



media  
reform

# ACTION GUIDE

tools, tips and techniques for promoting change

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# media reform **action guide**

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⊙ **Easy Targets.** These actions are great ways for someone new to media reform to get involved and make a difference.

## Introduction

For far too long, our media has been shaped by policies made behind our backs and without our interests in mind. Information about our media system isn't in the press, and policymakers make crucial decisions about media behind closed doors.

This media system provides extraordinary profits and power to huge media corporations — and lets them shirk their responsibility to provide us with the quality journalism, diverse viewpoints, educational programs and public forums that democracy requires. They'd like to keep it that way.

But Americans increasingly understand how corrupt our media system is, and together we are starting to change it. Concerned people around the country are building an extraordinary movement to speak out and stand up for media reform.

This Action Guide was created to support the efforts of media reformers like you. Every action in this guide will help get your voice heard by the people who make the rules. And each action you take connects you to a growing rank of people who have the clout to transform the current media landscape.

There is much great work being done on many fronts — but still so much more to do. Armed with the will to speak up, we *can* build a better media system.





# RAISE AWARENESS

Because we cannot rely on the media to educate us about their own failings — much less correct them — this task falls upon us, the citizenry, using every available channel of communication. One of the most important things you can do is to share your awareness of media reform with others.

## Send a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the Editor are among the most widely read sections of the paper; in fact, many members of Congress scan these letters to gauge their constituents' interests and opinions.

Here's how you can increase the likelihood that your letter will be printed:

***Check the specifications.*** Length and format requirements vary from paper to paper. Specifications are often printed on the editorial page, or you can call the paper to ask. Read the letters to the editor that get published in your paper to get ideas on successful style, format, etc.

***Make it timely.*** For example, refer to a recent story where media ignored or mishandled a critical issue, or to a timely media policy issue. You could also respond directly to a story recently printed in the paper to which you're writing.

***Make it local.*** Whatever you're writing about, relate it to local issues and illustrate how it will affect your community. For instance, you could refer to your local legislator's position on an issue or refer to a local media outlet.

***Know your subject.*** Reference facts — don't make false or misleading statements.

***Keep the tone reasonable.*** Use humor, irony, or even a hint of anger, but don't be nasty or offensive.

***Keep it brief.*** Try to make just one point in your letter, and state the point clearly in your topic paragraph, followed by one or two paragraphs and then a conclusion. 200 words is a typical limit. Letters that are too long will either be edited down or not printed at all.

***Make it easy for the paper.*** Include your full name, address, and daytime phone number. Without this info, your letter may not be printed. Find out how to send your letter— mail, fax, or e-mail.

**See page 54 for a sample letter to the editor you can tailor and submit to your local paper.**

## Publish an Op-Ed, Guest Column, or Newsletter Article

Seek out venues to publish an opinion or commentary article that advocates for media reform. Many mainstream newspapers publish submitted articles in a 'guest column' or accept op-ed submissions. (An Op-Ed is a brief essay that expresses a personal viewpoint, usually located on the page *opposite* the *editorial* page). Alternative newspapers, magazines, and news web sites often accept and publish submissions as well. Or submit to an organization's newsletter: they might welcome an article that makes the connection between their primary issue and media reform.

Some tips on writing and publishing an Op-Ed :

**Advocate.** An op-ed is an opportunity to strongly state your position on an issue; do so emphatically but thoughtfully. Be timely and controversial, but not outrageous. You are trying to convince a middle-of-the-road audience to adopt your position.

**Inform.** Base your arguments on factual or first-hand information. Provide insight and understanding without preaching.

**Write with verve.** Use humor or emotion where appropriate. Employ an engaging anecdote or personal account. Choose clear, direct, powerful language. An engaging and well-written op-ed is much more likely to be published than a dry critique.

**Use your professional affiliation** or other title that suggests authority or shows your stake in the issue. If you work for an organization, get permission to sign your Op-Ed as a representative of that organization.

**Write your own punchy title.** Otherwise the editor may choose one that may not accurately sum up your argument.

### CATCHY TAGLINES

"Media IS the issue"

"It's the media, stupid"

"Media reform: democracy demands it"

"Don't trust the corporate media"

"Rich media, poor democracy"

"Commercial media is toxic to your health"

"Our democracy, our airwaves"

"What the FCC is going on?"

**Submit it** after contacting the paper about their specifications. Length requirements are usually around 600-800 words. You can submit an Op-Ed to several different newspapers — even large national papers — but not to papers in the same market (for instance, submit it to either the *Boston Globe* or *Boston Herald*, but not both). Include a brief cover letter to the editor outlining your piece. Include your contact information and a brief bio.

For a guest column, article, or newsletter commentary, you can use the same general writing tips above, but check the other pieces in that publication to get a sense of the typical style, tone, length, and format of pieces they publish. Contact the publication's staff for information about how to submit a piece of writing.

**See page 55 for a sample op-ed you can tailor and submit to your local paper or page 57 for a sample organizational newsletter article.**

## RESOURCE

- To find contact information for newspapers and other media, use the online database at [www.congress.org/congressorg/dbq/media](http://www.congress.org/congressorg/dbq/media). Simply type in a zip code to get information for media outlets in a particular area.

## Sticker the Message Around Town

Free Press’ static-cling Warning Stickers (see below) are a great way to take media reform to the street (or the mall, or the airport...). They’re thought-provoking, attention-grabbing, and totally legal — they don’t use glue or adhesives so they won’t destroy property.

Places to sticker:

- Newspaper boxes
- TV’s at your local “big box” store (Best Buy, Circuit City, Wal-Mart, etc.)
- Outdoor advertisements for media (at bus stops, on subways & buses, etc.)
- TV’s in public areas such as bus stations, laundromats, or doctors’ offices.

To order stickers, see [www.freepress.net/tools](http://www.freepress.net/tools) or call us at 866-666-1533.

### BE BOLD!

A media reformer stickering TVs at a Best Buy store was caught in the act by a clerk — but when she explained the need for media reform to the worker, he allowed the stickers to stay!

# WARNING

This device may dispense corporate media that lacks the diversity, skepticism and alternative points of view required by democracy.

[www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net)

## Host a Media Reform House Party

House parties are a great way to bring up media reform with your friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other community members. Use a video or speaker presentation as the main activity of your party. Free Press' DVD, *Mobilizing Media Reform*, is a 14 minute video created for just this purpose. (Order a copy at [www.freepress.net/tools](http://www.freepress.net/tools) or by calling 866-666-1533).

**Invite people.** Either invite just people you know or open the event to the public. If it's an open event, publicize it in your local paper, post fliers around town, and/or advertise the event with local organizations. Include a phone number for questions. Request an RSVP if space is a concern.



House parties don't have to take place at your house — you can organize a presentation at a library, coffee house, community center, or local church.

**Provide informational handouts.** Download Free Press resources at [www.freepress.net/tools](http://www.freepress.net/tools) or order by calling 1-866-666-1533. News articles are also useful.

**Provide snacks** or ask guests to bring some.

**Play host.** Once most people have arrived, ask everybody to introduce themselves to the group. Pass around a sign-up sheet to collect contact info.

**Get people talking.** After the video or presentation, facilitate a discussion about the issues addressed. The *Mobilizing Media Reform* DVD insert provides suggested questions for discussion.

**Identify next steps.** Encourage participants to visit the Free Press website ([www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net)) and sign up to receive our e-activist alerts via email. Better yet, collect email addresses and ZIP codes from participants and sign them up yourself. Identify a follow up "action" you'd be willing to organize, like a letter writing campaign (see page 18) or assembling a group to meet with your Representative in Congress (see page 20).

**Most importantly, have fun!** People should come away feeling energized, with the knowledge that they *can* change the media!

## Give a Presentation about Media Reform

Whether it's a church group or a PTA, many groups — particularly those in which you already participate — might be interested in learning about media reform.

*Contact the group's leadership* to see if they'd allow you to give a brief presentation about media reform during an upcoming meeting.

*State the connection* between the group's main focus and media reform. Our failing media system impacts nearly every issue.

*Set a date and publicize* the presentation to group members through an email, announcement at a meeting, or newsletter blurb.

*Prepare your presentation.* Use the prepared speech or talking points provided on pages 59-63 of this guide. (Feel free to change the words so that you're comfortable speaking them.) Practice delivering your talk out loud before you give it. Also remember to bring some informational handouts for your audience. Free Press has resources you can download at [www.freepress.net/tools](http://www.freepress.net/tools).

*Always have a "take-away" action* that the group can do. Suggest that participants write letters to their members of Congress or another action that will seed their interest and motivate further involvement. This will provide you with a reason to follow up with them and a way to maintain a relationship. You can also encourage participants to sign up to be e-activists through Free Press' web site.

Some examples of groups to reach out to:

- Religious groups
- PTA groups
- Local political parties/organizations

### NOT A SPEAKER?

If you don't feel confident giving a presentation yourself, there are probably some people in your community who might be able and willing to speak to your group:

- Professors from a nearby university's Communications, Journalism or Political Science department
- Representatives of local independent media (community radio stations, indymedia centers, independent newspapers, etc.)
- Local politicians who have been outspoken on issues of media reform
- Representatives of local media reform groups

- Book clubs
- Student groups
- Labor unions
- Neighborhood associations
- Senior citizen groups

See page 59 for a prepared speech or page 62 for sample talking points to guide your presentation.

## **Other Easy Ways to Raise Awareness**

- E-mail articles, web site links, and e-petitions about media issues to your friends.
- Suggest that your book club read a book on media reform, such as Robert McChesney's *The Problem of the Media*.
- Post fliers and brochures around town.
- Give books, magazine subscriptions, and videos about media reform as gifts.
- Call in to radio talk shows and discuss media issues.



# ADVOCATE FOR POLICY CHANGE

Media corporations spend billions on lawyers, lobbyists, and campaign contributions — all in the name of pressuring Congress, the courts, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to craft policies that benefit their bottom line. We need to fight back by pressuring policymakers to make rules that support the public interest, not the bank accounts of Big Media moguls. Our pressure works. In 2003, Congress voted four times to roll back the FCC rules that let Big Media get bigger — because millions of Americans spoke up.

