

**THE BLOG**

What I Told the FCC

By Marty Kaplan

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On Tuesday the FCC held its first public hearing on media ownership at USC. Here's what I told them:

I'm speaking today as a research professor and director of the Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center. Since 1998, my colleagues and I have analyzed more than 15,000 local news broadcasts on TV stations around the country. My topic today is a tale of two studies.

In 2002, the FCC issued a study on "The Measurement of Local TV News and Public Affairs Programs." It concluded that bigger owners provided better quality. It has frequently been cited by the broadcast industry. Yet that study - astonishingly - was conducted without one single minute of local TV news or public affairs programs being watched.

In 2003, the FCC commissioned another study. This one asked, "Do Local Owners Deliver More Localism?" This one watched and analyzed more than 4,000 stories. This one concluded that local ownership dramatically increased localism. This one the industry did not want to hear.

And this one was suppressed. Reportedly, the FCC ordered staff to destroy all copies. The public only found out about it last month, thanks to a whistleblower. And its data still have not been released.

Now the FCC is commissioning a new study of the effect of ownership on the quality of local TV. But according to FCC staff, it proposes to measure news quality the same way it did in the first study, in 2002: not by watching programming, but by looking at ratings, and counting gross hours and awards won.

So a public affairs program dumped at 6am Sunday will be counted as having the same community value as the weeknight 6 o'clock news. A station that wins Niensens with sweeps-week stunts will be counted as serving the public interest. An award will be counted as quality, no matter how unrepresentative of total programming it may be.

Are local issues covered on local TV - or are they ignored? Under this research plan, don't ask, and don't tell. Are diverse voices being heard on local news? Don't ask, and don't tell. How much local news truly is news - and how much is teasers, bumpers, happy-talk and entertainment cross-promotion? Don't ask, don't tell. What kinds of media owners provide what kind of quality? Don't ask, don't tell.