



Midwest Reform Groups Call on FCC to Hold TV Broadcasters Accountable for Inadequate Election and Government Coverage

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MADISON - An alliance of Midwest civic and political reform groups is calling on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to impose stronger public interest obligations on local television broadcasters as part of the new regulatory framework that will govern the pending transition from analog to digital broadcasting.

In a letter sent to the FCC and federal lawmakers from five Midwestern states, the alliance cites recent studies showing that the viewing public is being shortchanged on coverage of state and local elections and critical government issues. The studies show that coverage of government and elections gets much less air time than crime, sports, and weather, and that during election season political ads outweigh election coverage by nearly three to one.

"The findings from the Midwest News Index (MNI) reports reveal a retreat from responsibility by local television stations," the groups said in their letter, citing studies conducted during the past year by the University of Wisconsin NewsLab. "They also reveal an equally distressing failure by the Federal Communications Commission to regulate broadcasting in accordance with the 'public interest, convenience, or necessity,' a principle first enshrined in the Radio Act of 1927 and later in the Communications Act of 1934."

The FCC is currently considering new rules to reflect the national transition from analog to digital broadcasting. The conversion, which is to be completed by February 2009, will allow single-license holders to air programming over several separate channels. Given the impact this transition will have on overall programming and the broadcast business generally, the alliance believes it is vitally important to strengthen and clarify broadcasters' public interest obligations - and to do it before the transition is complete.

The letter was sent by Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin reform groups that, under the banner of the Midwest Democracy Network, are working to strengthen the region's political systems, including a push for greater FCC enforcement of the news media's role of promoting informed participation in civic and political life.

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In the letter, the Midwest Democracy Network asked the FCC to support four specific reforms proposed in 2004 by national media watchdog groups. They include:

- Requiring licensed broadcasters to air a minimum of three hours per week of qualifying local civic or electoral affairs programming on the most-watched channels they control or operate. Such programming should air between 6:00 a.m. and 11:35 p.m., with at least 50 percent being aired weekdays between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. and 11:35 p.m.
- If a licensed broadcaster multicasts additional free over-the-air programming on separate channels, they should be required to air an amount of qualifying local civic or electoral affairs programming on those channels equal to three hours per week per channel or three percent of the aggregate number of hours broadcast between 6:00 a.m. and 11:35 p.m. per week, whichever is less.
- In the 30 days prior to a primary election and the 60 days prior to a general election for federal, state and/or local public office, broadcasters should be required to devote at least two hours of the three hour minimum for electoral affairs programming – and such programming should be aired between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. and 11:35 p.m. on the licensee's most-watched channel.
- Upon implementation of the previous three recommendations, digital broadcasters must periodically report in detail how they are serving the public interest. FCC license renewal would be contingent on stations documenting these efforts.

The groups also called on the FCC to conduct hearings in the Midwest to provide the public an opportunity to comment on proposals for defining and enforcing "meaningful public interest requirements" in the digital age.

The specific recommendations are offered as the groups' response to the findings of the Midwest News Index. Funded by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago, the MNI is an ongoing study examining the content of local television news in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Since September 2006, the MNI has systematically monitored and evaluated the early- and late-evening newscasts on 35 ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC affiliates in nine markets, including Chicago, Springfield, Detroit, Lansing, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Cleveland, Columbus, Milwaukee and Madison. From Labor Day to Election Day 2006, the MNI primarily analyzed election coverage in the markets. Most recently, the MNI provided the first systematic analysis of local television coverage of federal, state and local government outside of an election period.

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Their research has found that:

- Between the traditional Labor Day kickoff of the 2006 election season and October 6, television stations devoted an average of only 36 seconds to election coverage during the typical early- and late-evening 30-minute local news broadcast. In coverage of elections, strategy and horserace stories vastly outweighed substantive issue coverage by a margin of almost three to one.
- During the final month leading up to last November's elections (October 7-November 6), local television news viewers received considerably more information about campaigns from paid political advertisements than from actual news coverage. An analysis of local newscasts in seven of the nine markets revealed that during the typical early- and late-evening 30-minute broadcast, nearly four and a half minutes of paid political ads aired compared with an average of one minute and 43 seconds of actual election news coverage.
- During the first quarter of 2007, stations dedicated just one minute and 35 seconds to government news during a typical early- and late-evening 30-minute news broadcast. In contrast, five times more airtime was spent on "sports and weather." "Teasers, bumpers, and intros" also trumped government coverage at nearly 2 minutes.

While many local television stations offer government and election coverage during off-peak hours, the MNI has shown a lack of quantity and quality during the most-watched newscasts. According to the Pew Center for the People & the Press surveys, almost six in ten Americans (59 percent) watch local news regularly, and more than three in four (76 percent) say that television news is their chief source of election information. Furthermore, a 2006 poll conducted by the firm of Belden Russonello & Stewart found that 88 percent of 2,000 Midwest voters felt that if they had more information about how government works, they could keep it more accountable.

Previous MNI reports, as well a searchable archive of clips can be found at www.mni.wisc.edu. The next MNI report focusing on the second quarter of 2007 will be released in August or September.

The Midwest Democracy Network's full letter and accompanying reports to the FCC can be found at www.wisdc.org and at www.joycefdn.org/MidwestDemocracyNetwork.aspx.

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Signatories to the letter include:

Illinois

Common Cause Illinois, Chicago, IL
Citizen Advocacy Center, Elmhurst, IL
Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, Chicago, IL
Illinois PIRG, Chicago, IL
Protestants for the Common Good, Chicago, IL
Sunshine Project, Springfield, IL

Michigan

Common Cause Michigan, Lansing, MI
League of Women Voters of Michigan, Lansing, MI
Michigan Campaign Finance Network, Lansing, MI

Minnesota

Take Action Minnesota, St. Paul, MN

Ohio

Common Cause Ohio, Columbus, OH
League of Women Voters of Ohio, Columbus, OH
Ohio Citizen Action, Cleveland, OH

Wisconsin

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