

MEDIA CONSOLIDATION:

A Problem for Democracy

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MEDIA CONSOLIDATION: A PROBLEM FOR DEMOCRACY

Liberalization/deregulation of media has been fueled in the United States by an explosion in technology and increased distrust of government regulation. However, hidden behind the expansion of cable television, growth of satellite/wireless transmission, and explosion of the Internet is consolidation of ownership and demise of diverse local control of media which threatens the foundation of American democracy.

The Bush Administration's recent efforts to relax media ownership rules based on ideology rather than facts, and various media companies' effort to bias presentation of news events during the 2004 U.S. Presidential election illustrate the importance of promoting diversely owned local media entities in societies that seek open and thorough political debate. Community-based democracy requires diversely owned commercial media and a strong non-commercial presence.

One of the most important reasons that localism and diversity should remain critical focal points of broadcast media policy in the United States is the immense political and social-psychological impact that television has, particularly on U.S. elections. There are at least three aspects to the immense impact of television on the political process that contribute to a strong basis for policies to promote localism and diversity.

- Citizens rely on television for news and information.
- Television influences citizens' perception particularly when politicians rely on television to influence citizens.
- There is also a growing consensus that television fundamentally affects the process of democratic discourse.

Our comments in the media ownership proceedings have shown that the social scientific literature supports these three observations strongly.¹ This paper reports on survey research conducted by the Consumer Federation of America and Consumers Union that confirms the findings of the social science literature.

¹ See Comments of Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, Civil Rights Forum, Center for Digital Democracy, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and Media Access Project, "In the Matter of Cross-Ownership of Broadcast Stations and Newspapers; Newspaper-Radio Cross-Ownership Waiver Policy: Order and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, MM Docket No. 01-235, 96-197, December 3, 2001; Reply Comments of Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America, Civil Rights Forum, Media Access Project, Center for Digital Democracy, and Civil Rights Forum," *In the Matter of Cross-Ownership of Broadcast Stations and Newspapers; Newspaper-Radio Cross-Ownership Waiver Policy: Order and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, MM Docket No. 01-235, 96-197, February 15, 2002, pp. 58-59, 79-82; see also Cooper, Mark, *Media Ownership and Democracy in the Digital Information Age* (Palo Alto: Center for Internet and Society, 2004).

CITIZEN USE OF THE MEDIA USE OF THE MEDIA

In January of 2004, a national random sample survey was conducted to assess the relative importance of media sources for news and information about national and local events.² The survey was designed in part to address a critical methodological flaw in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC's) analysis of media sources³ which was based on conducted as one of the Media Ownership Working Group (MOWG) projects.⁴ Ultimately, the U.S. Third Circuit Appeals Court stayed and remanded the FCC's proposed rules in part because of the mishandling of the assessment of media influence.⁵ A brief discussion of the background of this controversy helps to frame the critical issue of the importance of media outlets as sources of news and information.

In establishing new standards for when a local broadcaster may own newspapers in a community, the FCC highlighted the need to understand what media people actually use the most to obtain local news and information,⁶ to ensure that its rules accurately reflect the influence of each medium in local markets.⁷ Unfortunately, the Commission never conducted or found a survey that asked the most important question it claimed to care about: which media people *rely on most* for local news and information. This unfortunate lack of data was a correctible error. The FCC could have asked the proper question by commissioning another survey. In this survey, we corrected this and other major errors in the FCC's survey approach to media weights.⁸

The Right Questions and the Right Way to Ask Them

In its effort to identify the most important sources of news, the FCC asked a question that combined both national and local news. "What single source do you use most often for local or national news and current affairs?" This, of course, destroys the possibility of using this question to specifically assess the importance of local media. Therefore, the FCC fell back on a much weaker question about local sources of news. "What source, if any, have you used in the

² The survey instrument was administered by Opinion Research Corporation as part of their Caravan Survey, which consisted of a national sample of 1011 respondents.

³ Cooper, Mark [Abracadabra! Hocus Pocus! Making Media Market Power Disappear with the FCC's Diversity Index](#) (Washington, D.C.: Consumer Federation of America, Consumers Union, July 21, 2003).

⁴ Nielsen Media Research, *Consumer Survey on Media Usage* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Communications Commission, September 2002), Media Ownership Working Group Study 8.

⁵ *Prometheus Radio Project v. FCC*, 373 F.3d 372, 402 (3d Cir. 2004).

⁶ "Although all content in visual and aural media have the potential to express viewpoints, we find that viewpoint diversity is most easily measured through news and public affairs programming. Not only is news programming more easily measured than other types of content containing viewpoints, but it relates most directly to the Commission's core policy objective of facilitating robust democratic discourse in the media. Accordingly, we have sought in this proceeding to measure how certain ownership structures affect news output." *FCC Report and Order, In the Matter of 2002 Biennial Regulatory Review – Review of the Commission's Broadcast Ownership Rules and Other Rules Adopted Pursuant to Section 202 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Docket No. 02-277* (hereafter *FCC Ownership Rules Order*, at ¶32).

⁷ "We have concluded that various media are substitutes in providing viewpoint diversity, but we have no reason to believe that all media are of equal importance. Indeed the responses to the survey make it clear that some media are more important than others, suggesting a need to assign relative weights to the various media," *FCC Ownership Rules Order*, at ¶409.

⁸ More technical and detailed discussions of the survey flaws addressed in this paper as well as other technical flaws in the FCC approach can be found in Cooper, *Media Ownership*, Chapters 7 and 8.

past 7 days for local news and current affairs.”⁹ Obviously, this question doesn’t necessarily tell anything about what people use or rely upon the most for local news and information.

