

# Airing Democracy: Politics and Broadcast Television

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*In an information age where knowledge is power, and political knowledge doubly so, broadcast (non-cable) television is of vital importance. As the cheapest and most widely available information medium, broadcast television has a uniquely democratic potential to disseminate political information across traditional socio-economic boundaries. And as the beneficiary of the immensely valuable gift of the free use of the publicly-owned airwaves, broadcast television has a real obligation to achieve this potential. Unfortunately, the amount of useful political information available on broadcast television has declined dramatically in the past twenty years to startlingly low current levels. This paper analyzes the extent of this decline, its possible causes and effects, and previous attempts at reform. While this complex issue defies simple solution, the importance and scope of the problem warrant continued vigilance in seeking to establish television as a truly democratic medium.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Politics and television. Both are indelible parts of our national consciousness, implacable objects of public scorn and ridicule, simultaneously blamed for all of society's ills and called upon to cure all of society's problems. And they are inextricably intertwined: television depending on politics for the regulation that ensures its existence, and our democracy depending on television to provide political information to the public.

It is thus imperative to analyze the current situation of this relationship, specifically concerning broadcast television, the most widely available, ideally democratic form of television, and its role in the dissemination of political information. To do this it is necessary to identify how much and what kind of political information is being aired on broadcast television. Unfortunately, most evidence gathered by concerned agencies and academic researchers over the past 40 years suggests that the amount is very low, and the quality likewise poor. Questions then arise as to what factors have gone into the creation of this situation, what the effects of this level of information are on the public and the healthy functioning of our democracy, what attempts have been made and are being made at change, and finally, the possibility of their success.

But before these questions are answered, it is necessary to first back up a step and answer the basic question "So What?" Why is a lack of political information on broadcast television so troubling? Why focus on broadcast television in particular, with so many other forms of media out there, such as the Internet, cable television, radio, newspapers, and magazines?

What is the importance of broadcast television to our democracy?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TELEVISION

The answer lies in the uniquely egalitarian aspect of broadcast television. For the average citizen, no other informational medium has such low barriers for entry in terms of cost, effort, and required level of education. Broadcast television is extremely cheap, requiring only a TV set—easily obtainable for under \$100—and a location within receiving distance of a broadcast station. Set-up for most basic television sets is relatively simple, and once the set is installed, the only effort required to tap into the broadcast informational stream is the push of a button. Television, because of its reliance on sounds, images, and emotion, also requires low active mental engagement, making it a relaxing leisure time activity certainly not limited to the industrious or motivated. Likewise, because of its visceral, non-verbal nature, most television broadcasts require little education to understand and appreciate.

These factors have combined to make the television a ubiquitous feature of the American home—with over 98 percent of households having at least one television set (US Census Bureau 2001)—and television watching a national past time, to the tune of an average of 319 minutes a day for the participants in one study, an amount which dwarfs the use of any other medium (Papper et al. 2004). Thus broadcast television is the most watched and the most influential medium on our shared popular culture. Through its prevalence, broadcast television has assumed the status of the common denom-

inator of our culture, the shared currency of an increasingly-fragmented society. Thus broadcast television is uniquely situated to be a disseminator of democracy, a tool to bring the political information to the masses that is necessary to empower them to act on their own behalf.

Another factor that makes the question of political information on broadcast television so important is the public's reliance on it as a source of political information. Use of television in general to follow presidential campaigns has traditionally been very high (Jamieson 1996) and a recent survey found that, despite some slippage in recent years, people turn to local, non-cable TV news for campaign information more than any other source (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004a).

The third factor that should concern us about the amount of political information being broadcast is that, in a very real and legally binding sense, the airwaves used by broadcasters are public property. Citing the inherent scarcity of broadcast spectrum and the necessity of government regulation for the orderly use of the airwaves, therefore providing them with their economic value, the Federal Communications Act of 1934 declared the airwaves to be public property. This decision has since been upheld in numerous court cases<sup>1</sup>. The Act recognizes that broadcasters, to whom the government grants the right to use the public spectrum for free, have a responsibility to serve the public interest. This responsibility has, to varying degrees throughout the years, been interpreted to include a responsibility to disseminate political information (New America Foundation 2004).

Thus we see that broadcast television is the single most important medium in terms of potential for creating a more equal democracy. It is then of greatest concern how well it is fulfilling this potential, specifically how much political information is being disseminated through this most democratic of media.

### AMOUNT AND QUALITY OF POLITICAL INFORMATION ON BROADCAST TELEVISION

Unfortunately, the answer is disheartening. The amount of useful political information on broadcast television is alarmingly low, and it looks to be in a state of continual decline.

