

Tucked Away in the Political Files



There's a lot of buzz about all the corporate money that has poured into politics since the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling and related court decisions lifted nearly all limitations on political spending. But there's a lot less talk about where that money — estimated to number in the billions this year — is going: into the pockets of the media.

Now people across the country are taking matters into their own hands. They're going to their local TV stations to comb through broadcasters' public and political files and connect the dots between front groups and the candidates they support.

So far **dozens of station inspections** have occurred nationwide. Public interest groups like **Free Press**, think tanks like the **New America Foundation**, transparency groups like the **Sunlight Foundation** and crowdsourced journalism organizations like **ProPublica** are working to uncover who is behind these political ads. This effort to get a clear picture of how money is flowing this election year shows **no signs of slowing down**.

With so much activity across the country it's fair to ask why all this work is needed. □ □ **Voters Are Losing**

With limits essentially eradicated for corporate spending in politics, broadcasters will likely rake in more than \$3 billion from political ad buys this election season. It's payday for the media, but voters are losing out.

While stations rake in the dough, their news departments are doing little to counter the onslaught of misleading political advertising. Studies done during previous elections show that stations show **far more ads** than news reports. Indeed, broadcasters are not using their increased profits to beef up coverage of election issues.

To make matters worse, it can be difficult to discern the agenda behind all of the third-party ads that are dominating the airwaves. Political ads always end, as they are required to do, with information about who paid for them. But special interests are hiding behind front groups with innocuous names like "Patriots and Puppies for an American's America." And these groups are pumping an exorbitant amount of money into local television stations.

In short, broadcasters are using the public airwaves to get rich while our democracy crumbles.

The Federal Communications Commission requires broadcasters to tell the public just how rich they are getting. Broadcasters must keep public files that contain important information about everything from who owns the station to who is paying for political advertising. The political files within these public files are a key puzzle piece to helping uncover the rest of the story.

Media strategists and advertising agencies pour money into television stations across the country to pay for premium ad slots — particularly in swing states and vulnerable districts. And with good reason: In 2008 the candidates who spent the most won their seats nine out of 10 times, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Ads are a proven formula — particularly attack ads, which are increasingly coming from third-party groups instead of the campaigns themselves, a tactic making candidates appear to be above the fray while their Super PAC allies engage in all the mudslinging.

FEC vs. FCC

Campaigns and donors are required to report certain information to the Federal Election Commission. And that information is available online in a searchable database.

But this database has its limits. The FEC collects data only on — wait for it — federal elections. So while there is information about spending on congressional races and the presidential election, there is nothing about gubernatorial races, statewide ballot initiatives, or national or local issue advertisements. Simply put, the FEC database doesn't tell the complete story.

In contrast, the FCC requires broadcasters to maintain records on all political advertising time they sell. This is the data that can give us the fullest picture of how money is influencing our elections.

And while the FEC data may show us that money is flowing from Super PACs and third-party groups into production companies and outside media buyers, it doesn't always reveal where the money goes next. It's only through the political files the FCC requires local stations to keep that we can really see where this vast amount of ad spending ends up — as well as which local communities have been targeted for a political advertising blitz.

Problem is, broadcasters don't want the public to have access to any of this information.

Broadcasters Have an Obligation to the Public

Broadcasters operate under a basic social contract: In exchange for using the public airwaves for free, broadcasters are supposed to give the public certain things in return. Among those is information on exactly how stations are serving the public interest. Broadcasters are required to regularly update their political files, which include information on who purchased the ads, the rates they were charged, the names of executives and directors for the funding entity and information on when the ads aired.

But accessing this information is anything but easy. The information is stored in filing cabinets at TV stations and is not available online. You have to go down to the station and pay for any photocopies of documents. Stations can charge the public whatever they deem is a “reasonable rate” —

which can be as much as \$1 per page. Accessing this “public” information can become quite cost prohibitive.

All of this points to the need for broadcasters to place these files online where anyone with an Internet connection can easily access them. And the FCC seems to agree that *public* information should actually be accessible to the *public*. The agency is currently considering rules that would require television broadcasters to put their public and political files online. But the broadcasters’ moaning is threatening to drown out all the FCC’s common-sense efforts.

Return of the Whinosaur

TV broadcasters have levied some (laughable) complaints about the FCC’s proposal — claiming, among other things, that maintaining paper files is more cost-effective than posting information on the Internet.

Broadcasters’ efforts to keep this information in the dark is appalling, to say the least. But that won’t stop the public from working to bring these files out of their dusty cabinets and into the light of day. Free Press members have already inspected over 50 stations across the country. And over 20,000 people have told the FCC that enough is enough: Broadcasters need to get with the times and post this information online.

In the meantime, though, we have to gather the data ourselves. If you want to join the efforts of Free Press volunteers who are **mining stations for this valuable information**, you can check out the **resources we’ve collected here** and sign up to do an inspection at your local station **here**.

And while you’re at it, remind the FCC that its proposal to put these files online is the **right idea**.