Wireless Spectrum Fraud by AT&T, Cingular (SBC & BellSouth), Verizon, T-Mobile and Sprint? Are these “Very Small Businesses”? 


Teletruth today filed an $8 billion complaint alleging that Verizon, AT&T, Cingular (SBC, AT&T and BellSouth), T-Mobile, Sprint and others rigged the FCC wireless auctions by creating false fronts to pose as “very small businesses”. This allowed these companies to secure valuable wireless spectrum at discounted prices. This Complaint was filed with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and various committees in Congress.

Deceptive Practices: Is it legal for America’s “Very Large Businesses” to pose as “Very Small Businesses” to win wireless licenses to be used by the very large business? Data from phone company annual reports:

- Salmon PCS LLC ---In November 2000, Cingular formed Salmon to bid as a “very small business” for certain 1900 MHz band PCS licenses auctioned by the FCC.
- In November 2004, Cingular and Edge Mobile Wireless formed Edge Mobile, (Edge) to bid as an “entrepreneur” for certain 1900 MHz band PCS licenses auctioned by the FCC.
- AT&T Wireless’s financial statements include other “variable interest entities” (read very small business), similar to Salmon and Edge Mobile Wireless.
- Verizon Wireless: On February 15, 2005, the FCC’s auction of broadband personal communications services licenses ended and Verizon Wireless and Vista PCS were the highest bidders for 63 licenses totaling approximately $697 million. --- Vista works for Verizon.

Is it legal to keep the estimated $8 billion that was saved by posing as a “very small business”? Doesn’t this harm competition? Doesn’t this defraud the government out of billions of dollars? Why haven’t the FCC and DOJ stepped in to get the money back?

Designated Entities or “Deceptive Entities”? 

The FCC even has a name for these companies: “Designated Entities”.

Complaint: Designated Entities
Commissioner Adelstein on April 25, 2006 wrote:¹

“We missed a real opportunity to shut down what almost everyone recognizes has the potential for the largest abuse of our Designated Entity program: **giant wireless companies using false fronts to get spectrum on the cheap.**”

The story is simple. The FCC auctions off something called “Spectrum”, which is used for wireless services, broadband services, television, radio, etc. Also known as the “airwaves”, the American people own these airwaves and give licenses for the use of these airwaves. An example: on June 29th, 2006, the FCC is about to have its 66th auction of spectrum for Advanced Wireless Services (AWS).²

“Today, the (FCC) adopted a Public Notice that establishes procedures, minimum opening bids, and a reserve price for the FCC’s upcoming first auction of spectrum licenses for Advanced Wireless Services (AWS-1). This auction, Auction No. 66, is scheduled to begin June 29, 2006, and will include 1,122 AWS-1 licenses in the 1710-1755 MHz and 2110-2155 MHz bands.”

This current spectrum auction is supposed to yield between $9-$15 billion.

The FCC, in creating this auction, is supposedly “promoting the rapid deployment of broadband, voice, and data services to the public by new AWS licensees.”³ And yet, the FCC’s most recent decision, April 25th, 2006⁴, did not address or fix the fact that these very large companies were able to rig the “small business” wireless auctions.⁵

FCC Commissioner Copps wrote:

“News reports indicate that, in prior auctions, entities with deep pockets helped themselves to discounts they were never meant to enjoy. This unacceptable behavior threatens the integrity of our auctions and, worse, it cheats consumers. It costs taxpayers millions of dollars in foregone revenue. It also means that spectrum goes to those most willing and able to manipulate the rules of the game, rather than to the entities Congress actually intended to benefit… So, our job is to deny wealthy companies or individuals any opportunity to misuse the DE discount to outbid small carriers – the very carriers the DE program is meant to protect.”

The phone companies will argue that the are playing by the rules.

**Teletruth believes this is fraud.** This is out-and-out-deception. Imagine that your state is building a road and a percentage of contractors must be small businesses. However, on
investigation you see contractors larger than Trump and other very large contractors have created shell companies to bid and get the contracts. Wouldn’t those contractors be put in jail?

