

Citizens Inundated: Democracy Under Threat

The Supreme Court's Citizens United decision has already picked a winner in the 2012 elections: TV broadcasters.

Companies like CBS Corp, News Corp. and Sinclair Broadcast Group are already dividing the spoils of an election year that will see unprecedented spending on political ads.

More than \$12 million was spent on ads during the Iowa Republican caucus. More than \$14 million was spent on the South Carolina primary. And Floridians are already seeing the effect of millions more in ad buys as the state readies for next Tuesday's vote.

But that's just the first glimpse of an election year that will leave viewers awash in misinformation. All told TV broadcast companies stand to pocket more than \$3 billion in political ad revenues by November. What they're not doing is letting viewers and voters in on the full story behind all this money and all these ads.

Free Press today released Citizens Inundated, a report exposing the media's role in the Citizens United problem. It traces a trail of political influence money that begins with contributions from wealthy corporations and individuals and ends up in the bank accounts of some of the most powerful television conglomerates in the United States.

Broadcast media, understandably, have no interest in shedding light on this excessive transfer of money. As a result, we are facing a crisis that threatens to undermine the most important single action people take in a democracy: voting.

Of, By and For the 1 Percent

Citizens United gave the wealthiest 1 percent unchecked power to pick and choose our nation's leaders. By November's general election, corporations and the rich will have funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into campaigns and Super PACs. The bulk of this money (approximately 60 cents to every dollar contributed to campaigns) will buy televised political attack ads that often misrepresent the issues and misinform the viewing and voting public.

Rarely within their local news coverage do local stations reveal the true funding sources behind this flood of misleading ads. Nor do they devote much of their news programming to reporting that might separate political fact from fiction and engage viewers in the democratic process. It's a confidence scheme that enriches broadcast media execs, while leaving voters none the wiser.

A 2011 FCC staff report found that 33 percent of commercial TV stations air little to no local news whatsoever. For those that do air news, the picture remains dim. Nearly two-thirds of local TV news directors reported staff cuts in 2009, as bosses slashed their reporting budgets. This translates into fewer reporters on the political beat and less objective reporting about electoral issues. A 2010 USC Annenberg School report showed that in the average 30-minute local news broadcast, less than 30 seconds is devoted to hard local government news, including reporting on political campaigns.

Meanwhile, it's estimated that political ads will air up to 200,000 times before viewers become voters in November. When researchers examined sample markets with a race for the House of Representatives back in 2004, political advertising outstripped news coverage of those elections by

an average of 6 to 1. In markets where Senate races took place that year, political ads exceeded news coverage of those races by as much as 17 to 1. The situation is likely to be even worse in a post-Citizens United world.

This television news failure hasn't been remedied by the rise of the Internet. Despite decades of advances in new media, broadcast television remains our most influential communications medium. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 78 percent of American viewers report getting their news from local TV on a typical day -- more than the number that rely on newspapers, radio or the Web.

Toward Transparency

Broadcasters have been unwilling to do much to live up to obligations to viewers. They balked when the FCC asked whether they should put online the political advertising information in their "public files" -- preferring to keep this information hidden away in dusty file cabinets. They unleash the full force of their mighty lobbying group, the National Association of Broadcasters, against any effort to ensure that stations, in the words of the Communications Act, "serve the public interest, convenience and necessity."

Such is the arrogance of an industry that profits from free access to our airwaves. In exchange for this free use, media companies are supposed to fulfill the news and information needs of the local communities in which they broadcast.

Broadcasters can start by more fully disclosing the financial interests that stand behind the Super PACs dominating political discourse in 2012. And broadcasters need to invest more of their election-year profits in the kind of reporting that engages viewers in political issues and increases election turnout. These changes would make voters the ultimate winners come Election Day.