We corrected this problem in our survey. We used the identical wording of the FCC, but we ask separate questions about national and local sources of news. To distinguish the national from local object of the question, we give examples. Furthermore, because the criticism of the FCC approach stems in part from reliance on a “weak” question about the frequency of use that failed to directly address the importance of sources, we asked a second question about each source that was intended to get at the importance of the sources in determining public opinion.¹⁰ In order to accommodate multiple sources of information, we adopted the approach used by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press.¹¹ The Interviewer reads the same list of potential sources twice:

Now thinking about national issues, like the Presidential election or the war in Iraq, what single source do you use most often for news and information?

And what do you use second most often?

Which single source is most important in determining your opinion about national issues?

And what source is second most important?

Now thinking about local issues, like the a city council election or school, police and fire department services, what single source do you use most often for news and information?

And what do you use second most often?

Which single source is most important in determining your opinion about local issues?

And what source is second most important?

⁹ The FCC also asked the question in an unbalanced manner. That is, it directly asked all the respondents who mention a given media in response to the first question, whether they had gotten any news from each of the other sources. The fewer the respondents who gave a medium in response to the first question, the greater the number who were directly prompted about it on the second round. The FCC then gave equal weights to the first and second responses. This has the effect of artificially increasing the weight of the lesser sources (since more people are prompted) especially when the question is about weak exposure to a source.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that this is the underlying impetus to public policy concerns about ownership, as the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals noted in *Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. v. FCC*, 284 F.3d 148 (DC Cir. 2002), “the greater the diversity of ownership in a particular area, the less chance there is that a single person or group can have an inordinate effect, in a political, editorial, or similar programming sense, on public opinion at the regional level.” First Amendment jurisprudence is driven by the recognition that ownership of media outlets can translate into the ability to affect public opinion on the regional level and diversity of ownership reduces the possibility of “inordinate” influence.

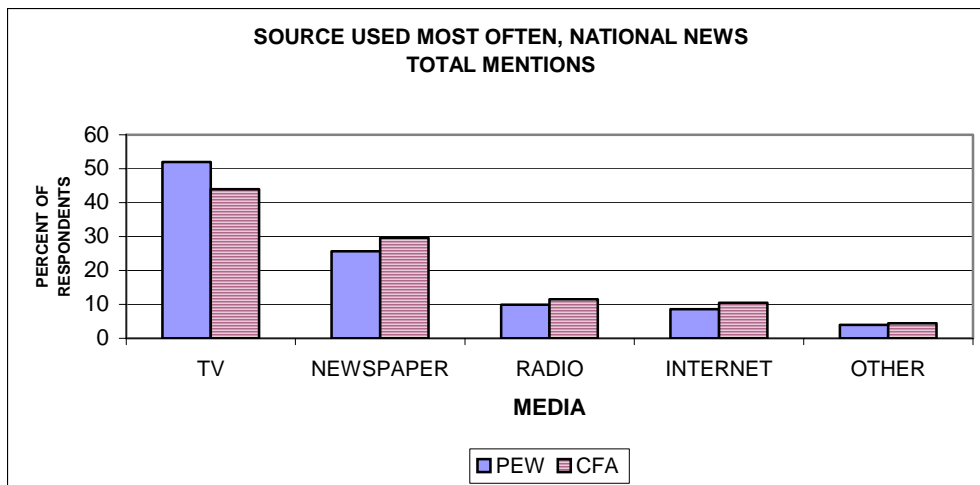
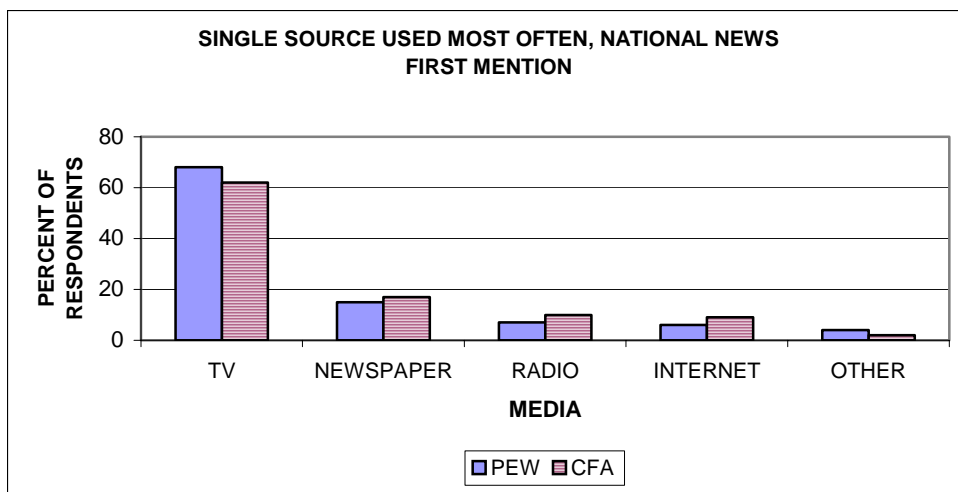
¹¹ “Perception of Partisan Bias Seen as Growing—Especially by Democrats” Pew survey (released Jan. 11, 2004), go to <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200>

Sources of Local News Differ Dramatically from Sources of National News

To begin the analysis, we compare our wording and approach to asking people about their most frequent sources of news and information to the Dec. 19, 2003 – Jan. 4, 2004 survey results obtained by The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press.