And these companies know full-well they are doing something wrong. Cingular writes:

“This … entities were formed to enable individuals and businesses with limited assets and revenues … to bid on licenses that were otherwise unavailable to large entities.”

And it directly impacts the authentic small businesses. Verizon and Vista PCS (Verizon’s front group) were the highest bidders in the 2005 auctions, meaning that Vista PCS won through its ability to outbid every real small business that wanted those licenses.

“On February 15, 2005, the FCC’s auction of broadband personal communications services licenses ended and Verizon Wireless and Vista PCS, LLC were the highest bidders for 63 licenses totaling approximately $697 million.”

Verizon, AT&T et al are NOT very small businesses and there is no law that can be cited that will make creating dummy corporations (“false fronts”) to win something that is designated for small businesses by large corporations legal. And this problem has been throughout the auction process with different groups acting as shills for the large corporations.

Some of the Designated Entities with National Carriers Relationships
(source: Council Tree, 2006)

- Alaska Native Wireless, L.L.C. (AT&T Wireless)
- Salmon PCS, LLC (Cingular)
- Edge Mobile (Cingular)
- Vista PCS (Verizon Wireless),
- Cook Inlet/VS GSM VII PCS (T-Mobile)
- SVC BidCo, L.P (Sprint).
- Wirefree Partners III (Sprint)

Teletruth supports the original principles of spectrum for entrepreneurs and does not argue that some of these companies are legitimate concerns that have large funding partners. Nor do we claim any knowledge that they, themselves are involved with some form of tomfoolery. This is an industry-wide problem. The system has been abused. While
everyone knows and acknowledges that this is wrong, the regulators have decided to ignore it.

Our request for legal action is aimed at ending this refusal to enforce the law. America has been robbed. Its treasury has been robbed of billions of dollars, and its market has been robbed of competition.

Conclusions:

America is 16th in broadband and needs innovation and competition. Instead, the system designed to bring this needed entrepreneurial expertise, and protect the rights of America’s innovators and small businesses, slaps them in the face. We are 16th in broadband because the large corporations that promised deployments, and that we put our trust in, gamed the regulatory system in multiple ways, and then failed to deliver. This is yet another view of the deceptive practices and should be treated as such. The FCC, DOJ, SEC and Congress should:

- Revoke the previous licenses that Verizon, AT&T, Cingular (SBC, BellSouth), Sprint and T-Mobile received under false pretenses.
- The companies should be taken to court over this act of fraud and pay damages for their fraudulent acts.
- The SEC should examine the lack of disclosure made by these companies about their relationships to fake-groups set up to bid as “small businesses”.
- Congress should commence an investigation into the failure to enforce Section 257 of the Act and the FCC’s failure to protect the rights of small businesses.
- The wireless companies should be divested from their wireline, broadband and long distance owners. It is clear that these companies are too powerful and have used their wireline services to cross-subsidize their own wireless businesses.
- Block the proposed AT&T-BellSouth merger. These companies are already too big and can’t be trusted. Previous mergers have proven that these companies, when they get larger, do not compete but reinforce their own market position.
- ALL of the original Bell grandfathered-in cellular licenses and all other auctions need to be investigated.
Small Business Regulations

Here’s the FCC discussion in their April 25th ruling on small business regulations.9

“Throughout the history of the auctions program, the Commission has endeavored to carry out its Congressional directive to promote the involvement of designated entities in the provision of spectrum-based services. Congress recommended that the Commission, in assisting designated entities, consider the use of various mechanisms such as tax credits and bidding preferences. Yet, in so doing, Congress also mandated that the Commission safeguard the award of the benefits it distributed to ‘prevent unjust enrichment as a result of the methods employed to issue licenses’.”

Congress made sure that there were provisions in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 so that small businesses could compete in telecommunications and information markets and even remove barriers to entry for entrepreneurs. And the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (“Commission”) is supposed to fulfill these obligations.

