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## The Persistence of Petitions: Some Thoughts About Broadcast Reform in an Era of Convergence

At the 2007 National Conference for Media Reform, I was excited and surprised to attend a panel on “How to Challenge a License Renewal,” which included representatives from activist groups who had recently filed petitions to deny license renewal of broadcasting stations. Petitions to deny had been a common media reform strategy back in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the wake of the 1966 *United Church of Christ* case, which afforded members of the public the right to participate in the license renewal process, a wide range of activist groups (feminist, African American, Chicano, gay and lesbian, conservative, environmentalist) had filed petitions with the FCC. But petitions had lulled by the 1980s—they were costly, rarely resulted in the denial of a license, and seemed particularly futile given the FCC’s embrace of deregulation. The petition to deny, to me, indeed seemed like the product of a bygone era, a reform strategy that fit with the tenor of the 1970s. This was the time, after all, when commissioner Nicholas Johnson was instructing communities to “talk back to their television sets,” the FCC had implemented the Prime Time Access Rule and Fin-Syn, and the Supreme Court had declared that the rights of viewers and listeners took precedence over the rights of broadcasters. The petitions filed in the 1970s also often hinged on regulatory policies that the FCC has since eliminated, most notably the Fairness Doctrine and rules requiring community ascertainment.

Contemporary petitioners look a little different than those filing back in the 1970s. Whereas many of the activists of the earlier period were part of identity-based groups, and as such were

focused on issues of representation and fair employment, contemporary activists often are part of locally-based organizations filing petitions to protest the paltry news and political coverage that their local stations offer. Iowans for Better Local TV, Chicago Media Action, and Voices for New Jersey, for example, have filed petitions with the FCC illustrating how local broadcasters had failed to provide to their communities of service adequate information pertaining to local elections and public affairs. Much of the earlier activism designated television as an arena where harmful stereotypes and images circulated, and enfolded reform efforts within broader campaigns for social justice. This current activism is in large part a fight against media consolidation and its deleterious impact on local communities.

Yet these petitions also highlight a trend of contemporary media reform, one made more obvious by the choice of activist strategy that they employ: the sense of nostalgia that underlies much of current activism. Voices for New Jersey (VNJ), for example, filed a petition to deny against WWOR, the only commercial VHF station licensed in NJ. The petitioners illustrated that the station overwhelmingly favored news programming about NY and offered inadequate coverage of NJ affairs and politics. Not only were New Jerseyans left without adequate local news and politics coverage but, according to VNJ, were denied a collective sense of identity afforded to residents of other states, one forged in the simultaneous broadcasts by television stations serving local communities; according to VNJ, “there is little that the citizens of New Jersey have in common beyond the color of their license plates.” Over-the-air television is identified as *the* primary platform where not only news and information circulate to citizens, but where a shared identity is fashioned via collective viewing practices. In the plaintiffs’ briefs filed in the 2004 *Prometheus* case, and in a number of the letters received by the commission decrying its new

media ownership rules, one can find a similar construction of broadcasting as the central, sacred media around which local communities form, and a more explicit rejection of the impact of newer media forms on the role of broadcasting in viewers' lives.

To be sure, since the 1980s the FCC and members of the media industries have pointed to the proliferation of media outlets and the growth of new technologies as a justification for deregulation, and this activist discourse must be understood in this context. But to read the petitions and legal documents, to attend the conferences on media reform, and to consider the letters to the commission and Congress circulating on listserves, is often to feel as though one has gone back in time. Though broadcast reform activist strategies have changed, as have the communities involved in media reform work, in important ways the definition of broadcasting asserted in activist campaigns has remained consistent: broadcasting, and especially television, functions as the locus of public culture, where the possibilities of citizenship and the parameters of civic belonging are instantiated. It is a view that seems to want to hold on to this central role of television, but also perhaps to a time before the messiness of the contemporary media environment and the attending difficulties in identifying the spaces for shared experiences.