



**Local TV News Coverage of Politics
And the Public Interest Obligations of Broadcasters**

Martin Kaplan

Associate Dean, USC Annenberg School for Communication

Testimony to the Senate Commerce Committee, Washington, D.C., July 23, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the invitation to testify. The question I want to try to answer today is this: Under current legislation and current FCC regulations, what kind of job are local television stations doing in fulfilling their public interest obligations?

More than two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson said that the strength of our democracy would depend on how well-informed the American electorate is. Today, most Americans say they get most of their information from local television news. Is local TV news actually telling voters what they need to know? How well are local broadcasters living up to the public interest promises they made in order to get their licenses?

My answer to these questions is based on academic research. My academic background includes a *summa cum laude* from Harvard College, a graduate degree from Cambridge University, and a Ph.D. from Stanford. I'm now associate dean of the Annenberg School at the University of Southern California, one of our nation's leading schools of communication and journalism.

But I have experience in three other realms that also bear on my testimony.

My professional background includes eight years here in Washington, where I was chief speechwriter to Vice President Walter F. Mondale, and also his deputy presidential campaign manager. So I know something from the candidate's point of view about the challenges of earning media coverage on television.

I've also had stints in print and broadcast journalism. I've been a columnist, feature writer, and editor at *The Washington Star*; a regular contributor to *All Things Considered* and *Marketplace* on public radio; and a commentator on the *CBS Morning News*.

My career also includes the entertainment industry. For twelve years I worked at the Walt Disney Studios, both as a senior motion picture executive, and as a screenwriter and producer. I believe that entertainment -- the need to grab and hold audiences -- has come to dominate every other realm of contemporary American life, for better and for worse, from news and politics to education and religion. Studying the impact of entertainment on society is the mission of the Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center, which I direct.

So my comments this morning, while they report on empirical research I've done, also reflect some first-hand experience in the trenches of politics, journalism, and show business.

Since the Radio Act of 1927, the possession of a broadcast license has been a contract between media owners and the public. In order to use the electromagnetic spectrum, which belongs to the public, the broadcaster promises to serve the public interest. From then to now, serving the public interest does not mean maximizing profit, however happy that may make owners and shareholders. Nor does it mean sponsoring charity benefits or street fairs, however happy that may make communities. Serving the public interest, as the Supreme Court said in *Red Lion v. FCC*, means that "[t]he broadcaster must give adequate coverage to public issues." Giving adequate coverage to public issues is what media owners promise the public to do in exchange for getting their licenses.

Since 1998, my colleague Dr. Matthew Hale and I have been investigating what kind of attention broadcasters have been paying to public issues. In particular, we've been looking at the quantity and quality of campaign and election coverage on local television.

This research is not a snap to do. Broadcasters are not required to keep tapes of their news programming or time logs of what they cover. Under current FCC regulations, all that stations must do is maintain in their offices "a list of programs that have provided their most significant treatment of community issues." These lists are next to useless for empirical research. The FCC's single study of "The Measurement of Local Television News and Public Affairs Programs" under its current ownership rulemaking illustrates this inadequacy. FCC researchers watched not one minute of local news or public affairs programming. Instead, they simply added up the raw number of minutes that stations labeled news or public affairs on their broadcast schedules. No matter that anyone who has actually watched local news knows how much of it is given over to empty happy talk, cross-promotion of network entertainment, and coverage of serial murders half a continent away. No matter that much public affairs programming airs not when ratings are high, but when only insomniacs are watching. As a proxy for quality, FCC researchers counted the number of awards given by members of an industry trade group, the Radio and Television News Directors Association, to itself, and by a journalism school (the DuPont Silver Batons at Columbia). If more industry votes go to network owned-and-operated stations than to other stations, does that really make the O&O's better? Three-quarters of the Silver Batons the FCC counted went to individual reporters

and producers for individual pieces, not to stations, and all the awards to stations were given for specific stories. If the DuPont jurors aren't pretending to compare the quality of one station's total news programming with another, why should the FCC? Yet this is the study that the FCC Chairman frequently cites as justification for lifting the ownership caps.

