



Will America's Democracy Get Covered?

Putting Democracy Back in the Hands of Viewers & Voters

Television can deliver our most important reality show – our democracy. It can mobilize, not just pacify; inform, not just placate; involve the public as problem solvers, not simply as spectators; and elevate, rather than obscure, public discourse.

The State of Television Today

Today, broadcasters are required to afford “reasonable access” to legally qualified candidates for federal elected office to their facilities, or to “permit purchase of reasonable amounts of time.”¹ No doubt candidates can buy lots of air time, as voters in swing states well know. But what about news coverage of candidates and issues of importance to voters? Voters are too often

being left in the dark, and our democracy is being left in a lurch.

- Voters are relying on local television news to help them make election decisions.²
- In the 2002 election, over half of the evening local newscasts contained no campaign coverage at all in the seven weeks leading up to the election.³
- Coverage of Congressional, state, and local issues is even worse. Less than

one-half of one percent of programming is devoted to local public affairs.⁴

- From 1996 to 2000, coverage of the Presidential race on the network evening news dropped by one-third.⁵
- The average Presidential candidate sound bite fell from 43 seconds in 1968 to just 8-9 seconds in 2004.⁶
- By one estimate, many Americans likely saw more prime-time entertainment on a single night

than they saw election coverage during the entire campaign.⁷

The Transition to Digital

Digital television, with its capacity for multicasting, provides an opportunity for broadcasters to better meet citizen needs for public information because it can provide more information on more simultaneous channels. As we transition to digital, policymakers have an opportunity to reinforce our democracy by establishing meaningful public interest obligations for digital broadcasters that can keep the public informed, the electorate engaged, and our democracy intact. We live in a democracy that

proposal that would strengthen the public interest standard in relation to civic affairs and elections. Under the plan, broadcasters would receive expedited license renewal if they air a minimum of three hours per week – at least half of which would air in or near prime time – of local, civic, or electoral affairs programming on the most-watched channel they operate. In the six weeks prior to a general election, at least two hours of the three-hour minimum would have to be local electoral affairs programming.

In the 108th Congress, Rep. Maurice Hinchey (NY-22) introduced legislation that would reinstate the Fairness

Steps for Improving Coverage of Civic Affairs:

- Tell the FCC you want it to set concrete and measurable minimum public interest standards for broadcasters.
- Tell your local broadcasters you want more coverage of local, civic, or electoral affairs.

A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy, or perhaps both. ~James Madison, 1822¹²

thrives only when people are educated and knowledgeable about the critical public issues they confront.

Some broadcasters are already stepping up to the plate. The Liberty Corporation announced that its 15 television stations would provide free airtime to candidates in significant state and local races.⁸ During the 2000 and 2002 election cycles, Hearst-Argyle stations broadcast a cumulative 200 hours of political news.⁹ But other broadcasters are failing our democracy, decreasing or ceasing the airing of local news programming.¹⁰

Proposed Solutions

In September 2004, a bipartisan majority of the Senate Commerce Committee directed the FCC to adopt minimum quantitative guidelines for local public affairs and electoral programs, locally produced programs, and independently produced programs.¹¹ But, the FCC has yet to take action in response.

The Public Interest, Public Airwaves (PIPA) Coalition has offered the FCC a

Doctrine and require broadcasters to afford reasonable opportunity for the discussion of conflicting views on issues of public importance. In the 109th Congress, Rep. Louise Slaughter (NY-28) and others are drafting the Fairness and Accountability in Broadcasting Act to ensure more balanced coverage of elections and issues of importance.

Government should never decide which views we can and cannot hear. But it is fully consistent with the First Amendment, and indeed promotes First Amendment values, for the public to be exposed to a wide range of views on issues of public concern.

The Public Interest, Public Airwaves (PIPA) Coalition is an alliance of public interest groups, media activists, and grassroots organizers. In Spring 2004, it announced a broad-based campaign urging the FCC to hold the nation's commercial broadcasters to a more responsible standard of public service. See www.pipac.info.