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The Public Interest Demands A Dose of Reality on TV

By Gloria Tristani and Meredith McGehee

The tragedy of Hurricane Katrina has taught us a number of painful lessons — including, unexpectedly, the vital role television sometimes plays in our lives.

As The Washington Post reported Sept. 1, the people most in need of information about the storm were the least likely to be able to see, hear or read about it. With electricity wiped out in the affected areas, receiving local broadcast or cable-TV signals was nearly impossible.

This time, catastrophic infrastructure failure kept the public in the dark. But when the next natural disaster strikes, the result could be the same — even if the lights stay on.

Members of Congress are considering legislation this month that could make permanent the media blackout we witnessed in New Orleans. At stake in legislation concerning the transition to digital television is whether or not television-station owners continue to serve the “public interest, convenience and necessity,” as federal law now requires.

In theory, America has the most locally responsive broadcasting system in the world because of laws that require television stations to satisfy reasonable public-interest obligations. Broadcasters are supposed to accept those obligations when they receive their licenses from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Public-interest obligations play a critical role — in fact, a life-saving role — in the lives of Americans and the safety of our nation. In part because these obligations require broadcasters to serve local community needs, television today can provide timely and effective emergency warnings that save lives, reduce property losses and speed economic recovery during times of crisis.

Public-interest obligations are about whether:

- Our televisions can keep us alert and informed in national and local emergencies.
- Our children can turn on a television and find truly educational content.
- The voices and views on our airwaves reflect the diversity of our country.

- People who are sight- or hearing-impaired can access all of TV's educational, informational and entertainment programming.
- We can be active and intelligent participants in our democracy with sufficient civic programming before elections.

Congress is considering legislation that would move U.S. television broadcasting into the digital age. The move would end current analog broadcasting in 2009. Broadcasters are balking at the move and asking for lawmakers to force cable systems to carry all their digital signals (digital TV stations can air up to six programs simultaneously).

Broadcasters have made vague claims that mandated "multicast must-carry" will serve the public interest. Instituting a new must-carry regime without having first implemented clear and strong obligations is certain to be a public-policy disaster, giving a sweetheart deal to broadcasters and a raw deal to the American people.

More than seven years ago, a presidential commission examined the long-standing social compact between broadcasters and the American people and made a series of landmark recommendations on what public-interest responsibilities should accompany the broadcasters' receipt of digital television licenses. Seven years later, unfortunately, the FCC has yet to act on those recommendations.

The FCC and Congress need to address how the transition to digital television will benefit citizens' local, civic and electoral needs. They should define meaningful public-interest obligations that ensure broadcasters:

- Air a minimum of three hours per week of local, civic or electoral-affairs programming on the most-watched channel they operate and a comparable minimum number of hours across other streams of programming they may provide.
- Promote the FCC's often-stated goal of diverse viewpoints and voices on television by ensuring that independent producers provide a minimum of 25 percent of broadcasters' most-watched channel's prime-time schedule.
- Tell the public how they are serving the interests of their audiences by making this information available in a standardized, searchable format, not only at the station, but posted on the station's own web site.

To achieve these goals, all of us — parents, voters, community leaders, activists, and concerned citizens — need to pick up the television policy remote control and change the tune coming from policymakers in Washington. Demand reality-based public-interest obligations that help make a difference in countless lives, before the next crisis strikes.

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