

Sacramento Television Coverage of the November 2004 General Election



**A Public Interest-Public Airwaves
Community-By-Community Campaign Project**

By

The Sacramento Media Group

March 2005

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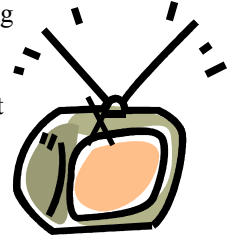
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Acknowledgements

The members of the Sacramento Media Group gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of local broadcast television station managers and their staffs, as well as the leadership and participation of JoAnn Fuller of California Common Cause, Ron Cooper of Access Sacramento, and members of Common Cause and the League of Women Voters of Sacramento.

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.

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.

SMG members also reviewed the public interest files of each station, files that are required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in order 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.

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 FCC recommendations:

- Develop and approve measurable, concrete public interest guidelines, 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.

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

FINDING 2:
No Sacramento station aired more than two hours of prime-time, local voter education.

FINDING 3:
Local stations keep shoddy records of public interest

I. Background



For generations, media activists and public interest groups have fought to have broadcasters take seriously their obligations, written in the Telecommunications Act of 1934, to serve the “public interest, convenience or necessity.” They have also fought the notion, put forward by broadcasters, that serving the public interest means charity telethons and airing public service announcements rather than giving viewers the tools and information they need to be citizens. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), charged with regulating broadcast media, has failed to put any meaning into the public interest obligations of broadcasters during the last two decades. In this vacuum broadcasters have been free to define for themselves what constitutes fulfillment of this critical obligation.

The 2004 elections were exceptionally significant because voters chose the next president, elected U.S. senators and congressional representatives, and decided on ballot measures that impact local communities and individual lives. In a democracy, the electorate must have knowledge about candidates and their positions as well as the potential consequences of proposed laws in order to make informed decisions. Television, in its capacity to reach and educate voters, should play a critical role in providing such information.

This report is being issued to focus attention on how fairly and effectively local broadcast television stations played that role during the 2004 general election cycle. It has been prepared by 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 Sacramento public access cable television station.

Results of national studies were the initial cause for Sacramento Media Group’s concern:

- **A viewer was four times more likely to see a paid political ad during a television news broadcast than an election related story during the 2000 presidential election.**
- **More than half of the top news broadcasts in the largest television markets did not offer any election coverage in the weeks before the 2002 congressional elections.**

- **During the two weeks leading up to Super Tuesday primaries, ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox devoted an average of only eight percent of their news to election coverage. With the exception of Sunday morning public affairs shows, coverage was overwhelmingly a discussion of campaign strategy, polls or the "horse race" rather than candidates' positions on issues.**
- **Fewer than one in five network television evening news stories about the 2004 presidential primary reported on candidates' positions on issues or their voting records.**
- **Television political advertising revenue, for the top 100 media markets, topped \$1.6 billion in 2004, double the amount spent in the 2000 presidential election. This does not include revenues in the 111 smaller media markets. (See appendix B for more information.)**

(Cited from reports by: *The Alliance for Better Campaigns*, *USC Annenberg School for Communication-Norman Lear Center*, *University of Wisconsin*, *Pew Charitable Trust*)

By law, television (and radio) stations have a public service obligation they are expected to fulfill in return for the use of publicly owned airwaves, an obligation upheld by the Supreme Court. Ever since the birth of radio, the broadcast spectrum has been viewed as the property of the American public, not the broadcasters. Concern about how well broadcasters would meet their obligation in the November 2004 election cycle seemed well-founded. In its report titled *Local TV News Coverage of the 2002 General Election*, The Lear Center, a project of the USC Annenberg School and the University of Wisconsin, notes:

"Over the seven-week period reported on in the study, over half (56 percent) of the top-rated half-hour news broadcasts did not contain a single campaign story. In the 44 percent of broadcasts that did contain campaign coverage, the average election story was 89 seconds long. When campaign stories aired, only 28 percent contained candidates saying anything at all. In those stories showing candidates speaking, the average sound bite was 12 seconds long."