# WHO'S IN CHARGE

	CONGRESS	FCC
<b>Content on radio and TV</b>	Can pass laws requiring broadcasters to air certain kinds of public interest programming, such as educational programs or election coverage.	Can fine TV and radio stations or revoke licenses if they don't follow Congress' rules—e.g. if they air obscene content or too little public interest programming.
<b>Content in newspapers, movies, books, etc.</b>	Minimal authority to regulate due to First Amendment protections.	No authority—FCC only governs broadcast media and telecommunications.
<b>Ownership of media</b>	Can overrule the FCC and make laws limiting consolidation of media ownership.	Can make or change rules that govern how much of the broadcast media a single company can own.
<b>Public broadcasting</b>	Can increase or decrease funding for public broadcasting. Can enact laws changing the way public broadcasting operates.	Can grant, renew, or revoke public radio and TV stations' licenses. Can fine noncommercial stations for violating rules about advertising and content.
<b>Independent media</b>	Can pass laws that allow more independent radio and TV stations to get on the air. Can allocate funds to subsidize independent media.	Can issue recommendations to allow increased use of the public airwaves for noncommercial use.
<b>Advertising</b>	Can pass laws limiting advertising on TV and radio. Can pass laws relating to political campaign ads.	Can punish stations if they air too many ads during childrens' programming or fail to offer political candidates "equal opportunities" to air ads.
<b>Internet access</b>	Can pass laws that foster improvements in Internet providers' service to communities or laws that require internet providers to let users visit any site they want to.	Recommends rules for regulating Internet provider systems (e.g., DSL, dial-up, cable modem). Can pass regulations that allow space on the airwaves for new technologies to provide affordable internet access.

## A few examples of media policy jurisdiction

### STATE/LOCAL

Local cable authorities can negotiate to get public access channels that will let community members put their own programs on cable TV.

No authority.

Local authorities can decide which companies will be allowed to provide cable and telecom services to the community.

States can allocate funding for public broadcasting.

States can allocate funding to subsidize independent media.

Local authorities can limit billboards or advertising in schools.

Local authorities can require cable companies to provide free Internet access to schools and libraries. State and community governments can also create and sell their own Internet services to their communities instead of going through a commercial provider.

### OTHER

Media outlets themselves decide what specific content to broadcast.

Media outlets themselves decide what specific content to publish.

The Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department can stop a merger from taking place.

The President appoints board members for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). CPB allocates Congressional funds to public radio and TV stations and programming.

IRS can grant tax-exempt, nonprofit status to independent media organizations.

Federal Trade Commission regulates the truthfulness of advertising. Federal Election Commission regulates political advertising.

Citizen groups can take their own initiative and provide 'wireless' Internet access to communities via 'community wireless network' setups.

## How Media Policy is Made

Media policy can be pretty complicated. In order to know where to put pressure, it's important for activists to know how lawmakers address these issues and who's in charge. A few key points on U.S. media policy:

### *Role of the First Amendment*

The First Amendment protects free speech and freedom of the press. Hence, media outlets have the freedom to choose whatever kind of 'content' (programs, music, articles, topics addressed, people in the programs, etc.) they want to express, with some exceptions. Congress can make laws to cover all sectors of the media system, but the First Amendment often prohibits government from regulating content.

### *Public Property and Public Responsibility*

Some types of media are subject to stronger regulation than others because they use public property to distribute their messages. For instance, TV and radio use public airwaves to broadcast. Because they are the trustees of a public resource, they have a legal obligation to serve the public and Congress can dictate how they do so.

### *Different Medium, Different Rules*

Different types of media (e.g., newspapers, TV, movies, Internet) are each regulated differently. The more dependent a media sector is on public property, the more power Congress has to enact public interest provisions. So, Congress has virtually no power to regulate newspapers (because newspaper publishers can do whatever they want with the paper and ink they buy). Broadcast television and radio are the most rigorously regulated because they get to use public airwaves for free. The FCC was set up to regulate broadcast media, but there is no parallel agency to regulate certain other types of media.

## RESOURCE

- For more info on the FCC, check out the *Media Activists' Guide to the Federal Communications Commission*, prepared by the Prometheus Radio Project: [www.prometheusradio.org/media\\_activists\\_guide.shtml](http://www.prometheusradio.org/media_activists_guide.shtml).

## How to Affect Federal Media Policy

Federal policies have the power to transform our nation's media system. Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) are the federal governing bodies with the greatest jurisdiction over media issues.

### Call Your Members of Congress

If you've never contacted an elected official, you'll be surprised at how empowering it can feel — and it does make a difference. When a legislator receives numerous calls and/or letters on a certain issue, it does influence his/her vote.

**Relax.** Feeling nervous is normal. If it helps, write down what you want to say before you make the call, then simply read it to the Congressional staffer you'll speak with.

**Identify yourself.** Give your name and what city or town you live in, and say you are a constituent of the legislator you're calling.

**Be brief and polite.** State the media issue you're calling about and summarize your position clearly. Limit your call to one issue. Be direct but not argumentative.

**Be specific.** If you are calling about a specific piece of legislation, identify the name and number of the bill. For a comprehensive list of media-related legislation, go to [www.freepress.net/washington](http://www.freepress.net/washington). It's also OK to call without specific legislation in mind — instead you could ask about your officials' position on a particular issue.

**Ask for an action.** You may want to first ask if the legislator has a stated position on the issue. Then ask for a specific action on the part of your elected official: to vote for or against a particular bill, co-sponsor a bill, hold a hearing on an issue, or state a position on an issue. Mention that how they vote on media issues is a deciding factor in how you cast your vote.

### GET THE SKINNY ON YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

You can get the name and phone numbers of your members of Congress by calling the Capitol Switchboard in Washington: 1-800-839-5276.

You can also get information on the Free Press web site at [www.freepress.net/washington](http://www.freepress.net/washington) which includes:

- The names of the Senators and Representative in your district
- Their contact information
- Which committees they serve on
- Links to their official web site, further biographical info, and fundraising info
- Whether they have co-sponsored media-related bills
- How they have voted on media-related bills
- Detailed info about specific media-related bills

**Don't get discouraged.** If you get a busy signal or can't get through, don't give up. Also, note that you will not be speaking directly to the legislator him/herself, but to his or her staffer who will relay the message.

**Share feedback.** If you learn anything about your Congressperson's positions, or have info to share about successful tactics, send us an email at [action@freepress.net](mailto:action@freepress.net).

## Send Letters to Your Members of Congress

A letter to your elected representatives in Washington is a tried-and-true way to work for change.

**Use your own stationery.** Don't use your company's letterhead unless the letter represents your company's formal position.

**Address elected officials with their official titles.** For Senators and Representatives, address the letter to "The Honorable [full name]." The greeting of your letter should be "Dear Senator [last name]" for a Senator and "Dear Mr./Ms. [last name]" for a Representative.

**Be brief.** A concise, one-page letter is more likely to be read. Don't ramble.

## LETTERS ARE BETTER

Postal mail letters to your members of Congress are generally the most effective communication method because they're more likely to be read — and your letter will often receive a written response. This is not necessarily true for e-mail, faxes or phone calls.

Note: Postal mail gets caught up in security screening at federal buildings for weeks before it reaches its destination, so it's not the best choice if you're writing about a bill that's going to be voted on soon.

By writing a letter about local radio, cable rates, media diversity, or hyper-commercialism (just to name a few), you may start a process that compels your elected official to become aware of citizen concerns, get educated about the issues, and articulate a position about where they stand. If you're satisfied with their position, you can hold them accountable the next time they vote on the issue. If you're unsatisfied, you can write them again and ask them to reconsider. This is democratic dialogue, and it is essential that we engage in it as often as possible.

**Use your own thoughts and stories.** Although you can certainly use a form letter, it's better if you insert some of your own thoughts and words in the letter or write one from scratch. Reference a personal experience or talk about how the issue affects you or your community.

**Be clear on your position.** Write about only one issue. If you're writing regarding a specific bill, mention its number and name and the list of principal sponsors.

**Request a specific action.** Depending on the situation, ask your legislator to vote for/against a particular bill or amendment or to co-sponsor a bill. You can, however, ask him/her to simply state a position on an issue.

**Include a return address.** Be sure to include a complete return address in your letter so that your legislator can send you a response.

**Mail the letter.** On the Free Press web site ([www.freepress.net/washington](http://www.freepress.net/washington)) you can find addresses for both the Washington, DC, offices and primary home offices of your legislators. Send your letter to their Washington office, unless Congress is not in session — in that case, send it to their district office. Note that faxes tend to be ignored.

**Let us know what you hear!** If you receive a response, please share it with us via email at [action@freepress.net](mailto:action@freepress.net). Also send us a copy if you've written a letter you'd like to share with other activists to use as a template.

**See page 64 for a sample letter to your member of Congress that you can tailor and send.**

## Meet with Your Members of Congress

Most legislators are lobbied heavily by the media industry, so it's important that they hear the other side of the story. A face-to-face meeting with a group of constituents lets them know that voters care about the issue, and that if they want your vote, their stance on media issues is important.

*Plan carefully.* Assemble a small group of fellow constituents to organize the meeting with you, and agree on one particular issue to address, such as media ownership regulation, low-power FM radio, or public broadcasting.

### TIP

The Committees that have power over media-related business in the Senate and House of Representatives are the Senate Commerce Committee and the House Energy and Commerce Committee. If your Senator or Representative serves on one of these committees, this makes them even more powerful when it comes to crafting media-related legislation.

*Make an appointment.* Call the legislator's home district office (not the DC office) and ask for the name of the scheduler. Fax a written request for a meeting to the scheduler's attention. In your fax, be sure to include your name and contact information, state that you are a constituent, note the issue you'd like to discuss during the meeting, and suggest a range of times that you can meet. Follow up with a call to the scheduler within a few hours of sending the fax.

*Prepare.* Agree upon a few key talking points and write them down. Find out how your legislator has voted in the past on the issue you will be addressing, and plan to note this during the meeting. Also prepare and make copies of fact sheets that you will bring with you to the meeting.

*Expect a brief meeting.* Plan to have each participant in your group briefly make one important and unique point during the meeting. Leave time for the legislator or staffer to ask questions and respond to your request for action. Note that meetings with a legislator can be as short as 10-15 minutes, though meetings with legislative staff may be longer.

*Be pleasant, clear, and concise.* Tell the legislator how the issue affects you personally, and provide facts and examples to support your argument. Don't be argumentative; keep the tone positive.

*Ask for a specific action.* For example, "Will you co-sponsor Senate bill S 1046, *the Preservation of Localism, Program Diversity, and Competition in Television Broadcast Service Act of 2004?*"

Check [www.freepress.net/washington](http://www.freepress.net/washington) for current information on pending legislation or see *10 Questions to Ask Candidates and Elected Officials* (on page 65) for a general guide. It's OK if the legislator or staffer wants to get back to you later with an answer, but be sure to follow up.

