More television coverage of the California recall has probably aired during the first week of this campaign than aired in all of the last gubernatorial race. News directors are betting that wall-to-wall coverage will be great for ratings. Will it also be good for democracy?

When Jerry Brown ran for governor against Houston Flournoy in 1974, journalist Mary Ellen Leary set out to learn how much coverage the race got on local California stations. Her conclusion: only 2.5 percent of local news was devoted to the race, a shocking finding she detailed in a book called "Phantom Politics."

In Gray Davis' 1998 gubernatorial race against Dan Lungren, I asked the same question. My colleagues and I looked at all the news programming on all the local stations from early morning till late at night in California's top four markets (Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and Sacramento), plus the eighth-ranked Bakersfield market, in the 11 weeks before election day. We found that local news spent just 0.45 percent of its programming on gubernatorial campaign coverage.

Anyone who has watched California television over the last week will have little doubt that the recall has already surpassed that low baseline. If you add in the blanket network and cable coverage of the recall -- both in scant supply in Davis' last two races -- it's clear we're headed for a record year of what candidates call "free media."

Turnout in Jerry Brown's 1974 race was 64 percent. By 1998, it had fallen to 48 percent; in 2002, it was 45 percent. Special elections are notorious for low turnout. Will more coverage mean more voters in 2003?

In 1998, horse-race coverage -- stories about tactics and polls -- amounted to 60 percent of the campaign news. This year the emphasis on strategy and personalities, as opposed to issues, promises to be equally as lopsided.

I would be delighted if issue stories dominate the coverage. I want to know the plans of each candidate to deal with the deficit. I want the press to hold the candidates' feet to that fire.

But much as I want to challenge candidates to be specific, and to challenge the media to cover those specifics, I'm not optimistic. Even though platitudes about leadership, cleaning house and cutting waste are insulting to voters, I fully expect many candidates in this field to conduct content-free campaigns. Even though some candidates may attempt...
to be specific and take risks, I expect that much of the coverage they'll get will be about
the politics of their policies, rather than about the policies themselves.

I'd like to be proven wrong. But if I'm not, I'm still not willing to throw in the towel on
democracy, not if it brings an upsurge of voters, especially new voters, to the polls.
Thomas Jefferson said that the health of our democracy will depend on our citizenry
being informed. It would be swell if the media would do their part to inform our public.
After all, the airwaves belong to the people, and broadcasters promise to fulfill public-
interest obligations in exchange for their licenses. But it has been a generation since the
Federal Communications Commission has monitored broadcasters' public-interest
performance, and while the sheer volume of coverage of the recall may end up increasing
the amount of issue stories, I don't expect miracles. Making money -- selling eyeballs to
advertisers -- is still what television, including television news, is about, and these days,
that means entertainment, not information.

Yet I think there'll be something to celebrate even if underinformed voters swamp the
polls. Civic engagement is a habit we've fallen out of in our country. At this point, it
almost doesn't matter if spectacle (or disgust with spectacle) is the reason people vote, as
long as they do it. If the upsurge of media coverage of this race helps change that, it's
worth applauding, and -- as Californians are famous for doing -- worth exporting to the
rest of the country.

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