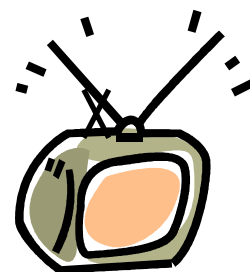


Executive Summary

In the fall of 2004, the Sacramento Media Group (SMG) – an association of concerned citizens including members of California Common Cause, the League of Women Voters Sacramento and Access Sacramento, the local public access cable television – joined a national campaign to evaluate how fairly and effectively local broadcast television stations used the public airwaves to educate voters about candidates and issues. The national campaign, coordinated by the Public Interest Public Airwaves Coalition (PIPA), tried to convince broadcasters nationwide to air two hours per week of locally produced election coverage in prime time (5:30 -11:35 p.m.) during the six weeks prior to Election Day 2004. The two-hour standard represents approximately 5 percent of total prime-time hours.



In Sacramento, SMG concentrated on stations that produce local news shows: Channels 3, 10, 13, 19, 31 and 40. SMG members contacted and visited station managers at these channels, except for Channel 13 which declined to participate. Most of the visited stations followed up by submitting letters that described their election-related activities.

FINDING 1:
Local stations earned nearly \$12 million in 2004 political advertising revenues.

Station managers interviewed responded to a series of questions designed to assess:

- Understanding of a broadcaster’s public interest obligations, particularly around election coverage
- Commitment to balance and fairness in political coverage
- Pressures put on local stations by corporate owners
- Planned coverage of candidates and issues during the weeks prior to the election.

FINDING 2:
All Sacramento stations aired far less than two hours of prime-time, locally produced voter education.

SMG members also reviewed the public interest files of each station, files that are required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to keep an accounting of each station’s public service work. These files include viewers’ comments as well as listings of broadcasts that benefit the community, donations or contributions to local nonprofit causes, and revenues for campaign ads sold to candidates and committees.

FINDING 3:
Local stations keep inadequate public interest records.

Key findings include:

- None of the Sacramento stations came close to the recommended standard of two hours of locally produced, prime-time programming designed to educate voters on candidates and issues. Reasons cited include the cost of producing original local programming; the need to compete for viewers with such sources as cable television and the Internet; and a geographically large viewing area with many different local issues and elections.
- Public interest files at all of the stations were of limited use in evaluating how the stations were meeting their obligations. News stories that contributed to the community’s interest were listed under several topics, so it was difficult to quantify what was actually provided. Many items – such as coverage of new “healthy” salads at McDonald’s –

seemed of questionable service to the public. Very little public comment was found in any of the files, with station managers confirming they rarely hear from viewers about coverage.

- Local stations earned approximately \$12 million in political advertising revenues in 2004, yet spent only a tiny fraction of that on locally produced programs that helped to inform voters about their choices. Advertising rates – dependent on type of race, time of day, time of program and viewing audience – sometimes went as high as \$8,000 for a single 60-second “spot.”

Sacramento Media Group’s local recommendations:

- Continue to monitor Sacramento stations’ performance against the PIPA standard: two hours per week of locally-produced election coverage during prime time throughout the six weeks prior to elections, and three hours per week of local civic or electoral affairs programming throughout the rest of the year, at least half of it during prime-time.
- Monitor news programs to record whether stations are covering important events in a nonpartisan manner. This would provide documentation for the FCC and public interest media watchdog groups.
- Develop a means for members of the public to register complaints and compliments about local television stations on a website hosted by a public interest group, thus providing a repository of information with no potential conflicts of interest.
- Encourage local stations to develop a tracking system that enables viewers to be assured their public comment communications are retained in a station’s public file, and to maintain station public interest files on a website that would be easily accessible to viewers.
- Encourage public input to the FCC during the re-licensing period, between now and the end of 2006, for television stations in California.

Sacramento Media Group’s recommendations to the FCC:

- Develop and approve concrete public interest guidelines with measurable objectives, sensitive to First Amendment media rights but serving the vital need to inform citizens about their democracy.
- Expand guidelines regarding what information must be collected in station public files and how this information must be presented for public view, including the placement of advertising revenues on station websites, listing amount received by client, candidate, and or ballot measure. Develop regulations (and/or support legislation) to reinstate a Fairness Doctrine so citizens can be sure of access to several, opposing points of view.

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