

Your Media Rights

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Are you happy with our mass media? Do you feel the values in most TV programs are appropriate and nurturing for our youth or our society? If not, what would you like to see? Did you know that you "own" the public airwaves? A 1966 U.S. Court of Appeals ruling states: "Under our system, the interests of the public are dominant. They are the owners of the channels of television—indeed, of all broadcasting." And in a Supreme Court decision in 1969 the court states "It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount." It has been thought that the sweeping deregulation of broadcasting since the late 1980's negates these laws. This is not the case. The Federal Communications Commission's 1984 ruling states: "(deregulation) does not constitute a retreat from our concern with the programming performance of television station licensees."

Most people do not realize that television broadcasters have a unique corporate charter unlike any other corporation. Based on legislation dating back to 1927, television broadcasters have an overriding obligation to "serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity." By law they are obligated to broadcast programs that inform our community on local, national and global issues that affect our lives—from diverse perspectives! This duty to serve the public before their own pocketbooks has been affirmed by more than a half-century of law in the U.S. Supreme Court, Congress, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Yet, in reality the situation is essentially turned upside down: TV broadcasters serve their profits first and put the genuine interests of the public a distant second. What needs to change is for the public to begin to articulate what we define as our public interest. Once that happens, citizens will have the power to force the media to be accountable.

It's not just the concern with what is currently on television. From gratuitous violence and stereotyping to the lack of diverse perspectives, mainstream television seems to confirm our worst fears about human nature. Yet, despite the glaring problems with what is ON television, we would argue that an even more important problem is what is NOT ON television!

Because more than half of the American people get all of their news about the world from television, it is not surprising that in American society, nothing is truly "real" until it has been brought into prominent public attention by being on television. Therefore, if we don't hear regularly televised reports about a wide array of local or national issues, the general public will assume that these areas are not yet critical. However, just because the mass media ignore critical trends does not mean they will conveniently cease to exist.

Television has become an advertising machine that generates consumption. Therefore, it is in their interest to ignore or minimize trends that bring into question the fairness and sustainability of the way of life they promote. Most people do not realize that 6 major corporate conglomerates own all of the American media. Hollywood is big business.

Power in a democracy is the power to communicate. If we don't have the power to be informed and to communicate about local, national and global issues affecting our lives we will not have the power to respond to them. The media has had an essential role in shaping our concerns and priorities as a country. As the mass media goes, so goes our future.

The last taboo topic on television is for television to reflect on itself. Numbed by consumerism and distracted by "entertainment," television never turns the cameras around to look at how it promotes a narrow and biased view of the world that is increasingly out of touch with the global reality. Challenging the mindset of television programming is not simply a matter of "taste," it is rather a matter of our survival if we are to mobilize ourselves to make life-preserving choices. It has been said that television broadcasters want provocative programming that won't provoke anyone." Despite the immense power of television to reach millions of people, the overriding message of

commercialism is numbing and suffocating, severely restricting the public's access to vital information and to creatively respond to the hard challenges ahead of us.

It is time for the public to make its collective voice heard in the media. It is time for the public to recognize that, despite whatever our other differences may be, we need to stand together and decide that we are no longer willing to be passive spectators in the face of a broadcast media that seeks to exploit rather than serve the public interest.

Our Media Voice, a campaign for media accountability, was formed to provide the forum for our collective voice to be heard. Our goal is to build a vehicle that creates an informed and engaged public who are equipped to understand and participate in making hard choices ahead of us locally, nationally and globally. As citizens, we know that, by law, broadcasters have an unequivocal responsibility "to serve the public interest" before they serve their own profits. The Campaign is establishing a national citizens media education campaign, coalition of organizations to work together, local chapters, a clearinghouse for media activism, and citizen feedback forums.

We are launching televised citizen feedback forums to provide a democratic means for the public to express its collective interests on an ongoing basis. These feedback forums will be presented on television and other media involving a representative sample of citizens whose feedback will hold broadcasters accountable to serve the public interest. They will be held in local communities around the nation to determine public views, concerns, and interests. This non-partisan, participatory, democratic process will become a vehicle for articulating each community's voice. Local organizations could sponsor these regular citizen feedback forums. These forums could employ live polling of a random sample of local citizens to get an accurate sense of public views. In addition to important issues such as gratuitous sex, violence, the effects of media on youth and our political process, citizen feedback forums could raise questions vital to a sustainable future for the Earth. What are the long-term effects of media-driven consumerism on our resources and societies? All the technology required for successful feedback forums already exists. What is required is a public that wants to be informed, involved and committed to creating a healthy, democratic, and sustainable world together.

How might the mass media nourish and strengthen our culture and enable us to cope with ecological, social, and spiritual challenges? Citizen feedback could be presented to representatives of television broadcaster at the end of each program, holding them accountable for their legal responsibility to present a balanced diet of relevant, socially-responsible programming with diverse perspectives that serves the public interest.

It's time to communicate with broadcasters. Citizens have a right to review the broadcaster's public file, which holds their FCC reports; we have a right to challenge their FCC licenses; and we have a right to demand a hearing regarding what will serve the public interest. It's time to take back the airwaves that belong to citizens. It's time for the public to have a voice in how this powerful institution, our mass media, is being used. It's time to invite a diversity of perspectives that inform, educate and empower the citizenry to make wise choices in responding to the crucial issues ahead of us.

Let your voice be heard. Share this information with your family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and groups that you belong to.