**Leave written information.** Leave fact sheets and other materials that provide accurate, concise information supporting your argument.

**Follow up.** Send a thank you note, and watch for your legislator's action on the issue. If they have made a commitment to you, make note of whether they follow through.

**Let us know how it went.** We'd love to hear about your meeting and help share your success stories or tactics with others. Send us a quick report at [action@freepress.net](mailto:action@freepress.net).

**TIP**

Try to set up a meeting in your legislator's district office (rather than DC office) around holidays or during August. This is when legislators tend to be home in their districts, and their staff may have less pressing schedules. They'll be more likely to give you the time you deserve.

## Sign or Start Petitions

Legislators need your vote to stay in office — petitions are a way to show that many votes are at stake and that an issue has widespread support.

- The success of petitions hinges on *muscle* and *messenger* — the number of people signing, and the credibility of the group collecting signatures.
- Petitions are most effective when a group gathers the signatures and then delivers them in person as part of a visit to members of Congress. During the lobbying visit, the group presenting the petition will argue their position on the issue.
- Petitions are less effective when they are simply e-mailed or faxed en masse to a Congressional office.
- Petitions should include printed names, full mailing address (not P.O. Boxes), and signatures or the names may not be counted.

## Ask Candidates About Media Policy

Asking candidates for elected office about their positions on media policy brings these issues onto the political agenda. It's important to let candidates know that we vote based on their positions on media issues.

- Pick one of the *10 Questions to Ask Candidates and Elected Officials* (see page 65) to ask during the Q&A portion of a campaign event. Or take the opportunity to ask these questions through meetings with elected officials and their staff, or through a phone call or letter to the candidate.
- If you'd like to ask a question during the Q&A portion of a campaign event, get in line for the microphone early — even before the Q&A segment of the program begins.

## File Comments on FCC Rule Changes

Like other federal agencies, the FCC can't adopt new regulations without first notifying and seeking comment from the public.

Unfortunately, the way the FCC solicits public comments can be confusing and often deters public participation. But that makes it all the more important that we file our comments. Often the FCC claims that they made industry-friendly rules because industry lobbyists were the only ones who offered opinions. By filing a simple comment in important proceedings, we effectively break this cycle of insider policymaking. It is a critical task.

Anyone can file and it requires no professional expertise. Comments from citizens describing their concerns, their experiences, and their desires for a better media system are both welcomed and highly important.

*To find a list of FCC rulemakings open for comment*, see the FCC's Electronic Comment Filing System page online at <http://gullfoss2.fcc.gov/ecfs/Upload/>. This provides a list of some of the more consumer-oriented rulemakings, with short descriptions of each.

*To learn more about a specific rulemaking*, use the docket number to do a search on the FCC's web site for related information. You can also call the FCC at 1-888-CALL-FCC or e-mail them at [fccinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:fccinfo@fcc.gov) with questions.

*You can view comments submitted by others* on the FCC's web site at this address: [http://gullfoss2.fcc.gov/prod/ecfs/comsrch\\_v2.cgi](http://gullfoss2.fcc.gov/prod/ecfs/comsrch_v2.cgi). Looking at other comments will help you understand the arguments being put forth by the media industry as well as public interest groups and citizens.

### TIP

When the FCC wants to gather information and comment on a broad subject, they issue a Notice of Inquiry (NOI). If they want to change a rule, they release a document called a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM). These notices assign a docket number to the proposed rulemaking, explain what regulations are proposed, and set a deadline for public comment. The FCC accepts public comments by mail, e-mail, online, and through public hearings.

For a fact sheet on the FCC's decision making process, see <http://ftp.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/knownoi.html>.

## EXAMPLES OF CITIZEN COMMENTS FILED WITH THE FCC

*Comments to the FCC can range from a short sentence stating your opinion to an entire legal or technical briefing. Here are just a few examples of brief comments filed on various issues by regular citizens across the country.*

### **In FCC docket # 02-277 (Media Ownership Rules)**

“The FCC was created to protect the public’s interest for the public’s airwaves. The original rules that limited media ownership were promulgated to insure diversity of opinion. Allowing the public airwaves to be consolidated under a few large corporate umbrellas will inevitably consolidate opinion & points of view.

I do NOT and never will believe that fewer points of view will be good for a free press or a free people. I believe that by succumbing to the blandishments of large media corporations to change the rules of ownership, the FCC would be not only violating its charter to protect the public’s interest but will also harm the public good.”

-Andrea P., Rapid City, SD

### **In FCC docket #04-261 (Violent Television):**

“The level of violence continues to increase with no level of common sense to stop at. Since the industry doesn’t control itself the government must step in with fines or loss of broadcast rights. The time of day doesn’t mean a thing since children can stay up to watch at anytime, day or night.”

-John S., Cedar Rapids, IA

### **In FCC docket # 03-202 (Rural Wireless):**

“Use of available spectrum in rural areas is a great idea! Care should be taken to ensure that the ‘new’ spectrum does not simply end up under control of huge companies (wireless, broadcasters, telephone companies) who will use it simply to prevent the public from having an ‘alternative’. Licenses should be given to true local entities. . . . I think that you’ll see a lot of inventive uses and true public benefit if these ideas are followed. I have great hope for this initiative!”

-Joe T., San Diego, CA

### **In FCC docket # 02-153 (Spectrum):**

“The FCC is supposed to regulate the spectrum as a public trust and in the public interest. We no longer have much educational programming and we certainly do not have diversity of opinion and music due in large part to the re-regulation of the Reagan Era, the Communications Act of 1996, and ongoing efforts by the current administrators of the FCC to remove further regulations to favor corporate interests over independent and non-commercial stations.

I would like to have additional support for creating and fostering community and LPFM stations. Non-commercial broadcasting should be subsidized with commercial licensing fees rather than, for example, giving away the digital television spectrum to the same corporations who have largely failed to offer programming that is educational, that provides information that aids in enriching and uplifting our communities, our families and our rapidly deteriorating democracy. . . .”

-Frederic N., Syracuse NY

**File a comment** online at <http://gullfoss2.fcc.gov/ecfs/Upload/>, via email at [fccinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:fccinfo@fcc.gov), or via fax at 1-866-418-0232. Comments sent via postal mail should be addressed to the FCC bureau that is handling the rulemaking docket and sent to that bureau's attention at 445 12th St., SW; Washington, DC 20554. Remember to include the docket number and your contact information with any comment.

## THE EASY WAY TO FILE

The Free Press web site has an easy-to-use submission form designed to help people submit comments on certain important FCC proceedings. Check it out at [www.freepress.net/action/fcc\\_comment.php](http://www.freepress.net/action/fcc_comment.php).

## Attend a Public Hearing

Though rare, the FCC occasionally holds public hearings to gather public input on a proposed rulemaking. In 2003 and 2004, the FCC held several hearings around the country on 'localism' in broadcasting, soliciting testimony from the public about how well local TV and radio serve their communities' needs. Public comments at these hearings are generally entered into the public record and considered as the FCC reviews its rules. If an FCC hearing comes to your area, be sure to attend and deliver your own brief comments.

You can also invite FCC Commissioners or staff to come to your community for a hearing or conference you arrange. Email the FCC at [fccinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:fccinfo@fcc.gov), call 1-888-CALL-FCC, or contact Commissioners' offices directly (their information can be found at [www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)).

## COMPLAINING ABOUT YOUR LOCAL MEDIA

Complaints you have about the programming on your local stations should be registered with the station itself and may also be sent to the FCC in a process different from filing comments on rule changes. For more info, see page 36 in this guide.

## How to Affect Media Policy on the State and Local Level

Although decisions on media policy are made primarily at the national level, state and local authorities wield considerable

### ISSUES AT THE STATE LEVEL INCLUDE:

- Providing funding to public broadcasting stations.
- Earmarking funds for independent media, minority-owned media, educational opportunities for media literacy, etc.
- Building state broadband networks to provide Internet and other media access to underserved communities in rural areas or low-income areas.
- Guaranteeing the right of municipalities to offer broadband services.
- Some states handle cable TV franchise negotiations at the state level through Public Utility Commissions, while other states do this at the local level. (More info in the section 'Pressure Local Governments for Better Cable' on page 29).

power over policy on certain issues. This is particularly true as cable becomes the dominant provider of television and broadband Internet access, because cable is regulated at the local level.

### Contact State Legislators

The same techniques that are useful in pressuring Congress can also be applied to pressuring state legislators. See the information in the *Federal Media Policy* section of this guide for tips on calling, writing, and visiting legislators.

In working with state government, it's helpful to find out which committee in your state's legislature deals with media issues. Find out if your state Rep. and/or Senator serve on this committee. Even if they don't, you can still pressure your representatives to make decisions on media issues that benefit your community.

### Work with City Councils & Local Regulatory Boards

Your town, county, or city council and local regulatory boards are good places to address concerns about the media in your community. Some ideas:

*Go to city or town council/county board meetings.* Become a regular participant in your local government to find out what media-related issues the council (or county board) is dealing with, or to propose that the council pass ordinances on issues important to you.

*Join a local regulatory board.* Local regulatory boards have the power to pass regulations that can have a real impact on local media policies. For instance, you could join your local cable board to help fight for a better deal with your community's cable

## RESOLUTION OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

*Activists succeeded in getting the following resolution passed by the City of Philadelphia in March 2003. Similar resolutions were passed in several other cities as well.*

### RESOLUTION

Supporting diversity in media ownership by urging the Federal Communications Commission to protect and preserve its ban on cross-ownership of print and electronic media, and by urging the Congress to exercise its oversight in the area of federal communications policy by holding public hearings on media ownership issues, and by enacting legislation to prohibit further media consolidation.

Whereas, freedom of the press and public access to diverse media are prerequisites for a functioning democracy; and

Whereas, the broadcast airwaves are owned commonly by the public, and should be managed to serve the public interest; and

Whereas, the public interest is best served by the availability of a broadly diverse range of viewpoints; and

Whereas, media diversity is seriously threatened by further consolidation of media ownership in an already highly concentrated market; and

Whereas, deregulation of radio ownership rules under the Telecommunications Act caused unprecedented consolidation, dramatically decreasing competition; and

Whereas, the Federal Communications Commission is currently considering an unprecedented rollback of media ownership regulations, including but not limited to rules which forbid companies from owning newspapers and TV stations—or TV and radio stations — in the same media market, and rules barring firms from owning TV stations that reach more than 35 percent of the nation; and

Whereas, the elimination or weakening of these regulations would further reduce competition, local accountability, diversity of content and voices, and the amount and quality of news coverage in broadcast and print media across the country, while providing windfall profits for a small handful of corporate media owners; therefore,

Resolved by the Council of the City of Philadelphia, that it urges the Federal Communications Commission to protect and preserve its rules banning cross-ownership of electronic and print media, and regulations that limit the number of stations one owner may hold; Resolved further, that the Council urges the Congress to exercise its oversight powers relating to federal communications policy through public hearings on media ownership issues, and to enact legislation prohibiting further media consolidation; and,

Resolved further, that a true and correct copy of this resolution be presented to all members of Philadelphia's congressional delegation as the true and sincere sentiments of this legislative body.

