

**PUBLIC INTEREST  
PUBLIC AIRWAVES  
COALITION**

**Alliance for Better Campaigns • Benton Foundation • Center for Creative Voices in Media • Center for Digital Democracy • Center for Governmental Studies • Center for Voting and Democracy • Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting • Committee for the Study of the American Electorate • Common Cause • Democracy Matters Institute • Demos • Free Press • The Global Resource Action Center for the Environment • Institute for Public Representation of Georgetown University Law Center • League of United Latin American Citizens • The Media Access Project • Media Alliance • Media For Democracy 2004 • MediaChannel.org • MoveOn.org • National Council of Churches • New America Foundation • Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, Inc. • Public Citizen • Rock the Vote • True Majority • Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations • The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops • U.S. PIRG • Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press**

# Public Interest, Public Airwaves (PIPA) Coalition

## GRASSROOTS TOOLKIT

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## **Local Broadcaster Visits**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Public Interest, Public Airwaves (PIPA) Coalition's campaign to encourage local broadcasters to serve the public by offering better coverage of local civic and electoral affairs.

The purpose of this campaign is to improve the quality of local public affairs coverage on television. For too long, broadcasters have shirked their responsibility to serve the public interest. As the campaign season heats up, now is the time for citizens to visit their local broadcasters and hold them accountable to a higher standard of public service.

The goal of the meeting is to have your local broadcasters sign on to a Pledge (see page 13) committing the station to new guidelines regarding their public interest obligations.

There are three potential outcomes. The broadcaster(s) may:

1. Agree to sign the pledge.
2. Decline to sign the pledge.
3. Ask for more time and information to make a decision.

Below you will find a sample agenda, tips on conducting a meeting, talking points, and suggested courses of action depending on the broadcasters' response to the pledge.

Please read over the information carefully. If you have any questions e-mail the PIPA Coalition at: [meetings@commoncause.org](mailto:meetings@commoncause.org). Good luck and thanks for your commitment!

# Sample Agenda for Meeting with Broadcaster

Briefly introduce yourself and explain that this meeting is being organized by the PIPA Coalition and community leaders to discuss how local TV stations are meeting their public interest obligations. Inform participants that broadcasters use the publicly owned airwaves free of charge in exchange for a commitment to provide a service that benefits the public. Be very brief. Allow each participant in the meeting to introduce himself or herself and say where he/she is from.

## Position on Public Interest Obligations

- The airwaves are the property of the American public, not the broadcasters. This is a fundamental principle in legislation that has been consistently upheld by the Supreme Court.
- Broadcasters have an obligation to serve the public interest. The government provides broadcasters exclusive access to a specific frequency in exchange for their commitment to serve the “public interest, convenience or necessity.”
- Broadcasters have not taken this obligation seriously, particularly their responsibility to provide citizens with information about local civic affairs and elections.
- Digital TV has the potential to generate billions in new income for the broadcast industry. The same space that currently transmits one channel of programming will soon accommodate six or more channels. Broadcasters are now asking the FCC to require cable companies to carry all their new programming, saying that they alone can provide citizens with quality local information of importance to the community.
- Broadcasters expecting more government generosity must consider what they owe the people in return. Now is the time to set concrete and measurable public interest standards.

## Group Input

Invite other members of the group to briefly share their views.

## Present the Pledge

Give the broadcaster a copy of the Pledge (page 13), and briefly outline its components. Listen carefully to the broadcaster’s response, and allow him or her to ask questions. Make a note about any existing plans the station may already have for election coverage (such as hosting debates).

## Summary and Closure

Briefly summarize your understanding of the station’s stance on public interest obligations and whether or not the station agrees to sign the pledge. If the station asks for more time or information to make a decision, **set a concrete date and person to contact who will provide more information and the PIPA Coalition guidelines on Public Interest Obligations** (available at [www.bettercampaigns.org](http://www.bettercampaigns.org) or [www.pipac.info](http://www.pipac.info)). Thank them for their time.