In response to data such as this, a group of interested citizens formed the SMG to determine how members of the community could reinforce the public interest responsibility of local Sacramento broadcast television stations. SMG decided the most effective response was to join a national campaign with Common Cause. Along with 25 other public interest organizations representing millions of Americans, Common Cause had joined the Public Interest Public Airwaves Coalition (PIPA) to work across the country to hold the nation's 1,300 commercial broadcasters to a more meaningful standard of public service in their coverage of elections—two hours per week of locally produced, prime time election coverage during the six weeks just prior to Election Day.

PIPA's larger goal is to convince the FCC to consider and approve measurable, concrete public interest guidelines for broadcasters, including a requirement that stations air a minimum of three hours per week of local civic or electoral affairs programming throughout the year, at least half of it between 5 p.m. and 11:35 p.m., when most adults watch TV.

The Sacramento Media group decided to enlist in the campaign by reviewing election coverage plans with Sacramento-based television stations, encouraging each station to provide two hours of locally produced, prime-time coverage each week, and comparing their efforts with the criteria established by PIPA. This two-hour goal seemed a reasonable amount of time to devote to helping invigorate the democratic process, given that the

industry makes millions from selling campaign advertising on public airwaves. An election cycle is filled with drama, competition and, at times, comedy, all ingredients of creative programming. Would local television producers use these elements to produce 17-18 minutes of programming each day to better inform the citizenry?

Our efforts were especially important and timely in light of the fact that the licenses of all California broadcast television and radio stations are soon coming up for renewal – radio stations by the end of 2005 and TV stations by the end of 2006. While most renewals are virtually automatic, they do present an opportunity for citizens to contact the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and stations with their evaluations and recommendations. One of the purposes of this report is to encourage more public participation in the license renewal process. Guidelines for public participation can be found at the FCC and Alliance for Better Campaigns websites:

www.fcc.gov/localism/renew_process_handout.doc

www.bettercampaigns.org/freeairtime/factsheets/LicenseRenewal.pdf

Although this study focused mainly on *quantity* of election-related coverage, there is certainly equal concern for *quality* of coverage. Can a licensed broadcaster repeatedly expound the virtues of a certain party, candidate or issue without some effort towards balance and fairness? Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

The standards for fairness and balance in political reporting disappeared in 1987 with President Reagan’s veto of the long-standing “Fairness Doctrine.” This FCC guideline, while not perfect, had bolstered the FCC to at least *expect* some political balance in a licensed broadcaster’s overall programming line-up. Without it, there is no such expectation and no basis for enforcing politically balanced programming. While it was our general observation that most broadcast television stations in the Sacramento area attempt to provide political balance, it is noteworthy that Channel 13 (Sinclair Broadcasting) regularly airs blatantly partisan “editorials” during local news programming – even during the weeks leading up to the November election. There is currently no legal basis for challenging this type of abuse of an FCC license to use our public airwaves.

II. Project Goals and Activities



Sacramento Media Group's goals were:

- **Meet with local broadcast television station managers and news directors to discuss their election coverage plans.**
- **Press stations to dedicate two hours each week to locally produced programming about candidates and/or electoral issues during prime-time viewing hours over the six weeks before the November 2nd election. The two-hour standard represents about 5 percent of total prime-time hours.**
- **Gauge station performance against the above standard.**

Project attention focused on stations that produce local news shows: Channels 3, 10, 13, 19, 31 and 40. (See Appendix A for station information). Channel 3 management also spoke for Channel 58 which broadcasts a half-hour version of the Channel 3 newscast daily. Channel 6, a PBS affiliate, was not approached since its schedule does not include regular, locally produced news programs. Channel 13 declined to participate. Channels 3, 10, 19, 31 and 40 were visited and interviewed by the study group. Most of the visited stations followed up by submitting letters describing their activities.

