



NEWS

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See MCI v. FCC, 515 F 2d 385 (D.C. Circ 1974).

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STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER JONATHAN S. ADELSTEIN ON NORMAN LEAR CENTER REPORT ON LOCAL TV STATION COVERAGE OF 2004 CAMPAIGNS

We owe a debt of gratitude to Marty Kaplan of the Norman Lear Center and the USC Annenberg School for Communication for providing us with another critical study on how local television stations cover campaigns in the weeks preceding Election Day.

Judging by this study, many broadcasters are failing to fulfill their responsibility to help their viewers participate in an educated way in our democracy. This adds to the growing pile of studies showing TV offers only the most cursory coverage of local elections. This should be an embarrassment for broadcasters who pride themselves on localism.

The Lear Center studies are exceedingly important because roughly half of the American public relies on broadcast and network newscasts as their principal source of campaign information and news. This latest report takes an important step by including data on a few Spanish-language stations in several of these markets.

It appears many station managers subscribe to the philosophy “if it bleeds, it leads,” and “politics is ratings poison.” Viewers are left with a distorted picture of their own communities, and are left ill-prepared to make choices that will shape their future.

Kaplan’s studies are among the very best, and they are having a real impact on policy deliberations at the FCC. If broadcasters take issue with the findings, they have a responsibility to counter with their own systematic studies. The deafening silence leads one to wonder if they don’t do the studies because they are afraid of what they might find.

We hear a lot of talk about promoting democracy abroad. Clearly, we also have work to do on the quality of our democracy here in the U.S. In 2004, broadcasters took in \$1.6 billion in political ads, but gave back only a pittance of real news coverage about the candidates who were filling their coffers. Senator John McCain has shown tireless leadership in fighting for campaign reform. But unless the broadcasters heed his call to do better coverage on their own, the public is getting shortchanged by those who are using their airwaves for profit but apparently giving little back.

There are some bright spots, and some broadcasters are clearly doing much better than others. The study identifies a number of political programs that local television stations aired outside of newscasts. For example, a number of stations aired debates among candidates or about ballot initiatives, and hour or half-hour long shows about the races or different propositions.

This study cries out for the need for stronger public interest obligations to make all broadcasters reach a higher level of accountability.

Senator McCain, Chairman Powell and I last year called for better coverage at the 2004 election. Apparently, many broadcasters did not heed the call. While voluntary measures are preferable, results like these underscore the need for the government to make sure the public gets more back in exchange for the free use of their airwaves.

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