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**MARKETPLACE**

**SHOW: Marketplace** (6:30 PM ET) - SYND

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**HEADLINE:** Martin Kaplan discusses whether broadcasters have an obligation to do more to serve the public interest

**ANCHORS:** DAVID BRANCACCIO

**BODY:**

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

In the Senate Commerce Committee this week, debate about allowing companies to buy more TV stations will also revive a once-dormant issue, whether broadcasters have an obligation to do more to serve the public interest. As it's Blue Sky Monday, a chance to blue sky, as it were, with some MARKETPLACE contributors with arcane talents, we turn to Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California. He's one of those testifying in the Senate about this idea of public interest obligation.

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Norman Lear Center, University of Southern California): It came from Herbert Hoover, who was the secretary of Commerce when radio first was established. And for something like 50 years, the government in the telecom acts and at the FCC, was determined to make sure that the public airwaves, which belong to the public and were licensed to broadcasters, in fact, carried important information that communities were interested in. They wrote it into regulations. They required that stations disclose what it is they were covering of interest to their community. They even required broadcasters to go out into their communities with clipboards to ascertain what it is that local people wanted covered.

BRANCACCIO: Now I remember this stuff. When I was a cub broadcaster in the mid-1970s, we had to fill out these detailed logs about this kind of stuff and then, as the years went by, deregulation – we didn't have to fill out those meddlesome, pesky logs.

Mr. KAPLAN: Exactly. You sound just like a station owner. Now the only regulation that covers the content of news is the marketplace. What people watch is assumed to be enough of a standard to guide programmers about what to give people.

BRANCACCIO: We've all watched the 11:00 news with that appalled look on our face. However, is this just our impressions? I mean, are there data to suggest that the news

actually is lousy?

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes. Although lousy might not be the word that programmers who get high ratings might use to describe it. Nevertheless, a study that the Lear Center just completed of the 2002 election of the highest rated half-hour early and late news on 122 stations around the country found that, on average, if you sat down during the election campaign, you were more likely than not to see any campaign coverage during that hour. On the other hand, you had an 80 percent chance of seeing at least one campaign ad and a 50 percent chance of seeing at least three such ads.

BRANCACCIO: You have an interest in more political coverage at the local level. Others might have other interests; trying to get television stations, for instance, to broadcast less violent TV shows.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes. And that will also be a topic at the Senate hearing on Wednesday. The whole thing turns on the question of whether the public has a right to say what broadcasters do with their airwaves. Owners will tell you that the First Amendment means that the public has no such right. However, every court case since the Telecommunications Act of 1934 was passed, which has looked at whether or not the public has a right to say what it means to serve the public interest, every such court case has sided with the public and not with the broadcasters.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, isn't one argument, though, that this is regulation from the old era, when there were a couple of broadcast networks. There was not 300 channels on DirecTV. There was not the Internet. And so, in fact, regulation should change. That, indeed, there's enough channels to serve different interests, it doesn't make sense to legislate what the news should look like.

Mr. KAPLAN: Well, no one should legislate what the news should look like. But there is no evidence that all this alleged diversity makes any difference. The number of viewers who turn to local news for their news predominates. The number of viewers who turn to the Internet or to print for alternative sources of news is very, very small.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is also the associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at USC. A link to his survey of how local news covered the last election will be posted on our Web site when the full results come out later this week.

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