

# **American Media and the Quality of Voter Information**

An Aspen Institute Conference Report  
in collaboration with the Center for Governmental Studies

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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*The reader should note that this report is written from the perspective of an informed observer at the conference. Unless cited to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas contained in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any specific participant at the conference.*

# Foreword

Citizens in a democracy express their sovereignty through the act of voting. The integrity of their vote, however, depends upon the quality and quantity of the election-related *information* available to them. That in turn depends upon the ability of the American media to deliver comprehensive and relevant information to potential voters on the candidates and measures on the ballot.

By many indicators, American media are failing in this task. The availability of high quality voter information is declining in the United States. For example, Americans cite local television newscasts as their leading source of political information, yet during the 2002 congressional elections over one-half (56 percent) of the nation's local news programs provided *no coverage* of any candidate positions whatsoever. Of the remaining stations, only 28 percent showed candidates saying anything at all, and the average sound bite was 12 seconds long.

Americans (35 percent) also get political news from network television news, but network news audiences have decreased 44 percent since 1985, and the newscasts' news content has shrunk by 11 percent since 1991. Americans also say they get political news from cable television newscasts, but these newscasts reach relatively small audiences (2.4 million) and primarily consist of live interviews, journalist stand-ups, anchor reads and banter. Moreover, newspaper readership is shrinking and has dropped about one percent a year since 1990. Overall, media fragmentation has created more news outlets, but the audiences for each outlet are smaller, making political advertising a dominant source of voter information.

There is, by contrast, no shortage of political advertisements. Politicians who can afford to pour rapidly increasing sums into radio and television advertising are doing so. In the 2004 election, candidates and independent expenditure committees will have spent more than an estimated one billion dollars on the presidential race alone. Despite this explosive increase in political advertising, however, it would be difficult to argue that voters are better informed about candidates and issues than they were 50 years ago.

Many political television ads have become thirty-second "hit pieces." They highlight flaws or omissions, sometimes minor, distorted or even fabricated, in an opponent's record—a controversial vote, a personal indiscretion—and then magnify them to monumental proportions.

These ads attack but rarely propose reforms or communicate any significant information about the sponsoring candidate. Indeed, hoping to immunize themselves against an onslaught of negative ads, many candidates shy away from taking public stands on controversial issues altogether, and instead state their views in the blandest terms.

**The Conference.** To address these issues, and to discuss potential solutions made possible by the emergence of digital video media, the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and the Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) convened a roundtable conference, *American Media and the Quality of Voter Information*, at the Aspen Wye River Conference Centers in Queenstown, Maryland, on June 16-18, 2004. Twenty-four leading journalists, media executives, public officials, political activists, critics and academics participated actively in the three-day roundtable discussion. The McCormick Tribune Foundation of Chicago generously supplied funding to make the conference possible.

The conference addressed a number of important questions: How sufficient is the quality and quantity of electoral information for American citizens today? How adequately do the media cover elections and candidates at all levels of government? Can candidates communicate adequately with the electorate directly through various media? How can the new media—digital, cable and satellite television, the Internet, digital video recorders (e.g., TiVo) and video-on-demand systems—improve voter information? Are new policies needed to enhance American media coverage of campaigns and provide new opportunities for candidates to speak directly to the voters?

Thomas E. Patterson, Bradley Professor of Government and the Press at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, opened the conference with a description of the troubling state of voter participation and a growing sense of voter apathy, especially among young voters. Participants then drew upon their own expertise to discuss a number of innovative solutions to improve the quality of voter information in the United States. The following report, an expert observer's interpretation of the points and proposals suggested at the meeting, offers the reader a sense of the issues and arguments that punctuate this area of inquiry. More importantly, it describes some of the more creative suggestions and proposals for remedying the problems with new uses of communications technologies. In that regard, among the most interesting suggestions were the following:

*Video Voter:* Video Voter, a CGS project, helps public, educational and governmental access producers on cable television produce and distribute videotaped candidate statements, interviews and forums, which can be collected by digital video recorders and video-on-demand systems, and viewed at the voter's convenience.

*Online Broadband Presidential Candidate Debate:* An online Internet debate between presidential candidates would utilize the advantages of broadband technology by making the debate more relevant and accessible, allowing Americans to participate by sending questions in real time to the candidates, and by time-shifting and providing portions of the debate to accommodate voter's schedules.

*Online Broadcaster Files:* Broadcast stations must maintain political broadcasting files, including the amounts of time they sell for political programming. Public disclosure online would make it easier for the media to report on the amounts of time purchased by political campaigns.

*Online Rolling Debate:* Some participants urged the reinstatement of Web White & Blue's online rolling debate between presidential candidates. One candidate would enter a videotaped position on an issue, and the next day the opposing candidate would rebut. Voters could review the rolling debate at any time.

Other suggestions included sharing successful models of political coverage with other broadcasters to encourage them to widen their coverage, improving Websites of newspapers to include more political information, and supporting online candidate guides (such as Democracy Network).

*Pending Legislation.* In addition, participants discussed two current legislative initiatives, introduced by Senators McCain and Feingold and supported by the Alliance for Better Campaigns, which would promote more candidate information on the nation's broadcast stations (see Appendix for Our Democracy, Our Airwaves Act Bill Summary). One initiative would require broadcasters to devote minimum percentages of their airtime (e.g., two hours a week) to candidate-centered political campaigns during the six-week period before a federal election. Broadcasters would retain journalistic control over formats and other issues. The other initiative would impose

a spectrum fee upon broadcast licensees and use that funding to provide the national political parties with funds for vouchers which their candidates could use to acquire broadcast airtime for political spot announcements.

**The Opportunity Ahead.** An unprecedented opportunity exists while the digital television and video-on-demand industries are still in their infancy to promote new public interest uses of these media to support improved political information and debate. These new approaches could change the face of politics for generations to come. We are gratified that many of the participants made long-term commitments to implement these or other innovative solutions. We hope that this report encourages others to do the same.

**Acknowledgments.** We would like to thank and acknowledge the McCormick Tribune Foundation for funding this project. We especially appreciate our rapporteur, North Carolina State University Communications Professor Robert Entman, for his excellent work at weaving the conference dialogue into a cohesive and plausible document. We thank each of our participants who generously took time out of their busy schedules to take part in the conference and offer insightful remarks as evidenced in this report. Finally, we thank Betsy Rosenfeld, project manager of CGS's Video Voter, and Maria Medrano, project manager of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, for their persistent work on the conference, and Patricia Kelly, assistant director of the Communications and Society Program, for bringing this publication to fruition.

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1 Survey by Norman Lear Entertainment Center, USC Annenberg School of Communications, [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org). The study reviewed the highest rated half-hour local TV news shows on 122 randomly selected stations in the top 50 national markets 7 weeks before the 2002 election.