The results for both the first mentions and the total mentions are very similar. For national news, television dominates in both surveys, getting the first mention over 60% of the time (see Exhibit 1). Newspapers are next, with first mentions in the mid teens. Radio and the Internet are around 10% or slightly less.

Exhibit 1: National Sources of News – CFA Compared to Pew

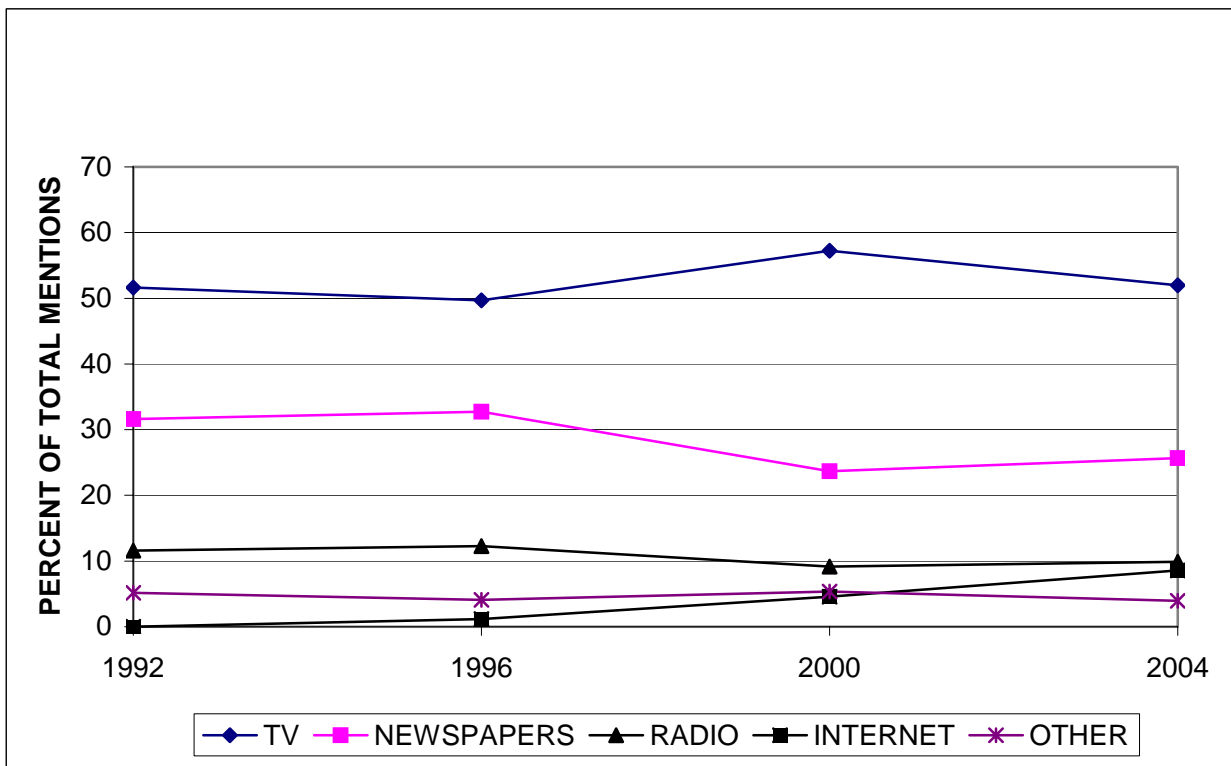


Source: Source: Consumer Federation of America/Consumers Union Poll, January 2004; The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press, *Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe*, January 11, 2003.

In both surveys, newspapers move up as a percentage of total mentions, to the mid-twenties, while TV declines to around or slightly below 50%. Throughout this analysis, whenever we show the sum of first and second mentions, we present them as a percentage of the total mentions. This is essentially what the FCC did by creating an index that summed to 100%. Radio and the Internet remain at around 10%.

In fact, these national results have been quite stable for over a decade (see Exhibit 2). Over the course of the past dozen years, the Internet appears to have reduced newspapers, radio and other sources by a few percentage points.

Exhibit 2: Trends of Most Used Media: Early in Presidential Election Years



Source: Sources: Graber, Doris A., *Processing Politics: Learning from Television in the Internet Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 3; Nielsen, *Consumer Survey on Media Usage* (Federal Communications Commission, Media Ownership Working Group, September 2002). The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press, *Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe*, January 11, 2003; Source: Consumer Federation of America/Consumers Union Poll, January 2004; The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press, *Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe*, January 11, 2003.

However, a careful analysis of major sources for local news and information tells a very different story. Our survey shows that the difference between sources of national and local news is quite dramatic and consistent with widely recognized patterns of media usage (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3: Frequency of Use and Importance of Sources of Local and National News and Information

	FIRST MENTION		TOTAL MENTIONS	
	Local	National	Local	National
MOST OFTEN USED				
Dailies	35	14	30	21
Weeklies	22	3	20	6
Broadcast	21	27	24	23
Cable	6	35	9	25
Internet	2	10	4	12
Radio	7	9	13	11
Magazines	0	1	0	2
MOST IMPORTANT				
Dailies	34	16	29	22
Weeklies	18	3	17	6
Broadcast	21	24	24	20
Cable	6	30	10	23
Internet	3	10	5	9
Radio	8	9	14	10
Magazines	0	2	0	1

Source: Consumer Federation of America/Consumers Union Survey, Poll, January 2004.