Before we document that decline, however, it is important to define the phrase "political information on broadcast television." For in a very real sense all television is political, in that it both reflects and shapes the public psyche, echoing and creating the sentiments of a nation, the country's zeitgeist for which an election is a concrete expression. However, for political information to truly count for our purposes, that is, for it to be considered as a useful tool in the expansion and

proper functioning of democracy, the information must function far more explicitly than as mere shaper of unconscious public opinion. It must be framed in such a way that it will be consciously digested as political information, so that it will be viewed as an argument to be evaluated and weighed on the scales of political opinion and voting choice. Furthermore, it must contain some substantial discussion of an issue or topic of actual interest to the voter when weighing his decision. As we will see, not all of what is sometimes called political information meets the narrow definition implied by these requirements.

First, while political information may crop up in shows from a variety of formats, the focus is primarily on programs that the public actually views with the intent or at least expectation of receiving political information. This is the case primarily with programs of an overtly political nature, such as debates and presidential speeches, and shows with a primary purpose of disseminating information, such as the news, talk shows, and the like. The main area of focus in this arena will be the local and national nightly news broadcasts, which have the highest overall audience of the informational programs and also are overwhelmingly cited by the public as their number one source of political information (National Association of Broadcasters 2002).

Secondly, not all political information is created equal. As any candidate will tell you, the information presented in the weeks closest to an election outweighs that of the previous months, for that is when the majority of the public starts weighing their decision. Thus we will particularly look at broadcasting in time periods surrounding major elections. Unfortunately, much of the election year broadcasting becomes caught up in the drama of the horse race as shown in the latest polls, which, though exciting to the political junkie, do not tell a voter anything about a candidate or an issue that would actually help him or her to decide for whom to vote. Thus consideration will be given not only the quantity of political broadcasting, but also the quality.

Unfortunately, both quantity and quality have declined to alarmingly low levels at the present. Quantitatively, the decline is striking. According to the Tyndall Report, a publication of ADT research which has tracked the amount of campaign coverage on network news for the last 16 years, in 1988 the weekday nightly newscasts of the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—had aired 1476 minutes of campaign coverage by May 28 (2004). At that same point in the 2004 campaign, the number was only 911 minutes, a decrease of almost 40 percent. A similar report by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) found that in 2003 the networks spent 32 percent less time covering the campaign than they did during the same period of the 2000 election cycle, and 62 percent less time than they did in 1996 (2004b). This fits with the data from the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), which found that only 4 percent of network news stories in 2003 were about campaigns or elections. The

<sup>1</sup> The landmark cases for establishing the public interest standard are *FCC v. Pottsville Broadcasting* (1940), *National Broadcasting Co. v. U.S.* (1943), and *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC* (1969).

PEJ also found the problem to extend beyond election coverage, as governmental affairs in general were only the topic of 17 percent of nightly network newscasts, half of what it was in 1987 (2004). These numbers come despite a vigorously contested Democratic primary anticipating a hotly contested general election, not to mention the war in Iraq. All of these issues should have provided ample fodder for substantial political newscasts.

The gap is not being made up by the local news broadcasts, which, according to a study by the Martin Kaplan of the USC/Annenberg Lear Center (Kaplan and Hale 2001), aired only an average of six minutes and 20 seconds of political coverage a night during the last 30 days of the 2000 general election. A similar study done by the Lear Center in 2002 found a nightly average of one minute 29 seconds for that year's general election, with barely half of all newscasts airing any election stories at all (Lear Center 2002). This fits with a study done by the PEJ in that year that found that only nine percent of local news stories dealt with politics at any level (2002). Thus we see that across the board the sheer quantity of political news is quite low.

Quality is a more slippery beast to pin down, but most data confirm that it is currently low. The single most glaring aspect of the degradation in quality is the appalling amount of "horse-race" coverage, discussion of poll results and campaigning tactics, instead of real issue or policy concerns. While this information may justifiably appeal to die-hard political junkies, it does not have any real value to the voter, as it contains no information that can actually be used in a political decision.

Horse-race coverage has been a staple of television political reporting for some time. According to data from the Annenberg Public Policy Center, over 60 percent of broadcast news stories in the 1980, 1988, and 1992 elections were structured around a horse-race or strategy frame (1997). A CMPA (2004a) analysis of general election news found horse race coverage comprising 58 percent of network news stories in 1988 and 1992, dipping slightly to 48 percent in 1996.