AMERICAN MEDIA  
AND THE QUALITY OF  
VOTER INFORMATION

*Robert M. Entman*



# American Media and the Quality of Voter Information

## Introduction

Observers of American politics have recognized for some time that Americans not only vote at lower rates than is typical in most advanced democracies but do so with less information than is desirable. Despite remarkable advances in communications technology and the spread of formal education since World War II, research suggests that the typical American is no more informed about candidates, parties, and issues today.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in March 2004, according to the National Annenberg Election Survey, a majority of Americans could not identify Herbert Hoover and therefore could not respond sensibly to the Democrats' frequent comparison of George W. Bush's economic record to that of Hoover. Just 43 percent of respondents knew that Hoover was the Depression-era president; 12 percent confused him with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (among other answers), and 3 percent associated him with the vacuum cleaner.<sup>2</sup> Other examples are legion.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this finding should not surprise us because local television news programs—the most popular source of news—often give politics short shrift. An extensive study by the Lear Center Local News Archive, for instance, found that 56 percent of local newscasts contained no coverage whatsoever of the 2002 campaign, and most of the rest offered only superficial reporting.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than throwing up their hands at such disturbing evidence of an uninformed and disconnected citizenry, a group of prominent experts on political communication, media, and journalism met June 16–18, 2004, to discuss harnessing information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance the U.S. media's coverage of campaigns and provide new opportunities for candidates to speak directly to citizens. Ranging over the entire spectrum, from traditional network evening news to video on demand and broadband Internet service, the group discussed a variety of innovations designed to encourage Americans to seek, find, and use political information as citizens and voters. Participants dissected both the demand and the supply sides of the problem, identifying needs, and assessing mechanisms to raise citizens' interest in obtaining information

to increase its supply in a variety of media. Among the key recommendations on the supply side were the following:

*Video Voter:* A project designed to help public, educational, and governmental (PEG) access producers on local cable television systems produce and distribute videotaped candidate statements, interviews, and forums. Free production time would be offered to candidates in any race. Recognizing the difficulty of promoting “appointment viewing” for PEG channels, video voter programming could be made available for on-demand viewing by using digital video recorders (e.g., TiVo) to time-shift or through video-on-demand (VOD) on cable TV systems, where video voter segments are stored and accessed from the cable company’s video servers.

*Online Broadband Candidate Debates:* An online broadband debate between or among presidential candidates would take advantage of broadband technology to make the debate more relevant and accessible to an electorate that often feels alienated from the political process. An online debate could allow Americans to participate in the event by sending questions in real time to the candidates, as well as to time-shift and view portions of the debate to fit their schedules.

*Broadcaster Files Online:* Public online disclosure by broadcast stations of their political broadcast files, including the amounts of time they sell for political advertising and the amount they devote to public affairs programming, would make it easier for the media to report on the amounts of time purchased by political campaigns and perhaps raise pressure on broadcast stations to do more and better public affairs programming.

On the equally important demand side of the equation, suggestions included the following:

*Personalized news content:* This approach would tap the potential of the Internet and other digital technologies that allow tailoring of content to the interests of the audience.

*Altering the cynical political culture:* Conference participants identified current and potential efforts to alter a political culture that encourages Americans to regard politics as unsavory and thus uninteresting.

*Innovative formats:* Participants suggested experimenting with formats that are simultaneously appealing and informative.

This report is one observer's interpretation of a lively and diverse discussion. It should not be read as a record of consensus recommendations of the group so much as an essay on using information and communication technologies (ICT) to promote informed citizenship. The report reflects on the dialogue and explores some—though certainly not all—of the many innovative ideas that circulated at the conference.

## Declining Citizenship

Thomas E. Patterson, Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at Harvard University, opened the conference by exploring the discouraging civic environment in the United States. Citizens' interest in politics is down, as is the amount of serious news on broadcast network television and even in newspapers. A vicious circle forms: Less interested audiences demand less serious news, thus becoming less aware of their personal stakes in policy and political debates. Seeing less reason to pay attention to civic news, audiences increasingly turn to abundant entertainment alternatives on cable and satellite television or the Internet. Traditional news outlets—pressured by growing competition and desperate to hang on to distracted, shrinking audiences—respond by “dumbing down” their products even further.<sup>5</sup>

Participants discussed several aspects of the problem. For example, from the perspective of democratic citizenship, market pressures push suppliers increasingly in the wrong direction. Soft news, lifestyle and cultural coverage, sensational crime, and celebrity scandal have all displaced hard news about government and public policy. Conference co-organizer Tracy Westen, Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Governmental Studies (CGS), cited a study by the Lear Center to argue that local television news—the most popular news medium—offers an even less nourishing diet.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Westen argued, although cable news is nearly ubiquitous and growing in popularity, it rarely offers in-depth, thoroughly reported story packages. Instead, cable news fare consists more of talk show shoutfests (or celebrity gabfests) and poorly edited live on-scene reports. In any case, on a given night the evening news broadcasts by the traditional big three broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) still reach more than 25 million households, compared to fewer than 4 million cumulatively for national cable news outlets.

Many conference participants seemed to agree that citizens rely too much on television. Reed Hundt, former Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), may have been most vocal on the civic deficiencies of broadcast television. He argued that television is the “least suitable medium for achieving representative democracy” and that its use should be discouraged. In Hundt’s words:

Political ads by campaigns are mostly negative, drive down voter participation, increase public distrust of political leaders, have little relationship to truth, and impose such large fundraising obligations on all candidates as to discourage sensible people from running for office. Who can recall any campaign advertisement by any campaign that made a positive contribution to the democratic process?

Unlike a print ad or a print news story, broadcast television does not offer the opportunity for re-reading or pausing and going back later. Although users of TiVo or other digital video recording or VOD technologies theoretically can do such things, in most cases rewinding and reviewing will remain less common than re-reading.

Tearing people away from their televisions may prove difficult, however. For this reason, Hundt and others pointed to the absence of regulatory incentives as a problem that might be addressed. Jonathan Adelstein, a current Commissioner of the FCC, described broadcast news coverage as “pitiful” in the wake of 15 or 20 years of deregulatory decisions by the FCC. Broadcast television firms no longer have incentives to subsidize the positive externalities of broadcast news coverage—their contributions to democracy. No longer facing much regulatory pressure, broadcasters do not internalize the socially beneficial impacts of providing serious journalism as a necessary cost of doing business. Far stronger competition to attract viewers (and impress the investment community) makes it more difficult even for public-minded executives to “donate” such benefits. As Deborah Potter, a former network television correspondent who now serves as Executive Director of the Radio-Television News Directors Foundation, suggested, station owners have little incentive to experiment with high-quality news if market research and ratings data fail to promise increasing profit.

For their part, the big three networks’ interest in serving civic life once again was illustrated in 2004 when, during a divisive election season and

in the midst of a controversial war, they each chose to broadcast a grand total of only three or four hours of each of the major party nominating conventions. This limited coverage deprives the political process of benefits enjoyed when the big three completely dominated prime-time viewing and many people learned about politics “accidentally” simply by keeping their television sets tuned to whatever was on.<sup>7</sup> Equally important, the networks’ failure to preempt “Fear Factor” spinoffs and reruns of canceled sitcoms to show the conventions teaches the public a lesson about the scant returns from investing time in politics. By ceding gavel-to-gavel coverage to several low-rated cable channels and public broadcasting, the networks convey the impression that party politics and presidential nominations are specialized matters for “narrowcasting” outlets, much like the Cartoon, Comedy, or Golf channels. “Narrowcasting” politics—relegating political news coverage to secondary channels—has a tremendous effect. The big three’s decisions to all but omit political coverage from their nightly news lineups diminishes the possibility that individuals who would not otherwise seek out political information will ever see it. Moreover, it sends a message: Politics is not important enough to be in broadcast primetime, so it must not be very important. This message has an unfortunate effect on voting behavior. Although threatened enforcement of public interest standards once induced the big three to send very different messages and provide significant political coverage, many analysts—including most FCC commissioners in recent years—would argue that such benefits of regulating broadcasters to extract higher-quality journalism are outweighed by the costs.

