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**Testimony of Martin Kaplan  
Federal Communication Commission Broadcast Localism Hearing  
Monterey, California, July 21, 2004**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Martin Kaplan. I am an associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, where I direct The Norman Lear Center, a research and public policy center.

I would like to answer two questions about localism tonight.

What kind of job do the nation's local television stations do in covering political campaigns, especially local races? And if it is not a good job, what should be done about it?

My colleagues and I have been studying the political coverage on local television news since 1998. Our research reports can be found at [www.localnewsarchive.org](http://www.localnewsarchive.org). In our most recent study, we collected top-rated early- and late-evening half-hours of news from a scientific sample of 122 stations in the top 50 U.S. markets. We analyzed more than 10,000 news broadcasts that aired during the last seven weeks of the 2002 campaign.

Here is some of what we found:

- Only 44 percent of those broadcasts contained any campaign coverage at all. In other words, almost six out of ten top-rated news broadcasts contained *no campaign coverage whatsoever*.
- Most of the campaign stories that did air were broadcast during the last two weeks of the campaign.
- Nearly half of the stories were about horserace or strategy, and not about issues.
- The average campaign story lasted less than 90 seconds.

- Fewer than three out of ten campaign stories that aired included candidates speaking, and when they did speak, the average candidate sound bite was 12 seconds long.
- Campaign ads outnumbered campaign stories by nearly four to one.

Of the campaign stories that did air, what kinds of races were covered? The answer is state-wide races, not local campaigns. Most of the coverage – 38 percent of the stories – focused on gubernatorial races, and 20 percent on U.S. Senate races. Potentially high profile statewide races, such as secretary of state or attorney-general, were the focus of just two percent of the stories. All told, 60 percent of the campaign stories on local news were about state-wide races.

By contrast, races for the U.S. House of Representatives made up only seven percent of the stories. Races for the state senate or assembly accounted for only three percent of the stories. Stories focused on regional, county or city offices made up only four percent of the stories. So even if you count a House race as a local election, *only 15 percent of all the campaign stories in our national sample focused on local races.*

Here in California, the 11 stations in our sample did markedly worse than the national average on covering local elections. *Only nine percent of the campaign stories on top-rated California local news were about local races, including U.S. House races.*

Size of station ownership group appears to make a difference. The 45 stations in our sample that are owned by large owners (with over 20 percent audience reach) carried a lower percentage of local campaign news than the national average, while stations owned by small- and mid-sized owners beat the national average. We were able to make head-to-head comparisons between stations with large owners and stations with small- or mid-sized owners in 22 markets; in 16 of them, stations with large owners provided less local campaign news than stations with small- or mid-sized owners.

I especially want to single out the Hearst-Argyle group. There were ten Hearst-Argyle stations in our national sample. On average, 40 percent of their campaign stories were about local races. On that measure Hearst-Argyle did more than two-and-a-half times better than the national average, and it did more than four times better than the California average.

Why did Hearst-Argyle do better? Why has Hearst-Argyle twice been the winner of the Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Television Political Journalism, which the USC Annenberg School and The Norman Lear Center administer? The reason, I think, is management commitment. Hearst-Argyle has decided that quality campaign coverage, and localism, are good for their communities, and that it can also be good for business.

But the Hearst-Argyle example is the exception, not the rule. The campaign coverage Americans get on the airwaves they own should not depend on good luck or good will. Voluntary standards were proposed by the Gore Commission in 1998. After years of deliberation, it urged stations to air at least five minutes of candidate-centered discourse a night on each night in the month before the election. How well did it work? In the 2000 election, we

studied 74 stations in 58 markets. Rather than five minutes of candidate discourse a night, the average station ran 74 seconds.

This year, a number of broadcast companies – including Hearst-Argyle, Belo, New York Times, Scripps, and Granite – have pledged to provide airtime for candidates in the fall campaign. But even if they all live up to that promise, they represent only six percent of the nation’s television stations.

That brings me to my second question: what to do about the lack of political coverage, and the lack of localism, on local television news nationwide.

First, we need explicit standards of performance by local news. Stations promise to fulfill a public interest obligation in order to get their license. This nation needs to spell out what those obligations are, in law and in regulation. There are several responsible proposals for doing so, including the “Public Interest, Public Airwaves” petition supported by more than a dozen nonprofit organizations; the petition to the FCC by former FCC Chairman Newton Minow and former FCC General Counsel Henry Geller calling for broadcast coverage of local candidates; and the “Our Democracy, Our Airwaves Act” supported by Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain.

Second, we need a way to know if stations actually meet those obligations. The public inspection files that the FCC requires stations to keep are useless for these purposes. It is not an onerous burden to require that stations record their public affairs programming and archive the rundowns of their news programs. I applaud the challenge to all local broadcast stations issued on June 14 by Chairman Powell and Senator McCain “to ensure they are providing local communities with significant information on the political issues facing the community.” But who will know if stations rise to that challenge, or ignore it? There is no monitoring process in place to answer that question. Nonprofit funds to support independent studies like The Lear Center’s come and go; why shouldn’t the industry or the public pay for the data needed for oversight and compliance?

Third, we need to link stations’ performance on the public interest obligation with the renewal of their licenses. The current postcard renewal system is a joke. If we believe stations must live up to the public interest promises they make, we must hold them accountable if they break them.

Last month, when the FCC issued the Notice of Inquiry that gave rise to these localism hearings, Commissioner Capps said this about enhancing political and civic discourse: “Here is an issue that demands action now, rather than another round of initial questions and comments. Study upon study depicts a bleak and depressing picture.... We have studies. We have comments. We don’t have action.... The better part of good government here is to move ahead and act on those matters where we already have compiled a record or where the statute has long since told us to be about our job of protecting the public interest. That would benefit the public interest and, in the process, help the credibility of this agency, too.”

I could not agree more. Thank you very much.