The networks' penchant for strategy-focused news has worsened in more recent years. The Project for Excellence in Journalism found that in the early press coverage of the 2000 campaign "only 13 percent of the stories produced were about things that would actually impact the American public if the candidates were elected" (2000b). It also found that less than 1 percent of stories explored the candidates' backgrounds and past voting records. This fits with another study which found that the networks employed a strategy frame for their political stories 70 percent of the time during the primaries (Falk and Aday 2000).

The 2000 election coverage improved little as the campaign got under way. A second PEJ study, conducted during the period following the debates which is regarded by many as the most substantive part of the campaign, found that the press continued to focus on horse-race and strategy issues (2000b). Similar studies found that between 61 percent (Falk

and Aday 2000) and 71 percent (CMPA 2000) of stories were strategy-oriented. Local news did a little better. According to the Lear Center study, 55 percent of stories on the local news in the 2000 general election employed a strategy-based story frame (2002).

The trend continues, as in 2002, the follow-up Lear study found 47 percent of stories focused on strategy of horse-race. A CMPA study on the early 2004 Democratic primary coverage found that only 17 percent of primary election stories investigated the candidates' voting records, proposals, or stances on issues, as opposed to 71 percent of the stories focusing on poll numbers and behind-the-scenes tactics (2004a). A current ongoing Media Tenor study has had similar findings, with policy coverage in January and February staying below 25 percent of all stories on network news (2004).

In addition to the low quality and quantity of news regarding elections, candidates are receiving very little direct exposure on broadcast television. In the 1960s, the average candidate sound bite on broadcast news was 42 seconds (Baum and Kernell 1999). In the 2000 election, this was down to nine seconds (CMPA 2000). Political conventions in 2000 saw their coverage on the three major networks drop by two thirds compared to 1980 (Alliance for Better Campaigns [ABC] 2000). Likewise, presidential debates, once hallowed as prime examples of the sweeping democratic potential of the television medium, now find themselves increasingly relegated to subscription cable and limited local coverage. In 2000, only two out of 22 television debates during the presidential primary campaign received any national network coverage (ABC 2002). As for the most recent election cycle, as of Feb. 2, 2004, only one out of the five Democratic presidential primary debates had received any sort of national network coverage. (Campaign Legal Center 2004). Also, in 2000 the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate found that only one-fifth of the gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional debates held were aired by a network-affiliated local television station (2001). Presidential addresses and press conferences have received declining network coverage as well. Traditionally, these events would unquestionably receive full coverage on all three major networks. However, at the end of the Reagan presidency, the networks began to refuse presidential requests for live coverage of their speeches, making the events less effective and increasingly rare. President Clinton had held only 15 of these conferences by the end of his second term in 1999, outdoing his predecessor President George H.W. Bush who held only eight, but still dwarfed by President Reagan, who staged 51 in his 8 years in office (Baum and Kernell 1999).

Thus we see that not only has the overall presence of campaign coverage dropped from broadcast television, but also the most useful forms of political information—debates, issue-oriented news coverage, and speeches—have dwindled as well.

## CAUSES

What lies at the root of this decline? Several explanations offer themselves—that politics is ill-suited for television, that the political process itself is increasingly shallow, that the changing media environment is forcing changes in broadcast political coverage. Some of these explanations seem to be greater contributing factors than others, but none seem to be a definitive, “silver-bullet” answer.

It is tempting to accept the simple explanation that politics makes bad television, dismissing the subject as far too boring, complicated, and serious for a medium that makes its primary living by being entertaining. Indeed many broadcasters, citing polls done by their marketing consultants that show little public interest in watching news on politics, have adopted the adage “politics is ratings poison,” and thus shy away from all things political on their news broadcasts.

However, abundant evidence discounts this adage. First of all, the premise that politics is something the public does not want to watch on television is defeated by the polls mentioned previously in which the public states that they look to television as their number one source of political information. Television station news directors often counter this, however, by citing their own polling data which shows the public to be very uninterested in viewing political reporting. But there is evidence, as pointed out by Tom Rosensteil and Dave Iverson in an October 2002 article for the *Los Angeles Times*, that “the research that has dominated TV consulting about covering public life is faulty” (2002). They use data from the Pew 2002 Believability Survey to show deficiencies in a standard survey from one of the nation’s major television consulting firms:

The Pew Research Center conducted a nationwide poll that included the standard consultant question on politics. Only 29 percent said they’d be very interested in that kind of reporting. Yet when people were asked whether they’d be interested in “news reports about what government can do to improve the performance of local schools,” the percentage of “very interested” jumped to 59 percent. Similarly, when participants were asked whether they’d be interested in reports on what government could do to ensure that public places were safe from terrorism, the percentage of “very interested” rose to 67 percent” (Rosensteil and Iverson 2002).