A final contributor to low demand for and supply of political information is a general cultural negativity toward politics and political involvement. Pervasive cynicism among journalists covering politicians and elections contributes one component of the negative culture.<sup>8</sup> Terence Smith, Media Correspondent and Senior Producer for the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, airing on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), pointed to reporting that “always seeks the political strategy behind every policy”—promoting the assumption that candidates and officials should never be believed or trusted. Negative advertising also may play a role. Tracy Westen of the CGS offered the analogy of the airline industry: If American Airlines promoted its service by showing videos of a United Airlines jet in flames after a crash, and vice versa, lower demand for air travel surely would follow. That, Westen said, is

something like the effect of negative political advertising on participation and confidence in the nation's political democracy.<sup>9</sup> Although some political scientists in attendance defended negative advertising as informative, Joe Trippi, founder of Changeformerica.com and former manager of Howard Dean's 2003–2004 presidential campaign, argued that politicians go negative because attack ads work—by effectively and reliably damaging the other side. Furthermore, Trippi said, some campaigns go negative because they deliberately *want* to suppress turnout. Trippi added that in light of the government's many mistakes and shortcomings, people arguably have good reason to be cynical about the likelihood that government will respond to the public's needs and interests.

All of this evidence could be regarded as further underlining the responsibility of journalism to counterbalance negative forces in the culture. The counterweight would arise not from idealistic propaganda for the system's virtues but from serious reporting on society's problems *and* the potential for good and responsive government. Furthermore, the Internet, particularly broadband, and VOD offer Americans a burgeoning variety of opportunities to access political information. Thus, conference participants paid particular attention to how these newer media might take up the slack created by the decline of traditional journalism, while also assessing ways of enhancing incentives for traditional media organizations to improve their contributions.

### **Stimulating the Supply Side**

Conference participants divided discussion of the provision of political information into two segments: unmediated or candidate-controlled communication and mediated communication that is not in the candidate's control but in that of news organizations. An example of the former would be political advertising or live coverage of a political speech. The latter includes most forms of news. For better or worse, most officials now interpret the First Amendment as strictly limiting the ability of government to regulate the content of political communication, mediated and unmediated, even for the laudable purpose of enhancing democracy. Therefore, most ideas discussed at the conference focused on providing incentives for the supply of *more information*. Among the means discussed were a minor change in a technical regulation, deployment of innovative new technology, and new forms of candidate debates.



**Broadcast regulation.** Although regulation is far from fashionable, some conference participants argued for renewed regulation of broadcast stations to raise citizens' access to political information. After all, despite all the attention to the Internet, most Americans still spend far more time with their television sets and radios than online. Jonathan Adelstein of the FCC made a pitch for revitalizing public interest obligations, arguing that "candidates and advocacy groups can get away with murder" in television political advertising precisely because there is so little serious television news of campaigns. With market incentives that put stations at a competitive disadvantage if they enhance their public affairs contributions, he said, the only way to level the playing field while serving the nation's civic life is some kind of regulatory requirement to improve.

In deference to political realities at the FCC and in Congress, however, the only concrete reform proposal that gathered much support at the conference was highly indirect: requiring stations to quantify and disclose their public interest activities in a standardized form and make the reports available on the Internet. Meredith McGehee, President of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, described the assumption behind this policy: Making communities aware of how much (or how little) stations are doing with respect to public affairs programming (as well as children's television and other valued categories) would pressure owners to do more. Broadcast firms also could be required to post the dollar amounts different campaigns are spending to advertise on their stations. Such information would be useful to journalists covering campaigns. For instance, reporters would be able to trace more readily the different audiences candidates are targeting and in this way better understand the true goals and appeals of the politicians.

As Alex Netchvolodoff, Senior Vice President for Public Policy at Cox Enterprises, observed, definitions are extremely important to this kind of rule, and experience suggests that stations may widely violate the spirit of disclosure requirements by making dubious, self-serving decisions in accounting for their programming. The infamous example is the many stations that counted low-quality fare such as "G.I. Joe" in claiming fulfillment of their children's educational programming obligations. The category of "public affairs" could be similarly abused. More important, in the absence of a realistic threat of loss of licenses, and in light of the aforementioned rising market pressures, it is far from clear

that disclosure of such data, however well-enforced and well-publicized, would noticeably alter stations' behavior.

Another idea discussed extensively at the conference would entail providing broadcast time to candidates, on the presumption that subsidizing the time would diminish candidates' reliance on donors and the many burdens that reliance places on politicians. Meredith McGehee described her organization's proposal to raise about \$750 million by placing use fees on broadcast stations and using the revenue to provide candidates and parties with vouchers to purchase broadcast time. McGehee believes such a fee would be unobjectionable because the broadcasters typically would get the money back when the candidates cash their vouchers.

Although conference participants did not object to this idea in principle, stations and their lobbies might object—even though the net cost to them should be close to zero—because it would establish a precedent for taxing them to serve public interest objectives. Beyond noting this option, participants appeared to be in general agreement that regulating the content of political advertising is impractical. Giving candidates free or voucher-supported television or radio time could lead to a somewhat paradoxical situation in which government would be subsidizing the very thing so many observers decry: purely negative, false, or misleading political advertising.

**Innovations that use new technology.** If broadcast regulation faces too many political and practical impediments, it makes sense to turn our attention to adaptations of newer technology. The CGS's Video Voter initiative and other uses of online communication garnered particular attention at the conference.

The Video Voter initiative currently helps PEG access channels on cable television systems videotape and distribute voter information programming on candidates and ballot measures. Sometimes this programming simply involves candidates talking to the camera on any issue they choose. Other times it may feature candidate debates or interviews. Distribution of Video Voter material in VOD formats has been tried in some communities, and CGS is proposing that TiVo and other digital video recorder (DVR) companies code political programming so viewers can easily record and view it at their convenience. Particularly when this initiative harnesses VOD and DVR technology and thus becomes available entirely at the viewer's convenience, such voter information could be

cost effective and engaging. The Video Voter approach has the potential to become a ubiquitous means of distributing voter information, especially on the local level where the races generally are not covered well by broadcast stations or, often, even by newspapers. The ideal would be to make such videos available on a combination of DVRs (such as TiVo), via cable “on demand” channels, and via online streaming video. The CGS is distributing a “best practices” guide for producers of Video Voter-type programming across the nation ([www.videovoter.org](http://www.videovoter.org)).