Newspapers are a much more important source of local news. Local newspapers are the first mentions of 57% of the respondents compared to only 15% for national news. Television drops from 62% (for national news) to 27% (for local news). Note, however, that broadcast television remains quite important. The Internet drops from 10% (for national news) to 2% (for local news). Radio is constant at just under 10% for both national and local news.

For total mentions we found the same pattern. Newspapers are much more frequently mentioned for local news, TV and the Internet less so. Broadcast TV is cited at roughly the same level for both local and national news. Radio is relatively constant.

The results for the responses to the question asking about “the most important news source” track the results for the responses to “the most often used news source” quite closely. For national news, TV is most frequently cited, followed by newspapers, radio and the Internet.

Note that television is somewhat less likely to be cited as important (54% of first mentions) than most used (62% of first mentions). For local news, the pattern of first mentions is almost identical to that for most used. Broadcast television is the second most often cited source on influence. It is relative constant across local and national.

The ability of respondents to distinguish between different media for different types of news is reinforced by their nuanced responses to the television question. Our survey question distinguished between cable and broadcast as a source of news. The FCC acknowledged that it had problems with the responses to these questions on its survey instrument, noting that “[a]lthough the responses to one survey question in MOWG [Media Ownership Working Group] study No. 8 suggests that cable is a significant source of local news and current affairs, other data from the study casts some doubt on this result... Our experience suggests that the local cable news response is too high.”¹²

Our questions, which give respondents concrete referents for local and national types of events, solve this problem. Approximately 35% of respondents gave cable as their first mention for national news, but only 6% gave it as their first mention for local news. In contrast, broadcast TV was given as the first mention for national news by 27% of the respondents and 21% mentioned it first for local news. This is consistent with the evidence in the FCC’s media ownership record that cable does not provide a significant independent source of local news, while broadcast is a very significant source of local news.

The cable/broadcast difference is critical for understanding the role of the media in civic discourse. Repeated claims about the abundance of programming available affected the framework in which media ownership rules were written by the FCC. Our survey shows that the FCC’s references to an abundance of national entertainment channels – “hundreds of choices” – are largely irrelevant to the Commission’s central obligation to promote diversity and competition in local sources of information.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR RESPONSIBLE BROADCASTER BEHAVIOR AND PUBLIC INTEREST OBLIGATIONS

Given the important role of television, we should not be surprised to find that citizens believe it has special responsibilities to inform and advance democratic discourse. Exhibit 4 shows responses to two surveys conducted over the past two years that dealt with various aspects the public responsibilities of broadcasters.

¹² FCC *Ownership Rules Order* at para 413-414.

Exhibit 4: Responsibilities of Broadcasters

	Level of Agreement			
	Strong very, complete	Somewhat		
Public Interest Obligations				
<i>TV broadcasters have the responsibility to act in the Public's interest in their programming decisions</i>	51	39		
Create a public or community trust fund to support Public programs	36	43		
Types of programming				
<i>Produce or air programs that cover local news</i>	81	17		
Report on local news and events	68	25		
<i>Produce or air programs that reflect the ethnic & cultural Make-up of your community</i>	36	41		
Produce or air programs that reflect the ethnic & cultural Make-up of your community	35	42		
Produce public affairs programs that discuss local issues	43	43		
Airing Candidates				
<i>Provide equal time to both candidates</i>	69	23		
<i>Inappropriate to air a program that is critical of one candidate without providing an equal opportunity to present an opposing point of view.</i>	43	27		
Attitudes about Sinclair airing "Stolen Honor"				
	Yes	No		
<i>Aware of Sinclair's plan to air "Stolen Honor"</i>	41	59		
	All Respondents		Aware only	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>Support airing "Stolen Honor"</i>	36	31	51	41
<i>Should air opposite point of view</i>	71	10	78	14

Source: Consumer Federation of America, *Media Policy Goals Survey*, September 2002, Consumers Union and Consumer Federation of America, *Fairness in Media Survey*, October 21, 2004.

The earlier survey was a national random sample telephone survey.¹³ The more recent survey was a random sample online survey. It was conducted as a rapid response to the controversy over Sinclair's plans to preempt network programming and broadcast "Stolen Honor," A documentary film critical of Senator John Kerry's anti-Vietnam War activities in the early 1970's.¹⁴ However, respondents were asked general questions before the topic of "Stolen Honor" was introduced. Although 41% of the respondents were aware of Sinclair's plans, there was no difference between those aware and unaware in the responses to the general questions.

Although wording varied between the two surveys and different aspect of the public interest obligations of broadcasters were addressed, there was generally widespread support for public responsibilities for broadcasters.

Ninety percent of respondents (51% strongly) believe broadcasters should act in the public interest in their programming decisions. Seventy-nine percent of respondents (43% strongly) support creating a public or community trust fund to support public programming. There are similarly high levels of support for covering local news (over 90%) and programming that reflects the cultural and ethnic diversity of the community (over three-quarters). Eighty-six percent (43% strongly) support airing public affairs programs that discuss local issues.

Respondents express strong support for giving candidates equal time (92% overall, 69% strongly). They feel it would be inappropriate to air a show that is critical of a candidate without providing an equal opportunity to respond (70% overall, 43% strongly).

The public was divided over whether Sinclair should air "Stolen Honor" but united in feeling that if it did air the show, it should air the opposite point of view as well. Over three-quarters of those aware of the show support the airing of the opposite point of view. Over 90 percent of those who said the show should not be aired said that if it was aired, the opposite point of view should be aired as well.