This information leads us to the conclusion that, while standard, political-insider strategy and maneuverings based coverage would typically fail to hold viewers’ interests, well-done, policy based coverage could easily connect with viewers and attract a large audience. There are numerous examples of stations that have had considerable ratings success through a devotion to politics. A South Carolina station airing a special about political advertising garnered more viewers than popular quiz show *Jeopardy!*—typically a powerhouse for that time slot. Likewise, in Orlando, Florida, a debate between Gov. Jeb Bush and opponent Bill McBride managed to be the highest rated program at 7 p.m., the heart of prime time. In addition, stations in West Palm Beach, Tampa, Miami, Jacksonville, and Ft. Myers also aired the program, which came in first in

the time slot in three of those markets (Rosensteil and Iverson 2003).

The Hearst-Argyle station group, one of the largest station groups in the country, has launched a “Commitment 2004” program which mandates its stations “provide the most comprehensive news coverage of national, state, and local campaigns possible” (McAvoy 2004). Hearst-Argyle stations must commit five minutes a day to candidate-centered coverage during prime time in the month before an election. This has had far from negative effects on the stations’ ratings and financial success:

News Director Michelle Butt reports that her newscasts held or grew their audience during the time frame. Dan Weiser at Sacramento’s KCRA says the political reporting didn’t hurt the station’s market lead. At WYFF in Greenville, where the news department produced an aggressive series of reports about political advertising, News Director Andy Still and reporter Brad Willis say they got more viewer response than for anything else they’ve ever done (McAvoy 2004).

The expanded coverage also makes the stations a very attractive target for political advertising, a fact reflected by the station group’s January net political revenues of almost \$3.9 million, “more than offsetting the prior year revenues garnered for the 2003 Super Bowl” (Hearst-Argyle, Inc. 2004).

In addition, television’s attempts to achieve higher ratings through superficial and gimmicky political coverage are misguided. A five-year study of local television done by the Project for Excellence in Journalism that analyzed more than 1,200 hours of news and more than 30,000 stories suggests that “by several measures quality, as defined by broadcast journalism professionals, is the most likely path to commercial success, even in today’s difficult economic environment” (2002).

Given this information, the broadcasters’ cries of “ratings poison” can be dismissed. Clearly, if properly done politics can mix well with television news, even though currently broadcasters barely even try. However, the decline of political broadcasting cannot be pinned wholly on misinformed broadcasters refusing to act in their own self-interest. Other factors must be at work. Another possible explanation, perhaps even more cynical than the first, is that the political process, especially elections, has become less substantial, thus making any coverage of politics necessarily superficial and horse-race oriented.

One serious flaw in this assessment is the assumption that politicians are primarily responsible for the content of political coverage. The majority of the time, this is not the case. News stories are far more likely to be the result of newsroom decisions or reporter enterprise than brought about by the candidates themselves. In addition, candidates are actually far more issue oriented, positive, and substantial in their speeches, debates, and even advertisements than the coverage of those same events (Jamieson 1996). And while it is true that politicians to some extent can exert influence over the topics

of discussion, they have almost no control about how those topics are discussed, and whether the stories are presented with an issue or strategy frame.

Placing the blame on the politicians themselves also puts us in a chicken-or-the-egg type dilemma: is political news coverage shallow and insubstantial because that is the nature of politics and politicians, or has politics become shallow and insubstantial because that is the nature of television news? The news director may feel that the politician's speech is nothing but clever empty phrases and thus show it only in sound bites; the politician, seeing that his speeches are always reduced to nine second clips, begins speaking solely in sound bites in order to be assured it will play well on the news. A spiral of mutual cynicism begins, each feeding off the other (Capella & Jamieson 1997).

Another factor that may contribute to strategy and horse-race focused news broadcasts is the predominance of Washington insiders on the news. The news about Washington politicians is most often reported by career Washington correspondents and commented on by political analysts and former government officials. It is easy to see how this closed loop of Beltway insiders could begin to lose sight of the fact that the daily ups and downs and maneuvering of politics, of such riveting interest and vital import to them, evokes little interest and has even less real effect on ordinary Americans. It has even been found that insider Washington analysts' presence on newscasts increases the use of strategy frames (Jamieson 1996).

But the press corps have always been Washington insiders, and the pundits similarly entrenched Beltway-ites. Thus their presence cannot adequately explain the precipitous decline seen in broadcast political news coverage in the last 15 years. One factor that perhaps can, however, is the drastic alterations the media environment has undergone in the last two decades.