# Information for Meeting Leaders

1. **Contact your local television station(s)** to schedule a meeting. Your first call should probably go to the lead station in your market. Number one stations are often more willing to experiment with innovative ideas. It's important to approach the key decision-makers at stations – usually the General Manager (GM) and/or the News Director (ND). While the distinctions sometimes blur, it's generally true that GMs will be more receptive to arguments about improving the station's community image and NDs will be more interested in arguments about increasing democratic discourse through political coverage.
2. **After you have a meeting confirmed**, consider mailing or faxing the pledge to the general manager, although it is not necessary to do so.
3. **Inform the other members of your group** about the time and place of the meeting.
4. **Familiarize yourself** with the Talking Points.
5. **Assign roles** to people attending the meeting where appropriate. For example, ask a few people to take notes, or ask someone to distribute any handouts you have.
6. **Offer to meet with people** who have volunteered to attend the meeting in front of the office a half hour ahead of the scheduled meeting time to assemble the group, make brief introductions, and quickly review the agenda. (Make sure you have told them how to identify you).
7. **Deal with any logistics** and last minute issues at the meeting.
8. **Be the primary spokesperson** at the meeting.
9. **Direct the agenda:** Encourage comments from participants but ensure that the discussion does not stray too far.
10. **Follow-up:** We want to hear from you! Let us know how the meeting went and what you learned. There is a brief section on follow-up below that provides some guidance. Follow-up information should be e-mailed to:  
[meetings@commoncause.org](mailto:meetings@commoncause.org)

## Tips on Conducting a Meeting

- **Present your views** precisely, politely and persuasively. Start by telling your local broadcaster that you want his or her commitment to new public interest guidelines and then give your arguments.
- **Allow the broadcaster** to ask questions as you go along and answer respectfully and thoughtfully with relevant facts and specific information.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, assure the broadcaster that you will **find the information** and send it as soon as possible.
- **Come prepared** with a notebook and pen to take notes so that you will remember what was said and what follow-up steps are necessary (or ask someone in your group to do it).
- **Listen intently** to what the broadcaster says. Be careful not to automatically tune out or get discouraged if you hear criticism in the broadcaster's questions or comments. Instead, use the questions as a barometer of his or her concerns about the issue and as an opportunity to further clarify the issue.
- **End the meeting** by thanking the broadcaster for considering your concerns.

# Talking Points

## Background

- Despite the fact that profit margins for local TV stations were around 40 percent, nearly six out of ten TV news outlets cut their staffs in 2002, investigative reporting declined by 60 percent, and about one-third of local stories were not even staffed by a news reporter on the scene. (Project for Excellence in Journalism)
- TV news is failing to cover elections. Over a seven-week period before the 2002 elections, more than half of the top half-hour news broadcasts in the country's largest TV markets offered no election coverage at all. (USC Annenberg School for Communication's Norman Lear Center and University of Wisconsin)
- The 2004 coverage of primary elections was primarily focused on strategy or polls (47%), rather than information about candidates' backgrounds or policy positions (30%), which would have informed citizens as voters.

## How Does Digital TV Change the Landscape?

- In 1996, Congress gave over-the-air broadcasters -- like your local ABC and WB stations -- digital TV licenses, which could have generated as much as \$70 billion to the U.S. Treasury if auctioned off. (Those licenses are now estimated to be worth well over \$100 billion). Broadcasters received these publicly owned licenses for free.
- By making the transition from an analog to a digital signal, broadcasters will be able to carry six or more multiple interactive channels over a frequency that now accommodates only one channel. This new technology -- called multicasting -- makes it possible for broadcast license holders to air more diverse and local content.
- TV station owners expect to reap massive profits from advertising, pay-per-view programming and televised home-shopping services on these new digital channels. They have proven reluctant, however, to air programming that encourages public participation in America's democratic process.
- Multicasting over public airwaves is worth billions of dollars to broadcasters and they're getting it for free. Broadcasters cannot have it both ways -- receive special treatment from the government, but give nothing in return. The public is entitled to certain benefits since we allow broadcasters free and exclusive use of our property -- the airwaves.

# How Broadcasters Can Serve the Public

The Public Interest, Public Airwaves (PIPA) Coalition, a broad national reform alliance, is calling on the FCC to set new rules that would strengthen the public interest standard.

With this local broadcasters pledge, the Coalition is proposing that broadcasters:

- In the six weeks preceding an election, air a minimum of two hours per week of candidate- or electoral issue-centered discourse on the most-watched channel they operate. This programming would have to be aired between 5 p.m. and 11:35 p.m., when TV viewership among adults is highest.

On other fronts, the Coalition is asking that broadcasters:

- Promote the FCC's often-stated goal of diverse viewpoints and voices on television by ensuring that independent producers provide a minimum of 25 percent of their most watched channel's prime-time schedule.
- Tell the public how they are serving the interests of their audiences by making this information available in a standardized format not only at the station, but also posted on the station's own web site, if it has one.

# Meeting Outcomes: How to Handle the Pledge and Follow-Up

You should be prepared for three possibilities upon the conclusion of your meeting with your local broadcaster. Listed below are some recommendations about how to handle each.