## ISSUES ADDRESSED LOCALLY INCLUDE:

- Banning or reducing billboards and outdoor advertising within a community.
- Promoting city-wide Wi-Fi initiatives for Internet access.
- Negotiating cable franchise agreements (including cable rates, public access channels, production facilities for public access, etc.).
- Limiting advertising and commercialism in schools (including Channel One and agreements with vendors who want to advertise in schools).
- Bringing media literacy curricula into schools.

company. Or you could join your local school board to push for media literacy curricula in schools or work to ban advertising and commercialism from schools.

*Get your town, city or county to pass a resolution for media reform.* Via resolutions, local governments can register disapproval of federal regulations and laws. Such resolutions against the FCC's loosening of media ownership rules in June 2003 were successfully passed in several communities (see page 27 for an example). Resolutions can also indicate the town/city/county's support for an ideal like diverse media or for a particular policy.

You can also pass a resolution for media reform in your union or in other organizations you're already active in.

## Pressure Local Government for Better Cable

The cable TV service in your community is regulated by a city or county agency (often called a 'local franchising authority' or LFA) that negotiates a contract with the cable company. The LFA allows the cable company to use public land and utility poles to lay their cable lines, and the cable company pays 'franchise fees' and provides other services to the city in return.

During the contract negotiations between the LFA and the cable company (called 'cable franchise renewal' negotiations), it's possible for your LFA to negotiate for various provisions in the contract such as providing channels that regular citizens can use to air their own programs (community access channels), providing funds for studios, staff, and equipment to help citizens make their own media, and offering technology access to schools, libraries, and local agencies.

However, many local franchising authorities fail to get good provisions for community media in the contract, missing an important opportunity for better media in their communities. You can help change that by pressuring your local government to approve better contracts during cable franchise renewals.

***Find out who is in charge of regulating cable in your community.*** This information may be printed on your cable bill. You can also call your mayor or city councilors.

***Get a copy of the current cable franchise agreement.*** This may be available from the cable board, Town Hall, or the county board. Look through the agreement to see what kind of provisions your city receives from the cable company.

### WHAT YOU CAN GET FROM YOUR LOCAL CABLE FRANCHISE

- The cable company can be required to set aside a percentage of its channel capacity for community use. This channel capacity can be used to provide TV channels for public, educational, and government (PEG) programming and can also provide cable bandwidth for community agencies to send and receive data.
- If the cable company also offers Internet service, it can be required to provide free or reduced-price Internet service to public schools, libraries, computer centers, and other public facilities.
- The cable company can be required to pay 5% of its revenue to the local government for 'franchise fees.'
- Franchise fees can provide funding for a community TV studio that the public can use to produce their own TV programs, plus video and technical equipment and staff to run the studio and teach community members to make their programs.
- Franchise fees can fund programs that provide public access to computers and the Internet and offer technology skills training for low-income communities.

*Find out when the current franchise agreement expires.* This should be noted on your copy of the franchise agreement. Negotiations around the renewal of the cable franchise agreement can take anywhere from one to three years, so if the current agreement is set to expire within that time frame, you should plan to get engaged.

*Find out who else in your community is advocating for improved public interest provisions.* If there is a community access TV channel or government channel in your town, speak to their staff as they will most likely be involved. Other groups might include libraries, schools, community technology centers, and media activist groups.

If no one in your community is working on cable issues, think about sparking interest and *building a campaign yourself*. This might include:

- Building a coalition of organizations and interested community members to pressure local authorities to negotiate a better cable agreement.
- Researching the process of cable franchise renewal and the particular situation in your city.
- Determining your community's 'wish list' — what provisions you and your neighbors want your city to get from the cable company during franchise negotiations.
- Trying to get yourself appointed to the board or commission that governs cable issues.
- Pressuring the mayor, city council members, and local cable authorities to negotiate for the provisions your community wants.

*Let us know what you're up to.* If you have information that might be useful to others waging battles in their communities, please share it in an email to [action@freepress.net](mailto:action@freepress.net).

## RESOURCES

A few good sources for information and support around cable franchise renewal are the Alliance for Community Media ([www.alliancecm.org](http://www.alliancecm.org), 202-393-2650), the Young Americans and the Digital Future Campaign ([www.techpolicybank.org](http://www.techpolicybank.org), 202-429-0033), Reclaim the Media ([www.reclaimthemedias.org/comcast](http://www.reclaimthemedias.org/comcast), 206-709-0558) and the Our Cable website ([www.ourcable.org](http://www.ourcable.org)).



# CHALLENGE YOUR LOCAL MEDIA

If your media aren't living up to their duties, there are ways you can challenge them directly. Directly confronting your local media outlets can result in tangible changes in what you see or hear in your community's media.

## Tell Media Outlets When You Don't Like What You're Getting

### TIP

Written complaints are especially recommended for TV and radio stations, because stations are required to keep written complaints in a public file. Contents of the public file can be used to evaluate the station's performance when its license comes up for renewal by the FCC.

If you don't like what you're seeing on TV, hearing on the radio, or reading in your newspaper, make sure your media outlets hear about it! Free speech rights give media outlets authority to choose whatever kind of content they want, but that doesn't mean you can't object. Don't be shy about looking up a newspaper or station's address or phone number in the phone book and giving them some feedback.

## Launch a Targeted Campaign Against a Media Outlet

More effective than a single complaint, a coordinated campaign may succeed in pressuring media outlets to alter their news coverage, air a popular program, or make other changes. If you and others in your community share the same complaint about your media, join forces and ramp up the pressure.

*Determine the goal you're working toward and which media outlet to target.* You'll be more effective if you start with a precise goal (e.g., bringing back a radio call-in show at a particular station or increasing coverage of local elections on Channel 5 news) than if you aim for broad changes in the media landscape.

*Gather support from friends, colleagues, and allies in your community who share your concern.* Build a coalition of citizens, activists, and representatives of organizations who are interested in the issue. Convene an initial meeting to discuss the issue and plan your actions.

*Do some research to support your campaign.* Your research might involve doing community surveys or interviews, starting a project to monitor your local media for their coverage of certain issues, researching the corporations who own your local media, or inspecting a broadcast station's public files. See the *Research* section in this guide for more information (p. 39).

*Determine what actions will be most effective in reaching your goal.* Start with tactics that engage the media outlet in a dialogue,

but plan to turn up the heat if you don't get a response. Some tactics to consider might include:

- Coordinate a letter writing campaign.
- Invite the media outlet's management to meet with your group to discuss your concerns. Present your case and get agreement on ways the station or paper will work to solve the problem.
- Compile a report outlining your concern with data to support it. Send copies of the report to the media, policymakers, and other people who hold authority in your community.
- Get media coverage of your campaign. Work with members of your group to write letters to the editor of local papers, get Op-Eds placed, call in to talk radio shows, etc. (See the section on 'Raising Awareness' in this guide for more information, or check out great resources from the SPIN Project: [www.spinproject.org](http://www.spinproject.org).)
- Raise public awareness by distributing fliers through the mail, e-mail, or by handing out leaflets in places where people gather.
- Conduct a boycott against companies who advertise on the media program or outlet you are targeting.
- If all other methods fail, think about holding a demonstration in front of the media organization's headquarters. Publicize your demonstration well to get good turnout. Use posters, signs, and slogans to get your message across to people who see the demonstration and media who cover it.

*Share information and success stories.* Drop us an email at [action@freepress.net](mailto:action@freepress.net) if you have a story you think might be useful for other activists around the country.

## RESOURCES

Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) has a Media Activist Kit that provides information on detecting bias in the media and organizing campaigns for change. Check it out at [www.fair.org/activism/activismkit.html](http://www.fair.org/activism/activismkit.html).

The Youth Media Council conducted a successful youth-led campaign to hold a San Francisco radio station accountable to local youth organizers. Read a report of their campaign at [www.youthmediacouncil.org/publications.html](http://www.youthmediacouncil.org/publications.html).

## Report Violations of FCC Rules

Not many FCC regulations are specific enough to be enforced, but there are a few with which radio and TV stations must comply. If you know that a local station is violating the following rules, you can report them to the FCC.

The FCC will investigate, and if the station is found to be in violation, they may be fined or have their license revoked.

### WHAT'S "OBSCENE"?

Congress has set out the following guidelines for the FCC to use in determining whether to punish a broadcast TV or radio station for obscene content:

- "An average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;"
- "The material must depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable law;" and
- "The material, taken as a whole, must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

Obscene content can't be aired at any time on broadcast TV and radio. There are separate guidelines for indecent or profane material. For more information, see the FCC fact sheet on obscenity, indecency, and profanity at: [www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/obscene.html](http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/obscene.html)

### Some violations of FCC rules

Stations can't broadcast *obscene material* at any time of day, or indecent or profane content during certain times of the day (generally when children are likely to be watching).

Stations can't accept *payment in exchange* for airing a particular program or record unless they explicitly tell listeners/viewers who paid for the program to be aired.

Broadcasters must *keep a 'public file'* at the station containing documents that describe the station's service to the community. They must also allow members of the public to inspect the public files at any time during normal business hours. (See the *Research* section of this action guide for more information on the public file).

TV stations (not radio) must air at least three hours per week of regularly scheduled *children's educational programming* between 7AM and 10PM.

TV stations (not radio) can't air more than 12 minutes per hour of *commercials during children's programs* on a weekday or 10.5 minutes on a weekend.

## How to report

- To report violations of FCC rules, submit a complaint in writing to the FCC.
- Complaints should include the call letters and location of the station, a specific statement of the problem, and the name of anyone contacted at the station.
- If your complaint is about access to the public file (see below), also include the date, time, and address where you attempted to inspect the file, and the specific documents you were unable to view or obtain.
- If your complaint is about obscene programming, include a tape or transcript of the incident (or a very precise description).
- Mail your letter to:  
FCC — Enforcement Bureau  
Investigations & Hearings Division  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554
- You can also email it to: [complaints-enf@fcc.gov](mailto:complaints-enf@fcc.gov).

## CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

In exchange for their free use of the public airwaves, broadcast TV stations (but not cable networks) must air at least 3 hours per week of "Core Educational Programming" for children.

But because the TV stations themselves are allowed to define what is educational, stations often claim that shallow programs like "NFL Under the Helmet" and "Saved by the Bell" fulfill these requirements — squandering TV's capacity to serve as an educational tool for kids.

The requirements for "Core ed" programs include:

- The program must have education "as a significant purpose".
- The program must be aired between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m.
- Advertising during the program must be limited to 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes per hour on weekdays.
- The educational objective of the program and the target child audience must be specified in writing in the children's programming report ('FCC 398 report').

You can find out what your stations are showing to satisfy "core ed" requirements by looking at your local stations' "FCC 398" reports on the web. Simply go to <http://gulfoss2.fcc.gov/prod/kidvid/prod/query1.htm> and enter the 4-letter call sign for your TV station (e.g. 'WUSA' or 'KPIX').

## File Objections When TV and Radio Licenses Are Up for Renewal

TV and radio stations get broadcast licenses for free — on the condition that they serve ‘the public interest.’ Every eight years, broadcasters have to submit a renewal, during which time citizens can object by filing comments with the FCC. If you’re not happy with a local station’s public service, you have one chance every eight years to challenge their license.

Unfortunately, policy changes pushed for by broadcast industry lawyers and lobbyists have made it almost impossible to successfully challenge a station’s license, and stations now get their licenses renewed with very little scrutiny from the FCC.

### WHY BOTHER?

While it’s unlikely that a station’s license would get taken away, it’s still important to file comments so there is a record of public dissatisfaction with a station that is performing poorly. The more citizens participate in the license renewal process, the more likely it is that changes to the system will be implemented.

License renewals can also provide a good organizing opportunity for media activists. You can use the license renewal as a chance to analyze your broadcasters’ service and educate your community about broadcasters’ public interest duties.

- Find out when your TV and radio stations’ licenses are up for renewal. License renewal dates are the same for all stations in a particular state. See the chart on page 38 to find out when radio and TV station licenses expire in your state.
- Choose either a formal ‘petition to deny’ a license application, or an informal objection. Formal petitions to deny carry certain legal requirements and are best undertaken with the assistance of a lawyer. An informal objection is a better choice for most people.
- Plan to submit your comments two to four months before the license expires.

Officially, you can file informal objections anytime after the station submits its renewal application and before the FCC grants the renewal. You can find out about the status of your station’s application through the FCC’s Consolidated Database System (CDBS), available at: [http://gullfoss2.fcc.gov/prod/cdbs/pubacc/prod/cdbs\\_pa.htm](http://gullfoss2.fcc.gov/prod/cdbs/pubacc/prod/cdbs_pa.htm)

- State your objection in a letter to the FCC. On the first page of the letter, include the station’s call sign, city, and state, the station’s facility number, and the station’s license renewal application file number. You can find this info in the FCC’s Consolidated Database System, mentioned above.

- In the body of your letter, provide specific information about the station’s performance and why it should have its license revoked. Point out specific issues of community concern that were not covered, other inadequacies in the station’s programming, or any actions by the station that are not in the best interests of your community. Remember that the FCC doesn’t monitor stations’ programming, so any specifics you can provide will be useful. Some research into your station’s ‘public file’ (see page 41) is highly recommended to help uncover specific information to support your objection. Also note the violations of FCC rules on page 34.

For radio stations, address your letter to:

Audio Division, License Renewal Processing Team  
Mailstop 1800B  
FCC, Office of the Secretary  
445 12th St. SW  
Washington, DC 20554

For TV stations, address your letter to:

Video Division, License Renewal Processing Team  
Room 2-A665  
FCC, Office of the Secretary  
445 12th St. SW  
Washington, DC 20554

- Send a copy of your comments to the station’s managing director to let them know you’re watching. Also send a copy to us at [action@freepress.net](mailto:action@freepress.net), and share any information that might be useful for other activists challenging licenses around the country.

## RESOURCES

Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy created a guidebook for residents of Grand Rapids, MI who will be challenging licenses in that community. Their resource has information useful for other communities as well: [http://www.griid.org/pdfs/License\\_Renewal\\_Guide\\_Rev\\_2.pdf](http://www.griid.org/pdfs/License_Renewal_Guide_Rev_2.pdf)

Media activist group Rocky Mountain Media Watch filed objections to the license renewals of four stations in Denver, CO. Read an example of their objections at: [www.bigmedia.org/texts2.html](http://www.bigmedia.org/texts2.html)

The FCC has its own info sheet on participating in the license renewal process, available at: [www.fcc.gov/localism/renew\\_process\\_handout.doc](http://www.fcc.gov/localism/renew_process_handout.doc)

## BROADCAST LICENSE EXPIRATION DEADLINES

Shown below are radio & TV license expiration dates. All deadlines occur on the first of the month. Plan to file informal comments 2-4 months before TV or radio stations' licenses expire in your state.

<i>STATE</i>	<i>RADIO</i>	<i>TV</i>	<i>STATE</i>	<i>RADIO</i>	<i>TV</i>
<b>Alabama</b>	Apr 2004	Apr 2005	<b>Montana</b>	Apr 2005	Apr 2006
<b>Alaska</b>	Feb 2006	Feb 2007	<b>Nebraska</b>	Jun 2005	Jun 2006
<b>Arizona</b>	Oct 2005	Oct 2006	<b>New Hampshire</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007
<b>Arkansas</b>	Jun 2004	Jun 2005	<b>Nevada</b>	Oct 2005	Oct 2006
<b>California</b>	Dec 2005	Dec 2006	<b>New Jersey</b>	Jun 2006	Jun 2007
<b>Colorado</b>	Apr 2005	Apr 2006	<b>New Mexico</b>	Oct 2005	Oct 2006
<b>Connecticut</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007	<b>New York</b>	Jun 2006	Jun 2007
<b>Delaware</b>	Aug 2006	Aug 2007	<b>North Carolina</b>	Dec 2003	Dec 2004
<b>D. Columbia</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007	<b>North Dakota</b>	Apr 2005	Apr 2006
<b>Florida</b>	Feb 2004	Feb 2005	<b>Ohio</b>	Oct 2004	Oct 2005
<b>Georgia</b>	Apr 2004	Apr 2005	<b>Oklahoma</b>	Jun 2005	Jun 2006
<b>Hawaii</b>	Feb 2006	Feb 2007	<b>Oregon</b>	Feb 2006	Feb 2007
<b>Idaho</b>	Oct 2005	Oct 2006	<b>Pennsylvania</b>	Aug 2006	Aug 2007
<b>Illinois</b>	Dec 2004	Dec 2005	<b>Puerto Rico</b>	Feb 2004	Feb 2005
<b>Indiana</b>	Aug 2004	Aug 2005	<b>Rhode Island</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007
<b>Iowa</b>	Feb 2005	Feb 2006	<b>South Carolina</b>	Dec 2003	Dec 2004
<b>Kansas</b>	Jun 2005	Jun 2006	<b>South Dakota</b>	Apr 2005	Apr 2006
<b>Kentucky</b>	Aug 2004	Aug 2005	<b>Tennessee</b>	Aug 2004	Aug 2005
<b>Louisiana</b>	Jun 2004	Jun 2005	<b>Texas</b>	Aug 2005	Aug 2006
<b>Maine</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007	<b>Utah</b>	Oct 2005	Oct 2006
<b>Maryland</b>	Oct 2003	Oct 2004	<b>Vermont</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007
<b>Massachusetts</b>	Apr 2006	Apr 2007	<b>Virginia</b>	Oct 2003	Oct 2004
<b>Michigan</b>	Oct 2004	Oct 2005	<b>Washington</b>	Feb 2006	Feb 2007
<b>Minnesota</b>	Apr 2005	Apr 2006	<b>Wisconsin</b>	Dec 2004	Dec 2005
<b>Mississippi</b>	Jun 2004	Jun 2005	<b>West Virginia</b>	Oct 2003	Oct 2004
<b>Missouri</b>	Feb 2005	Feb 2006	<b>Wyoming</b>	Oct 2005	Oct 2006



# RESEARCH AND WATCHDOG

If you feel that your local media aren't doing an adequate job of serving the public interest, the results of a research or monitoring project can help back up your claims with evidence. This is a good start to any campaign to pressure your local media.

## Investigate Ownership

Media ownership is becoming increasingly consolidated, with major conglomerates buying up more and more media outlets around the country. For many of your projects, it will be important to learn about the companies who control your media.

### RESOURCES

- The Center for Public Integrity has a database called MediaTracker that will display information on who owns the TV, radio, cable, and print media in your community — simply by typing in your zip code. Check it out at: [www.openairwaves.org](http://www.openairwaves.org)
- Free Press has an interactive chart at [www.freepress.net/ownership](http://www.freepress.net/ownership) outlining the media holdings of a handful of the biggest media conglomerates.

## Monitor Media Content

You may want to launch a project to monitor your media for data on representation of diverse communities, coverage of important public affairs, corporate bias, or other concerns you have. There may be a research organization or professor in your community who could help develop a monitoring project. Two resources for monitoring projects are below.

### RESOURCES

- Grade the News has developed a scorecard that can be used to grade local newscasts and analyze the results. Check it out online at: [www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/feat/scoring.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/feat/scoring.htm)
- FAIR provides useful tips on detecting bias in the news media at: [www.fair.org/activism/detect.html](http://www.fair.org/activism/detect.html)

## Inspect TV and Radio Stations' Public Files

Local commercial stations make lots of money using our public airwaves to broadcast. The question is: Do they do enough for the community in return?

One way to find out is by investigating their “public file.” There are certain FCC rules about what kinds of information must be in the file, including info about station ownership, community issues programming, educational programming, and public complaints.

Stations are required to show the public files to any citizen who shows up at the station and asks to see them — but since most citizens aren't aware of their rights, stations almost never receive such requests. This is a great way to find out about your local media and to monitor whether they're serving the public interest as required by the FCC. It's also a good first step in pressuring them for change.

