



Ensuring that Television Serves the Full Spectrum of America

Voices & Views on the Airwaves Could Reflect the Country's Diversity

Since television's inception, diversity has been an important goal, whether it is through programming, hiring, news, or discourse. By representing the widest range of information, opinion, and entertainment – including programming that meets the needs of minorities and other underserved populations – television becomes more valuable to us all.

The State of Television Today

Historically, some groups have been left behind or ignored in media. For example, many of the nation's broadcasting licenses were given away in the 1940s and 1950s when women and people of color were unlikely to obtain a license. The

legacy of this mistake is still seen today: While people of color constitute over 30% of America, they own only 4.2% of the nation's radio stations and around 1.5% of TV stations.¹

Today, an individual entrepreneur might be able to become a media owner by purchasing a single radio or television

station. But, as media businesses grow larger, it is more difficult to raise the financial capital necessary to purchase a media company. This decreases the likelihood that women and people of color can become media owners.

As ownership by women and people of color shrinks and the nation becomes

more diverse, studies have shown that our nation's prime-time programming is becoming more homogenous.

- Forty percent of American youth ages 19 and under are children of color, yet few of the faces they see on television represent their race or cultural heritage.²
- Though females slightly outnumber males in the real world, prime-time television continues to present a world that is overwhelmingly male.³
- People of color too often appear in programming as only caricatures.⁴
- Nearly half of Middle Eastern characters on TV (46%) are criminals.⁵

What does all this teach our children? Television not only fails to accurately reflect the world in which people live, but it also sends a message that some groups of people are more valued by society and more worthy of attention than others.

In an ideal world, rules to ensure diversity would be unnecessary – serving minorities and others should make business sense to broadcasters.

- African-American households watch 75 hours of television per week – an amount well above any other ethnic group, according to Nielsen Media Research.⁶
- African-American households' buying power of \$687 billion a year should add up to an attractive target for broadcasters.⁷
- Likewise the Hispanic market is one of the fastest growing markets in the U.S. with a combined annual purchasing power of about \$500 billion – hardly a market that broadcasters can ignore.⁸

However, consumer advocates have found that marketplace forces are not ensuring greater program diversity. In the wake of growing media concentration and consolidation, there are signs that program diversity may be decreasing. Whether someone reads a story on Microsoft's news site on the Internet

(MSNBC.com), or hears it from Brian Williams on NBC's broadcast network news (NBC), or on the cable news channel (MSNBC), the same producer and reporter likely produced the same story. Despite a greater diversity of outlets, the diversity of viewpoints and voices appears to be narrowing, not expanding.

In 2004, a circuit court rejected the FCC's attempts to relax its media ownership rules on grounds of their potential negative impact on diversity.⁹ And the Administration has decided not to appeal that ruling.¹⁰ The FCC must now decide how it will revise its rules while protecting diversity. It will need your input.

The Transition to Digital

Digital broadcast technology facilitates innovation in the use of digital channels for multiplexed, multi-channel programming. A multi-channel digital broadcasting model could include program streams that are "narrowcasts" aimed at distinct audiences, including minority groups and other underserved communities. Multiplexing could also create new opportunities for minority entrepreneurship through channel-leasing agreements, partnerships, and other creative business arrangements. Additionally, digital TV's enhanced audio capability could facilitate increased use of foreign language audio tracks to expand the usefulness and entertainment value of broadcast programming for minority communities.

Proposed Solutions

At a time when new spectrum is delivering a broader palette of colors and a greater diversity of programs to television screens, broadcasters have an opportunity to bring a broader range of community voices – representing the full gamut of American viewpoints, background, and ethnic diversity that makes America America. Ensuring that television looks more like America ensures broadcasters can reach the broadest audiences and makes television fundamentally more valuable.

Steps for Enhancing Diversity:

- Tell the FCC you want it to protect media diversity as it revises its media ownership rules.
- Tell your local broadcaster you want more locally produced and independent programming.

In December 2004, the FCC's Advisory Committee on Diversity for Communications in the Digital Age adopted a wide range of recommendations aimed at promoting opportunities for minorities and women in telecommunications and related industries.¹¹ The Committee expressed its strong belief that tax-based incentives and media property sales would open opportunities for socially and economically disadvantaged persons, including minorities and women.

There are several ways to increase diversity in the media workforce – including offering tax certificate programs, requiring diversity audits, creating incentives within FCC ownership and licensing rules, and providing auction credits to companies that do business with diverse entities.

Today, there are far more people of color, disabled people, seniors, and poor people in the real world than we see on television. Government-imposed station ownership limits, policies encouraging station ownership by minorities, and monitoring of hiring practices remain necessary counterbalances to market forces.

In order to ensure a greater diversity of viewpoints, the Public Airwaves, Public Interest Coalition (see previous section) recently asked federal regulators to adopt guidelines that would promote independently produced programming during prime-time hours. In addition, the Coalition suggested that TV stations be encouraged to run locally produced independent programming.