contracts that gave the company the right to sue if they left their jobs early. Reporters were told to produce man-on-the-street interviews with topics and questions selected by Sinclair's corporate news division.

A former general-assignment reporter at the station, Jonathan Beaton, told me, "Almost immediately, I could tell it was a very corrupt culture, where you knew from top down there were certain stories you weren't going to cover. They wanted you to keep your head down and not upset the fruit basket. I'm a Republican, and I was still appalled by what I saw at Sinclair." Beaton characterized the man-on-the-street segments as "Don't forget to grab some random poor

soul on the street and shove a microphone in their face and talk about what the Democrats have done wrong.” He said that reporters generally complied because of an atmosphere of “intimidation and fear.”

A former WPEC reporter and anchor, Gary Widom, said that questions for the segments were often phrased to cast a negative light on President Obama. Sometimes they were based on inaccurate information or faulty premises. Widom regularly filled in as an anchor, and, on one occasion, he was assigned to interview a director who was making a film that was critical of Obama. Widom said that the documentary was “basically bashing the Administration, and everyone who was interviewed in it was someone who wasn’t going to vote for Obama.” On the air, he asked whether the filmmaker had considered interviewing any Obama supporters, a question that was met with bafflement. Widom said that he was never asked to fill in as an anchor again.

Sinclair began sending WPEC “must-runs”—pieces produced at the corporate level that local affiliates were required to air—including Hyman’s editorials. The segments were designed to look like news pieces, and to run directly after newscasts. In one, Hyman accused Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren of inciting their “unhinged” supporters to commit violence; in another, he derided the Obama Administration’s policy requiring that transgender students have access to their choice of school bathrooms. The segments embarrassed many of the Sinclair journalists. “None of them were what I would describe as good,” Aaron Weiss, a former Sinclair news director in Sioux City, Iowa, told me. “Some were less politically slanted than others. But many of the scripts were poorly written, left out crucial context, or didn’t tell a story well. Had it been up to me, I would never have run any of them, because they weren’t good TV or good journalism.”

WPEC tried to bury the segments by airing them at times when few people were watching, such as Sunday at 5 A.M. Employees were not only uncomfortable with some of the company’s requests; they were also poorly paid. “Some days, you were choosing between putting food on the table and gas in your car,” a former reporter at the station told me. “I heard of at least two employees who bumped into each other at check-cashing places, because they were getting loans. When I heard that, I was, like, Is that what this industry has come to?”

The ideological changes were not unique to WPEC. In a paper published last April, researchers at Emory University found that, after stations are acquired by Sinclair, they begin to focus more on national news stories, and the slant of the coverage shifts notably to the right. Smith, for his part, contends that Sinclair is simply counteracting liberal bias in the mainstream media. “Facts and truth have been lost for a long time and likely to never return,” he told *New York*, in April. “The print media is so left wing as to be meaningless dribble which accounts for why the industry is and will fade away.”

By the time of the 2016 Presidential primary, Sinclair was in a position to have a significant impact on the election. Its stations were concentrated in crucial states, such as Florida, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Ohio. In Michigan, it owned or operated at least five stations—branded as CBS, ABC, NBC, and Fox—that appeared to be independent and competing with one another. According to *Rolling Stone*, Sinclair hired one reporter to cover the race for all five. The reporter, Nick Minock, was granted exclusive one-on-one interviews with Trump, Donald Trump, Jr., Mike Pence, and other prominent Republicans. (Sinclair said that it offered interviews to Hillary Clinton and other Democrats and that the offers were declined; the Clinton campaign said that it was wary of bias in Sinclair’s coverage.) The Michigan stations barely mentioned one of the biggest scandals of the campaign—the emergence of the “Access Hollywood” tape, in which Trump boasted about grabbing women’s genitals. Trump won the state by about ten thousand votes.

A similar dynamic played out in Florida, at WPEC. A campaign adviser for Ben Carson named Armstrong Williams was a commentator for Sinclair, and also owned several divested Sinclair stations. In 2005, Sinclair had been sanctioned by the F.C.C. after it was revealed that Williams had been paid two hundred and forty thousand dollars to promote the Bush Administration’s education policies, and that he hadn’t disclosed the payments to his viewers. A former anchor-reporter at WPEC named Israel Balderas told me that he and his colleagues were dispatched to interview Carson, who had a house in Palm Beach, on multiple occasions. “Every time he made a mistake, Sinclair was right there to help him fix it, or to tell people why he was being taken out of context,” Balderas said. “It was the same thing with covering Donald Trump.” According to several people at the station, Sinclair provided suggested

questions for many of the interviews with conservative candidates, and most of the suggestions were nonconfrontational softballs.

Balderas told me that he refused to ask questions that he hadn't written himself, and that Sinclair assigned another reporter to do the interviews with candidates. Many Sinclair employees, Balderas said, felt trapped. "People said, 'Gosh, if you're a true journalist, you'd just quit.' But life is hard," Balderas, who is now an assistant professor of journalism and media law at Palm Beach Atlantic University, told me. "I feel compassion for all these folks. They have spouses, they have children."