THE DOMINANT ROLE OF TELEVISION

The importance of TV rests on more than its role as a source of information. TV has come to dominate mass media in political discourse,¹⁵ by influencing on attitudes and

¹³ Consumer Federation of America, *Media Policy Goals Survey*, September 2002.

¹⁴ Consumers Union and Consumer Federation of America, *Fairness in Media Survey*, October 21, 2004.

¹⁵ Albarran, Alan B. and John W. Dimmick, "An Assessment of Utility and Competitive Superiority of in the Video Entertainment Industries," *Journal of Media Economics*, 1993 (6); Bennett, W. Lance, Regina G. Lawrence, "News Icons and the Mainstreaming of Social Change," *Journal of Communication*, 1995 (45); McLeod, Douglas M., "Communicating Deviance: The Effects of Television News Coverage of Social Protests," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1995 (39); Dimmick, John, B. "The Theory of the Niche and Spending on Mass Media: The Case of the Video Revolution," *Journal of Media Economics*, 1997 (10); Sparks, Glenn G., Marianne Pellechia, Chris Irvine, "Does Television News About UFOs Affect Viewers' UFO Beliefs?: An Experimental Investigation," *Communication Quarterly*, 1998 (46); Walma Van Der Molen, Juliette H., Tom H. A. Van Der

behaviors,¹⁶ especially in election campaigns. Television and radio have long been recognized as occupying different product spaces¹⁷ although radio's role may be changing.¹⁸ Generally, radio is seen as having less of an impact than television.¹⁹ However, the difference between TV and radio may be in the citizens' exposure to political advertising on TV, while radio talk shows have a different impact.²⁰ Broadcast does not compete effectively with newspapers in the news function.²¹

Framing and Agenda Setting

The broadcast media play a special role in influencing the agenda of public policy issues and the public's perception of those issues.²² The agenda setting and influence of perception that

Voort, "The Impact of Television, Print, and Audio on Children's Recall of the News," *Human Communication Research*, 2001 (26).

¹⁶ Wilkins, Karin Gwinn, "The Role of Media in Public Disengagement from Political Life," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2000 (44).

¹⁷ Clarke, Pere and Eric Fredin, "Newspapers, Television and Political Reasoning," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1978 (summer); Robinson, John P. and Mark R. Levy, "New Media Use and the Informed Public: A 1990s Update," *Journal of Communications*, 1996 (spring).

¹⁸ The role of radio talk shows is the new development. Johnson, Thomas J., Mahmoud A.M. Braima, Jayanthi Sothirajah, "Doing the Traditional Media Sidestep: Comparing Effects of the Internet and Other Nontraditional Media with Traditional Media in the 1996 Presidential Campaign," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 1999 (76), find that nontraditional media do not have an impact on a variety of measures of knowledge and perceptions about the 1996 presidential campaign and to the extent they do, it was specifically radio talk shows, influencing views of Clinton negatively (see also Moy, Patricia, Michael Pfau, LeeAnn Kahlor, "Media Use and Public Confidence in Democratic Institutions," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1999 (43)).

¹⁹ Berkowitz, D. and D. Pritchard, "Political Knowledge and Communication Resources," *Journalism Quarterly*, 1989 (66); Chaffee, S. H. and X. Zhao and G. Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," *Communications Research*, 1994 (21); D Drew and D. Weaver, "Voter Learning in the 1988 Presidential Election: Did the Media Matter?" *Journalism Quarterly*, 1991 (68).

²⁰ Johnson, Braima and Sothirajah, 2000, juxtapose the earlier finding of a lack of influence for radio with more recent findings that radio talk shows have an impact. See also, Johnson, Braima and Sothirajah, 1999, and Stamm, K., M Johnson and B. Martin, "Differences Among Newspapers, Television and Radio in their Contribution to Knowledge of the Contract with America," *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, 1997 (74).

²¹ Stepp, Carl Sessions, "Whatever Happened to Competition," *American Journalism Review* (June 2001). "Wasn't it television and radio that were going to kill newspapers? "I don't really consider them competition in that old-school way," stresses Florida Sun-Sentinel editor Earl Maucker. "They reach a different kind of audience with a different kind of news...Publisher Gremillion, a former TV executive himself, seconds the point, "I don't believe people are watching TV as a substitute for reading the newspaper..." ...Many newspapers are increasingly writing off local TV news as a serious threat, treating local stations instead as potential partners who can help spread the newspapers' brand name to new and bigger audiences."

²² Kim, Sei-Hill, Dietram A. Scheufele and James Shanahan, "Think About It This Way: Attribute Agenda Setting Function of the Press and the Public's Evaluation of a Local Issue," *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, 79, 2002, p. 7.; Chaffee, Steven and Stacy Frank, "How Americans Get Their Political Information: Print versus Broadcast News," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546, 1996; Jack M. McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Patricia Moy, "Community, Communications, and Participation: The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," *Political Communication*, 16, 1999; Dietram A. Scheufele, "Agenda-setting, Priming and Framing Revisited: Another Look at Cognitive Effects of Political Communications," *Mass Communications & Society*, 3 (2000) and Maxwell Macomb's and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion quarterly*, 36, 1972.

takes place during election campaigns frames issues.²³ For example, studies have shown that subtle race cues in campaign communications may activate racial attitudes, thereby altering the foundations of mass political decision-making.²⁴ While race may be a particularly prominent case of influence over attitudes and agenda-setting, the media plays a powerful role across a broad range of issues.²⁵

