



WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

Statement by Martin Kaplan to FCC Public Forum on Media Consolidation
University of Southern California
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Martin Kaplan. I'm associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and director of its Norman Lear Center for the study of entertainment, commerce and society.

Since 1998, with my colleague, Dr. Matthew Hale, I've been conducting empirical studies of the content of local news on broadcast television. In particular, we've been looking at the quantity and quality of political campaign coverage by stations across the country, in races at all levels of government, in both primaries and general elections.

What's motivated these studies has been Thomas Jefferson's idea that Americans need to be informed in order to be good citizens. Since most Americans today say they get most of their news from local television stations, the kind of attention that those stations pay to campaigns and elections—not in paid ads, but in journalism—is a good measure of the health of our democracy.

Our most recent study is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted in collaboration with the NewsLab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the direction of political science professor Ken Goldstein. To date we have captured and analyzed about 90% of the campaign news stories that aired on the top-rated early-evening half-hour and top-rated late-evening half-hour on 122 randomly selected stations during the last seven weeks of the 2002 campaign. The stations are a representative national sample of the four top-rated broadcasters in the top fifty U.S. media markets, covering 65% percent of the nation's households. Our data set of campaign stories is culled from more than 4000 hours of local news programming, and we have analyzed almost 7000 stories. A full report of our findings, together with a searchable video archive of the actual stories, will appear on our Web site, www.localnewsarchive.org.

What we have found so far is this:

48% of the early- and late-evening half-hours of local news watched by most Americans during the 2002 general election season—nearly a majority of the broadcasts in our sample—contained *no* campaign coverage at all. When campaign stories did air, they mostly were less than ninety seconds long; they mostly contained *no* sound bites from candidates; they mostly came in the last two weeks before Election Day; they focused on strategy and polls nearly half the time; they focused on statewide over local races by almost 7 to 1; and they were outnumbered by paid campaign ads by nearly 4 to 1. In other words, most Americans probably saw more prime time entertainment on a single night than they saw election coverage over an entire campaign season of watching local news.

Today the FCC is reported to be searching for an objective formula for (as it says on its Web site) “a sound empirical basis for FCC media ownership policies that promote competition, diversity and localism.”

Any such formula must take account of the empirical condition of local news. With the FCC’s obligation to *promote* competition, diversity and localism comes the obligation to *measure* competition, diversity and localism. Until the FCC has chosen objective tools to measure local news, and until it has rigorously used those tools in a broad sample of the nation’s media markets, it will not be possible to conclude that current policies achieve the FCC’s goals, and it would be a riverboat gamble to overthrow those policies in order to do a better job of achieving them.

Of course the First Amendment permits local news broadcasters to air the amount and quality of news that they want, subject to the FCC’s licensing requirements. It is also undeniable that some ways of assessing journalistic quality involve subjective elements; drawing the line between hard and soft news, for example, may differ from person to person, and place to place.

But our research on campaign news suggests that there are some objective yardsticks that economists, regulators, elected officials and citizens might be able agree on. For example, we measure the percentage of broadcast news time that local stations spend covering campaigns and elections; we measure the percentage of news broadcasts that contain at least one campaign story; we measure the average length of campaign stories; we measure the percentage of a station’s campaign stories about local races; and we measure the frequency and length of candidate sound bites.

Today, no one knows what those numbers look like across America—not for individual stations, nor individual media markets, nor for station ownership groups. No one has done the quantity of recording and analysis that would require. Until this baseline exists, comparisons within markets and between ownership groups is doomed to be anecdotal, and without it, no formula to measure competition, diversity and localism has any basis for comparison.

The closest anyone has come to drawing those nationwide baselines is the Lear Center/Wisconsin research that I've described today, and our study looks at top-rated half-hours, rather than round-the-clock; it looks at randomly selected top stations, rather than all stations in a market; it is a scientific sample of stations, but not of ownership groups. Yet even with those limitations, our study is powerfully suggestive of what a comprehensive national study could reveal.

For example, there is a huge range of performance on these and other measures among the 122 stations we studied. Some stations aired a campaign story on less than 20% of their top-rated half-hours; other stations had campaign stories on more than 90% of these broadcasts. Some stations spent only 1% of this most-watched news time on campaigns; other stations spent as much as 11%. On some stations, an average campaign story was well over two minutes long; on other stations, it was just forty seconds. Nine stations covered no local races at all during their top-rated half-hours; four stations devoted more than half their political coverage to local races. Other measures—like the presence and length of candidate sound bites, or the focus of stories on issues vs. horse races—similarly demonstrate how different television stations around the country can be.

That raises the research question of what range of news is available to Americans within individual media markets, and it raises the policy question of what ranges—on what measures—constitute acceptable competition, diversity and localism.

Here, too, our findings are suggestive, and they make it clear how much more research is needed about the state of news within our states. Our study included twenty-two markets where we analyzed as many as three or four stations. When you look at the percentage of news time they gave to campaign news, and at the frequency and length of their campaign stories, a disparity exists. In half of those twenty-two markets, virtually all the stations we studied were below or at the national average on all those three measures. In six of those markets, almost all the stations we studied were above the national average on all those measures. In the remaining five markets, it's mixed—some stations are above the average, and some are below. Localism shows a comparable split. When you measure what percentage of campaign stories in those twenty-two markets went to local races, in half of those markets, all the stations we studied were below the national average.

For the FCC to do its job, it must be able to relate station ownership to station performance on measures like these. While our research was not designed to study that correlation, our 122 stations do include forty-five owned by large owners (with audience reach above 20%), fifty-four owned by medium-sized owners, and twenty-three by small owners. It turns out that the large owners in our study carried a lower percentage of local campaign news than the national average; the medium and small owners carried a higher percentage of local stories. Our sample picked up twenty-four markets where we have data from stations with large owners competing with stations

from small and/or medium owners. In two of those twenty-four markets, we are awaiting final numbers. But in sixteen of the remaining twenty-two markets, stations with a small or medium owner provided more coverage of local elections than stations with a large owner. There were only two markets where large owners provided more local campaign coverage. The rest were virtually tied.

Before the FCC lifts the ownership caps, wouldn't it be useful to find out how owner size actually correlates to local campaign coverage, and to other objective measures, in markets around the country? What we already know from our study is this: depending on what city Americans live in, the campaign coverage they get can be rich, poor or anywhere in between. Media competition, diversity and localism aren't about national averages; they're about the actual opportunities afforded by broadcasters to citizens within individual media markets. Today, no one knows what that complete picture actually looks like—not for campaign news, nor for any other kind of news. We're happy to make our data available to anyone wanting to start drawing that picture. But until those ambitious studies are conducted, any major changes in media ownership rules by the FCC can be no more than a roll of the regulatory dice. It is difficult to imagine Thomas Jefferson entrusting the future of American democracy to a crapshoot.

Thank you very much.

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For additional information, visit the Norman Lear Center Web site, www.learcenter.org. The Lear Center's e-mail address is enter@usc.edu; its telephone number is 213-821-1343. The Lear Center is part of the USC Annenberg School for Communication (ascweb.usc.edu); the School's Public Affairs Director is Geoffrey Baum (gbaum@usc.edu; telephone 213-821 1491).