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TV: A Vast Oasis of Public Interest Programming

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TV: A Vast Oasis of Public Interest Programming

Edward O. Fritts*

A presidential candidate once asked: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” The American people answered with a resounding “No.”¹

Today’s question is, “Is the American public better served by television now than it was forty years ago?” The answer, resoundingly, is “Yes.”

I am not sure I ever subscribed to the notion of television as a “Vast Wasteland,” but putting that aside, today’s TV landscape bears little resemblance to the three-network era when Newton Minow uttered his memorable catch phrase.

Then, there were fewer than 600 commercial stations mostly affiliated with ABC, CBS, and NBC. Today, there are around 1300 commercial stations affiliated with nine commercial networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PAX, WB, UPN, and the Spanish-language networks, Univision and Telemundo), along with dozens of true independent stations. There is also a vibrant public television system, and multi-channel video providers, such as cable and satellite, that offer a wide variety of niche programming options.

Even if one eliminates cable and satellite from the mix, it is undeniable that U.S. broadcasters provide a far more diverse menu of news, information, sports, and entertainment than that which is available anywhere else in the world. America’s unique system of free, over-the-air broadcasting—based on localism and free of government control—is the model for nations around the globe. Indeed, in my occasional travels

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1. This theme was carried through Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign.

abroad, I am struck by how many international broadcasters are striving to emulate the U.S. model.

As U.S. broadcasters, we take seriously our responsibility to serve the public. That is why the most successful stations are those that are laser-like in their focus on localism, whether they are sponsoring a debate between candidates for Congress, sending news anchors to a community service event, or partnering on a local Toys for Tots campaign.

Every day and in every community, local broadcasters serve the public interest in a variety of ways. For example, broadcasters across America voluntarily launched the AMBER Alert that has been responsible for the rescue of dozens of kidnapped children all over the country. Stations implemented the plan, not because they were coerced by the government, but because it was the right thing to do.

The causes are endless, and the requests for airtime for such causes are countless. That is why stations donate considerable airtime to public service announcements (“PSAs”) tailored locally to serve the needs of individual communities. PSA airtime is used to implore teens to stay off drugs, to aid in anti-drunken-driving efforts, and to raise millions of dollars for breast cancer research and AIDS research, to name a few.

Several years ago, the National Association of Broadcasters undertook a program to systematically document the amount of public service generated by over-the-air radio and television stations. In our last census, we discovered that in one year alone, broadcasters generated \$9.9 billion in public service in the form of donated airtime for PSAs—money raised for charity and disaster relief.

Broadcast public service also encompasses the coverage of emergency weather alerts that can mean the difference between life and death for viewers in the path of a tornado or hurricane.

Throughout the history of broadcasting, stations have brought into American living rooms the seminal events of world history—a presidential assassination, a man walking on the Moon, and the collapse of Communism.

Broadcasters also chronicled the events of September 11, 2001, with a degree of commitment and professionalism that drew universal praise. In the midst of the worst media recession in fifty years, stations all over America provided viewers with round-the-clock, advertising-free coverage of the horrific attack for nearly a week.

In the aftermath of September 11, stations rallied the American spirit with PSAs, charity fundraising appeals, blood drives, and pleas for tolerance for our immigrant neighbors. I could not have been more proud to

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be associated with the broadcasting community at that time. Indeed, it was broadcasting's finest hour.

As broadcasters move forward into the digital era, the panoply of both entertainment and public-service programming options for viewers only will increase. Digital and high-definition television provides consumers with the finest TV viewing experience the world has ever seen, with unparalleled picture and sound quality. Digital also offers the opportunity for broadcasters to deliver multiple program streams of educational and public-interest programming that can serve niche audiences.

I do not think there is any doubt that the public interest is better served by today's television programming environment than it was forty years ago. I would submit that when historians look back forty years from now, they will regard the early twenty-first century as the Golden Age of Television. And for that, you can thank your local broadcaster.