The importance of visual images in *priming* the audience has been affirmed, while the understanding of the mechanisms through which the effect operates grows

Findings suggest that visual news images (a) influence people's information processing in ways that can be understood only by taking into account individual's predispositions and values, and (b) at the same time appear to have a particular ability to trigger consideration that spread through one's mental framework to other evaluations.²⁶

²³ Valentino, Nicholas A., Vincent L. Hutchings and Ismail K. White, "Cues that Matter: How Political Ads Prime Racial Issues During Campaigns," *American Political Science Review*, 96, 2002, p. 75; Edsall, Thomas B. and Mary D. and Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights and Taxes on American Politics* (Norton, New York: 1991); Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, New York: 1992); Gillens, Martin, "Race Coding and White Opposition to Welfare," *American Political Science Review*, 90, 1996; Mendelberg, Tali, "Executing Hortons: Racial Crime in the 1988 Presidential Campaign," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 61, 1997, *The Race Card: campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages and the Norms of Equality* (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 2001); Valentino, Nicholas A. "Crime News and the Priming of Racial Attitudes During the Evaluation of the President," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 63, 1999.

²⁴ The references cited in support of this proposition include Mendelberg, 2001; Coltrane, Scott and Melinda Messineo, "The Perpetuation of Subtle Prejudice: Race and Gender Imagery in the 1990's Television Advertising," *Sex Roles*, 42, 1990; Entman, Robert M., and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Gray, Herman, *Watching Race Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Dixon, Travis, L. and Daniel Linz, "Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as Lawbreakers on Television News," *Communications Research*, 50, 2000, ; Gilliam, Franklin D., Jr., and Shanto Iyengar, "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public," *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 2000; Peffley, Mark, Todd Shields and Bruce Williams, "The Intersection of Race and Television," *Political Communications*, 13, 1996.

²⁵ Kim, Shefuele and Shanahan, p. 381. Graber, Doris, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1997); Paletz, David L., *The Media in American Politics: Contents and Consequences* (New York: Longman, 1999); Just, Marion, R., Ann N. Crigler, Dean F. Alger, Timothy E. Cook, Montague Kern, and Darrell M. West, *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates and the Media in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Kahn, Kim F. and Patrick J. Kenney, *The Spectacle of U.S. Senate Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Iyengar and Kinder, *News That Matters* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987); McCombs, Maxwell E. and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-setting Function of the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 1972.

²⁶ Domke, David, David Perlmutter and Meg Spratt, "The Primes of Our Times? An Examination of the 'Power' of Visual Images," *Journalism*, 3, 2002, p. 131. The authors present a detailed social psychological and even neurological discussion of the reasons why and ways in which visual images have a greater impact, but the politically oriented research that they cite as consistent with their findings include Krosnick, J. A. and D. R. Kinder, "Altering the Foundation of Support for the President Through Priming," *American Political Science Review*, 84, 1990; Pan, Z. and G. M. Kosicki, "Priming and Media Impact on the Evaluation the President's Performance," *Communications Research*, 24, 1997; Just, M. R., A. N. Crigler and W. R. Neuman, "Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Political Conceptualization," in A. N. Crigler (ed.) *The Psychology of Political Communications* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Iyengar and Kinder.

The special role of television in providing information and influencing elections is well recognized. Research attention now focuses on how television affects election campaigns and public opinion. “[V]oters do learn about candidates and their position on issues (policy) from candidate advertising.”²⁷

Advertising

The impact of television is pervasive throughout all elections.²⁸

Television has become society’s primary source of information, and local television news is more likely to be used by viewers than national news broadcasts. Therefore, how such election news is relayed on local television is increasingly important in our political system.

Candidates and campaign consultants believe that television advertising is pivotal to winning a state-level campaign...

Research confirms; that television spots influence election outcomes at all levels.²⁹

The impact of television is not only in news coverage, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, in advertising and the interaction between advertising and news. TV in general, and network TV in particular, has become the premier vehicle for political advertising. The differential impact of television advertising is clear.

Clearly, television is a unique communications medium unlike any other, including print, radio, and traditional public address. Unlike most other media, television incorporates a significant nonverbal component, which not only serve to suppress the importance of content but also requires little deliberative message processing...

A number of empirical studies have concluded that reliance on information from television leads to less understanding of policy issues than newspapers. Studies also indicate that when people use television for political news, they emerge less

²⁷ Hansen, Glenn, J. and William Benoit, “Presidential Television Advertising and Public Policy Priorities, 1952–2002,” *Communications Studies*, 53, 2002, p. 285. The studies cited in support of this proposition include Patterson, T. E., and McClure, R. D., *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics* (New York: Putnam books, 1976); Kern, M., *30 Second Politics: Political Advertising in the Eighties* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Brians, C.L. and M. P. Wattenberg, “Campaigns Issue Knowledge and Salience: Comparing Reception for TV Commercials, TV News, and Newspapers,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 40, 1996.

²⁸ Brazeal, LeAnn M, and William L. Benoit, “A Functional Analysis of congressional Television Spots,” *Communications Quarterly*, 49, 2001, pp. 346-437.