Increased media conglomeration could be a contributing factor. In 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which deregulated much of the television industry and loosened the caps on media ownership by large corporations, allowing one company to own up to 39 percent of the media in one market. Changes in ownership patterns of individual stations certainly cannot account for changes in the quality of the national network news, but, as the Project for Excellence in Journalism showed in a five year study, where local news is concerned smaller station groups produce higher quality newscasts than stations owned by large conglomerates by a significant margin (2002).

The rise of cable has had serious consequences for broadcast television in general, and the rise of cable news has had even more serious repercussions in the broadcast news departments. Less than 7 percent of homes with at least one television had cable in 1970. By 2003, 69.8 percent of television households had cable television subscriptions (Media InfoCenter 2004). Despite this, the major broadcast networks have continued to dominate the ratings, but recent years have

seen cable garnering more and more of a mainstream audience, eating into broadcast's traditional territory. The bevy of options presented to the viewer through cable has broken the networks' monopoly on the public's attraction. The concept of a political event broadcast on all three major networks guaranteeing an essentially captive audience is no longer valid. This has been documented in a marked decline of the ratings for presidential addresses since the rise of cable, perhaps explaining the networks' reticence to cover events such as debates and conventions (Baum and Kernell 1999).

Cable news has seriously altered the playing field for the network news broadcasts. Minor upstarts when they began in the 1980s, all-news cable channels such as CNN and Fox News have risen to a place of prominence, receiving increasingly higher ratings and, albeit less than local and national news broadcasts, being cited by more and more of the public as a source for campaign news. Their 24-hour, instantly accessible nature makes them even bigger players than ratings numbers would indicate, for while the number of people watching cable news at any one time may be low, the number who tune in during any 24-hour period is substantially higher. This upturn has been led by Fox News, which pioneered a style of flashiness, confrontation, and 24-hour up to the minute immediacy which has since been copied by the other cable news networks.

It is this style and immediacy which the networks now see themselves as contending against, thus possibly acting as a force towards increased superficiality and strategizing in lieu of in-depth and substantial reporting. Also, the fact that political events receive treatment on these channels, regardless of whether they are treated in any depth or with anything but a horse-race approach—in addition to the supposed accessibility to politics offered by C-SPAN and the Internet—has led to a decreased sense of duty on the part of broadcasters. They feel the public's political needs are being met by those outlets, and thus assume that their traditional special public obligations are no longer as important.

This is a claim, however, that rests on unproven ground. Despite its perpetual potential to revolutionize politics, the Internet remains a marginal source of campaign information for most people, and is neither as substantial (PEJ 2000a) or as widely used as is commonly thought (Consumers Union 2004). C-SPAN, though a wonderful public service, has a fairly small audience (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004b), and is still hampered by its subscription-basis, making it unavailable to members of the public without cable, a problem it shares with cable news networks such as Fox News or CNN. Although most of the population does have access to cable television, almost a third of the population, over 80 million people, do not (Media InfoCenter 2004). Those without cable fall disproportionately in the lower income brackets, and thus are the same people more likely to not have access to other means of political information such as the Internet (Fetto 2003). Thus neither cable nor the Internet provide enough public education to significantly

weaken the load on broadcast television, and the subscription nature of both services immediately discounts them from fulfilling true universal availability, and disqualifies them as replacements for the public obligations of broadcast television.

As far as creating market pressure on television stations, C-SPAN's audience is far too small to pressure anyone, and the Internet is not truly in direct competition with television news. However, they do seem to be exerting real influence on the minds of broadcasting executives and news directors, and thus they can be chalked up as factors toward political broadcasting decline.

Thus we see a parade of possible causes of the decline of broadcast political information, none of which are wholly satisfactory as the single primary cause of the decline. Substantial new research must be done in this area by economists, political scientists, and journalists alike to truly get to the bottom of the problem. While the cause may elude us, the current and future effects of a sustained decline stare us all too obviously in the face.

#### EFFECTS

The decline of viable political information on broadcast television could have serious negative effects on our democracy. These include an increased dependence on political advertising for voter education and campaigning, creating an undemocratic and expensive campaign system, and increased voter ignorance and cynicism.