Joe Waz, Vice President for External Affairs and Public Policy at Comcast Corporation, pointed to a variety of other ways that cable is experimenting with VOD to improve voter education. In some markets, broadcast stations could agree to put each day’s main newscast on servers for retrieval at viewers’ convenience. At the presidential level in 2004, Comcast plans to put key speeches from the major party conventions, as well as the presidential and vice presidential debates, on VOD. Comcast also is developing a pilot program in which candidates answer questions in a three- to five-minute format and these short clips are made available on VOD. Waz reported that VOD is available now to about 30 percent of Comcast households; within a few years that figure should be nearly 100 percent, and according to the Yankee Group, VOD should be in at least one-third of all cable homes by 2008. By the end of 2004, Forester Research estimates, about 7 percent of households will use DVRs, of which TiVo is the best-known example.<sup>10</sup>

Broadcast stations also could place the material on their Websites for convenient streaming on demand, particularly by users with broadband Internet connections. In a related vein, Alex Netchvolodoff of Cox Enterprises pointed out, “Newspapers throw away most of the information they collect.” At little cost, they could gather much of the campaign material that does not make the printed version of the paper and place it on their Websites. Several participants emphasized the importance of menu design for both newspaper and television Websites. Users need to be able to dig through large volumes of information quickly to get the information they want as easily as possible. Today’s often-frustrating or primitive Website and VOD menus need to be improved if these technologies are to fulfill their promise as civic information tools.

A related mechanism that may be more suitable to the larger, better-funded electoral campaigns was exemplified by “Dean TV.” This service was

online 24 hours a day, seven days a week during much of Howard Dean's run for the Democratic nomination. The content consisted of footage from a video camera that followed Dean on the campaign trail, supplemented with amateur videos sent in by Dean supporters discussing the candidate. It was "broadcast" to a cache on users' computer hard drives and available for their reference at any time. According to former Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi, the operation cost the campaign just \$5,000 a month and served as a vital connection between the Dean campaign and ordinary citizens.

One drawback that might make this mechanism less attractive to more conventional candidates than Dean is that the camera following a candidate around virtually everywhere could record awkward moments for opponents to pick up and disseminate. Relatively few candidates might want to run such a risk. Nonetheless, using the Internet to make details on a candidate's activities, speeches, proposals, and supporters widely accessible no doubt will increase, even if most candidates choose to exert more control over content than Dean did. For third-party candidates, who rarely have much financial backing, such Internet exposure could provide an important boost.

Many of these suggestions highlight the importance of broadband technology. Although the "digital divide" issue was outside the scope of the conference, increasing reliance on the Internet to serve civic life further highlights the urgency of ensuring universal or near-universal access to high-speed broadband Internet service. Currently, 48 million adults (24 percent of all Americans age 18 or older) have broadband at home; 68 million (34 percent) can access the technology at home, work, or both.<sup>11</sup> These data suggest that universal broadband penetration is not imminent.

**Debates.** Most conference participants appeared to believe that candidate debates are vital means of informing citizens. As contests, they seem to stimulate more widespread interest than many other information formats. They also promise to reveal aspects of candidates' styles and personalities that voters cannot easily detect through other formats. Indeed, research suggests that traditional televised debates (such as Kennedy-Nixon or Reagan-Carter) are among the most effective mechanisms for raising citizens' level of information about candidates.<sup>12</sup>

Former FCC Chairman Reed Hundt argued, however, that the incentives for candidates and broadcasters—at least with regard to the presi-

dential election—undermine the usefulness of traditional broadcast debates to citizens. He noted that certain problems reappear quadrennially. Candidates always maneuver for formats that protect their strategic interests, and at least one (usually the incumbent) holds the debate hostage by refusing to agree to participate unless the timing, number, and formats of the debates are advantageous. For their part, major broadcast news organizations insist on having their personnel ask questions. Hundt said that what results is superficial discourse during which candidates merely recite their prepared sound bites. Recalling the 2000 presidential contest, he argued that debates elevate style over substance, making performative features such as Al Gore’s loud and exasperated sighs over George W. Bush’s assertions more influential than the actual truth and wisdom of either candidate’s statements.

Hundt suggests that ideally there should be three or four presidential debates, with no moderator. Instead, he proposes that each side pick its own group of “special interest” representatives—presumably key members of support coalitions—who would ask questions of the other candidate and stimulate direct engagement of the candidates with each other. This model would be useful for statewide and perhaps local office debates as well. Although conferees did not dissent from these views, getting candidates and networks or stations to relinquish control could prove difficult in the absence of legislation mandating such reforms.

In any case, one relatively simple way to at least make debates more available is to make recordings of them available for reference online and in VOD formats. For instance, TiVo could easily highlight debates for the presidency and other offices in its menus; cable VOD offerings could include debates (Comcast has announced that it will do so); and the Websites of C-SPAN, CNN, ABC News, and many other organizations could link to streaming video of debates.

Two other innovations suggested at the conference could transcend the limitations of traditional broadcast debates. One is Hundt’s proposal for taking advantage of the alternative medium of broadband. He suggests that the major broadband portals host live, real-time debates featuring candidates talking directly to each other and perhaps other innovative means of generating lively discussion. Portals such as America Online (AOL), Comcast, Microsoft Network (MSN), and Google would be representative of proposed participants. The portals

would all show the same debate simultaneously. PBS, C-SPAN, and other cable networks also could show the debates. Charles Firestone, Executive Director of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, observed that signing on to this concept could give broadband services a unique selling proposition, as well as generating considerable positive publicity and goodwill.

Although the concept met with general approval, representatives of the cable industry—which also operates broadband portals—sounded a note of caution. The problem is that if millions of broadband users tune in simultaneously for a real-time debate, servers might crash. Not only would this possibility render the debate unwatchable on various portals, it would probably disrupt their services more generally—causing user frustration, bad publicity, and lost revenue. More investigation of capacity limits on systems is required before broadband debates can be launched.

A final proposal called for asynchronous online written debates. There has already been a precedent in the “Web White & Blue” project of 2000. Michael Cornfield, consultant to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, researched this effort and said the project ran for 37 days. Each day featured a question from a subscriber to which candidates responded, although candidates also could put up their own messages. Tucker Eskew, a former Bush administration advisor and President of the Eskew Strategy Group, noted that the presidential campaigns seemed eager to participate. Web White & Blue involved day-to-day exchanges between the campaigns on various topics, each often responding to the other. Arguably, this format more closely resembles real debating than the typically stage-managed broadcast debate events. Although it takes significant campaign staff resources, Eskew predicts that candidates might well participate in Web White & Blue again.

On the other hand, Phil Noble, President of Politics Online, Inc., described problems he was having in raising funds to support Web White & Blue for the 2004 campaign. Assuming funding could be found, however, this model is as valid for state and local races as for national contests. Kelly McFarland Stratman, Senior Manager for Membership and Field Support at the League of Women Voters, observed that a similar League-sponsored venture, Democracy Network ([www.dnet.org](http://www.dnet.org)), is up and running. Democracy Network is a one-stop information shop, where voters find comprehensive information on

statewide ballot initiatives and candidates running for federal- and state-level races. Again, participants urged attention to designing Websites and their menus with a close eye on user friendliness.

## **Pumping Up Demand**

Although the conference devoted significantly more time to examining the supply side of voter information, participants also considered ways to boost citizen demand for improved information. After all, information is not exactly scarce. Anybody with access to the Internet can access a virtually inexhaustible supply of information about national candidates and issues, ranging from newspaper and other commercial news websites on every continent to Web logs (“blogs”) to interest group and think tank reports such as this one. Citizens also have online access to congressional hearings and other government proceedings, reports, and databases—not to mention the many information resources that appear in print. Information on state and local issues and elections may be less voluminous, and quantity and quality vary considerably from locale to locale. Yet almost everywhere, citizens can find more information more readily than ever before.

