

# Mining TV Stations' Political Ad Files

## What's there, what's interesting and what you can do with the information you uncover

Free Press staff and volunteers have inspected political files at hundreds of local TV stations in cities around the U.S., and we've scanned and uploaded files to our [DocumentCloud](#) site. This work is part of our campaign to shine a spotlight on the shady organizations spending millions on political ads this year.

We've got some tips below on how you can use this data to write an article, a blog post or a letter to your local paper.

## But First ... What's a Political File?

TV broadcasters must maintain records documenting all political advertisements their stations air. These files are available to the public and contain a goldmine of information about who's buying political ads and how much they're paying for airtime.

These files include invoices explaining what each ad cost, lists of when each ad ran, and an "Agreement Form" that should note some of the names behind the Super PACs and tax-exempt 501(c)(4)s that are placing ads.

## Start Digging into the Files in Five Easy Steps:

We can't predict what great stories you'll find in the files, but here are some guidelines for navigating the forms you'll see.

- 1) Go to our [DocumentCloud](#) site, where you can search by station call letters or city/media market and see whether we've collected files from stations in your area. You can also search the FCC's [database](#) (but it includes only information from the four major network affiliates in the 50 biggest media markets).
- 2) Look at the Order or Invoice page on top. Here's what you'll likely see:
  - a. "Order": a vague description of the ad ordered
  - b. "Agency": the name of the ad buyer (the intermediary between the advertiser and the TV station)
  - c. "Advertiser": the person/organization purchasing airtime
  - d. Amount: The order/invoice should list the total amount spent.
- 3) Check the "flight dates" to see when each ad ran. You can then check your local TV listings to see what programs were on when the ads ran. The flight schedule will also break down the cost of each ad.
- 4) Find the "National Association of Broadcasters Form" or the "Agreement Form," which should provide more information, including the advertiser's mailing address and the names of officers and board members. (A copy of a check may provide similar details.)

## Why Do These Files Matter?

TV stations' political files are one of the best sources of information about political ad spending because:

- They include data on spending for state races, local races, ballot initiatives and national issue ads. Other sources include information only on ad spending in presidential and congressional races.

- They're updated roughly every 48 hours, far more frequently than the Federal Election Commission data.
- They require advertisers to list “chief executive officers or members of the executive committee or the board of directors.”

### **What's Possible With This Data?**

Here are some examples, with links to actual projects:

- Comparisons of [campaign ads versus campaign coverage](#) on your local station
- Data visualizations that [track the flow of money](#) around the country and interactive dashboards that [go in-depth](#) for an individual district
- Stories on the frequency of specific ads and [which demographic groups](#) the ads are targeting
- [Flowcharts](#) that [connect](#) the people [behind](#) the Super PACs and other third-party groups
- Cross-references of political ad data [versus](#) federal and state election reporting that illustrates whether campaigns are reporting their spending accurately

The list above is drawn from this *Columbia Journalism Review* [article](#). Free Press is collecting links to every article and project we find that uses political ad data and posting them to our Tumblr: <http://mediamoney2012.tumblr.com/>

So: Write an article or letter to the editor. Write a blog post and send us the link so we can spread the word. Tweet about what you find (use the hashtag #politicaladsleuth). Or drop us a line and we can brainstorm other ideas!