- 1. If the broadcaster agrees to sign the pledge:**  
Thank the station manager/staff for their support of the public interest campaign. Inform management that you will be reporting back to the PIPA Coalition and that the station will be added to a list of stations that support responsible stewardship of the people's airwaves.
- 2. If the broadcaster declines to sign the pledge:**  
What reasons do they give? Be prepared to press for an answer and indicate that you plan on following up on this meeting with additional activism, including monitoring their broadcasts. Your follow-up note should ask for a written response from the broadcaster detailing specific reasons why the pledge was declined, and in what specific ways the broadcaster intends to fulfill the station's public interest obligations.
- 3. If the broadcaster asks for more time or information:**  
Thank the manager/staff for their time and consideration of the pledge. Have the meeting leader(s) exchange contact information and designate a general timeline for a follow-up conversation, making sure to ask how much time the station needs to respond. Provide them with a link to the PIPA Coalition guidelines on Public Interest Obligation.

If there is still no positive response to the pledge, we recommend the following steps:

- Initiate a Letter-To-The-Editor campaign
- Plan a press conference and/or protest in front of the station
- Recruit a prominent local citizen to place on editorial in the paper
- Launch a letter-writing campaign

# After the Meeting

After the meeting, gather the participants and find out what each person thought of the meeting and any other impressions they had. This is a very important part of the process since many times different people will remember different things. See if anyone has any suggestions for what could be improved in the meeting process or ideas about what can be done locally to move the issue forward.

## Follow-Up

As soon as possible (we recommend within 24 hours), write a summary of the meeting to address the following issues:

- Did the station agree to sign the pledge?
- What reasons did they give?
- What additional useful comments did the broadcaster make?
- We would also appreciate any feedback concerning the meeting dynamics. Did everyone participate? Did the meeting stay on track? How could we make this process more productive?
- Please e-mail us this information at [meetings@commoncause.org](mailto:meetings@commoncause.org)

# Sample Press Release (Campaign Launch)

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## **Citizens Press Broadcasters to Fulfill their Public Interest Obligations**

Pledge Campaign Launched to Encourage Coverage of Civic Issues and Elections

For Immediate Release

Contact:

Joe Smith (202) 555-5555

Local residents will be meeting with broadcasters to define ‘public interest obligations’ and to press for coverage of local issues and elections in 2004 and beyond. For decades citizens have tried to turn to their local media for information that matters to them in their community in order to make informed decisions about policies and politicians.

In the coming weeks local residents will ask broadcasters to sign a pledge showing their commitment to what should already be common practice: public affairs programming that is both relevant and timely. Unfortunately, more and more broadcasters are eliminating coverage of the very issues and local elections that people need to make informed decisions that affect their daily lives.

Within the pledge, broadcasters are asked to air a minimum of two hours per week of candidate- or electoral issue-centered discourse in the six (6) weeks before the general election on November 2. “We’re not asking the broadcasters to change their entire schedule,” said XXX of XXX “rather to include civic discourse to help local citizens make valued decisions about their community.” The proposed pledge also asks that the political discourse be aired between 5:00 and 11:35pm, which is the most watched time by adults.

Broadcasters have an obligation to serve the public interest and citizens rely on their local media for the information they need to make important decisions. This pledge is another step to ensure that broadcasters show their commitment to serve the ‘public interest, convenience or necessity.’

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# Sample Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

The time has come for local TV news to take responsibility for providing in-depth, locally relevant election coverage.

In return for the use of publicly owned transmission frequencies, broadcasters have an obligation to serve the public interest—which includes keeping citizens informed about local candidates and issues during an election. This obligation is largely being ignored. Election coverage is sparse, and political news focuses primarily upon strategy and polls rather than substantive information.

The election process is truly democratic only if voters can make informed decisions. We need to send the message to our community's stations that they have a duty to provide local candidate and issue-based coverage during the upcoming election.

All local broadcasters should agree to air, during prime viewing hours, at least two hours per week of candidate- or electoral issue-centered discourse in the six weeks leading up to the November election. It is the least they can do to serve the public.

# 2004 Elections: Public Interest, Public Airwaves Pledge

\_\_\_ **YES**, as a part of our commitment to serve the public interest, our station hereby makes the Public Interest, Public Airwaves Pledge. Recognizing the unique role we play in informing the American electorate, we pledge to create meaningful public interest programming that:

- Encourages viewers to become informed about – and involved in – local civic affairs and elections;
- Gives the greatest number of viewers a chance to learn about the candidates and issues on the ballot in 2004;
- Offers a larger diversity of viewpoints and voices available over our airwaves; and
- Promotes local and community programming.