A. Station Visits and Interviews

Station visits were extremely useful in understanding issues local television broadcasters face. Most heartening to hear was station managers' confirmation that viewers respond well to political issue programming and that such programs are popular. Representatives from SMG enjoyed these accommodating and productive meetings with general managers and news directors from every Sacramento station with the exception of Channel 13. The general manager of Channel 13 refused to meet, citing concerns that the station's broadcast plans, which were proprietary, should not be subject to public scrutiny before the election. Channel 13 also refused to send a letter describing its coverage even after the election.

During the interviews, station managers were asked about their understanding of a station's public interest obligations, particularly around election coverage. All managers stated they understood the need to be good corporate citizens, and exhibited a general awareness and respect for their licensed use of public airwaves. They also explained that there are competing sources of information available to the public such as cable television and the Internet. Because of this, local television needs compelling ways to cover issues relevant to people and provide information that is needed to successfully recruit an audience. They did emphasize

that, to survive in a competitive Sacramento market, local stations must be responsive to the community and focus on what is of importance to viewers.

Regarding balance and the need for fairness in political coverage, every manager stated this is vital to garner the trust of their audience. They understood such evenhandedness to be basic to democratic principles and fundamentally good business. The managers did complain that, while their activities are regulated, their cable competition is not. It is noted, however, that stations use public airwaves for free while cable companies do not broadcast on public airwaves.

All stations visited are owned by large commercial corporations that operate numerous stations nationwide. In the Sacramento-Stockton-Modesto broadcast market (representing 1.2 percent of the national audience) the six English language stations are owned by five major media conglomerates: Viacom, Tribune, Sinclair,¹ Hearst and Gannett. There is also one local Spanish language station owned by Univision. In terms of the total number of markets across the country in which each owns one or more stations they are ranked as follows: Viacom, 2nd; Tribune, 3rd; Sinclair, 5th; Hearst, 7th; and Gannett, 8th.

SMG inquired if stations ever felt corporate pressure to alter the political content of their programming. The managers denied any pressure and said they understood they needed to be fair in their political coverage or would lose viewers. SMG was not able ask these questions of Channel 13, owned at the time by Sinclair Broadcasting Group which, shortly before Election Day, mandated their television stations preempt regular programming to carry a politically partisan “news” feature. The station also presented regular editorials from one partisan point of view produced by Sinclair Broadcasting in the weeks before the election.

Station managers did express frustration with providing local campaign coverage when their viewing area covers such a large geographic area. With so many local races occurring in their domain, they didn’t think it was feasible to cover the many local issues and elections. Managers also spoke of their frustration when candidates refuse press coverage. According to several stations, they attempted to produce a debate between U.S. senatorial candidates, but were not successful because the incumbent refused to participate. Economics compounded the challenge, managers added, since local programming is expensive to produce and there are fewer advertisers who can support locally produced shows over several metropolitan areas.

B. Summary of Station Activities

The following is taken from information included in letters sent by stations describing their election coverage. Channel 10 did not send a letter so information is provided from notes taken during the meeting with the station manager. As noted earlier, Channel 13 refused to participate. All stations aired some coverage of the Democratic and Republican conventions and the presidential and vice presidential debates. (See Appendix D for copies of station letters).

Channel 3 (Owner: Hearst Argyle Television Inc.)

- Committed a minimum of five minutes, Monday through Friday between 5 p.m. and 11:35 p.m., to election coverage, including profiles of propositions and candidates, “ad watches” of political commercials and longer candidate sound bites. Political polls or “horserace” coverage was not included in the five minute tally.

¹ The sale of KOVR (Channel 13) by Sinclair Broadcasting to Viacom is awaiting federal approval. Once it is complete, the six Sacramento stations will be owned by only four major media companies.

- Aired two half-hour specials: on October 24, how diverse minority communities are affected by the issues of the election; and on October 31, voters' guide to help familiarize people with the ballot.