Nevertheless, there is little evidence that ordinary people have become more informed or interested in politics and political races as a result of the Internet. One reason is that although the Internet has become a part of life for many Americans, people typically do not use it for citizenship purposes. Overall Internet use has reached 63 percent of adults. On an average day in the United States (i.e., a day not at the height of a presidential campaign), 68 million adults (55 percent of those age 18 and older) report that they go online,<sup>13</sup> among whom 13 percent say they “look for political news/information.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, 87 percent of adults who regularly use the Internet do *not* report a habit of using it for civic information.

Therefore, although the foregoing suggestions for making more information more accessible offer additional value, they must be allied with a concomitant increase in citizen interest in actually using the Internet, broadband, VOD, and other new—and old—media technologies to become more informed. One other important caveat: Information about candidates, particularly information they control—

advertising, official Websites, answers to interview questions, and assertions in debates—is not always reliable. Some observers might even say that candidate-supplied information is *per se* unreliable—or at least highly selective and partial, in both senses of the term. Some citizens can independently assess competing candidate claims and figure out which are more reliable, but others cannot or do not.

In fact, political scientists have long known that candidates have strong incentives to fudge their true positions.<sup>15</sup> Information from candidates often is less useful than that coming from independent investigations of who the candidates really are, what their records are, what they stand for, who their friends and supporters are, and what they want for their constituencies. Providing such data is the irreducible function of good journalism. If the market is not producing enough of it, there are two alternatives: government intervention to increase the supply, on the presumption of market failure, and doing things to pump up demand.

There does appear to be a market failure in the sense that most citizens would benefit from a more informed population because that information presumably would yield a more responsive government. For any given individual, however, investing time and effort in becoming more informed does not yield heightened government responsiveness to that individual's agenda. Thus, people may "under-demand" the information. This situation also sets up a self-perpetuating vicious circle whereby many citizens do not pay enough attention to learn enough to realize that perhaps they *should* pay attention.

One answer to market failure is PBS. Participants generally criticized underfunding of the United States' noncommercial broadcasting in comparison to funding levels in other democracies. Terence Smith—who helps produce a show that appears on PBS, but does not work for the network—assessed the state of the network's finances as troubled and its primetime programming as "terrible." He saw an opportunity, however, in the situation PBS faces: "They face enormous competition from cable, so they need a new role." Therefore, he said, expanding PBS's news and public affairs offerings might make sense as a way to create a new niche for a revitalized PBS. This strategy would still be a supply-side solution. With sufficient funding and imaginative programming, PBS is a better candidate than commercial broadcast firms—enslaved as they are to ratings and the stock market—to take risks and



grow a new audience for high-quality public affairs and journalism.

Unfortunately, however, it is far from clear that significant funding increases for PBS would fly politically. Officeholders and their backers may be quite comfortable with a citizenry that does not pay close attention to what the government is doing. They may have little interest in raising taxes or government spending for this particular purpose, especially in a time of record deficits. Moreover, many officials have sincere philosophical objections to government-funded broadcasting, especially with regard to political matters (as opposed to ballet, travelogues, and British period dramas).

For these and other reasons, other paths to raising demand merit consideration. Among the suggestions aired at the conference, three stood out: personalized news, cultural change, and new formats.

**Personalized news.** Sean Badding, President of The Carmel Group, observed that U.S. society experiences information and entertainment overload. Getting people interested in citizenship when they are so distracted by a multitude of entertainment options is increasingly difficult. Badding therefore emphasized the need for content customization—using ICT to deliver more personalized information.

To motivate uninterested or barely interested citizens, for example, some variant of TiVo's capacity for learning people's tastes and interests could be harnessed. TiVo monitors the programs users choose to record and on that basis makes suggestions for other programming they also might like. Analogously, a DVR and perhaps a cable VOD system could use what it learns about viewers (subject to appropriate privacy protections) to suggest public affairs programming that are relevant for them. For example, somebody who watches gardening or hunting and fishing programs might be alerted to a documentary on environmental protection.

Deborah Potter of the Radio-Television News Directors Foundation observed that Internet users already can create personalized content for themselves. Some use a format called Really Simple Syndication (RSS) to sign up for newsletters and other information on candidates or issues. RSS aggregates information from various RSS-enabled Websites. Users of RSS-aware software can set their systems to grab and send to them, for example, all material on Howard Dean, George W. Bush, or Ralph Nader or a particular issue appearing on various Websites and

Weblogs. Perhaps making Internet users more aware of this capacity would help generate more demand for information that responds to citizens' specific interests. For example, many participants in this conference of experts appeared not to have heard of RSS.

**Cultural change.** Although the United States has experienced a general decline in civic interest, particularly among persons younger than 40 years old,<sup>16</sup> conditions differ across states. For example, Minnesota had the highest voter turnout in 2000, with 71.3 percent of the voting-age population casting ballots. At 55.1 percent, Massachusetts was above the national average of 50.0 percent. The rate was as low as 40.4 percent in Arizona.<sup>17</sup> This broad range suggests that varying state political cultures and perhaps public policies can affect citizen involvement.

Investigating these differences was beyond the scope of the conference, but as Tracy Westen of the CGS said, "I vote because politics is fun and interesting to me, but most people don't see it that way. We need to engage people in this fascinating activity." There are a variety of media mechanisms available to boost interest. Westen and others suggested running more public service announcements (PSAs) to encourage voting and involvement. Former FCC Chairman Reed Hundt suggested that broadcast and cable television channels run text "crawls" at the bottom of their screens (as CNN, CNBC, and others do continuously) that announce upcoming elections and tell people where to register and even where to vote. Sean Badding of The Carmel Group pointed to the need for good civic education in kindergarten through grade 12. He asked, "If schools can be required to teach computer skills, why not teach students to use that technology for civic information?" Bunnie Riedel, Executive Director of the Alliance for Community Media, added that schools should teach media literacy as a matter of course.

Kelly McFarland Stratman of the League of Women Voters focused on the particular need to engage younger Americans. Voting participation among Americans age 18 to 35 years old significantly trails that among older citizens. Just 32.3 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds and 43.7 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds reported to the U.S. Census that they voted in 2000, compared with rates of more than 60 percent for those older than 45.<sup>18</sup> Stratman described a large coalition trying to increase youth participation in the 2004 election. Smackdown Your Vote! is a partnership of diverse organizations, including the League of Women

Voters and World Wrestling Entertainment, that is dedicated to reaching out to and including America's youngest voters in the electoral process by registering 2 million 18- to 34-year-olds and by getting the candidates to speak candidly to America's youth on the issues of importance to them. One significant tool in this effort is the League-supported *18–30 Voter Issues Paper*, which covers issues that are important to younger voters, as determined by research conducted by various organizations. This publication serves as a starting point for discussion between younger voters and candidates. It has already received attention and comments from several candidates for federal office, including both the Bush and Kerry campaigns. Smackdown! represents an effort to influence the cultural associations of voting (and other forms of participation) to engage previously underrepresented groups.

**Format changes.** Tracy Westen offered the interesting observation that although all kinds of expensive research has been conducted on how to improve entertainment formats to make them more attractive and effective, there appears to be little investigation into making *political* information more appealing and useful. Foundations could fund systematic research on new formats that might make public affairs television and interactive Websites more interesting to a wider range of Americans, most of whom do not find politics inherently fun or interesting. On the contrary, many find it precisely the opposite.