This drop of "free" coverage has meant for candidates the need to rely on paid news advertising. Thus occurring concurrently with the decline of coverage has been the skyrocketing of campaign advertising. In 1970, political ad sales for all races, federal, state and local, including spending by candidates, parties, and interest groups, adjusted for inflation totaled less than \$100 million. In 2000, it is estimated that political ad spending on broadcast television reached almost \$1 billion dollars, ten times the 1970 amount (ABC 2002). The 2004 Democratic primaries saw record spending on political advertising, reaching an estimated \$90 dollars spent for every resident of the state during the Iowa caucuses (Wisconsin Advertising Project 2004). Despite more stringent restrictions put in place by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, record-breaking territory is already being reached in fundraising by presidential and congressional candidates. That money is promptly used to purchase advertising spots, most candidates' single biggest campaign expense, and oft times upwards of 50 percent of their campaign budgets (ABC 2002).

This spending results in a tremendous amount of broadcast time devoted to political advertisements. In the 2000 election, some stations aired up to 60 political advertisements a day (ABC 2002). Assuming each spot lasts 30-seconds, this is more than double the average amount of political coverage aired on both local and national news broadcasts during that election (Kaplan and Hale 2001). It seems the job of provid-

ing voters with information during elections has shifted from the news organizations to the candidates themselves, a thought which probably provokes fear and concern in most Americans.

However, the negative effects of paid political advertising in the realm of creating an informed populace can be overrated, and may not be the effects one would assume. Despite the common belief that campaign advertising is negative, attack-oriented, and insubstantial, the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that candidate advertisements were actually negative less often than the news, contained fewer direct attacks, and discussed policy issues more regularly (Jamieson 1996). Even when the ads do get negative, this is not necessarily a bad thing. According to Kenneth Goldstein of the Wisconsin Advertising Project,

Negative ads often contain a lot of information that allow voters to make decisions about the candidates. We should not necessarily see them as a harmful part of our electoral system. In fact, voters actually learn more from negative ads than they do from positive ones. Moreover, negative ads can stimulate turnout and that's not a bad thing either (Wisconsin Advertising Project 2002).

Where dependence upon political advertising for voter education does have a pernicious influence is in the uneven playing field it creates for candidates, providing an overwhelming advantage for the wealthier and better financed candidate. Since the poorer candidate can no longer rely upon generating free publicity through the broadcast news media, paid advertisement becomes the primary campaign battlefield, one in which the candidate is at a severe disadvantage. This is doubly true in the case of challengers to sitting incumbents, who must counter the incumbent's superior name recognition and ability to generate free publicity solely through raising massive amounts of money to pay for advertising, an area in which the candidate with less money is again at a disadvantage. Incumbents and challengers alike, dependent on money and the ads it buys, must spend even more time courting wealthy supporters—creating the opportunity for corruption, or even worse, creating a public suspicion of widespread government corruption and subservience to special interests.

The drop of substantive political information on the news and the disappearance of debate and convention coverage means that, except for in campaign commercials, increasingly the public does not learn about candidates from any first-hand exposure. Instead, their information regarding a candidate has been filtered through newscasters, pundits, and commentators (Jamieson 1996), and increasingly channeled through a strategy or political maneuvering frame, making it difficult for citizens to glean how this all applies to them, why it is important, and what it should mean for their voting decision.

Voter ignorance is one area where the effects of television's unfulfillment of its democratic education potential become obvious. Three days before Super Tuesday, March 2, 2004, a survey by the National Annenberg Election Survey

found only one third of registered voters who were about to vote in that primary said they knew enough about the candidates to make an informed choice. A September 29, 2004, poll by the same organization found that six months had accomplished little; a majority of adults did not know where the two candidates stood on major issues such as Social Security and tax breaks (National Annenberg Election Survey 2004b). This follows the trend set in 2000, in which only 50 percent of the public thought themselves knowledgeable enough to make a decision before the final election (National Annenberg Election Survey 2000). While some of the blame for this must fall on other media, television, as the most relied upon source for campaign news, must shoulder the bulk of the responsibility. Adding to television's culpability is a Pew study which found that those voters who rely upon network or local television news broadcasts for political information ranked among the most ignorant about the campaign (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004b).

The degraded quality of television political news also lends to voter cynicism and disaffection. The distortion of all political events through a strategy frame leaves voters with the impression that politicians act only in their own self-interest, as any evidence of idealism or honest concern for the country's well-being is introduced as a campaign tactic and immediately analyzed by Washington pundits in terms of its effects on that candidate's political future. Strategy coverage could also lead to the view that politics is a game played by politicians and insiders with no effect on normal people's everyday lives, and, conversely, that ordinary citizens can have no effect on politics.