“SEC. 257. MARKET ENTRY BARRIERS PROCEEDING.(a) ELIMINATION OF BARRIERS- Within 15 months after the date of enactment of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Commission shall complete a proceeding for the purpose of identifying and eliminating, by regulations pursuant to its authority under this Act (other than this section), market entry barriers for entrepreneurs and other small businesses in the provision and ownership of telecommunications services and information services, or in the provision of parts or services to providers of telecommunications services and information services.

“b) NATIONAL POLICY- In carrying out subsection (a), the Commission shall seek to promote the policies and purposes of this Act favoring diversity of media voices, vigorous economic competition, technological advancement, and promotion of the public interest, convenience, and necessity.”

The policy of small business spectrum licenses, also called “entrepreneur” licenses, is not new. It was discussed in the first FCC report on wireless competition in 1995.

46. The Commission has allocated 120 MHz [**43] to broadband PCS, which has been licensed in six bands; three bands each containing thirty MHz (Blocks A, B and C), and three bands each containing ten MHz (Blocks D, E and F) … In the auctions for Blocks C and F, the Commission has limited bidder eligibility to "entrepreneurs" with less
than $125 million in gross revenues and $500 million in total assets. Winning bidders for these entrepreneurs' blocks may pay for their licenses in installments and small businesses (under $40 million in gross revenues), including small businesses owned by minorities and women and small rural telephone companies, are eligible for bidding credits and enhanced installment payments. Rural telephone companies are eligible to obtain smaller, geographically partitioned broadband PCS licenses in order to provide service in their rural, wireline service areas.\textsuperscript{10}

**Designated Entities or Deceptive Entities?**

**This out and out deception is not new.** It’s been around for years, and it is growing. The FCC has only ignored this issue, even while Commissioner Copps noted that these practices “erode the integrity of our auctions by masquerading as small carriers”, and will impact the current and future auctions, not simply the past auctions.\textsuperscript{11}

“I expressed concern about misuse of our Designated Entity program – calling for action to fix it in advance of the AWS auction. As I explained then, I believe the DE program plays a critical role in ensuring that smaller carriers have a fighting chance to obtain spectrum resources. But at the same time, we have a solemn obligation to take a strong stand against abuses of the program. We must not allow deep-pocketed companies or individuals to erode the integrity of our auctions by masquerading as small carriers. It is critically important that we act to ensure reforms that protect against fraud in time for the upcoming AWS auction.”\textsuperscript{12}

This problem is deep and insidious. There has been some recent legal action taken in one case, as pointed out by USA Today:\textsuperscript{13}

"In perhaps the best-known case, a lawsuit charges Mario Gabelli, whose company manages billions of dollars in mutual fund and private assets, with creating "sham" small businesses in a series of auctions to win at least $85 million in discounts. Entities were formed a few days before each auction, often were dissolved shortly afterward and never used the licenses, some of which were later sold for profit, the lawsuit says. It was filed by a citizen under a law that lets an individual sue on the government's behalf. In statements, Gabelli's telecom company, Lynch Interactive, called the suit "frivolous" and says it "adhered to both the letter and spirit" of FCC rules."

This is crime being committed against the US government, not to mention a crime against competition. These companies are gaming the regulatory system and it should be
investigated now. And yet, every government agency, while it doesn’t consider these groups a good thing for the public interest, has yet to take an action that any five-year-old could understand as just plain wrong. The Department of Justice knows there's a problem.

“The U.S. Department of Justice ("Department")... supports the Federal Communications Commission's ("FCC") proposal to deny designated entity ("DE") benefits to entities that have a material relationship with a large in-region incumbent wireless service provider or a large entity that has a significant interest in communications services. The Department believes this proposal will serve the public interest by ensuring that DEs are in fact small businesses.”

Instead of talking, why hasn’t this agency gone after the money in the previous auctions? And the Department knows that these entities are controlled by the large phone companies

“The Department's extensive experience reviewing DE's relationships with large wireless carriers in its numerous wireless merger investigations, it has often encountered DEs that are not independent of large enterprises”.

