

## The Oregonian

### TV news fails on elections, group says

**FCC - A coalition challenges Portland stations' licenses because each only devoted 1 percent of coverage to local campaigns**

Thursday, December 28, 2006

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The Oregonian

All eight Portland TV stations have been thrown into a national test case brought by activists who want to force television stations to beef up coverage of local elections.

A coalition of Oregonians filed a formal petition with the Federal Communications Commission, asking it not to renew the license of any commercial TV station in the Portland market because they aren't serving the "public interest," as federal law requires.

During the heat of the 2004 political season, Portland's leading television stations each devoted just 1 percent of local news time to state and local political campaigns, the coalition complained.

Two of the area's four top-rated stations, KOIN and KPTV, did not run a single news story about the hard-fought \$1 million race between Jim Francesconi and Tom Potter to become Portland mayor, a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found. The four top stations each devoted more than 100 hours to local newscasts in October 2004, but spent less than 2 minutes of that time covering campaigns for the Oregon Legislature, it found.

"Voters are not served by that," says Janice Thompson, head of the Portland-based Money in Politics Research Action Project and a leader of the effort to challenge the Portland stations' licenses. "We need coverage of political campaigns on TV news, because that is what people watch."

Don't expect local TV screens to go blank Feb. 1 when the federal licenses for every Oregon TV station expire, however. The five-member FCC acts slowly and favors free-market policies. Stations whose licenses are challenged get to keep operating until the FCC makes its decision -- a step that often takes more than a year.

If stations are told to increase election coverage, that would take several years, experts say.

News directors at KOIN, KATU and KPTV did not return calls Wednesday. KGW's general manager and news director were out of town and could not be reached.

KATU general manager John Tamerlano said, "We do an awful lot of coverage of local community and local politics 52 weeks a year." He said Bill Johnstone, president of the Oregon Association of Broadcasters, could better speak for all the stations.

Johnstone vigorously defended the stations' track record of political coverage, saying the 1 percent of newscast time devoted to state and local campaigns in October 2004 gave regular TV viewers "more than our fill."

"Very few politicians can tell the truth," and all are trained to stick to the negative scripts that make political ads so unpalatable, Johnstone said. Asking TV stations to air more stories quoting those same mud-slinging politicians would not serve the public interest, he said.

People in the Portland area who want more information about candidates and ballot measure should look on the Internet and pay attention to political ads, not look to TV, Johnstone said.

"Our coverage is certainly adequate, given everything else that the public has access to -- the Internet, the ads they see and hear, the billboards, the unwelcome calls from candidates," he said.

The same lawyer who wrote the petition challenging Portland TV licenses -- Andrew Schwartzman of the Washington, D.C., public interest law firm Media Access Project -- filed similar petitions last year against the relicensing of all Milwaukee, Wis., and Chicago television stations. All three petitions rely on a study by a nonprofit research group analyzing every local TV newscast in all three markets in the month before the November 2004 election.

The study and legal challenges are funded primarily by foundations, including the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Joyce Foundation.

The FCC has not acted on the Chicago and Milwaukee petitions. It has been about 10 years since the FCC turned down a station's license based on citizen complaints, so the case is a long shot, Schwartzman said.

The best hope for activists who want to see more local election coverage on TV, he and others say: Appealing the FCC decision in the Chicago, Milwaukee and Portland cases to court, or getting a law passed by the new Democratic-controlled Congress, which may look more favorably on regulating broadcasters.

Federal law says broadcasters may be licensed to use the public airways only if they serve the "public interest, convenience and necessity." And FCC rules say, "The basic responsibility to contribute to the overall discussion of issues confronting the community is a . . . duty . . . for each licensee."

But the commission does not spell out what constitutes adequate coverage of local issues, nor how many minutes a station should spend on it.

Meredith McGehee, policy director at the Campaign Legal Center in Washington, D.C., says the study of news coverage in the three cities shows the FCC does not require enough.

"Look, these are miserably low percentages spent covering local elections," she says. "This is not saying broadcasters are evil. They are doing their job -- making money within the rules they have to operate under.

"The side that's not working is the public policy side," McGehee said. "Public officials are supposed to say that the payment in return for using the public airways is to fulfill the public interest obligation" and define that obligation in clear terms.

In the study, trained volunteers analyzed all 520 hours of local news on KATU, KOIN, KGW and KPTV in October 2004. Their finding: Only 5 percent of newscast time was spent on elections, and most of that was on the Bush-Kerry presidential contest. Only 1 percent of local news airtime was spent on state and local campaigns.

Those percentages do not include special public affairs programs, such as debates and town halls. But only KGW, with its weekly half-hour public affairs show "Viewpoint," spent more than an hour on such programs that fall.

The study found that stations in Milwaukee also spent about 1 percent of their local news coverage on state and local campaigns, while Chicago stations averaged 3 percent. The higher rate in Chicago was largely because of interest in Barack Obama's race for the U.S. Senate and a late-breaking scandal in a district attorney's race, it said.

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