These possible and ongoing negative effects of the drop of real political information on broadcast television are disastrous and deleterious to our democracy. An increased reliance on paid advertising to fill the void left by other forms of media could lead to an uneven candidate playing field, shallow coverage could lead to voter ignorance, and strategy-focused coverage can result in widespread voter cynicism and apathy. Thus it is not surprising to learn of reforms introduced to avoid this calamity.

### THE POSSIBILITY OF REFORM

The disappearance of political information from the broadcast news has not gone unnoticed by caring citizens and reform groups. Traditionally, reforms to ameliorate the situation have taken one of two approaches. One is voluntary initiatives by local or, less frequently, national media organizations to increase their political coverage. The other is government intervention, which has come through legislation, voluntary challenges, or the FCC.

There have been numerous instances of media organizations in a specific community working with each other, politicians, reform groups, and the public to increase the quality of political information disseminated. Most of these initiatives have been limited in scope, choosing to concentrate on one

specific election or race, and thus it is difficult to assess their potential for long term success. However, their impact can perhaps show whether there is a ray of hope for future reforms.

During the 1997 New Jersey gubernatorial election, academic and civic communities launched an effort to improve campaign quality, hoping for more issue-oriented and positive campaign discourse on the part of both candidates and the media. These efforts involved a set of voluntary standards of campaign conduct for candidates, free air time provided by the networks, and a series of public debates. The attempts were successful in parts, resulting in a campaign that 70 percent of the public found more positive than the 1996 senate race, as well as campaign and newspaper coverage that 60 percent of the public thought was more focused on issues of concern to voters. However, for our purposes it was a failure, as coverage on television network affiliates remained minimal, and candidate television debates were poorly scheduled and little watched (Waldman 1998). An even more extensive effort in Minnesota in 1996, called the Minnesota Compact, while enjoying success in other areas, also failed to dramatically increase campaign coverage on the local television stations, and the televised debates failed to reach a wide audience, with the final debate reaching only 70,000 households. (Cappella and Brewin 1998).

However, a 1996 attempt at reform in the Massachusetts Senate race showed that television debates can be successful. Through the cooperation of the major Boston newspapers and both cable and broadcast stations, eight candidate debates were scheduled, all of which were televised. The cooperative nature of this venture helped to boost viewership, as the debates were aired in prime time, and half of them were carried live by all the local broadcast stations. The final debate was watched by more than 500,000 households. These debates then became topics for the evening news broadcasts, ensuring an increased level of campaign discussion in that arena as well (ABC n.d.). Similar results were found by the Madison Project in Wisconsin during the 1992 presidential primaries, with debates being widely watched and resulting in widespread television news coverage (Denton and Thorson 1994).

Efforts to improve television campaign discourse on a national level have occurred, albeit more rarely than localized initiatives. As discussed previously, the Hearst-Argyle station group launched significant campaigns to increase campaign coverage on their stations, with great success. In 1996, the Free TV for Straight Talk coalition appealed to the major networks to provide presidential candidates with two- to three-minute segments of free air time. It was hoped that these segments would be more issue-oriented than the news and more accurate than the ads. However, perhaps because the networks did not cooperate and air their spots simultaneously, the segments were not widely seen. Only 22 percent of voters reported having seen the spots in a survey taken after the election. But 60 percent of those who saw the spots reported having learned something from them, showing them to have

been effective at least in part (Annenberg Public Policy Center 1997).

Governmental attempts at ensuring political discourse on broadcast television have traditionally come through the FCC. Since its creation in 1934 with the Federal Communications Act, the FCC has recognized that, in order for broadcasters to fulfill their public interest obligations brought about by their free use of the public spectrum, television must be used to develop an “informed public opinion through the (public) dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital issues of the day” (Federal Communications Commission 1949). Initially, this included concrete regulations by the FCC such as the Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to cover public issues of importance to the community and to provide reasonable opportunity for contrasting views, and “ascertainment” policies, which required broadcasters to propose programming to address specific community needs and problems. Most of these regulations were abolished during the deregulation of the 1980s, however, as they were seen as unnecessary governmental burdens on journalistic free speech (New America Foundation 2004).

Thus today the main surviving concrete regulations concerning political broadcasting deal not with the journalistic content of the news but more with the way in which broadcast stations sell time to candidates. These are equal opportunity requirements, which require broadcasters to allow all candidates in a particular race the same opportunities for use of its facilities (bona fide news events excluded); requirements for reasonable access to, or to permit purchase of, broadcast time; and lowest unit charge requirements, which require stations to sell candidates advertising time at the same low price they charge high-volume costumers (New America Foundation 2004). While all of these are valuable in assuring an equal and fair playing field for candidates, they do nothing to address the problem of a lack of free and at least purportedly objective news coverage. Addressing this would require substantial additions to the current public interest obligations as they have been interpreted by the FCC.