In December of 2016, shortly after Trump won the election, Politico reported that Jared Kushner had told a private gathering of business executives that the Trump campaign had given Sinclair stations greater access in exchange for a promise to air interviews without additional commentary. Kushner reportedly boasted that Sinclair reached larger audiences than CNN, citing the critical swing state of Ohio. "It's math," Kushner said. Sinclair executives responded that there was nothing inappropriate about the arrangement. Still, according to an analysis by the *Washington Post*, Sinclair stations aired many more segments that were critical of Clinton than were critical of Trump. Most of them focussed on Clinton's private e-mail server and her supposed health issues. Meanwhile, Sinclair-owned stations aired fifteen exclusive interviews with Trump, and ten with Pence.

After Trump's victory, it looked as though Sinclair's investment in the candidate would pay off. In January, 2017, Trump appointed Ajit Pai, a vocal proponent of media deregulation, to be the chair of the F.C.C. Pai, formerly an associate general counsel at Verizon and an aide to Senators Jeff Sessions and Sam Brownback, was exactly the sort of commission head that Sinclair had been hoping for. He believed that competition from technology companies such as Google had made many government restrictions on traditional media irrelevant—an argument that echoed Smith's views on ownership caps and other regulations. Sinclair executives quickly tried to cultivate a relationship with Pai; shortly after the election, he addressed a gathering of Sinclair managers at the Four Seasons in Baltimore. He also met with David Smith and Sinclair's C.E.O., Christopher Ripley, the day before Trump's Inauguration.

It's not unusual for business executives to meet with the chair of the F.C.C., but Pai soon announced a series of policy changes that seemed designed to help Sinclair. The first was the reinstatement of the ultrahigh-frequency discount, an arcane rule that digital technology had rendered obsolete. The move served no practical purpose, but it freed Sinclair to acquire many more stations without bumping up against the national cap. The same month, Sinclair hired Boris Epshteyn, a Russian-born former Trump-campaign and Administration official, as a political correspondent; his pro-Trump commentaries now air several times a week. In one segment, last March, Epshteyn said, "Most cable networks and shows are run and staffed by those who cannot stand President Trump and will take any opportunity to embarrass him."

Three weeks after the rule change, Sinclair announced that it had agreed to the multibillion-dollar merger with Tribune Media Company. Deals of that size typically take months to negotiate, and the timing led some critics to speculate that Sinclair had known about the reinstatement of the UHF discount in advance. "Without that maneuver, Sinclair would never be able to do this transaction," a telecommunications attorney involved in litigation over the deal told me.

The F.C.C. soon made other regulatory modifications that were helpful to Sinclair. It eliminated a rule requiring television stations to maintain at least one local studio in licensed markets, essentially legitimizing Sinclair's centralized news model. Perhaps most perniciously, Pai took steps toward approving a new broadcast-transmission standard called Next Gen TV, which would require all consumers in the U.S. to purchase new televisions or converter devices. A subsidiary of Sinclair owns six patents necessary for the new standard, which could mean billions of dollars in earnings for the company. Jessica Rosenworcel, the sole Democratic commissioner at the F.C.C., told me, "It's striking that all of our media policy decisions seem almost custom-built for this one company. Something is wrong." Rosenworcel acknowledged that many F.C.C. policies need to be modernized, but, she said, "broadcasting is unique. It uses the public airwaves, it's a public trust." She added, "I don't think those ideas are retrograde. They are values we should sustain."

Sinclair handled its proposed merger with a disturbing level of confidence, even after the Department of Justice began investigating the deal for potential antitrust violations. Sinclair had offered to sell a number of stations, but once again planned to use illegitimate divestitures. Some stations would be sold to Cunningham, which was now run by Smith's mother's estate; others would be sold to Steven Fader, a close associate of Smith's who ran a car dealership—in which, it later emerged, Sinclair held a controlling interest. The F.C.C. and the D.O.J. both warned Sinclair about the dummy divestitures, insisting that the company find independent owners in ten problematic markets. According to a lawsuit later filed by Tribune, instead of taking steps to appease regulators, Sinclair executives “antagonized DOJ and FCC staff” by acting “confrontational” and “belittling.” The company offered to make sales in only four of the markets, and told the Justice Department that it would have to litigate for any further concessions. One Sinclair lawyer told government representatives, “Sue me.” There was no tactical reason for Sinclair to take such a combative and self-sabotaging stance. Instead, the episode seemed to reflect how Trump's own corruption and conflicts of interest have filtered into the business community. One industry expert who followed the proceedings closely told me that the company clearly “felt that, with the President behind them, why would the commission deny them anything?”