In fact the only way to conduct scientific research on the content of local news and public affairs coverage is to get people in each market being studied to record that programming, or to purchase it from commercial vendors, and then to have analysts log and code every single broadcast. That's what we've been doing.

This is the third nationwide study we have conducted. In 2000, we studied local news campaign coverage both in the primaries and in the general election. That research, funded by the Ford Foundation, came in the wake of the recommendation of the Presidential Advisory Commission on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters, co-chaired by CBS president Leslie Moonves and American Enterprise Institute resident scholar Norm Ornstein. Their proposal was a voluntary five minutes of candidate-centered discourse on each station, on each night between 5 pm and 11:30 pm, for the last 30 days before each election. To see how that voluntary standard was working on selected stations, we taped all news coverage between those times in the month before Election Day. We counted candidate-centered discourse under a generous definition, which included issue-centered stories, and we counted all candidates for all offices at every level, dogcatcher to president.

We did the study twice – in the primaries, and in the general election. In the primaries, we studied 19 top-rated stations in 11 markets around the country. Two groups of stations emerged. Typical stations – 16 of the 19 – aired an average of just 39 seconds of candidate discourse a night. Only three stations aired over 3 minutes a night, and two of them included New Hampshire in their markets. (The study can be found at <http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/tvnews.pdf>.)

During the 2000 general election, we expanded our sample to include 74 stations in 58 markets. Twenty-three of those stations had made a public commitment to the voluntary five-minute standard; we found that they aired an average of 2 minutes and 17 seconds of candidate discourse a night. The remaining 51 stations, which had been silent on the voluntary standard, aired an average of 45 seconds of candidate discourse a night. All candidates, all races, all evening, all month: 45 seconds a night. (The study can be found at <http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/campaignnews.PDF>.)

By 2002, the five-minute-a-night voluntary goal had all but disappeared from discussion. The public interest obligation has today essentially been entrusted to an unregulated and unmonitored market. So in this most recent campaign, we set out to learn how much and what kind of election news most Americans were actually exposed to in that marketplace. Our research was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and done in collaboration with Professor Ken Goldstein of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. (Our report can be found at www.localnewsarchive.org/pdf/LocalTV2002.pdf.)

We recorded and analyzed more than 10,000 top-rated early- and late-evening half-hour news broadcasts on 122 stations in the top 50 U.S. media markets over the seven weeks leading up to Election Day. This representative national sample is the most ambitious quantitative study of local news coverage of politics ever undertaken. Not only were the stories logged and coded; those video clips have also been archived online on a unique searchable database, at www.localnewsarchive.org, which is now available to any registered user.

Here is some of what we found in 2002. This is how well the marketplace is actually doing at fulfilling the public interest obligation of broadcasters:

- Only 44 percent of the more than 10,000 broadcasts we studied contained any campaign coverage at all. In other words, almost six out of ten top-rated news broadcasts contained *no campaign coverage whatsoever*.
- Most of the campaign stories that did air were broadcast during the last two weeks of the campaign.
- Nearly half of the stories that aired were about horserace or strategy, and not about issues.
- The average campaign story was less than 90 seconds.
- Fewer than three out of ten campaign stories that aired included candidates speaking, and when they did speak, the average candidate sound bite was 12 seconds long.
- Even when counting U.S. House races as local elections, only 14 percent of all the campaign stories in our sample focused on local races. Races for the state legislature only accounted for three percent of the stories, and stories focused on regional, county or city offices made up only four percent of the stories.
- Campaign ads outnumbered campaign stories by nearly four to one. While little more than four out of ten of the broadcasts analyzed contained at least one campaign news story, eight out of ten of those broadcasts contained at least one campaign ad. Just seven percent of the broadcasts analyzed contained three or more campaign news stories, while almost half of these same broadcasts contained three or more campaign ads.

So what kind of job are local stations doing to fulfill the public interest promises they made when they applied for their licenses? If you look at the campaign coverage they provided in 2002, the answer is grim. While there are some encouraging exceptions, most local television stations largely ignored the 2002 campaign on most of their top-rated broadcasts. At the same time, those stations took in a record-breaking billion dollars of political advertising revenue. It is striking that while general managers and

news directors often fret that covering politics may be an audience turnoff, they have no compunctions about barraging that same audience with political ads.