Steps for inspecting a public file:

- Find out where your local stations are located through the Internet or the yellow pages.
- You may want to review (or bring a copy of) the FCC's “The Public and Broadcasting” guide, which discusses your rights to see the file, and the obligations of the station. The guide is available at [www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/decdoc/public\\_and\\_broadcasting.html](http://www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/decdoc/public_and_broadcasting.html).
- You can show up at a station any time during regular business hours and simply ask to see the public file — they are required by the FCC to show it to you. However, it's a good idea to make an appointment in advance. When you call for an appointment, ask for the station's Public Affairs director. You don't have to explain why you want to see the files or mention your affiliation.
- Station staff will most likely be courteous and helpful. But if they're rude, unhelpful, or unwilling to show you the file, take note of this. Also take note if the public file is incomplete. Either of these is a violation of FCC rules.
- Station staff (usually the Public Affairs director) will either take you directly to the files, or they may ask you which files you're looking for, and bring those files to you. For this reason, it's important to know what you're looking for ahead of time (see ‘What to Look for in the Public File’ on pages 44-

45). They may leave you alone with the files, or they may stay with you as you inspect the files.

- The public file will most likely be in hard copy: papers in file folders. If parts of the public file are on a computer database, the station must provide you a computer terminal to look at them.
- You can either take detailed notes or request photocopies of all documents you're interested in. The station is required to make any photocopies that you request. They may make copies for free or may charge you a "fair price" (usually 10 or 25 cents per page). If you're asking for several copies, they may want to mail them to you later. The station must pay postage to send the photocopies, and must send them within seven days.

## IT'S THE SYSTEM, STUPID!

After inspecting your local stations' public files, you may find that stations are making a lot of money off your airwaves and giving back little in return for this right to broadcast. This is largely due to lax policies that fail to hold stations accountable.

Tell your members of Congress and the FCC if you think there should be stronger public interest accountability rules.

- Should TV and radio licenses be reviewed more seriously before they are renewed every 8 years? Should there be more explicit rules about "public interest programming" and "treatment of community issues"?
- Should stations be required to air a certain amount of local issues programming or more educational children's programming?
- Should they be required to air some shows that are produced by community members?
- Should citizen surveys be required to determine what issues get covered?
- Should there be stricter rules about who can own media in your community?

Congress can develop policies that make better, more accountable media a reality in our communities — but they must hear it from you, because they certainly won't hear it from broadcast industry lobbyists.

## **What to Do With the Information You Find**

If you found information in the public file that was interesting or surprising, share it with community groups, leaders, station owners, and even the press to start a dialogue with your community about media's obligation to the public.

You could prepare a report with some of the information you found, such as: Which company owns your station (and what else they control); what kind of programs and information the station thinks are most important to your community; how responsive the station has been to community concerns; what programs the station thinks fills its educational programming requirement for children, etc. Use it to:

- Bring community awareness and/or press attention to broadcasters' public interest obligations.
- Start a dialogue with your station about how they can better serve your community. Think about developing a "citizens' agreement" with your broadcasters if there is not already one in place.
- Provide data and examples to FCC and/or Congress that will encourage them to strengthen laws and rules that hold media accountable.
- Encourage the FCC not to renew a station's broadcast license.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE PUBLIC FILE

### Citizen Agreements

Stations must keep a copy of any written agreements they make with local viewers or listeners. These “citizen agreements” deal with programming, employment, or other issues of community concern.

- Does the station have any citizen agreements? Is it adhering to these agreements?

### Letters and E-Mail from the Public

Commercial stations must keep written comments and suggestions received from the public for at least 3 years.

- Is the station keeping all letters and e-mail from the public, or just the positive ones? (If you know of a prior negative comment that was sent, you might check to see if it’s in the file).
- If there is consistent criticism from the public on a certain issue, did the station respond to these criticisms, or ignore them?

### Material Relating to an FCC Investigation or Complaint

If the FCC is investigating a station or somebody has filed a complaint that the station has violated the Communications Act or FCC rules, the stations must keep related materials.

- Is the station being investigated for violating FCC rules?

### Time Brokerage Agreements

A “time brokerage agreement” (also known as a Local Marketing Agreement or LMA) is a type of contract in which a station sells blocks of airtime to another company. The other company then provides the programming to fill that time block and sells the ads that run during the programming. (This is one of the deceptive ways that Big Media companies get around media ownership limits in local communities.) The station may also have this information in a “joint sales agreement.”

- Who else is supplying programs on this station? Is another station providing the news for this station to cut costs? Does this reduce the number of different sources of information in your community?

### Ownership Reports

The public file must contain a copy of the most recent, complete “ownership report” filed for the station.

- If the station is a subsidiary of another company, who is the ultimate owner?
- Is there a “Local Marketing Agreement” that allows another station to control some of this station’s programming? [This information might be found in “time brokerage agreements”].
- Does the file list any other interests of the owners that might conflict with the public interest requirements of broadcasting?

### Issues/Programs Lists

Stations are required to keep a quarterly file of which local issues their programming covered and how those issues were covered specifically. This file will usually be separated

by issue (for instance “public safety,” “environment,” etc.) with examples of when and how the issues were covered (usually as part of local news segments).

- What are the issues that are covered? Are they representative of the community and community concerns?
- Did some issues receive a great deal more coverage than others? What important issues are not being addressed?
- Are the issues that the station claims to be covering actually being covered adequately?
- Is important programming getting enough airtime? Is important programming on the air during prime times of day, or during times when nobody’s listening or watching?

### **Political File**

All candidates for public office must have equal access to broadcasting facilities. Also, stations must charge the lowest commercial rate available for political ads.

- Did the station provide more air time to one candidate than another? Did it provide free time to one candidate but not another?
- How much did the ads cost?

### **Employment Records**

TV and radio stations must offer equal employment opportunity (EEO) and cannot discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. Stations have to file reports saying how they comply with these policies.

- How is the station recruiting candidates for open positions? Are they taking steps to recruit a staff that represents the diversity of your community?

### **Children’s TV Programming Reports**

Commercial TV stations are required by the FCC to air a minimum of 3 hours per week (between 7 AM and 10 PM) of “core educational programming” specifically designed to educate and inform children and teens under 16. Stations must file “FCC 398” reports describing how their core educational programs have “education as a significant purpose.” Note that the stations — not the FCC — decide what counts as educational programming.

- Does the station list at least 3 hours of educational programming for children, airing between 7AM and 10PM? Is it regularly scheduled for the same time every week?
- What kind of programs does the station air to fill its “core education” requirement? Are these programs legitimately educational, or are they fluff entertainment programs with some nominal information or morality component?

### **Records regarding advertising in children’s programming.**

There are limits on the amount and type of advertising in TV programs for children 12 and under. There cannot be more than 12 minutes of commercials per hour on weekdays and 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends during kids’ programs.

- Did the station exceed ad time limits during children’s programming?





# PLUG IN

Our success in national and local battles will hinge on the strategic, coordinated actions of Americans working together. Plug in with established national organizations and local groups — or organize your own local group if there isn't one yet.

## Join in National Advocacy Efforts

Free Press and other national advocacy groups monitor media policy and then organize large numbers of people to pressure Congress, the FCC, and others at crucial times in the policymaking cycle. Working with these organizations is a great way to ensure your voice will be heard.

- If you haven't already done so, join the Free Press e-activist network to be notified of important developments and opportunities for action. You can join by visiting [freepress.net](http://freepress.net) — the signup appears in the upper left on every page.
- Get your friends and neighbors to sign up, too!



### RESOURCE

The Center for International Media Action (CIMA) created a directory of all the organizations that were involved in the 2003 fight against the FCC's attempt to allow more media ownership consolidation. You can download it at [www.mediaactioncenter.org](http://www.mediaactioncenter.org) or call CIMA at (866) 470-2954 to order a copy.

## Connect with Local Media Reform Groups

Coordinated, local grassroots activism is a driving force in all social change movements. Get involved!

- Check [www.freepress.net/orgs](http://www.freepress.net/orgs) for a directory of media reform groups, searchable by state.
- Hundreds of cities have action groups called “Fight Big Media MeetUps” that meet on the second Wednesday of each month. Go to [www.fightbigmedia.meetup.com](http://www.fightbigmedia.meetup.com) to link up with a group in your community or to find out how to start your own.

### EXAMPLES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA ACTIVIST GROUPS

**Chicago Media Action** ([www.chicagomediaaction.org](http://www.chicagomediaaction.org), 1-866-260-7198) is an activist group dedicated to analyzing and broadening Chicago’s mainstream media and to building that city’s independent media.

**Citizens for Media Literacy** ([www.main.nc.us/cml](http://www.main.nc.us/cml), 828-255-0182) is a North Carolina-based organization linking media literacy with the concepts and practices of citizenship.

**Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy** ([www.griid.org](http://www.griid.org), 616-459-4788), based in Michigan, does research on local media, provides media education workshops, trains community members in media relations and develops media strategy for local organizations.

**Media Alliance** ([www.media-alliance.org](http://www.media-alliance.org), 415-546-6334) is a San Francisco-based media resource and advocacy center for media workers, non-profit organizations, and social justice activists.

**Media Tank** ([www.mediatank.org](http://www.mediatank.org), 215-563-1100), out of Philadelphia, promotes media literacy, policy education, and a vibrant local media culture through community workshops, lectures, screenings, forums, national organizing, speaking engagements, and resource materials.

**Reclaim the Media** ([www.reclaimthedia.org](http://www.reclaimthedia.org), 206-709-0558) is a coalition of independent journalists, media activists and community organizers in the Pacific Northwest, promoting press freedom and community media access as prerequisites for a functioning democracy.

## Start an Action Group

If there isn't a local group working on media issues in your community, start your own! An awareness-raising event like those mentioned earlier in this guide could be a catalyst to launch your working group.

**Lead the launch.** Be the person who will organize people to come together for meetings and facilitate conversations about what the group will do. The success of your group will depend on others' involvement, but somebody has to get it all started.

**Strengthen your organizing skills.** Study up on some of the skills that will come in handy as you help launch your group, such as meeting facilitation, community organizing, and action planning. There are lots of great resources available on the web and in your local public library.

**Use this action guide** and the other resources referenced here to help plan your group's actions.

### RESOURCE

The Media Empowerment Organizing Manual, produced by the Media Empowerment Project of the United Church of Christ, provides information on the basics of community organizing and resources for media activism. You can download it at [www.ucc.org/ocinc/mep/orgman.htm](http://www.ucc.org/ocinc/mep/orgman.htm) or call the Media Empowerment Project at 800-778-9214 to order a copy.

## Tap in Using Listservs, Blogs, and Online Forums

Blogs (online journals where people can post entries about their personal experiences and interests), listservs (automatic mailing lists which allow people sharing an interest to subscribe to a given discussion), and online forums (electronic bulletin boards) are all great ways to get a good sense of who's doing what and what the hot issues are.