Gene Kimmelman, the president of the consumer-protection group Public Knowledge, told me, “It would be highly unusual for the President to weigh in on a transaction overseen by law enforcement or an independent agency. But this President is unorthodox. While it might have had an appearance of impropriety before, I have no idea how it would be viewed in today's political climate.” Many observers believed that Trump, out of personal spite, had already tried to scuttle another major business transaction: the eighty-five-billion-dollar merger of A.T. & T. and Time Warner. Trump has been a vocal critic of CNN, which is owned by Time Warner, and Trump's Justice Department had attempted to block the merger. (In June, courts allowed the deal to proceed. A month later, the D.O.J. appealed the decision.)

Public-interest groups and competitors filed objections to the Sinclair deal and, in late 2017, in response to pressure from Congress, the F.C.C. inspector general launched an investigation into whether Pai had improperly coordinated with the company. Then, in April, the Web site Deadspin edited the broadcasts of Sinclair anchors reciting the script

about fake news into one terrifying montage, with a tapestry of anchors in different cities speaking in unison. The video ignited public outrage, and Trump tweeted a defense of Sinclair, calling it “far superior to CNN and even more Fake NBC, which is a total joke.” (In a statement, a spokesperson for Sinclair said, “This message was not presented as news and was not intended to be political—there was no mention of President Trump, political parties, policy issues, etc. It was a business objective centered on attracting more viewers.”)

The controversy united Sinclair critics on both ends of the political spectrum. Sinclair is not the only media company with ties to the Trump Administration. Rupert Murdoch is a close adviser to Trump, and Fox News has become the Administration’s favored TV outlet. Trump is also friends with Chris Ruddy, the founder of the conservative online publisher Newsmax. Ruddy, who is based in Palm Beach and occasionally joins Trump at Mar-a-Lago, wants to build his company into a rival to Fox News. Both Ruddy and Murdoch had an interest in curtailing Sinclair’s growth, and Ruddy hired lobbyists to argue that the Tribune merger would result in a dangerous homogenization of news. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, he wrote, “While President Trump has been condemning ‘fake news,’ his very own FCC is pursuing policies that will lead to the greatest concentration of television media power in history.”

Ruddy also told the President that he opposed the merger. “I never asked him to meddle in anything, and I never got the sense he was going to do that,” Ruddy told me. “But I wanted him to be aware, because he liked Sinclair, why I was doing it. He always had an opposing view that Sinclair was a good actor.” Ruddy said that Trump was “generally supportive of Sinclair” but seemed open to his arguments.

In July, Pai announced that he had serious concerns that after the merger Sinclair would continue to control the television stations it was divesting, “in violation of the law.” He referred the deal to an administrative-law judge for review, delaying it for months and likely dooming it altogether. A week later, Trump tweeted that the decision was “disgraceful,” and “sad and unfair.”

Given Sinclair’s history of getting around F.C.C. rules, this outcome was a surprise. “I think they were skating on very thin ice,” Kimmelman told me. “In a situation where they had grown so large, and were buying new properties

that put them over a national ownership limit, over community-by-community limits, I think the past maneuvers were just too much for the F.C.C. to stomach.” The administrative-law hearing has not been scheduled, but, Kimmelman said, “the legal issue surrounding the transaction includes a question of whether Sinclair is fit to be a licensee, period. Whether it is fit to own *any* stations, not two hundred. *Any*. So I think it has a much bigger legal cloud over its head.”

Sinclair’s humbling comes too late for many of the employees of WPEC. Jonathan Beaton told me that working for Sinclair had sapped his idealism about the profession. “The trade-off for years in journalism was, I’ll work these hours—the hours suck—but at least my morality is intact,” he said. “The trade-off isn’t the same as it used to be. Now you work the awful hours, for terrible pay, and you don’t even get to feel good about what you’re doing.” Beaton left journalism in 2015 and launched a P.R. firm.

Lauren Hills told me that her work as a reporter had been draining but rewarding. “I loved my career in journalism,” she said. “I loved storytelling. I loved the visual aspect.” But, after almost four years at Sinclair, she quit. She now works in public relations for a Florida utility company. Widom, Balderas, and others I spoke with left WPEC as well. The station continues to have significant staff turnover. Almost a year after Hills and Beaton departed the company, Sinclair sued them both, claiming that they had breached their contracts by leaving before their terms were completed. Hills and Beaton had been making less than fifty thousand dollars a year. Sinclair, a corporation with almost three billion dollars in revenue, was suing them for seventeen thousand five hundred dollars and fifty-seven hundred dollars, respectively. Both suits were eventually dropped.

Although the collapse of the Tribune deal was a setback for Sinclair, Smith’s ambitions to build a conservative media empire have not diminished. In 2015, Sinclair bought an online news company, Circa, and it has been exploring ways to deliver its right-leaning content to more viewers through a proprietary streaming application. Sinclair has reportedly held talks with current and former Fox News anchors, with an eye toward competing more directly with the channel. And the F.C.C. recently announced a potential regulatory change that would please Smith and his

company: the commission is considering raising the national ownership cap. Sinclair, unsurprisingly, supports eliminating the rule entirely. ♦

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