Among the 122 stations we studied in 2002, there is of course a wide range of performance. Some stations aired a campaign story on less than 20 percent of their top-rated half-hours; other stations had campaign stories on more than 70 percent of those broadcasts. Some stations spent only 1 percent of this most-watched news time on campaigns; other stations spent as much as 9 percent. On some stations, an average campaign story was well over two minutes long; on other stations, it was just 40 seconds. Ten stations covered no local races at all during their top-rated half-hours; five stations devoted more than half their political coverage to local races. One station's average candidate sound bites were over half a minute long; another station's sound bites averaged just 4 seconds. One station ran no stories about issues; on another station, 75 percent of the campaign stories were about issues or adwatches.

What explains disparities like these?

They can't be attributed to differing local appetites for the coverage of public issues, because these station differences can exist side by side in the same communities. In Greenville, South Carolina, for example, WSPA, a Media General station, aired 146 campaign stories on their top-rated early and late half hours of news during the seven weeks before Election Day, at the top end of the country in our sample, while WLOS, a Sinclair station, aired 40. The average candidate sound bite on the Sinclair station in Greenville was 7 seconds long, which put it in the bottom 10 percent of our national sample, while the Media General station candidate sound bite averaged 36 seconds, at the top of the country.

Does ownership make a difference in campaign coverage? Our 122-station sample wasn't designed to study that. But our sample does include 45 stations owned by large owners (with audience reach above 20 percent, based on percentage of U.S. household coverage as calculated by the FCC, discounting UHF coverage by 50 percent), 54 owned by mid-sized owners (audience reach between 20 percent and 6.2 percent), and 23 by small owners (audience reach below 6.2 percent). It turns out that the large owners in our study carried a lower percentage of local campaign news than the national average, while the small and mid-sized owners carried a higher percentage of local stories. The same pattern appears in individual media markets: in 16 of the 22 markets where we can make the comparison, stations with small or mid-sized owners provided more coverage of local elections than stations with large owners. If a national study designed to correlate ownership with localism came up with similar numbers, it would have inescapable implications for the regulations now in play.

What causes some stations to excel? My school is proud to award the USC Annenberg Walter Cronkite Awards for Excellence in Television Political Coverage, and the journalists and stations that win it prove what good work can be done. In our study, some stations, even in the absence of contested political races, nevertheless did a top-tier job of offering campaign coverage to their viewers. A commitment by ownership-group

leaders to fulfill their public interest obligations can count for a lot, as demonstrated by the ten Hearst-Argyle stations in our study, which were impressively ahead of the pack. The priorities of individual station managers and news directors can also make a difference, as can making the financial commitment of assigning experienced producers and talented correspondents to cover a political beat.

But the sad truth is that across the country, the murderous pressure for ratings has largely trumped every other goal. The conventional wisdom among general managers and news directors is that politics is ratings poison. This belief – that public issues are boring, that viewers would rather watch car chases than candidates – is promoted by the television news consulting industry whose advice dominates local programming decisions. In my view, those consultants are selling dangerous nonsense. The truth is that good reporters working for good managers can make politics and public affairs just as compelling to audiences as news about celebrity divorces or teasers for prime-time voyeurism.

Let's not blame the audience for what appears on local television. Programmers aren't just delivering what people want. They are accomplices in manufacturing that desire. Americans aren't just consumers; we are also citizens. Broadcasters have more than an obligation to make money. They have an obligation to inform us. That's what they promise in order to get their licenses. Today, the enforcement of that promise is alarmingly inadequate. Right now the ability of the American people to get the information they need, from the sources they turn to most, about the most important choices they make together as citizens: today that ability depends on a marketing culture that too often puts sensationalism ahead of substance, fear ahead of reason, and dollars ahead of democracy. Surely Americans deserve better from the industry they've entrusted with their airwaves, and from the agency they've entrusted with monitoring it.

Thank you very much.

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