²⁹ Cater, Fico and McCabe, p. 42.. In support of this statement the authors cite Joslyn, R., “the Impact of Campaign Spot Advertising Ads,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 7, 1981; Mulder, R., “The Effects of Televised Political Ads in the 1995 Chicago Mayoral Election,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 56, 1979; and Pfau, M., and H. C. Kenski, *Attack Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

informed than those of equal education and political interest who avoid the medium.³⁰

Certainly the huge amounts spent on TV advertising by candidates attests to its importance. The audience that is most susceptible to advertising and news coverage by this account is precisely the audience on which general elections focus – the undecided middle – thereby justifying the spending. Whereas candidates must focus on the committed, active party base in primaries, they must shift their attention to the less aware, less committed middle of the political spectrum to get elected.³¹

TELEVISION AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The News Production Cycle of Commercial Mass Media

There is yet a more fundamental manner in which television affects political dialogue. Many media critics across the political spectrum have argued that hyper-commercialism combined with the expansion of media outlets deeply affects the news reporting process, particularly as it relates to politics. On the one hand, there are more television outlets needing to fill more space.³² On the other hand, they need to attract more viewers to be profitable. The media's schedule and perpetual news cycle become the driving force, emphasizing speed, simplicity and routinization.³³ The news production process is transformed.

The problems stem largely from the very nature of commercially supplied news in a big country. News organizations are responsible for supplying an always-new product to large numbers of people, regularly and on time. As a result, news must be mass-produced, virtually requiring an industrial process that takes place on a kind of assembly line.³⁴

³⁰ Sinclair, Jon, R., "Reforming Television's Role in American Political Campaigns: Rationale for the Elimination of Paid Political Advertisements," *Communications and the Law*, March 1995.

³¹ Gwiasda, Gregory, W., "Network News Coverage of Campaign Advertisements: Media's Ability to Reinforce Campaign Messages," *American Politics Research*, 29, 2001, p. 461; Kaid, L. L., et al., "Television News and Presidential Campaigns: The Legitimation of Televised Political Advertising," *Social Science Quarterly*, 74, 1993; Ansolaehe, S and S. Iyengar, "Riding the Waive and Claiming Ownership Over Issues: The Joint Effect of Advertising and News Coverage in Campaigns," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 58, 1995, Lemert, et al., *News Verdicts, the Debates, and Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Hansen and Benoit, pp. 284. While Zaller, J. R., *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) is cited as the origin of the hypothesis on effect, the author does note that Joslyn, M. and S. Cecolli, "Attentiveness to Television News and Opinion change in the fall of 1992 Election Campaign," *Political Behavior*, 18, 1996, find that the most attentive are most influenced. Benoit, William L. and Glenn Hansen, "Issue Adaptation of Presidential Television Spots and Debates to Primary and General Audiences," *Communications Research Reports*, 19, 2002.

³² Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media* (New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999).

³³ Gans, Herbert J., *Democracy and the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 50; Kovach and Rosenstiel, p. 6.

³⁴ Gans, p. 49.

The tight schedules and competition for attention put their stamp on the newsgathering and reporting process.³⁵ Reporting becomes highly condensed and selective.³⁶ Planned events and personalities are the easiest to cover. Short pieces require extreme simplification. Stories become stylized so they can be easily conveyed. Time pressures create a tendency to not only run quickly with a story but to uncritically pass through manufactured news.³⁷ Entertainment and aesthetic values dictate the nature of the picture and getting good video images becomes a critical need.³⁸ Staging gives the news the predictability it needs, but results in typecasting and posing.³⁹

Competition drives news outlets to seek blockbuster scoops and to play the big story more intensely and longer, to hold the larger audiences that have been attracted.⁴⁰ The search to find and maintain the audience's attention drives the media towards exaggeration and emotionalism at the expense of analysis.

Four types of news are ideally suited to perform this function. Celebrity personalities become the centerpiece because of the easy point of focus on highly visible individuals.⁴¹ Scandal attracts audiences. The personal travails of prominent figures in titillating scandals are grist for the media mill, attracting attention without threatening the audience. This news may not be happy, but it fills the preference for happy news because it involves someone else's troubles of no direct relevance to public policy or the public's welfare. The horse race and hoopla – the game – are another easy way to frame the news and to produce constant updating of who is ahead.⁴² Who wins and who loses is much easier to portray than the complexity of what is at stake. Verbal duels⁴³ and loud, often one-sided, arguments find audiences more easily than reasoned, balanced debates.⁴⁴ Talk show pundits grab attention with extreme positions, usually negative attacks on targets that are not in the room to defend themselves.

The Impact on Journalism and Politics

Both journalism and politics suffer as a result of this process. Pressures to submit to heavy profit-maximizing strategies that foster financial gain at the expense of the journalistic values prevail. As a result, "There has been an enormous increase in expenditure on public

³⁵ Street, John, *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 36-52.

³⁶ Graber, Doris, *Processing Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 113-114.

³⁷ Kovach and Rosentsteil, p. 21, 44.

³⁸ Meyer, Thomas, *Media Democracy*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 32-35.

³⁹ Meyer, p. 67; Graber, p. 112-114; Jones, Nicholas, *Soundbites and Spindoctors: How Politicians Manipulate the Media – and Visa Versa* (London: Cassel, 1995).

⁴⁰ Kovach and Rosentsteil, p. 7-8.

⁴¹ Street, p. 47-49; Meyerowitz, J., *No Sense of Place: The Effect of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford, 1985).

⁴² Street, p. 47; Graber, p. 111-112; Gitlin, T., "Bits and Blips: Chunk News, Savvy Talk and the Bifurcation of American Politics," in P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds), *Communications and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1991). p. 119-136.