To fulfill the goals above, our station pledges to:

- Air at least two hours per week of candidate- or electoral issue-centered discourse in the six weeks prior to the November elections;
- The two hours per week will occur between 5pm and 11:35pm.

\_\_\_ **NO**, our station will not commit to airing at least two hours per week of prime time candidate- or electoral issue-centered discourse in the six weeks before Election Day, 2004.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_

Station \_\_\_\_\_ Market \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return this form to \_\_\_\_\_ at the address below  
no later than August 15, 2004. Thank you for your participation.**

<Insert Your Address Here>

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

<Your Phone:> \_\_\_\_\_  
<Your Fax:> \_\_\_\_\_  
<Your Eml:> \_\_\_\_\_

# Background Fact Sheet on the PIPA Coalition Proposal

The **Public Interest, Public Airwaves (PIPA) Coalition** is taking action as the television industry stands poised to receive another massive giveaway from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) -- involving billions of dollars worth of publicly-owned digital broadcasting capacity. Before the FCC acts on behalf of broadcasters, the **PIPA Coalition** has called on the agency to clearly define broadcasters' public interest obligations, particularly as they concern civic and electoral programming.

On April 7 the Alliance for Better Campaigns, Benton Foundation, Common Cause, Center for Digital Democracy, Center for Creative Voices in Media, Institute for Public Representation of Georgetown University Law Center, Media Access Project, New America Foundation and the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, Inc. submitted a proposal to the FCC and asked them to move quickly to establish a clear and strong public interest obligation for the nation's commercial broadcasters.

The **PIPA Coalition** proposal asks the regulatory agency to help ensure that:

- Broadcasters air a minimum three hours per week of civic or electoral affairs programming on their most-watched primary channel;
- Independently-produced programming accounts for at least 25 percent of the primary channel's primetime schedule;
- Broadcasters' efforts to fulfill their statutory public interest obligations are fully disclosed to the public.

According to the proposal, "One core component of these public interest requirements is that broadcasters provide opportunities for citizens to become informed about -- and involved in -- local civic affairs and elections."

The FCC proposal is supported by a nationwide petition drive launched on April 12 by grassroots organizations including the Alliance for Better Campaigns, Common Cause, Free Press, Media for Democracy 2004, MediaChannel.org, MoveOn.org, and TrueMajority.org. The petition calls upon the FCC "to define minimum standards for broadcasters to fulfill their public interest obligation through coverage of elections and civic affairs."

Finally, on Tuesday, April 20, The Coalition announced its broad-based campaign to urge the FCC to hold the nation's commercial broadcasters to a more responsible standard of public service. The announcement was made with FCC Commissioners Jonathan Adelstein and Michael Copps at a press conference during the National Association of Broadcasters annual trade show in Las Vegas.

## **Giving Back to Viewers**

This coordinated initiative comes as the television industry fundamentally changes the way it transmits content -- from analog to digital signals that can carry multiple interactive channels -- six or more -- over a frequency that now only accommodates one. This new technology, called multicasting, makes it possible for broadcast license holders to air more diverse and local content.

TV station owners expect to reap massive profits from advertising, pay-per-view programming and televised home-shopping services on the new digital channels. They have proven reluctant, however, to air programming that encourages public participation in America's democratic process.

## **The Next Front in the Media Reform Movement**

The **Public Interest, Public Airwaves Coalition** will continue to press the FCC for meaningful policies to serve the public's interests, despite ongoing attempts by the powerful media lobby to block any efforts to define broadcasters' obligations to their viewers. These lobbyists, working on behalf of large commercial media conglomerates, continue to push for industry deregulation that will open the way for further concentration of local media outlets in the hands of fewer corporations.

In the months ahead, media activists and grassroots organizations aligned with the **PIPA Coalition** will reach out to television stations in all 50 states to brief them on the FCC proposal and engage station managers in a constructive discussion of best standards for local broadcasters.

# THE PUBLIC INTEREST, PUBLIC AIRWAVES COALITION

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Benton Foundation  
Center for Creative Voices in Media  
Center for Digital Democracy  
Center for Governmental Studies  
Center for Voting and Democracy  
Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting  
Committee for the Study of the American Electorate  
Common Cause  
Democracy Matters Institute  
Demos  
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Global Resource Action Center for the Environment  
Institute for Public Representation of Georgetown University Law Center  
League of United Latin American Citizens  
Media Access Project  
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