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POLITICAL ADS DOMINATE LOCAL TV NEWS COVERAGE

Stations Air Over Four Times as Many Political Ads as Campaign Stories; Devote Almost Twice As Much Time to Advertising as to News

*News stories as much about campaign strategies and horserace as about issues and candidates;
U.S. House races receive little attention even in closing weeks of the campaign*

Voters tuning into the most popular local television news broadcasts for the latest campaign information were over four times more likely to see political advertisements as they were to see non-partisan news stories about the elections, according to a new report released today.

Nationally, of the 4,850 half-hour local news broadcasts analyzed in the study of local news in the country's 50 largest media markets, just over one in three (37%) carried any campaign coverage. In contrast, almost three out of four (72%) of these same broadcasts aired at least one paid political ad and over half (52%) aired at least two ads.

On average, four campaign ads were aired for every one election-related story during local news broadcasts. During the average broadcast, voters saw just 39 seconds of total news coverage about political campaigns, but over a minute of political ads.

"Voters watching local news broadcasts are virtually guaranteed to see paid political advertising every night," said Kenneth Goldstein, associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and director of the Wisconsin Advertising Project.

The report, released by the Lear Center Local News Archive—a collaboration between the USC Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center and the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison—results from an analysis of the highest-rated early- and late-evening half-hours of regular news programming on 122 randomly selected stations in the top 50 media markets. These data are from September 18th through October 24th, 2002, and are part of an ongoing project that represents the largest and most systematic study ever conducted of local news, the main source of information for a large majority of Americans. The comparative political advertising data come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Both projects are funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

“Many station managers feel that putting political news on their airwaves would be ratings poison for their news broadcasts,” said Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and director of the Norman Lear Center. “It looks like that fear doesn't apply to airing paid political ads during those same shows.”

House Races Largely Ignored By News But Advertise Heavily During Broadcasts

Overall, while gubernatorial campaigns comprised nearly half (46%) of election stories analyzed, fewer than one in five (16%) focused on U.S. Senate contests, and fewer than one in ten (7%) of the stories focused on campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives. The remaining stories were on other state and local election contests and ballot initiatives.

In contrast, 28% of the campaign ads that ran during local news broadcasts featured U.S. House races, 34% were on gubernatorial contests, and 25% focused on U.S. Senate races.

Local News Focuses on Strategy and Horseraces as Much as on Candidates and Issues

Campaign stories on local TV news around the country were as likely to be about campaign strategy and the horserace (who is winning and losing) as they were to be about candidate characteristics and the issues. Strategy was featured in nearly four out of ten (39%) of all stories, while the horserace was the focus of around 12%. This is compared to the more than one in three (37%) stories centered on issues, and eight percent of stories on candidates' personal characteristics. Despite the plethora of political ads shown during the broadcasts analyzed, less than 5% of the stories critiqued these ads.

Early News Devotes More Time to Campaign Stories; Four in Ten Stories Feature Candidate Directly

Of those local news broadcasts in the sample, the average election story length was 87.5 seconds on the top-rated early evening news, and 63.7 seconds on the top-rated late-evening news, for an overall average of 75.6 seconds.

Of the 2,487 political stories captured by the sample, 40% included sound bites from candidates. The average length of a sound bite was 11.2 seconds for early and late-news combined.

To conduct the study, field staff in 54 markets (about 65% of the country) capture local news broadcasts on Philips DVD recorders. DVDs are sent every two days to the University of Wisconsin, where project staff log and encode close to 150 hours a day of high-resolution digital video. Using specialized Virage® video editing software, codes are appended directly onto the video, enabling substantive searches through thousands of hours of video. The software also captures scripts of the broadcasts and makes the video searchable by face, voice, and keyword. Coders go through every news broadcast and make video clips of all campaign-related stories, which are then coded for over 50

attributes, including length of story, candidates covered, focus of story, issues discussed, and journalistic practices.

The Lear Center Local News Archive, a unique new resource, will make all these campaign stories available and searchable on the Web by scholars and other registered users. More information about the Archive, whose resources will include thousands of hours of local news broadcasts, will be announced shortly.

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. Based at the USC Annenberg School (www.annenberg.usc.edu), one of the nation's leading institutions offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in communication and journalism, the Lear Center bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. The impact of entertainment on news is a principal focus of the Lear Center. For more information about the Lear Center, visit www.entertainment.usc.edu.

The Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin has consistently been ranked in the top ten political science departments in the country (www.polisci.wisc.edu). It is currently home to another major project on political communication in America, the Wisconsin Advertising Project (www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising). This project gathers and analyzes political advertising from the country's top 100 markets and has become the major source of information for journalists, policy makers, and scholars on the volume and tone of political advertising.

The Pew Charitable Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy and religion. Based in Philadelphia, the Trusts make strategic investments that encourage and support citizen participation in addressing critical issues and affecting social change. The opinions expressed in this research are those of the investigators and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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