According to Commissioner Adelstein, when the FCC had the chance to change these practices, they chose not to:  

"On January 27, 2006, my colleagues and I adopted an FNPRM in which we tentatively concluded that we should modify our Part 1 rules to restrict the award of designated entity benefits to an otherwise qualified designated entity where it has a ‘material relationship’ with a ‘large in-region incumbent wireless service provider.’ This position was supported by a large and diverse group of commenters ranging from DEs to Tier II carriers, the minority community to rural telephone companies, and even members of Congress and the Department of Justice.

"Yet, in a troubling and curious reversal, less than three months later, I stand alone in dissenting from our decision today to not to close this obvious loophole. It is stunning that we have failed to take any meaningful action to specifically address the single biggest issue facing the DE program given the overwhelming support in the record to do so. We missed a real opportunity to shut down what almost everyone recognizes has the potential for the largest abuse of our DE program: giant wireless companies using false fronts to get spectrum on the cheap."
The FCC has it wrong…. It shouldn't be questioning whether the rules are adequate, it should have been investigating this as a straightforward fraud case. These companies knew they were playing with the rules.

**Dummy Corporations Abound.**

**Some of the Designated Entities with National Carriers Relationships**
(source: Council Tree, 2006)

- Alaska Native Wireless, L.L.C. (AT&T Wireless)
- Salmon PCS, LLC (Cingular)
- Edge Mobile (Cingular)
- Vista PCS (Verizon Wireless)
- Cook Inlet/VS GSM VII PCS (T-Mobile)
- SVC BidCo, L.P (Sprint).
- Wirefree Partners III (Sprint)

**Cingular, AT&T, SBC, BellSouth, and T-Mobile**

As previously noted, this problem has been going on for a while, thanks to the failure of the FCC to properly monitor and enforce the small business statutes. According to the Cingular 10K for 2002, (published in 2003), the company had put in over $4.3 billion dollars to play-act as a small. Salmon was "formed to bid as a very small business", thus, it only existed to help Cingular get use of low cost licenses. Cingular also had a deal with T-Mobile over another group called “Factory”.

"The Company has investments in affiliates for which it does not have a controlling interest that are accounted for under the equity method. The more significant of these investments are GSM Facilities, LLC (Factory), a jointly-controlled infrastructure venture with T-Mobile for networks in the New York City metropolitan area, California and Nevada, and Salmon, formed to bid as a "very small business" on FCC licenses and build out and operate wireless voice and data communications systems using those licenses. Investments in and advances to equity affiliates consist of the following."
Cingular Investment in and Advance to Equity Affiliates
(in the millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investment in Factory</td>
<td>$1,275</td>
<td>$1,966</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment in Salmon</td>
<td>$262</td>
<td>$236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced to Salmon</td>
<td>$475</td>
<td>$101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>$11</td>
<td>$13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$2,033</td>
<td>$2,316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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We note: T-Mobile is owned by a foreign concern, “Deutsche Telecom”, Germany’s largest phone company.

Here are Cingular’s own words in 2006, claiming to be the largest wireless US company. Cingular is owned by BellSouth and SBC. Cingular also bought AT&T’s wireless division as well as AT&T. SBC renamed itself to AT&T.

“Cingular Wireless is the largest wireless company in the United States, with more than 54 million subscribers who use the nation’s largest digital voice and data network.”

SBC-AT&T-BellSouth-Cingular – Other Data

AT&T had a number of different groups that were added to the Cingular mix, which they call “Variable Interest Entities” This is from the 2005 Cingular Annual Report.

“These (Variable Interest) entities were formed to enable individuals and businesses with limited assets and revenues to partner with, and receive financing from, large businesses, such as the Company or AT&T Wireless, to bid on licenses that were otherwise unavailable to large entities. To date, the activities of these entities have consisted primarily of acquiring licenses through acquisitions and FCC auctions and network construction.”

- “Salmon PCS LLC ---In November 2000, the Company and Crowley Digital Wireless, LLC (Crowley Digital) entered into an agreement, pursuant to which Salmon PCS LLC (Salmon) was formed to bid as a “very small business” for certain 1900 MHz band PCS licenses auctioned by the FCC.”