Channel 10 (Owner: Gannett Broadcasting)

- Aired four half-hour shows that included information on propositions and how they could impact people's daily lives.
- Developed a "Truth Test" to evaluate campaign commercials.
- Covered pros and cons on propositions on station website; ran news flashes on pumps at selected gas stations.
- Aired political coverage in news programs.

Channel 13 (Owner at the time of the study: Sinclair Broadcasting Group)

- Refused to meet with the Sacramento Media Group.
- Preempted regular programming to carry a politically partisan "news" feature shortly before Election Day.
- Aired partisan editorials as a regular feature of local news prior to the election.

Channel 19 (Owner: Univision Communications Inc.)

- Aired stories several nights per week analyzing the ballot measures most likely to affect Sacramento's Latino community on their three daily news casts with two political reporters covering the Capitol and on the weekly half hour *Voz Y Voto*, the only Spanish-language public policy program in the nation.
- Covered national presidential and vice presidential debates by simultaneously translating them into Spanish.
- Encouraged viewers to register and vote with public service announcements featuring Univision news personalities on a heavy rotation in weeks before the registration deadline and get-out-the-vote public service announcements immediately before Election Day.

Channel 31 (Owner: Viacom Television Stations Group)

- Aired two-three minutes of political coverage per hour, for a total of 8-12 minutes per day, Monday through Friday, during the broadcast of *Good Day Sacramento* (a non-traditional locally produced morning show) from July-November 2004.
- Aired 20-30 minutes on *Good Day Sacramento* of total political news and reports per morning during the conventions, debates, and weeks leading up to Election Day.
- Aired three minute daily analysis of propositions in two weeks leading up to Election Day.
- Aired special campaign reports and provided exclusive polls on *Make-It-Count*, a regularly scheduled Sunday half-hour political program.

Channel 40 (Owner: Tribune Broadcasting Company)

- Aired during primetime on October 3, 2004 a Local Town Hall special on state ballot gaming propositions 68 and 70.
- Offered free five minute prime time interviews to major candidates in U.S. Senate and key congressional races, 10 candidates accepted.
- Aired several public service announcements urging viewers to vote.
- Produced nightly news stories and coverage during primetime newscast at 10 p.m.
- Carried three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate.

- Continued to air regular monthly programs, *Viewer's Voice*, in which viewers shared perspectives and questions and *Your Town*, highlighting different communities and concerns.

Several stations used their websites to provide election coverage such as the pros and cons of ballot initiatives. This is an innovative use of resources but does raise questions of ease of access to information and equity, given that many people do not have computers and/or Internet access at home.

C. Review of Station Public Files

Because the FCC requires broadcast television stations to keep an accounting of their public service work, each station must keep a “public interest file” that includes documentation of viewers’ comments, stories broadcast that benefit the community, donations or contributions to local non-profit organizations, and a listing of campaign ads the station sells to political candidates and committees. The files are compulsory for stations to be re-licensed and must be available to the public.

In preparation for visits with stations, the group investigated what public service programming the stations reported they provide by reviewing their public interest files. All stations had files in good order, but they were found to be of limited use in evaluating how the stations were meeting their obligations. The stations listed news stories by topics they felt contributed to the community’s interest. However, some stations listed the same story under several topics so it was difficult to quantify what was actually provided. In addition, many listings seemed of questionable service to the public. For example, one station listed its coverage of new salads offered at McDonald’s as a community service related to health issues.

Most interesting was the lack of public comment in the files. During interviews, station managers confirmed that they rarely hear from viewers except when a program is cancelled or a schedule changes and that input is usually received via e-mail (e-mail files were not made available to SMG). Every manager indicated interest in receiving public comment and that they attempt to review every letter or email that comes into the station.