The public interest obligations of broadcasters were revisited in 1998 by a special commission, headed by then Vice President Gore and thus called the Gore Commission, charged with looking at these obligations in light of the upcoming transition to digital television. Digital television, due to its compression capabilities, offers broadcaster roughly four times as much spectrum space as does the current analog system, and thus the transition amounted to the bequeathment of a gift valued at almost \$70 billion of public spectrum to broadcasters (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998). The commission was put in place to determine what public obligations this incredible gift should place on broadcasters.

The commission came up with a number of proposals, but one of the most interesting for our purposes was a voluntary challenge to all broadcasters to air 5 minutes of candidate-centered discourse between the hours of 5:35 and 11:35

p.m. in the 30 days before the election. The commission felt that even this small commitment of time to electoral matters could hopefully convey the public the importance of elections and simultaneously educate them about the issues involved. The commission urged the stations to start even before the beginning of the digital transition, with the elections of 2000 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998).

By and large, this challenge went unmet. None of the three major networks broadcast 5 minutes of candidate-centered discourse (CCD) per night during the 2000 election. In fact, they did not come anywhere near that mark, averaging only 64 seconds of CCD per night per network during the general election (Falk and Aday 2000). Local news did little better, even among stations that made a public commitment to meeting it. The 74 stations in a Lear Center study done on the 2000 general election averaged only 74 seconds of CCD per night, far short of the five minute mark set by the commission. The 24 stations that had made public commitments did better than average, airing 2 minutes 17 seconds of CCD per night, but still aired only half as much as they had committed to. The remaining stations that made no commitments aired only an abysmal 45 seconds of CCD per night (Kaplan and Hale 2001).

Despite the failure of this challenge to have the desired effect, the fact that stations who made the commitment aired more than double the amount of CCD than did uncommitted stations showed that voluntary challenges could have some positive effects in increasing the sheer amount of political information broadcast, if not necessarily its quality or effectiveness. This led some reform groups to call for a renewed challenge for the 2004 election. The occasional successes of media-instigated voluntary efforts to improve broadcasting provide some hope for that route as a path for reform. However, a large coalition of reform-minded groups have given up on voluntary solutions and are promoting a mandatory, government regulated set of reforms.

This coalition of 60 national groups, called the Our Democracy, Our Airwaves coalition, introduced in 2003 similarly-named legislation in the Senate sponsored by Sens. John McCain and Russ Feingold to provide for reform in the political broadcasting arena. Their legislation would require broadcasters, as part of their public interest obligations, to air two hours of CCD per week, for a total of six weeks prior to an election. It also would provide for a system of vouchers to give free air time to candidates and parties, and make changes to the lowest-unit charge requirements. The bill faced stiff opposition from broadcasters and those who feel it is unconstitutional or overburdening. It was read twice and then sent to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, where it died. It has not been reintroduced in the 109th session (Library of Congress 2005).

However, the FCC recently held hearings in preparation for its rulemaking regarding the public interest obligations for the transition to digital television, and thus immediate attention was shifted to that arena. Reformers called upon the FCC



to require three hours of CCD per week, even more than called for in the senate bill. The proposals had the strong support of the two Democratic commissioners, but its future remained uncertain at the time (Evensen 2004). On Feb 10, 2005, the FCC ruled on the other major issue in the digital transition, the multicasting must-carry rights for broadcasters, without any ruling on public interest obligations. The five-year old notice of inquiry on the subject remains open, and it is unknown when and if any action will be taken on it (Campaign Legal Center 2005.)

### CONCLUSION

Whether any of these attempts at governmental reform of political broadcasting will be implemented is difficult to say. Even more difficult to tell is whether once implemented these reforms would have significant impact. As we have seen, past attempts at reform have had mixed success, and a complex array of factors have reduced political broadcasting, making it difficult to alleviate the problem with any one solution.

The situation of the special relationship between politics and television that this report set out to explore is at present a melancholy one. The current amount of political information on broadcast television is low. The effects of this calamity are disastrous, the causes murky, and the chances for reform appear suspect at best. No simple solution offers itself. Yet, in order to avoid a "subscription democracy" in which the political information necessary to participate is limited only to those who can afford to access it on cable, the Internet, or newspapers and magazines, it is necessary that efforts at reform continue and that the issue remains one of deep and active public concern. The grand potential of television as a tool for democratization is currently unfulfilled, but it is not too late to rescue the promised future, even though for the moment it seems to have been betrayed.

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