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I Got the Broadcast Blues



By Marty Kaplan

Local TV news is the number one source of news for Americans. Seventy-eight percent of the country turns to it to find out what's going on. The Internet may be growing as a news source, and some people still read the paper, but for most people, what's on local TV news is pretty much what they know about where they live. If you care about the quality of democracy, you have to care about the quality of local TV news — even if you don't watch it.

So what's on?

Where I live — Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest media market — an average half-hour of local news packs all its local government coverage — including stories about the budget, law enforcement, education, layoffs, new ordinances, personnel changes, city and county actions on health care, transportation and immigration and more — into 22 seconds.

That's what a study I did found. L.A. may be hemorrhaging red ink, but "if it bleeds, it leads" doesn't apply to news coverage of fiscal mayhem. Though crime led local news on one out of three broadcasts, stories about L.A.'s budget crisis topped local news only one time out of 100.

Crime stories filled seven times more of the broadcast than local government news. Soft news — human interest, news of the weird, the vacuous stories begging to be parodied — took up nearly two-and-a-half minutes, the next largest chunk after crime. But if, during this Great Recession, you're looking for news about the local economy and how business is doing, you'll have 29 seconds to take it in.

The broadcast signals that reach the four counties of the L.A. media market are carried by radio waves, the part of the electromagnetic spectrum that's also used by your cell phone, your wireless network at home and the Wi-Fi at Starbucks. That spectrum belongs to the public; it's as much a natural resource as our air, oceans, mountain ranges and parklands, and like them, it's held in trust for the people by the government.

In order to use the spectrum, TV stations need to get a license from the Federal Communications Commission. If the spectrum were auctioned off, it would bring in hundreds of billions of dollars. So you might think that stations pay a pretty penny for their licenses, and that the F.C.C. extracts both money (the equivalent of energy, mineral and logging leases) and public interest obligations (the equivalent of soil

conservation, sustainable forestry and wildlife management) in exchange for the right to use the public's airwaves, but you would be wrong.

The licenses are free. To renew them, stations send the F.C.C. a postcard every eight years. And though communication law says that stations must serve "the public interest, convenience and necessity," the meaning of the public interest in broadcasting was so whittled away during Reagan deregulation that stations are free to program whatever kind of news they want: no news, dumb news, left or right wing news, Christian news, Jewish news, all-crime-all-the-time, you name it. The likelihood that the F.C.C. will examine a station's news programming as part of the license renewal process is exactly zero. As Sue Wilson's documentary *Broadcast Blues* shows, the public's petitions to the F.C.C. to deny licenses go unread for years; there's no record there of the last time a station license was pulled.

So we lease our airwaves to broadcasters for nothing, giving them a monopoly on the public square where most people get their information. The stations then rent our eyes and ears to advertisers, including candidates for public office, who are forced to pay for the chance to appeal to us because most stations believe that giving candidates free coverage on the news is ratings poison.

This year, station revenues from political ads are expected to reach \$3.3 billion. To pay for those ads, candidates and elected officials (including judges) must spend more time on fundraising than on any other activity. The bulk of the money they get comes from lobbyists, Political Action Committees, and special interest groups, who then hold them hostage. It's legal bribery, and at the center of it is public and regulatory indifference to the way that TV stations, to which we give free licenses in perpetuity, cover — or rather, don't cover — government, politics and public affairs.

There are some terrific local TV journalists in this country, doing great work covering important public issues on stations that manage to lead their markets in ratings. I know this, because every two years I'm privileged to organize the jury for the Walter Cronkite Awards for Excellence in Television Political Journalism. But they're an endangered species.

A couple of weeks ago, the head of a station group told the F.C.C. that there's no such thing as "the public interest"; there's your version of that, there's mine, there's his, and no government agency has the right to impose its version on broadcasters. How he squares this with laws saying there's a non-subjective public interest in requiring kids to go to school, rivers to be clean and food to be inspected, I don't know.

No, to this television executive, and to the many in his industry he speaks for, the public interest is no more than what the public is interested in. "We broadcasters, as content creators," he said proudly, "monitor what the public wants on a daily basis."

What the public wants.

I *want* ice cream. I *need* a balanced meal.

Apparently the people of Los Angeles want only 22 seconds of local government coverage. I wonder: if they got more than that, would they want more than that?