- Media Tank runs a national listserv for media activists to discuss timely media issues. Sign up at [www.mediatank.org](http://www.mediatank.org).
- MediaChannel.org hosts Citizen Media Watch, a web forum for debating and discussing media issues. You can tap in at <http://64.225.103.105/forum/>.
- AlterNet has a MediaCulture discussion forum with several sub-topics. Check it out at <http://forums.alternet.org>.

## Participate in Media Reform Events

Attending conferences, lectures, hearings, fundraisers, rallies, and other events about media reform is a great way to plug into the media reform movement. Visit [www.freepress.net/action/calendar.php](http://www.freepress.net/action/calendar.php) for a listing of events (and to contribute other events to the calendar as well). Independent media (including alternative newspapers, community radio stations, and public access TV channels) are also good places to check for information about local media-related events.



A grayscale photograph of a person's face and hands, with the word 'APPENDICES' overlaid in a bold, dark red font. The person's face is in the upper half, looking down, and their hands are in the lower half, clenched into fists. The background is a plain, light color.

# APPENDICES

## Sample Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Information is the lifeblood of democracy. We depend on our media to provide us with what we need to know, so that we can make informed decisions about the things that affect our lives.

Over the past several weeks, I've seen local TV, radio stations, and newspapers devote plenty of time to [insert a reference to a major 'infotainment' story you've seen recently, such as celebrity gossip or sensationalistic court cases]. Coverage of these stories may be good for ratings or advertising dollars, but they have absolutely no impact on the lives of [insert city or region] residents, and they obscure the real issues that are crucial to our families and our communities. The media aren't telling us what's really going on in our statehouse, in Washington, and around the world!

I don't blame this problem on the reporters and editors, because I know journalists often get pressure from corporate headquarters to cover what's most profitable — instead of what's most important. The real blame goes to the policymakers in Washington who have let our media system become totally corrupted by profit motives of big media companies. We as citizens need to let our members of Congress — and the FCC — know that our media system is failing and they need to fix it. Media is the issue.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your address]

[Your daytime phone number]

## Sample Op-Ed / Commentary

*Make the Op-Ed timely by leading it off with a paragraph that references a current issue related to media. For instance, you might mention a media policy bill being debated in Congress or an action being taken by the FCC, a recent report or event related to media, or any current discussion about a particular media phenomenon or the media's role in covering an issue or event. Make this first paragraph a punchy and compelling hook into the media issues discussed below.*

Media is an important part of our lives. We read the paper to find out what's happening in our neighborhoods and in the world. We listen to the radio to hear music and find out about weather, traffic, and politics. We watch TV — on average, over 4 hours a day — to unwind, be entertained, and get the latest news.

Yet for all this media exposure, most of us are left in the dark when it comes to media policy.

For generations, the government policies that determine how we get our media, who owns it, and what they are able to do with it have been decided behind closed doors with virtually zero public participation. Why? These regulations are complicated, we're told. But there is no justification for excluding citizens from debates that affect what we hear, see, and read everyday.

The results of closed-door decision making have been disastrous. Without public involvement, policymakers have delivered control over the civic and political dialogue of our country (not to mention music, entertainment, and culture) to a handful of corporate conglomerates, while limiting our ability to develop viable alternative media systems.

In June of 2003, the Federal Communications Commission voted to gut media ownership limits. Had they been successful, almost all of the media outlets in a single community — the cable system, the newspaper, TV and radio stations, even the dominant Internet provider — could be owned by a single company. Realizing the impact of consolidating such complete power over information in a few hands, citizens across the country responded with outrage. Millions contacted their legislators to demand responsible public interest standards. Eventually the Courts reversed the FCC's decision, ordering the Commission to start over.

This uproar over media ownership alerted the public to a wide variety of media policy issues that not only affect us, but demand our involvement. When citizens are left out of the equation, we get policies that allow companies like Clear Channel to gobble up over 1200 radio

stations, eliminating independent, local voices. We get cable rates rising five times faster than inflation with no local competition. We get politicians spending almost \$1.5 billion on ads in the 2004 election cycle alone — because they're not afforded free airtime and their issues aren't covered adequately in the news. We get corporations sitting on copyrights for decades while art, culture, and innovation suffer. We get public broadcasting with a budget so small that it is forced to rely on corporate donations and advertising dollars to stay on the air.

As citizens committed to freedom and democracy, we need a media system that serves us better and provides us with a wider array of ideas and culture. Our democracy depends on it.

## Sample Newsletter Article

I care about *[insert your priority issue or value here]*. I think it's imperative for our society to focus on these issues, discuss and debate them, and arrive at solutions to the problems. But it seems to me that more people on the street can carry a conversation about the latest Michael Jackson court case than *[reference issue]*.

That's why I also care about the media — and media policy.

Today's media system is dominated by a small number of powerful corporations whose sole objective is making money, not providing citizens with the information we need to help guide our country. Journalism has been hijacked by celebrity gossip and sensationalism, and the range of political debate is shrinking. Without a media system that fosters democratic debate and dialogue on important issues from diverse perspectives, we'll never see the kind of public participation that it takes to bring about change in *[your issue]*, or any other issue.

*[Optional: Insert a paragraph here detailing some facts, examples, or statistics that illustrate how your issue is poorly covered by the media. Note how this inadequate media coverage hinders success in achieving your goals or values.]*

The decline of our media system shouldn't just be blamed on journalists who fail to cover important stories, but on the root causes of media failure — the policies governing our media system which enable media corporations to evade their responsibilities.

For generations, Big Media corporations have successfully lobbied Congress and the FCC — behind closed doors — to make sure their profit motives are prioritized in government policies that determine how we get our media, who owns it and what they are able to broadcast. The results have been disastrous. Large media conglomerates have been granted enormous subsidies and free use of our public airwaves while public interest regulations are gutted and accountability measures relaxed.

As a result of corporate-driven media policy, we now get policies that allow companies like Clear Channel to gobble up over 1200 radio stations, eliminating independent, local voices. We get cable rates rising five times faster than inflation with no local competition. We get politicians spending almost \$1.5 billion on ads in the 2004 election cycle alone — because they're not afforded decent airtime and their issues aren't covered adequately in the news. We get corporations sitting on copyrights for decades while art, culture, and innovation suffer. We get

public broadcasting with a budget so small that it is forced to rely on corporate donations and advertising dollars to stay on the air.

In June of 2003, the Federal Communications Commission voted to gut media ownership limits. Had they been successful, one company could have owned almost all of the media outlets in a single community — the cable system, the newspaper, TV and radio stations, even the dominant Internet provider. Once people started hearing about the latest in disastrous media policy, they were outraged.

Over two million people spoke up to say they didn't want to let giant media conglomerates gain even more power. Groups from across the political spectrum — from the NRA to the National Organization for Women — spoke out too. Eventually the Courts reversed the FCC, ordering the Commission to start over. The politics of media ownership in 2003 have alerted the public that if more people are involved in the movement to change the media, the current system will fall apart like a house of cards. We must continue to stay engaged.

As citizens committed to freedom and democracy, we need a media system that serves us better, providing us with the information we need to play a role in government. Our *[insert the value related to your issue here]* and our democracy depend on it.

## Prepared Media Reform Speech

I'm going to talk about an issue that affects your life as much as any other issue, but gets little attention: the media.

Television, radio, newspapers, books, movies and the internet are our windows to the world. They provide the information we use to form opinions and make crucial decisions about the issues we care about most - issues like health care, education, the economy.

But today's media system is dominated by a small number of powerful companies whose sole objective is making money, not serving the needs of a democratic society. Many people – myself included – are beginning to understand that the media system in our country is broken.

Journalism has become celebrity-obsessed fluff, and the range of political debate is shrinking. In fact, it's dreadful. The average adult knows more about the state of [insert hot celebrity here]'s love life than the state of the world.

Investigative journalism is declining, replaced by opinionated rants.

Entertainment has become overly violent and sensationalistic, or mindless cheap-to-produce drivel.

Commercialization of our culture is out of control, with over 30,000 advertisements bombarding the average American child each year. Our kids see ads in their schools, on their clothes, in the games they play, even on park benches.

The music we get to hear on the radio is no longer about how good a song is — but about who pays the most to have their client's song played 3 times in one hour. And forget about getting anything newsworthy from your radio. You could be driving through a toxic cloud of gas — and this did happen in North Dakota a few years ago — and no one would tell you about it on the radio because there's a good chance no one is at the radio station. These days radio giants like Clear Channel — with over 1200 radio stations across the country — slash costs by cutting staff and running their stations on pre-recorded autopilot.

I could go on and on about this sad state of affairs, but instead I'll sum it up like this: Unless we create a more diverse, independent, skeptical and competitive media system, all of the issues we care about most will not advance.

Most people think that, like death and taxes, you can't change the media — but we can. And it wasn't always like this.

When the postal service was first established, the nation's founders de-

bated subsidizing the cost of mailing newspapers — which constituted 90% of the mail. The debate was not about how much to subsidize — but whether there should be any charge at all for sending newspapers through the mail. Because those who started our country knew that democracy would thrive only if ideas could thrive. And there was a fear that differing viewpoints would be silenced if you had to have money to distribute a newspaper.

What a difference a few centuries can make. Today, instead of subsidizing the media to create an even playing field, our government still subsidizes media, but in the form of giveaways to huge corporate media conglomerates. One example is that TV and radio stations are allowed to broadcast on the airwaves that legally belong to the public — free of charge. The airwaves belong to you and me — just like a national park is there for you and me — yet the media moguls are making billions of dollars off of them. Cable and satellite companies also get huge gifts of monopolies while they use our streets and public utilities to place their wires.

Our government gives media corporations free use of our airwaves and other public property under the condition that they use the media to serve the needs of their communities. But I know I'm not the only one who thinks the media aren't living up to their end of the bargain.

These giveaways are made behind closed doors in the most corrupt manner imaginable, and the worst part is that most of us don't even know it. The individuals who are responsible for this corrupt system want to make sure that people don't understand how the media cake is sliced — or even that there is a cake — because they know that once we know about this corruption, we won't stand for it.

In 2003, the FCC tried to quietly change the regulations to make it possible for one company to own virtually all the media outlets in one town — the cable system, the newspapers, TV and radio stations. And they inadvertently started a revolution. Once people started hearing about the proposal to allow consolidation of power over information in even fewer hands, people were outraged. Over two million Americans — from across the political spectrum — spoke up to say that they didn't want to let giant media conglomerates get even bigger.

The people won and these rule changes were stopped by the courts. Suddenly it became clear that the public could have a big impact. That if more people are involved in the movement to change the media, the current system will fall apart like a house of cards. But first we need to make more people aware that we do have the power to fight Big Media — because fighting big money takes big numbers.