D. Review of Station Political Advertising Revenues

In addition, SMG reviewed data on revenues received for political advertising during the 2004 calendar year. Channels 3/58, 10, 13, 19, 31 and 40 received a total of approximately \$12 million in revenues from advertising for U.S. congressional positions, the California Senate, the mayor of Sacramento, and 19 ballot measures. More than 80 percent of the revenues were for ballot measures.

Advertising rates varied widely from a low of \$300 per 30-60 second “spot” to a high of \$8,000, depending on type of race, time of day, type of program and viewing audience demographics and size. For the Sacramento-Stockton-Modesto television market area the revenue represents:

- Approximately \$4 per capita
- Approximately \$8 per registered voter
- Approximately \$11 per 2004 general election vote.

Given an estimated cost of \$10,000 to \$25,000 to produce a 30-60 minute program that would feature candidates or electoral issues, stations could fund many such programs if they were to set aside even a modest percentage of their political advertising revenues.

III. Summary



None of the Sacramento stations came close to meeting the goal of two hours per week of locally produced election coverage aired during prime time. If network coverage of the Democratic and Republican conventions and the presidential and vice-presidential debates were included, most stations would have met the goal.

The following are specific findings drawn from station visits and from interviews with television station executives.

Station management claimed that:

- The goal of two hours per week of prime-time, locally produced election coverage programming is not realistic.
- They have an awareness of, and respect for, a station's license to use the public airwaves.
- Political programming usually is well received by viewers.
- Political balance and fairness is a goal of the stations.
- Pressure from corporate ownership does not influence a station's political coverage.
- Local election issues are difficult to cover due to the broad viewing region that broadcast stations cover.
- Stations compete with cable television and other news sources for audience share; broadcast television is subject to more FCC regulation than are cable stations since cable does not use public airwaves.
- Stations increasingly develop and promote their own websites as "go to" resources for more information on subjects they cover on air.
- Public input is welcomed and read by station managers.

Sacramento Media Group's observations are:

- Stations visited were generally open to scrutiny and input from the SMG team.
- Public Interest files existed and were accessible upon request.
- As currently kept, station public files do not present documentation in a useful way for evaluating fulfillment of station public interest obligations or responsiveness to the community.
- Public input letters (e.g., complaints) were not found in "hard copy" files and there is no way of verifying how many letters the stations may have received.
- Stations today generally receive public input via e-mail which was not made available to SMG.
- Campaign advertising revenue information was found in the file but was challenging and laborious to calculate.
- Station websites can be useful in presenting election campaign information, but they could also provide a justification for not giving public affairs ample coverage during on-air news.

IV. Recommendations

The federal government has allowed the nation's television broadcasters to use the enormous power of the public airwaves – estimated to be worth billions of dollars – free of charge. Our democracy requires and the public expects that broadcasters, in turn, serve the public interest with programming that encourages Americans to take a more active role in determining the future of their democracy. SMG is confident that local stations will respond, as they have indicated, if the public uses findings of this project to invigorate viewer involvement and communication with local broadcasters.

This year provides a timely opportunity for the public to provide comment on the public affairs and political coverage on local television broadcasts since every television station in California must be re-licensed by the end of 2006. In view of this and the results of our project activities, SMG intends to work with the public, other media activists and broadcasters to help implement the following actions:

- Continue to monitor Sacramento stations' performance against the PIPA standard: 1) two hours per week of locally-produced election coverage during prime time throughout the six weeks prior to elections; 2) 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.

Over the past few years Americans have demonstrated that they care about media reform by sending more than two million messages to the FCC and Congress in opposition to media consolidation. Concerted efforts must call for a more forceful standard for broadcasters, and air time for electoral discourse must be a crucial component. SMG joins with Common Cause and the Public Interest Public Airwaves Coalition to call on the FCC to do the following:

- Develop and approve measurable, concrete public interest guidelines, 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.