A specific suggestion along these lines did receive some attention at the conference. Michael Cornfield, consultant to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, offered a creative proposal that could integrate with traditional broadcast or broadband debates: a reality program contest. Contestants would compete for the right to present their questions to presidential candidates at a debate. They would stand in symbolical and literally for the ordinary people who usually are absent from the process. The goal of the program would be to build public interest in the debates and the campaign, as well as to winnow the field and find particularly articulate, creative, and representative citizen interrogators.

Rather than forcing participants to eat worms or climb trees to advance in the contest, Cornfield and Changeforamerica.com founder Joe Trippi advocate telephone voting. They cite the model of "American Idol," which attracts millions of voters to select the winners of singing contests. According to Trippi, individuals might make videos arguing in

favor of a particular candidate, which would be placed online after being broadcast. Viewers could then vote for the ones they like best, and winners—having demonstrated their mettle as political advocates and observers—might earn a place to ask questions in candidate debates. Aside from the debates, Trippi noted, viewing and voting on the videos would itself be a form of participation and a way of distributing information and generating interest. Whatever forms such a “reality program” contest might take, entertainment and civic values could be combined to make such a program commercially viable.

## **Conclusion**

Advocates who seek to augment Americans’ informed involvement in democracy face an uphill battle. American political culture treats politics as unsavory. For their part, politicians sometimes confirm the stereotype by running nasty campaigns, and they exacerbate the problem when they mislead the public after reaching office. At the same time, the U.S. media system offers increasingly numerous and attractive entertainment alternatives to the more demanding activity of following public affairs. Meanwhile, news organizations experience growing pressure to maintain audience share by dissolving distinctions between journalism and entertainment. Nonetheless, this conference offered numerous practical ideas, and it embodied optimism about enhancing U.S. democracy. By tapping the real potential of communication technology to make unique new contributions, the United States can make progress toward countering unfavorable trends and revitalizing democracy.

## Endnotes

1. The classic reference is Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Polls showing continuing low levels of voter information since then can be found at [www.pipa.org](http://www.pipa.org) and [www.pewtrusts.org](http://www.pewtrusts.org), among other places.
2. National Annenberg Election Survey, “As campaigners cite Hoover and Fonda, a Majority of Americans Do Not Know Who they Are.” [http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004\\_03\\_herbert-hoover\\_03-18\\_pr.pdf](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_herbert-hoover_03-18_pr.pdf).
3. An ABC/*Washington Post* poll in June 2004 found 62 percent of respondents agreeing that Iraq provided assistance to al Qaeda—barely changed from the 68 percent who said this in January 2003, before the Iraq war and before all the exhaustively covered testimony and reports by the 9/11 Commission and other inquiries showed this claim to be unfounded. See “Iraq and the Election.” [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/Polls/iraq\\_election\\_040621.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/Polls/iraq_election_040621.html).
4. Martin Kaplan, Kenneth Goldstein, and Matthew Hale, *Local TV News Coverage of the 2002 General Election Campaign* (Los Angeles: USC Annenberg School, 2003). <http://www.learcenter.org/html/projects/?&cm=news/pubs>.
5. See Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993) and *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Knopf, 2002); see also Robert M. Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion, 6th ed.* (New York: Longman, 2004).
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7. On the public good benefits of an informed citizenry and the tendency of the market to underproduce it, see James Hamilton, *All the News That’s Fit to Sell* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
8. Patterson, *Out of Order*.
9. See Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Shanto Iyengar and Stephen Ansolobehere, *Going Negative* (New York: The Free Press, 1997). The question of whether negative advertising promotes or discourages voting turnout has generated considerable controversy among political scientists. The most recent conclusion is that it does neither: Joshua D. Clinton and John S. Lapinski, “‘Targeted’ Advertising and Voter Turnout: An Experimental Study of the 2000 Presidential Election,” *Journal of Politics* 66, no. 1: 69–96.
10. “Digital Video Recorders Take Flight,” Forrester Research, April 16, 2004. <http://www.forrester.com/Research/Document/Excerpt/0,7211,34264,00.html>.
11. John B. Horrigan, “55 Percent of Adult Internet Users Have Broadband at Home or Work,” Pew Internet Project Memo, April 2004. [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Broadband\\_04.DataMemo.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Broadband_04.DataMemo.pdf).
12. Kathleen Jamieson and David Birdsell, *Presidential Debates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

13. Lee Rainie, "Latest Internet Tracking Data," Pew Internet Project Memo, April 2004. [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_April2004\\_Data\\_Memo.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_April2004_Data_Memo.pdf)
14. "Daily Internet Activities," Pew Internet Project (April 23, 2004). [http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/Daily\\_Activities\\_4.23.04.htm](http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/Daily_Activities_4.23.04.htm).
15. See Adam Simon, *The Winning Message* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
16. David Mindich, *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
17. See Michael McDonald, "2000 Voting-Age and Voting-Eligible Population Estimates and Turnout," George Mason University. [http://elections.gmu.edu/Voter\\_Turnout\\_2000.htm](http://elections.gmu.edu/Voter_Turnout_2000.htm).
18. See <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/p20-542/tab01.pdf>.

# APPENDIX

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## ***American Media and the Quality of Voter Information***

Aspen Wye River Conference Center—Queenstown, Maryland

June 16–18, 2004

### **Conference Participants**

**The Honorable  
Jonathan Adelstein**

Commissioner  
Federal Communications  
Commission

**Mr. Sean Badding**

President and Senior Analyst  
The Carmel Group

**Dr. Michael Cornfield**

Consultant  
Pew Internet and American Life  
Project

**Mr. Colin Crowell**

Telecommunications Policy  
Analyst  
Office of Representative  
Edward J. Markey  
United States House of  
Representatives

**Mr. Robert M. Entman**

Professor  
Department of Communication  
North Carolina State University

**Mr. Tucker Eskew**

President  
Eskew Strategy Group, LLC

**Mr. Charles M. Firestone**

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Communications and Society  
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**Ms. Robin Gee**

Cable TV Manager  
City of Santa Monica

**Mr. Reed Hundt**

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Department of Political Science  
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**Ms. Kelly McFarland Stratman**

Senior Manager  
Membership and Field Support  
League of Women Voters

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

**Ms. Meredith McGehee**

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Alliance for Better Campaigns

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**Mr. Phil Noble**

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Politics Online, Inc.

**Mr. Thomas E. Patterson**

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**Ms. Deborah Potter**

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**Mr. Robert Stern**

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Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

# *Our Democracy, Our Airwaves Act*

## **Bill Summary**

*by Alliance for Better Campaigns*

The bill amends the Communications Act of 1934 to establish minimum air time requirements on television and radio stations for candidate-centered and issue-centered programming prior to primary and general elections; to establish a voucher system for the purchase of commercial broadcast air time for candidate advertisements, financed by an annual spectrum use fee on all broadcast license holders; to revise and expand the lowest unit cost provision applicable to political campaign advertisements; and to provide increased disclosure of the rates paid by candidates for advertising time.

### **Candidate and Issue-Centered Programming**

The bill ensures that, as a part of their public interest obligation, all radio and television broadcast stations must air at least a minimum of two hours per week of candidate-centered or issue-centered programming for a total of six weeks preceding a primary or general federal election, at least four of which must be immediately preceding the general election. Half these segments must air between 5 p.m. and 11:35 p.m., and no segment that airs between midnight to 6 a.m. counts toward meeting this requirement.