- “AT&T Wireless Variable Interest Entities --- As a result of the AT&T Wireless acquisition, the Company’s consolidated financial statements include other variable interest entities, similar to Salmon and Edge Mobile Wireless.”
“Edge Mobile Wireless, LLC ---In November 2004, the Company and Edge Mobile Wireless, LLC (Edge Mobile Wireless) formed Edge Mobile, LLC (Edge) to bid as an “entrepreneur” for certain 1900 MHz band PCS licenses auctioned by the FCC. In February 2005, Edge’s total high bids for the 21 licenses it won at auction in November 2005 amounted to $181, of which the Company was obligated to fund $174.”

Verizon

Verizon is also disguising itself as a “very small business” in plain violation of law. Here, Verizon claims that it and Vista PCS were the two highest bidders in the broadband personal communications services licenses auction.

“On February 15, 2005, the FCC’s auction of broadband personal communications services licenses ended and Verizon Wireless and Vista PCS, LLC were the highest bidders for 63 licenses totaling approximately $697 million. On May 13, 2005, the licenses won by Verizon Wireless were granted by the FCC. The licenses won by Vista PCS remain subject to FCC approval.”

Never heard of Vista PCS? Well, that’s because Verizon doesn’t say that Vista PCS is a Verizon-front. And like Cingular, Verizon is the “industry-leader” and the second largest wireless concern in the country.

“Verizon Wireless is the industry-leading wireless communications provider in the United States in terms of profitability, as measured by operating income. Verizon Wireless has the second largest customer base of any U.S. wireless provider, with 51.3 million wireless subscribers as of December 31, 2005.”

Is it an SEC violation for a company to not properly disclose important information about the relationship of Verizon and Vista PCS?

The Concentration of Power, Not Competition and Diversity.

According to Council Tree, an authentic small business entity, the consolidation of power and coverage is what this is all about. The large company gets the rights of the company they created (or partnered with). It gives the large company the coverage they want at a discounted price. As found, 93% of the Vista licenses were in Verizon territory, 98% of the Cook-Inlet licenses in existing T-Mobile territories, while 100% of the Edge Mobile
licenses were within Cingular territories, and 100% of Wirefree spectrum was in the Sprint territories.

“In Auction 58, 93 percent of the spectrum rights (POPs) for which Vista PCS, LLC was a high bidder was within the existing territory of Verizon Wireless, with whom it has a series of material arrangements. Ninety-eight percent of the spectrum rights (POPs) for which Cook Inlet/VS GSM VII PCS, LLC was a high bidder was within the existing territory of T-Mobile, with whom it has a series of material arrangements. And 100 percent of the spectrum rights (POPs) for which Edge Mobile, LLC (material arrangements with Cingular) and Wirefree Partners III, LLC (material arrangements with Sprint Nextel) was within the respective national wireless service provider’s territory.”

Council Tree also quotes T-Mobile about how these “designated entities” are “extending the influence of the already dominant player”.19

“We do not qualify as a Designated Entity, and so in order to continue expanding service to our customers, we currently hold non-controlling ownership interests in two companies that qualify as Designated Entities, Cook Inlet/VS GSM V PCS Holdings, LLC (“CIVS V”) and Cook Inlet/VS GSM VI PCS Holdings, LLC (“CIVS VI”). These two companies (hereafter referred to as the “CIRI Designated Entities”) are controlled by an affiliate of Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (“CIRI”). Through wholesale reseller and other contractual arrangements, T-Mobile customers can obtain service in territories covered by the C and F Block spectrum licenses that are owned and operated by the CIRI Designated Entities.”

And Council Tree points out that Verizon simply characterizes the “Vista PCS Auction 58 spectrum rights as if they are part of the Verizon wireless portfolio”.20

“If we considered all acquisition transactions that are pending completion in 2005, including Auction No. 58 for both us and Vista, we would have access to spectrum in all of the top 100 BTAs, and in those BTAs, we would average 39.9 MHz.”

How Much Was Overcharged to Date? Over $8 Billion.

