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## **OVER HALF OF LOCAL NEWS BROADCASTS IGNORED 2002 MIDTERM ELECTION CAMPAIGNS**

Stations Air Nearly Four Times as Many Political Ads as Campaign Stories during Local News

*Large media owned stations least likely to cover local campaigns, new study suggests*

**Online video archive of campaign news stories launches: The Lear Center Local News Archive**

WASHINGTON – Over half of the top-rated half-hours of local news broadcasts that aired in the weeks leading up to the 2002 midterm elections did not contain a single story about the campaign, a new report shows. This startling finding comes on the heels of a recent FCC ruling that relaxes media ownership rules, and with both houses of Congress now tackling the issue.

Of the more than 10,000 broadcasts analyzed by the study, 44 percent contained at least one campaign news story. This compares to 82 percent of the same broadcasts that contained at least one paid campaign ad. Just seven percent of the broadcasts analyzed contained three or more campaign news stories, while nearly half – 49 percent – contained three or more paid campaign ads.

“While there are some encouraging exceptions, most local television stations ignored the 2002 campaign on most of their top-rated broadcasts,” said Martin Kaplan, co-Principal Investigator on the project, during testimony today at a Senate Commerce Committee hearing. “At the same time, those stations took in record-breaking amounts of political advertising revenue.”

The report ([www.localnewsarchive.org/pdf/LocalTV2002.pdf](http://www.localnewsarchive.org/pdf/LocalTV2002.pdf)), released by the Lear Center Local News Archive, is a collaboration between the USC Annenberg School’s Norman Lear Center and the Wisconsin NewsLab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The findings are based on analysis of the highest-rated half-hour news program aired during the early evening (4:00 – 7:30 pm) and the highest-rated half-hour of late local news (9:00 – 11:30 pm) every night of the week on 122 randomly selected local television stations in the top 50 media markets in the United States. The broadcasts analyzed in the report aired from September 18 through November 4, 2002. The comparative political advertising data come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Both projects are funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

In conjunction with the report, the project is making the campaign stories analyzed accessible free-of-charge to registered users on the first searchable online video archive of campaign news stories

aired on regular local television news broadcasts. The archive can be found at [www.localnewsarchive.org](http://www.localnewsarchive.org). The archive allows users to define either broad or narrow search criteria, and then watch the stories that meet their selections.

### **Majority of local news contained no election coverage**

Over the seven-week period analyzed, 56 percent of the top-rated half-hour news broadcasts did not contain a single campaign story. In the 44 percent that did, the average election story was 89 seconds long. When campaign stories aired, only 28 percent contained candidates saying anything at all. In those stories showing candidates speaking, the average sound bite was 12 seconds long.

Nationwide, 68 percent of all the election stories aired in the final three weeks of the campaign, and 54 percent aired in the final two weeks of the campaign.

### **Few stories focus on campaign issues or local races**

Overall, 48 percent of the stories in the sample were about either campaign strategy or the campaign horserace. Strategy stories focus on the tactic of a candidate, party or interest group. Horserace stories are primarily concerned with which candidate is ahead or behind in a race, usually using poll results.

Only 27 percent of the stories that aired focused on campaign issues or analyzed political advertising.

Nationwide, 38 percent of all campaign stories focused on a gubernatorial race. In contrast, 20 percent of the stories focused on U.S. Senate races, and only seven percent centered on campaigns for the U.S. House.

Races for the state legislature only accounted for three percent of the stories, and potentially high-profile statewide races, such as secretary of state or attorney general, were the focus of just two percent of the stories. Four percent of all the stories focused on regional, county or city offices, and six percent were stories about ballot initiatives or referenda. The remaining stories focused on voting issues (11 percent), multiple races (six percent), the courts (one percent), and other aspects of the election process (one percent).

Even when counting stories about U.S. House races as a type of local election, only 14 percent of all the stories in the sample focused on local races.

President Bush, who traversed the nation on behalf of Republican candidates during the midterm election, appeared campaigning in more stories than Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Hillary Clinton, Joe Lieberman, Tom Daschle, Ted Kennedy, Richard Gephardt, Bill Bradley and Jesse Jackson combined. In fact, the President appeared campaigning in more than twice as many stories as did the second most frequent campaigner, Bill Clinton.

### **Campaign ads outnumber campaign stories nearly 4 to 1 during local news broadcasts**

The ratio of political ads to campaign news stories was 3.6 to 1. Slightly more than four out of 10 of the broadcasts analyzed contained at least one campaign news story, while eight out of 10 of these same broadcasts contained at least one paid campaign ad. Just seven percent of the broadcasts analyzed contained three or more campaign news stories, while nearly half – 49 percent – of these same broadcasts contained three or more paid campaign ads.

### **Different coverage from different stations**

The average station aired 61 campaign stories over the seven-week period, with the top 10 percent of stations airing at least 107 stories – almost double the national average. In terms of total coverage, the top 10 percent of stations in the country aired at least three hours and two minutes of coverage over the course of the study. In contrast, 38 percent of the stations in the sample aired less than one hour of campaign coverage over the same seven-week period.

### **Large owners offer less local race coverage than small- or mid-sized owners**

While the study wasn't designed to correlate ownership to performance, the 122-station sample contains 45 stations owned by large owners (with nationwide audience reach of more than 20 percent), 50 by mid-sized owners, and by 23 small owners.

The stations with small- and mid-sized owners offered more coverage of local races than the national average, while stations with large owners provided less. The same pattern appears in individual media market comparisons: in 16 of the 22 markets in the sample where the comparison could be made, stations owned by small- or mid-sized owners aired more local campaign coverage than their large-owner counterparts in the same market.

Overall, the study examined 10,066 news broadcasts, or 5,033 hours of local news programming, over a seven-week (48 days) period. A total of 7,460 campaign news stories aired during these broadcasts.

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. Based at the USC Annenberg School (<http://ascweb.usc.edu>), one of the nation's leading institutions offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in communication and journalism, the Lear Center bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. The impact of entertainment on news is a principal focus of the Lear Center. The Lear Center is directed by USC Annenberg associate dean Martin Kaplan. For more information about the Lear Center, visit [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).

Located at the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Wisconsin NewsLab ([www.polisci.sic.edu/localnews](http://www.polisci.sic.edu/localnews)) coordinated the capture, coding and analysis of over 20,000 broadcasts during September and October 2002. The NewsLab is staffed by a team of post-doctoral, graduate and undergraduate students and directed by Professor Kenneth Goldstein, who also runs the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which has been monitoring political advertising across the United States since 2000. Funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the project documents the content, volume and targeting of political advertising in the country's top 100 markets. More details on the project and its methodology are available at [www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising](http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising).

The Pew Charitable Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy and religion. Based in Philadelphia, the Trusts make strategic investments that encourage and support citizen participation in addressing critical issues and affecting social change. The opinions expressed in this research are those of the investigators and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

For a full copy of the report, please go to [www.localnewsarchive.org/pdf/LocalTV2002.pdf](http://www.localnewsarchive.org/pdf/LocalTV2002.pdf). For more information, contact Martin Kaplan at 213-740-9945; or Steve Rabinowitz or Jesse F. Derris at 202-265-3000 or 202-258-9444.