What is necessary to win this fight is nothing new. Like other times of

change in our nation's history, we need to educate, and activate. We must all understand how crucial media reform is to democracy. Americans like us must become actively involved, sending petitions, writing letters to the editor, meeting with our elected officials, calling Congress, hosting "house parties" to tell our friends, talking to local groups about media reform — just like I am now. It is about being actively involved in a democratic process that requires just that: active involvement.

Corporate control of the media is drowning out our democracy... Join me. We can rescue our broken media system and the voices that deserve to be heard. To join this fight, please read the materials being handed out and then visit [www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net) to learn more about some simple steps you can take to make a difference. And it will make a difference. That's [www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net) or call 866-666-1533.

Thank you.

## Talking Points for a Presentation on Media Reform

**1. *Television, radio, newspapers, books, movies and the internet are our windows to the world.*** They provide the information we use to form opinions and make crucial decisions about the issues we care about most — issues like health care, education, the economy.

By the age of 70, Americans will have spent 7 to 10 years of their lives watching TV.<sup>1</sup>

**2. *Today's media system is dominated by a small number of powerful companies*** whose sole objective is making money, not serving the needs of a democratic society.

Time Warner alone — in addition to its cable empire reaching 11 million subscribers — controls over 100 magazines, dozens of television networks and record companies, as well as major publishing, Internet, TV and movie production companies.<sup>2</sup>

**3. *The quality of our media is deteriorating.*** Journalism is celebrity-obsessed. Investigative reporting is declining. Cheap-to-produce, mindless “reality shows” are a fast growing genre.

Commercialization of our culture is out of control: Kids see ads in their schools, on their clothes, in the games they play, even on park benches.

The music we get to hear on the radio is determined by who pays the most to have their client's song played 3 times in one hour.

Local radio is being replaced with pre-taped programming to save money.

In 2002, a Minot, North Dakota train wreck resulted in a release of toxic gas. But the local radio station, owned by Clear Channel, was unable to issue any warnings because no one was at the station at the time. One person died.<sup>3</sup>

Clear Channel now owns 1200 radio stations — over 1 in 10 stations nationwide.<sup>4</sup>

The average person sees 400 to 600 ads per day, or 40 to 50 million by the time they are 60 years old.<sup>1</sup>

More than 1 out of 5 parents say that their kids began asking for brand name products by age 3.<sup>5</sup>

**4. *This decline is directly at odds to our nation's founding principle:*** that a healthy democracy depends on the free flow of a diversity of opinions and ideas.

When the postal service was first established, the nation's founders subsidized the cost of sending newspapers through the mail. There

was a fear that if postage for news wasn't free, then differing viewpoints would be silenced.

**5. Our government still subsidizes the media system** — but in the form of unpublicized corporate giveaways and deregulations. The government gives a limited number of TV and radio broadcasters the right to use the airwaves free of charge, and allows cable and satellite monopolies to make extraordinary profits while using public streets and utilities to place their wires.

Between 1996 and 2000, the fifty largest media firms and the four media trade organizations spent \$111 million on lobbying Congress.<sup>6</sup>

In the first five months of 2003, when the FCC was debating the media cross-ownership rules that were overturned in June of that year, the commercial TV and cable networks provided “virtually no coverage” of the issue, with the big networks typically airing nothing until a week before the FCC decision.<sup>7</sup>

**6. Media reform is possible when the public becomes aware and involved** in policy decisions. Last year the FCC tried to quietly change the regulations to make it possible for one company to own virtually all the media outlets in one town — the cable system, the newspapers, TV and radio stations. Over two million outraged citizens challenged this deregulation, which was ultimately stopped by the Courts and Congress.

Prior to relaxing media ownership rules in 2003, FCC officials met behind closed doors 71 times with the nation's major broadcasters, but had only five such meetings with Consumers Union and the Media Access Project, the two major consumer groups working on the issue. The meetings were not recorded.<sup>6</sup>

**7. Fighting Big Media — and Big Money — requires big numbers.** In order to change the system, Americans must become actively involved -- sending petitions, writing letters to the editor, meeting with your elected officials, calling Congress, hosting “houseparties”, talking to local groups about media reform.

**8. Join the fight to rescue our broken media system** by learning more and taking action. Visit [www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net) to get educated and activated.

Sources: (1) About-Face facts on the MEDIA; (2) Columbia Journalism Review, 9/22/03; (3) New York Times, 1/19/02; (4) Reuters 7/22/04; (5) Center for a New American Dream Poll, July, 1999; (6) The Center for Public Integrity, May, 2003; (7) American Journalism Review, Dec./Jan., 2004.

## Sample Letter to Member of Congress

Dear Senator [*last name*] or Mr./Ms. [*last name*]:

I am writing as a constituent from [*your city and state*] to bring your attention to something which impacts every problem we face as a nation. I'm talking about the media — the venue of public debate and democratic deliberation. What we see, hear, and read has a profound effect on how we act as informed (or uninformed) citizens.

I have watched with great concern in recent years as the American media system has taken a turn for the worse. In a world of digital media with potentially millions of channels, our society seems to be even less well-informed, less conscious of diversity, and less attuned to local needs than ever before. In large part, these dire circumstances are the result of public policies. Despite the responsibility of the government to protect the democratic interests of the public in the structure of mass media markets, our public officials have failed miserably. They have bowed to the pressure of organized wealth and handed the keys to the kingdom to a handful of media conglomerates.

Certainly I support the First Amendment rights of all media producers. But I also insist on the First Amendment rights of all citizens—to speak for themselves and to hear the widest possible range of voices in the public media system. We have a Constitutional right to a media system that offers a diversity of voices over mainstream channels. We have a Constitutional right to open up the public airwaves to as many speakers as technology will permit, and a responsibility to ensure that our communications systems are open and accessible to all public speakers, great and small.

I ask you to consider these issues carefully. I ask you to respond to this letter with concrete ideas about how you intend to put media channels in the hands of local people. I ask for specific policy proposals which will promote diversity and competition. I ask for your ideas on how to promote open access, a broad non-profit and non-commercial media sector, and dedicated attention to the cultivation of independent voices.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

[*Your Name*]

[*Your address*]

[*Your city, state, ZIP*]

## 10 Questions to Ask Every Candidate and Elected Official

### 1) Media Ownership.

The United States has seen a massive wave of media consolidation over the past two decades. For example, Time Warner alone controls over 100 magazines, dozens of television networks and record companies, as well as major publishing, Internet, TV and movie production companies — in addition to its cable empire reaching 11 million subscribers.

*Do you support setting limits on media consolidation — through antitrust law and ownership protections — to prevent large companies from having too much control over what Americans see, hear and read?*

### 2) Public and noncommercial media.

Democratic discourse requires quality sources of information free from advertiser pressure. However, we provide less funding per capita for public broadcasting than most other industrialized countries — by a wide margin.

*Do you support policies that would increase and preserve funding for public and noncommercial media, and eliminate commercial sponsorship of public radio and TV programs?*

### 3) Marketing to kids.

Our children today are bombarded with advertising. Parents, teachers, and organizations dedicated to children's issues are growing increasingly concerned as evidence mounts connecting media exposure to a variety of health and behavior problems.

*Do you support efforts to reduce commercialism and predatory marketing toward children, and to promote noncommercial educational TV programming for young children?*

### 4) Cable rates.

Over the past 5 years, cable rates have risen over 40% nationwide. This is the direct result of government-granted monopolies and lack of competition. The government has stalled on setting reasonable cable ownership limits. Meanwhile, cable companies are increasing their profits as they eliminate communities' ability to negotiate public-interest-oriented cable agreements.

*Will you promote consumer choice by setting limits on cable ownership and by supporting policies to encourage the development of competition in cable markets?*

**5) Internet freedom.**

Big cable and telephone companies now want to restrict what users and providers can and cannot access on the Internet, all in the name of profit. The Internet exploded over the past decade in part because Internet Service Providers were required by law to allow access to all websites and users without discrimination.

*Do you support open access rules that keep the Internet free and open, and that protect individual privacy from both government and corporations alike?*

**6) Campaign coverage.**

The skyrocketing cost of buying ad time is a major reason candidates raise ever-higher sums of campaign money from wealthy special interests. This year, TV broadcasters — who are granted licenses to use publicly-owned airwaves, free of charge — will rake in a record \$1.47 billion from political ads alone. At the same time, news coverage of campaigns, especially on radio and television, has plummeted.

*Do you support requiring broadcasters to provide significant free airtime for candidates and public debates as a condition of receiving their government-granted licenses?*

**7) Community radio.**

Many communities find themselves and their concerns misrepresented or ignored by major broadcasters. Citizens need to hear their own voices over their own airwaves, and the capability exists to fulfill this demand. Legislation can create thousands of new low-power FM radio licenses.

*Do you support giving more communities the ability to broadcast their own locally-based programming through an expanded low-power radio and television service?*

**8) Minority ownership.**

Minority ownership of media is at a 10-year low, down 14% since 1997. Today, only 4% of radio stations and 1.9% of television stations are owned by people of color. And studies show that the glass ceiling for women is firmly in place at communications companies.

*Do you support providing incentives to increase diversity in media ownership and leadership?*

**9) Media workers.**

Media consolidation pressures media workers to abandon their professional values in order to generate maximum short-term profits. Trade unions are especially important in media industries because they serve both to protect the rights of workers and to insulate the media's role in our democracy from economic pressure.

*Do you support laws that make it easier for media workers to form trade unions and ensure they are paid for their overtime?*

**10) Copyright.**

Existing copyright law serves the interests of large corporations to the detriment of public information, culture, and innovation. Legislation has kept the past 80 years' worth of copyrighted works and ideas out of the public domain, depriving new thinkers of the chance to build on old ideas. If copyright laws being considered today had been in effect a few generations ago, recording a show on your VCR or photocopying a news story may have been illegal.

*Do you support policies that will shorten the terms of copyright and lend balance to the law by allowing fair use for nonprofit and noncommercial purposes?*

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The Free Press Action Fund, the advocacy arm of Free Press, is a member-supported organization. By contributing, you will be directly supporting our efforts to promote public-interest media policy in Congress and at the FCC.

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Free Press is a national nonpartisan organization working to increase informed public participation in crucial media policy debates, and to generate policies that will produce a more competitive and public interest-oriented media system with a strong nonprofit and noncommercial sector. To learn more, please visit our web site: [www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net)



## media reform action guide

Tired of a media system that puts profits in front of the public interest?

This Action Guide contains step-by-step instructions for media reform strategies that get results!



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