

# Show Me the Convention

By Michael J. Copps

WASHINGTON

**A**s a Democratic commissioner on the Federal Communications Commission, I may not agree with many positions taken by speakers this week at the Republican National Convention. Even so, I believe our broadcast media owe us more coverage of an event that remains an important component of the presiden-

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tial campaign. Yet tonight, if people around the country tune in to the commercial broadcast TV networks, most will not see any live convention coverage. That's not right.

Let's remember that American citizens own the public airwaves, not TV executives. We give broadcasters the right to use these airwaves for free in exchange for their agreement to broadcast in the public interest. They earn huge profits using this public resource. During this campaign season broadcasters will receive nearly \$1.5 billion from political advertising.

What do we get in return for granting TV stations free use of our airwaves? Unfortunately, when it comes to coverage of issues impor-

## Broadcasters get the airwaves, but what do we get in return?

tant to our nation, the answer is less and less. Coverage of the 2000 presidential election on the network evening news dropped by a third compared to reporting on the 1996 election. During the last election cycle we heard directly from presidential candidates for an average of 9 seconds a night on the news. Local races? Forget it. In 2002 — the most

recent midterm elections — more than half of local newscasts contained no campaign coverage at all. Local coverage has diminished to the point that campaign ads outnumber campaign stories by four to one. What coverage there is focuses inordinately on polls and handicapping the horse race.

TV executives tell us that the convention and campaign coverage provided by the cable channels is sufficient. I don't think so. Around 35 million Americans don't get cable, often because they cannot afford it. To put it in perspective, that's more than the combined populations of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Furthermore, broadcasters legally undertake to serve the public interest themselves in exchange for free spectrum — their licenses don't allow them to pass the buck to cable. Remember also that the vast majority of cable channels are national, not local. So don't look for local campaign coverage on cable, except in the few towns where local cable news exists. Most Americans still must look to their local broadcaster for news of local campaigns and issues.

The F.C.C. is doing nothing to help as the situation deteriorates. It has weakened almost every explicit duty stations once had for serving the public interest, like ensuring that stations cover local issues and offer viewers a diversity of opinion. Just as bad, the commission eliminated protections against media consolidation last year, even though critics warned that this would result in even less local coverage. Luckily, a federal court rejected this decision, so we have another chance to save these rules.

The F.C.C. has also failed to set guidelines for how broadcasters will meet their public interest responsibilities when digital TV and multicasting become more widespread. To make matters worse, the F.C.C. now practically rubber-stamps TV license renewals, usually without auditing station records to determine whether licensees are fulfilling their public interest responsibilities or checking with communities to ensure that stations are meeting local needs.

Whether we are Democrats, Republicans or independents, we all can agree that democracy depends on well-informed citizens. So as you flip through the channels tonight while the convention is largely ignored, consider whether TV broadcasters, sustained by free access to the public airwaves in exchange for programming in the public interest, are holding up their end of the deal. □