The next two exhibits summarize the data, using the information supplied for Auctions 35 and 58 alone. In the first case, the “Designated Entities” saved about $34.6 million dollars per license in Auction 35 and $5.6 million in Auction 58.
Cost Per License

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<th>Auction</th>
<th>DE</th>
<th>Retail</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>$43.2</td>
<td>$77.7</td>
<td>$34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>$ 8.2</td>
<td>$13.8</td>
<td>$ 5.6</td>
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(There were 379 licenses in these two auctions alone.)

If you simply re-price the “DE” licenses at retail prices, there was $9.049 billion that was saved. This amount only includes two auctions and does NOT include the other FCC auctions.

DE As If They Paid Retail
(in the millions)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Auction</th>
<th>DE</th>
<th>Retail</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>$5,524</td>
<td>$9,947</td>
<td>$4,423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>$ 902</td>
<td>$1,520</td>
<td>$ 618</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$6,426</td>
<td>$15,475</td>
<td>$9,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>$9,049</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owes:</td>
<td>$8,144</td>
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</table>

However, there is a need to adjust this number. According to Council Tree21, the primary large carriers have 90% of the market based on different indicators, including the number of subscribers, the percent of spectrum and the percent of industry revenue.

“90 percent of industry subscribers, 91 percent of industry spectrum (MHz-POPs), and 92 percent of industry revenue”.

Therefore, the total cost to the government was $8.144 billion. This is the low-end number, since the FCC is currently at auction number 66, this does not include any hanky-panky from the previous 63 auctions that the FCC has overseen. (There were 65 auctions (or at least numbered auctions) to date and we include two auctions in our analysis.)

To see other sources:

Council Tree’s Comments and Reply Comments
http://www.teletruth.org/docs/counciltreewirelessDE.pdf
http://www.teletruth.org/docs/counciltreewirelessDE.pdf
Media Access Comments: (comments of NHMC, et al)22
http://www.teletruth.org/docs/mediaccesswirelessDE.pdf
Conclusions:

America has been robbed. Its treasury has been robbed of billions of dollars, and its market has been robbed of competition.

America needs broadband competition. We are currently 16th in the world because the phone companies failed to deliver on previous promises to rewire America with fiber optic services. Instead, the Bell companies rolled out inferior DSL services over the old copper wiring, but pocketed the money from customers.

To learn more about the Bells failed fiber deployments see: http://www.newnetworks.com/broadbandscandals.htm

And here we find another scam that could also harm America’s broadband and economic growth. The phone companies, by rigging the bidding and allowing their own deceptive partners to get licenses, as well as the own licenses, closes the door on innovative new smaller competitors using wireless broadband. They can't afford the deep pocket bids of the Bells’ dummy corporations. The Bell companies have also been suing communities because some municipalities have been rewiring of wifi-ing their own towns. They have been also getting state legislatures to outlaw municipal builds. And now we find that they have gamed the regulatory system to act as “Very Small Businesses” – yet another attempt to keep their monopoly control.

This is a deceptive practices case and should be treated as such. The FCC and DOJ, SEC should:

- Revoke the previous licenses that Verizon, AT&T, Cingular (SBC, BellSouth), Sprint and T-Mobile received under false pretenses.
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- ALL of the original Bell grandfathered-in cellular licenses and all other auctions need to be investigated.
ENDNOTES:

3. Ibid.
8. Comments, Council Tree Corporation, WT Docket No. 05-211, February 24, 2006.
14. Department of Justice Ex Parte, WT Docket No. 05-211, March 17, 2006.
15. FCC Commissioner Adelstein Separate Statement, WT Docket No. 05-211,

16 Cingular Web site, March 17, 2006
17 Verizon 10K for the year 2005
18 Reply Comments, Council Tree Corporation, WT Docket No. 05-211, March 3, 2006
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Comments, Council Tree Corporation, WT Docket No. 05-211, February 24, 2006
22 Media Access Project on behalf of our clients, National Hispanic Media Coalition, Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, Inc., and Reclaim the Media