Appendices

A. Station Contact and Ownership Information

KCRA Channel 3

President and General Manager Elliott Troshinsky
Contact Mr. Troshinsky at etroshinsky@hearst.com
Or write KCRA 3 Television Circle Sacramento, CA 95814
Network: NBC
Owner: Hearst Argyle Television Inc.

KXTV Channel 10

President and General Manager Russell Postell
Contact Mr. Postell at rpostell@news10.net
Or write KXTV 400 Broadway Sacramento, CA 95818
Network: ABC
Owner: Gannett Broadcasting

KOVR Channel 13

General Manager Dan Mellon
Contact Mr. Mellon at dmellon@kovr.sbgnet.com
Or write KOVR 2713 Kovr Dr. West Sacramento, CA 95605-1600
Network: CBS
Owner: Viacom is buying the station; it was owned by the Sinclair Broadcast Group during the project

KUVS Channel 19

Vice President and General Manager Diego Ruiz
Contact Mr. Ruiz at druiz@univision.net
Or write KUVS 1710 Arden Way Sacramento, CA 95815
Network: Univision
Owner: Univision Communication Inc.

KMAX Channel 31

Vice President and General Manager Bruno Cohen
Contact Mr. Cohen at bcohen@kmaxtv.com
Or write KMAX 500 Media Place Sacramento, CA 95815
Network: United Paramount Network
Owner: Viacom Television Stations Group

KTXL Channel 40

Vice President and General Manager Audrey Farrington
Contact Ms. Farrington at AFarrington@tribune.com
Or write KTXL 4655 Fruitridge Road Sacramento, CA 95820
Network: Fox Broadcasting Company
Owner: Tribune Broadcasting Company

KQCA Channel 58

President and General Manager Elliott Troshinsky
Contact Mr. Troshinsky at etroshinsky@hearst.com
Or write KQCA 3 Television Circle Sacramento, CA 95814
Network: Warner Bros. Network
Owner: Hearst Argyle Television Inc.

B. National statistics on revenues from political advertising, election coverage

C. California Common Cause Letter to Stations

D. Station Response letters

E. Statement from Common Cause and/or PIPA (change italics when hear from Lauren)

Press Release

March 00, 2005

Contact: JoAnn Fuller
California Common Cause
916-443-1792 extension 11
jfuller@commoncause.org

TV Broadcasters Fall Short of Goal to Inform Voters in 2004 Elections

Just how much could Sacramento voters depend on their local TV broadcasters for information on candidates and issues during the 2004 elections?

That's the question asked this fall by 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.

SMG 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 Public Interest Public Airwaves Coalition (PIPA), tried to convince broadcasters nationwide to produce two hours per week of locally produced election coverage in prime-time hours (5:00-11:35 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, as in most other cities surveyed in the campaign, broadcasters fell far short of that goal, typically airing only a few minutes each day. A major reason cited for this lack of coverage was the cost of producing local programming.

Yet those same Sacramento area stations earned approximately \$12 million in political advertising revenues in 2004, as tallied from station public interest files. Ad rates – dependent on type of race, time of day, type of program and viewing audience – sometimes went as high as \$8,000 for a single 60-second “spot.” Only a tiny fraction of these revenues were used to produce programs that helped to inform voters about their choices.

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

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.

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

Public interest files at all of the stations were of limited use in evaluating how the stations were meeting their obligations, noted SMG member and Common Cause California grassroots organizer JoAnn Fuller. "News stories which contributed to the community's interest were listed under several topics, so it was difficult to quantify what was actually provided. And, 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 the files; station managers confirmed they rarely hear from viewers about coverage.

"This year is an ideal time for the public to scrutinize and provide comments on public affairs and political programming on local television broadcasts, since *every television station in California must be re-licensed by the end of 2006*," added Fuller. In view of this, SMG intends to work with the public, other media activists and broadcasters to:

- Monitor Sacramento stations' performance against the PIPA standard: 1) two hours per week of locally-produced election coverage during prime time throughout the six weeks prior to elections, and 2) 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.
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