“Candidate-centered programming” refers to debates, interviews, candidates statements and other news or public affairs formats that provide for a discussion of issues by candidates; it does not include paid political advertisements. “Issue-centered programming” refers to debates, interviews and other formats that provide for a discussion of ballot measures on the ballot in the forthcoming election. It does not include paid political ads.

Within these guidelines, stations retain complete editorial control over the segments that make up the two hours per week of programming.

Stations decide, for example, the placement and duration of each segment, the number of segments, and the mix of local, state and federal races covered in the segments.

### **Political Advertisement Voucher Program**

The bill allows candidates to earn vouchers for the purchase of paid political advertising on broadcast stations by raising small dollar contributions. The total cost of the voucher program is set at \$750 million in the 2004 election year, and is indexed to rise with inflation in ensuing federal election years. The vouchers are financed by a spectrum use fee of not less than 0.5 percent and not more than one percent on the gross annual revenues of broadcast license holders.

#### *Eligibility for Vouchers*

- **Candidates:** Candidates for federal office—the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate and the Presidency—are eligible for an aggregate total of up to \$650 million in vouchers in each election.
- **Political Parties:** National committees of political parties—including the Democratic Party, the Republican Party and any other party that meets qualifying thresholds—are eligible for an aggregate total of up to \$100 million in vouchers in each two year federal election cycle.

#### *Qualifying Thresholds*

- **U.S. House:** In order to qualify for vouchers, a candidate for U.S. House of Representatives must raise at least \$25,000 in contributions from individuals, not counting any amount in excess of \$250 received from any individual. In addition, the candidate must agree not to spend more than \$125,000 in personal or immediate family funds on the House campaign; and the candidate must face at least one opponent who has raised or spent at least \$25,000 on the campaign.

- U.S. Senate: In order to qualify for vouchers, a candidate for U.S. Senate must raise at least \$25,000 in contributions from individuals, not counting any amount in excess of \$250 received by any individual, multiplied by the number of U.S. Representatives from the state in which the Senate candidate is seeking election. In addition, the candidate must agree not to spend more than \$500,000 in personal or immediate family funds on the campaign; and the candidate must face at least one opponent who has raised or spent at least \$25,000 on the campaign, multiplied by the number of U.S. Representatives from the state in which the Senate candidate is seeking election.
- Presidential candidates: Candidates qualify to receive broadcast vouchers in the same way they qualify to receive partial public financing for their primary election campaigns and full public financing for their general election campaigns.
- Political Parties: The two major national parties qualify by virtue of their designation as parties, as defined in the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971. Minor parties qualify for a proportionate share of party vouchers once they field candidates in at least 22 U.S. House races or five U.S. Senate races, and once these candidates have been certified as eligible to receive candidate vouchers. Once a “minor party” fields candidates in at least 218 House races or 17 U.S. Senate races and these candidates meet qualifications to receive vouchers, the party is entitled to receive a full major party share of vouchers in that election cycle.

#### *Amounts and Limits on Candidate Vouchers*

- U.S. House: Once they have qualified, U.S. House candidates receive \$3 in broadcast vouchers for every \$1 they receive in individual contributions during the election cycle, not counting any amount in excess of \$250 received from any individual. No House candidate can receive more than \$375,000 in vouchers in any election cycle. Candidates must use their

vouchers in the election cycle in which they are earned; the candidate vouchers expire on the day of the general election.

- U.S. Senate: Once they have qualified, U.S. Senate candidates receive \$3 in vouchers for every \$1 they receive in individual contributions during the election cycle, not counting any amount in excess of \$250 received from any individual. No Senate candidate can receive more than \$375,000 in vouchers in any election cycle, multiplied by the number of Representatives from the State in which the candidate is seeking election. Candidates must use their vouchers in the election cycle in which they are earned; the candidate vouchers expire the day of the election.
- Presidential candidates: Candidates for their party's presidential nomination receive \$1 in broadcast vouchers for every \$1 they receive in federal matching funds under the presidential public financing system. Candidates for presidency in the general election receive 50 cents in vouchers for every \$1 they receive in federal funds. The use of these vouchers does not count against the expenditure limits in the presidential public financing system. The presidential voucher system does not go into effect until the 2008 campaign.

### *Exchange of Vouchers*

Any candidate who receives a voucher but does not wish to use it to purchase a broadcast ad may transfer the right to use the voucher to his or her political party in exchange for money in an amount equal to the cash value of the voucher. The party may use these vouchers to broadcast its own ads, or to broadcast ads on behalf of any candidate for local, state or federal office.

### *Conditions on Party Use of Vouchers*

When a party uses its vouchers to run ads on behalf of a candidate, that use is considered a contribution to the candidate and must conform to all relevant campaign finance laws. Unlike candidate vouchers, party

vouchers do not expire on the day of a federal general election. A party voucher may be used for political ads until December 31st of the year following the year in which the voucher was issued to the party.

#### *Redemption of Vouchers*

Each voucher disbursed to candidates and parties shall have a value in dollars, redeemable upon presentation to the Federal Communications Commission. A radio or television broadcasting station shall accept vouchers in payment for the purchase of political ads. The station then submits the vouchers to the Commission, which shall redeem the vouchers for cash, using funds from a Political Advertising Voucher Account.

#### *Political Advertising Voucher Account Funded by a Spectrum Use Fee*

The Federal Communication Commission shall create a Political Advertising Voucher Account and fund it by assessing an annual spectrum use fee on commercial television and radio broadcasting stations, based on a percentage of their gross revenues, in an amount necessary to carry out the provisions of this bill. The fee is set at a rate not less than 0.5 percent and not more than one percent of a broadcasting station's gross annual revenues. Revenues collected in this manner may also be used to pay for the administrative costs incurred by both the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Election Commission as they implement this legislation.

#### *Administration of Program*

The Federal Communications Commission shall prescribe regulations necessary to carry out the provisions of this legislation, including the lowest unit charge provision, the minimum air time requirement, the political advertising voucher account and the spectrum use fee. The FCC shall consult with the Federal Election Commission in prescribing regulations that relate to the eligibility of candidates and parties for broadcast vouchers.

### **Advertising Rates for Political Candidates and Parties**

The bill amends the current Lowest Unit Charge provision of Section 315(b) of the Communications Act (which requires stations to provide

candidates, and national political parties which advertise on behalf of a candidate, with the "lowest unit charge" in the period 45 days before a primary election and 60 days before a general election) by prohibiting stations from preempting the advertisements purchased at the lowest unit charge by candidates, or parties on behalf of a candidate, except in circumstances beyond a station's control.

The Federal Communications Commission is directed to establish a standardized form for station use in reporting the rates for advertising purchased by candidates. Broadcast stations that maintain Internet websites are required to make the reports available online.



## About the Authors

**Robert M. Entman**, Professor of Communication and Political Science at North Carolina State University, received a Ph.D. in political science from Yale University and an M.P.P. in policy analysis from the University of California at Berkeley. His research and teaching interests focus on political communication and communication policy.

Among Professor Entman's books are *Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1989); *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2001; edited with W.L. Bennett); and *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2000; with A. Rojecki). *Black Image* won the Mott/KTA prize for best book from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication; the Lane Award for best book in political psychology from the American Political Science Association; and the Goldsmith Book Prize from Harvard University. His most recent book, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2004. He is working on a new book, *Media Bias and Scandals*.