⁴³ Meyer, p. 35; Kovach and Rosenstiel, p. Ch. 7; Street, p. 44)

⁴⁴ Barker, David, C., *Rushed to Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

relations by both government and business... these powerful institutions subsidize the cost of gathering and processing the news in order to influence positively the way they are reported.”⁴⁵

Politicians conform and cater to the demands of the media, while they leverage their ability to manipulate their public image. The politicians acquiesce in a Faustian bargain. “In exchange for their ‘tactical’ submission to the media rules, political actors gain a well-founded expectation that they will be invited to help shape the way the media portray them.”⁴⁶ Their interaction with the media becomes a form of extracted publicity and serves as photo-ops that place them in the most favorable theatrical light. Political entities submit to the media’s dictatorship over the depiction of parties and personalities, “in which both politics and the media recognize only images of themselves, thereby losing sight of the real world.”⁴⁷

Journalism degenerates into a dance⁴⁸ between reporters and political handlers in which the spinmeisters have the upper hand. Spinmeisters become gatekeepers who can punish or reward with access to politicians and who control the scheduling of events. They can stonewall some or give exclusives to others. As a result, “top-down news turns journalists into messengers of the very political, governmental, and other leaders who are... felt to be untrustworthy and unresponsive by significant numbers of poll respondents.”⁴⁹ The media produces a blend of news and free advertising for the candidates.⁵⁰ As with all advertising, the point may be to give a misimpression rather than convey accurate information. Hence, journalistic values are marred.⁵¹ Dependence on well-connected sources and pressures to get a story out first short-circuit the application of traditional standards of reporting. Discourse degenerates into a stream of stage-managed, entertainment-oriented, and issueless politics.⁵²

The watchdog function is short-circuited by close relationships.⁵³ This awards too much attention to too few political figures and views and sets the stage for politicians to manage their public identities through manipulation of the media’s tendencies. Parties and ordinary group affiliations recede, as individuals and lead institutions become the center of attention.

The fashion in which stories are selected and the time-frame within which these stories are developed, in accordance with mass media’s pursuit of big headlines and profits, have undercut politicians’ ability to realize legitimate political agendas.⁵⁴ Instead, parties and political

⁴⁵ Levine, Peter, “Can the Internet Rescue Democracy? Toward an On-Line Commons,” in Ronald Hayuk and Kevin Mattson (eds.), *Democracy’s Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21st Century* (Lanham, ME: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 124.

⁴⁶ Meyer, p. 58.

⁴⁷ Meyer, p. 133; Gans, p. 47-48.

⁴⁸ Sparrow, Bartholomew H., 1999, *Uncertain Guardians: The News Media as A Political Institution* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins), p. 28-38.

⁴⁹ Gans, p. 49.

⁵⁰ Meyer, p. 53; Dorner, A., *Politainment* (Frankfurt/Main: Surhkamp, 2001).

⁵¹ Graber, p. 88.

⁵² Gans, p. 50-51.

⁵³ Curran, James, *Media and Power* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 150.

⁵⁴ Street, p. 57-58, 83, 90.

players shape their decisions and actions within the framework of how the media will present them.⁵⁵

Without an ongoing dialogue of the conditions that enable the reported events to take place, the public cannot adequately formulate opinions; hence, they cannot act or mobilize in an educated manner. Public involvement in policy formation suffers not only because of the shift in focus fostered by the media, but also because of the short-time frame demanded by the media. The recognition of the news as being reported ‘outside of time’ highlights the troubling difference between the media’s timeline and the timeline necessary for political agendas to be carried out.⁵⁶

The critical elements of responsibility, causality and connectedness between events are lost. “Abbreviating the time interval normally demanded by the political process down to what the media’s production schedule permits means abridging the entire process by deleting the procedural components that qualify it as democratic.”⁵⁷ Insisting that politicians’ rush to get their views to their constituents before they can be swayed in an opposing direction further truncates debate.⁵⁸ The rapid-fire sequence of simple, emotional snapshots staged to increase popularity replaces discourse as the basis of politics.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined three reasons that support public policy to promote localism and diversity in the broadcast media. There is a fourth reason that localism should be a primary focal point of media policy in America that needs no analysis – our federalist political system makes government essentially a local matter. There are no national elections. Even the president is chosen by state-based electors. We pride ourselves in relying vesting power in small units of local governments. Other than national defense and major income transfer programs (social security), most decision that affect daily life – police, education, land use, community development – are made by state and local governments. Localisms matters by design, not accident. The concern about localism is not a quaint yearning for a distant romantic past; it is the principle on which our democracy is founded.

Thus, the legal, political and social bases of localism in our political system provide a strong basis for policies to promote localism. These are reinforced by the key role of local relations in culture and political participation and the paramount role of television in affecting political dialogue. The immense influence of television on political discourse underscores the need for diversity to promote multiple points of view. Ownership rules that prevent a few powerful media companies from dominating the most important sources of local news and information – including print, television, radio and the Internet – are critical to democracy.

⁵⁵ Gans, p. 83; Cook, Timothy E., *Governing with the New: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ Meyer, p. 24.

⁵⁷ Meyer, p. 106.

⁵⁸ Meyer, p. 104.

The impact that the powerful commercial forces affecting television have on political discourse argues strongly for non-commercial space where a more thoughtful discourse can be conducted. Traditionally, that space has been created by obligations to air public interest programming or requirements to conditions that limit the purely commercial inclinations of broadcasters. This paper suggests that while such policies serve the goal of promoting diversity and localism, because the forces of commercialism have become so strong in a deregulatory age, additional policies should be implemented to significantly expand the non-commercial arena for democratic discourse in the broadcast media.