A former National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow and National Institute of Mental Health Post-Doctoral Fellow, Dr. Entman was the Lombard Visiting Professor at Harvard during the fall 1997 semester, and he taught previously at Duke and Northwestern. With Lance Bennett, he edits the book series *Communication, Society and Politics* for Cambridge University Press.

**Charles M. Firestone** is Executive Director of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program. For three years he also was the Institute's executive vice president for policy programs and international activities. Prior to his arrival at the Aspen Institute, Mr. Firestone was director of the Communications Law Program at the University of California at Los Angeles and an adjunct professor of law at the UCLA Law School. His career has included positions as an attorney at the Federal Communications Commission; director of litigation for a Washington, D.C., public interest law firm; and a communications and entertainment attorney in Los Angeles. He has argued several landmark

communications law cases before the U.S. Supreme Court and other federal appellate courts. Mr. Firestone holds degrees from Amherst College and Duke University Law School and is the editor or co-author of seven books, including *Digital Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (The Aspen Institute, 1998) and *Television and Elections* (The Aspen Institute, 1992). He also has written numerous articles on communications law and policy.

**Tracy Westen** is Founder, Vice-Chair, and Chief Executive Officer of the Los Angeles–based Center for Governmental Studies ([www.cgs.org](http://www.cgs.org)). He also is Adjunct Professor of Communications Law and Policy at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication, and Chair of the Municipal Access Policy Board for Channel 35, City of Los Angeles.

Westen has authored or coauthored dozens of publications on voter information, media coverage of government, campaign finance, ballot initiatives, judicial elections, state budgeting, higher education, and health care. He helped create CGS Video Voter ([www.VideoVoter.org](http://www.VideoVoter.org)), Digital Democracy, PolicyArchive.Net, Democracy Network ([www.dnet.org](http://www.dnet.org)) (an online voter information system), the California Channel (video coverage of state legislature), ConnectLA ([www.ConnectLA.org](http://www.ConnectLA.org)) (a Website for low-income users), the National Resource Center on Campaign Finance Reform, the California Citizens Budget Commission, the California Citizens Commission on Higher Education, and the California Commission on Campaign Financing.

Westen is a graduate of the University of California Law School (J.D.), Oxford University (M.A.), and Pomona College (B.A.). He has received national “public interest” awards from Common Cause (for campaign finance reform) and the National League of Women Voters (for online voter information systems).

# The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

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The Communications and Society Program is a global forum for leveraging the power of leaders and experts from business, government, and the nonprofit sector in the communications and information fields for the benefit of society. Its roundtable forums and other projects aim to improve democratic societies and diverse organizations through innovative, multidisciplinary, values-based policymaking. They promote constructive inquiry and dialogue and the development and dissemination of new models and options for informed and wise policy decisions.

In particular, the Program provides an active venue for global leaders and experts from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds to exchange and gain new knowledge and insights on the societal impact of advances in digital technology and network communications. The Program also creates a multidisciplinary space in the communications policymaking world where veteran and emerging decision makers can explore new concepts, find personal growth and insight, and develop new networks for the betterment of the policymaking process and society.

The Program's projects fall into one or more of three categories: communications and media policy, communications technology and the democratic process, and information technology and social change. Ongoing activities of the Communications and Society Program include annual roundtables on journalism and society, international journalism, telecommunications policy, Internet policy, information technology, and diversity and the media. The Program also convenes the Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society, in which chief executive-level leaders in the business, government, and the nonprofit sector examine issues relating to the changing media and technology environment.

Conference reports and other materials are distributed to key policymakers and opinion leaders within the United States and around the world. They also are available to the public at large through the World Wide Web.



## Selected Publications from the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

*Media Convergence, Diversity, and Democracy* (2003)

Neil Shister, rapporteur. In the summer of 2002, chief executive–level leaders from the public and private sectors met at the Aspen Institute to address the underlying the role of the media in a democratic society and policies that may improve the ability of citizens to exercise their roles as informed sovereigns in that society. This publication, authored by journalist Neil Shister, examines the concern of many participants about the shrinking electorate in U.S. elections and the role the mass media may play in that trend, the debate over whether consolidation in old and new media raises “democratic” as opposed to antitrust concerns, and opportunities for new media to enable citizens to communicate—both in terms of gaining new information and exchanging their own opinions with others. Shister also addresses the concern that new media will become bottlenecked rather than continue the open architecture of the Internet, as well as the apparent choices available to government at this time. 56 pages, ISBN: 0-89843-374-6.

*In Search of the Public Interest in the New Media Environment* (2002)

David Bollier, rapporteur. The Forum on Communications and Society (FOCAS) comprises chief executive–level leaders of business, government, and the nonprofit sectors. Each year FOCAS looks at a different aspect of how business, government, and the nonprofit sector can act together to improve the human condition, particularly through the tools of the communications and information sectors. In 2001 the FOCAS session addressed how we might fund “public interest” content when all media are moving toward digital transmission. It centered on a proposal by Lawrence Grossman and Newton Minow called “A Digital Gift to the Nation,” which would apply proceeds of U.S. spectrum auctions to fund cultural and educational content and transmission. The Forum had to define public interest in the new digital context, and this discussion yielded a report that not only critiqued the Grossman/Minow proposal but also suggested innovative alternatives. The publication also includes after-

thoughts from an international perspective by British historian Asa Briggs. 66 pages, ISBN: 0-89843-333-9.

*Campaigns in Cyberspace: Toward A New Regulatory Approach* (2000)

Anthony Corrado, rapporteur. This report provides an overview of online campaigning and the current regulatory environment and sets forth participant-developed proposals to address several of the most troublesome issues. 44 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-290-1.

*Digital Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (1998)

Charles M. Firestone and Amy Korzick Garmer, editors. This report is the result of a series of meetings convened by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and supported by The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation to explore options for broadcast regulation in the digital era. It offers crucial context for these issues and aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the legal, constitutional, economic, political, and other issues surrounding the debate. 369 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-252-9.

*Elections in Cyberspace: Toward a New Era in American Politics* (1996)

Anthony Corrado and Charles M. Firestone, editors. The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and the American Bar Association Standing Committee on Election Law, with the support of The John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, gathered key academics and experts on civic participation, media, and election law to discuss the implications of new technologies on political communication and elections. This report of the 1995 conference lays out the key issues involved in conducting political campaigns and elections in a digital environment, including the promises and dilemmas of the electronic republic. 103 pages, ISBN: 0-89843-202-2.

*Television and Elections* (1992)

Ellen Mickiewicz and Charles M. Firestone, rapporteurs. In 1991, as part of an initiative by former President Jimmy Carter and Mikhail Gorbachev called the Commission on Television Policy, the Aspen Institute convened a multilateral group of U.S. and former Soviet scholars, journalists, and former public officials to discuss principles of television and electoral coverage. The report is a joint effort of The Carter

Center at Emory University and the Aspen Institute. It explores the key elements of television's coverage of elections, such as news coverage, the issue of free time, paid political advertising, candidate debates, and regulation. The report includes various examples of solutions from around the world and provides specific recommendations of the Commission as well. This report has been used as a guide by several emerging democracies in Eastern Europe. *Television and Elections* has been translated into 14 languages. 122 pages, ISBN: 089843-124-7.

