

## Informal Objection

### **RE: The license renewal application for WGN-TV, Chicago, IL.**

My name is Stephen H. Macek. I reside at 1201 Greensfield Dr., Naperville, IL, 60563 and have lived there for three and a half years. I am a regular viewer of WGN-TV -- in particular, of its late evening news program -- and of other area television stations.

In April and March of 1962, the FCC held hearings in Chicago to determine whether the city's television stations were living up to their obligation to serve the public interest, convenience and necessity (see Christopher Anderson and Michael Curtain, "Mapping the Ethereal City: Chicago Television, the FCC and the Politics of Place" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16 (3-4) 1999, pp. 289-305). Over four decades later, it is clear to me that another round of such hearings is long overdue.

The news and public affairs programming offered up by Chicago's commercial television broadcasters consistently ignores local political races, marginalizes dissident political perspectives, skimps on news about the poor, people of color and the working class, and focuses overwhelmingly either on stories of crime and mayhem or on human interest and celebrity gossip. For instance, a recent study of TV news in the Chicago market found that during one week in June 2005 "all the stations covered the Michael Jackson trial, as well as a sort of performance artist who had filmed himself falling off the Museum of Contemporary Art—both with multiple followup stories. Not one station covered the approval of state funds for CeaseFire, a community group credited with lowering the local murder rate by working with at-risk youth and combatants" (*Is This What Chicago Needs to Know?: Study of Local Television News, June 2005*, Chicago: Media Democracy Chicago, 2005, p. 7). At the same time, much of the entertainment programming on Chicago stations revels in vulgarity, violence and outright stupidity. All of this is especially true of the fare proffered by the Tribune Co.'s WGN-TV.

I contend that WGN has served the public interest poorly for the following reasons:

#### **1. Skewed News.**

Though WGN is owned by a parent company that specializes in news and owns newspapers in the three largest cities in the country, its news and public affairs programming consistently fails to provide Chicagoland residents with the news and information they need as citizens.

To begin with, WGN's coverage of the 2004 elections ignored many of the important choices facing voters at the Illinois ballot box and the information they gave viewers about the few races they did focus on was often trivial and politically meaningless. The abject failure of WGN's election reporting is perhaps best symbolized by the fact that the station decided not to air any of the 2004 campaign debates between U.S. Senate

candidates Alan Keyes and Barak Obama in their entirety, despite the fact that this particular race was in the national spotlight and much talked about by political pundits around the nation. According to a recent study of the performance of Chicago-area TV news outlets during the 2004 election, WGN devoted on only 7.4% of its newscasts in the last month of the campaign to election stories (S. Robert Lichter and Daniel Amundson, *2004 Campaign News Study in Chicago, Milwaukee and Portland Markets*, Washington, DC: Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2005, p. 5). Of the election stories it did air, fully 71% concerned the Presidential race. Only 11% of its political stories were about the U.S. Senate race and a mere four percent concerned elections for U.S. House of Representatives (*Ibid.*, p. 7). Shockingly, the station *did not broadcast a single story* about the many hotly-contested races for the Illinois House of Representatives during the month before election day and only 2 of the 492 election-related stories it aired in that period concerned local elections. Even more sobering, 38% of all the election stories WGN carried in the closing months of the campaign were devoted to aspects of the “horse race” between various candidates (i.e. focused on the candidate’s prospects rather than their policies or ideological positions) and only 15% dealt with substantive issues (*Ibid.*, p. 11). In short, WGN’s 2004 election coverage was abysmal and this fact alone should cause the FCC to closely scrutinize the station’s license renewal application.

But the WGN’s abandonment of its public trust has been more extensive and systematic than a few lapses in campaign reporting (serious as those lapses are).

Consider, for instance, their incomplete and often biased coverage of the so-called “war on terror” and, in particular, their coverage of the debate leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. While WGN did, from time to time, report on the large, rather rambunctious anti-war movement in Chicago and aired video of the anti-war demonstrations held in response to the initial invasion and at various times since then, never once, to my knowledge, did they air extended interviews with peace activists or critics of U.S. policy. At the same time, they consistently showcased the views of warmongers like President Bush, Vice President Cheney, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and went out of their way to present their rationales for going to war as credible and well-grounded. Essentially, they carried only one side of the debate and, as a result of this unbalanced coverage, the public lacked the information they needed to accurately assess the wisdom of the administration’s drive for war. Subsequent events have vindicated anti-war activists’ criticisms of many of the administration’s original arguments for invading Iraq yet WGN – unlike the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* – neglected to issue an apology for the credulous way it reported the administration’s bogus claims.

This pattern of pro-war, pro-administration bias did not go unnoticed by the station’s viewers. On August 16, 2005, I visited WGN’s offices and examined the contents of its public file, including viewer mail going back to the year 2001. One viewer letter from 2001 pleaded with the station to balance out its skewed, pro-Bush Administration coverage of the debate leading up to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan by reading the

author's anti-war essay on the air and by setting aside 3 minutes every day for comments by ordinary citizens. To my knowledge, the station never acted on this suggestion. There were other letters scattered across the years that also complained about the jingoistic tenor of the station's news shows.

The failure of WGN news and public affairs programming has been even more pronounced in cases where hard-hitting reporting might damage the interests of its parent company, the giant media conglomerate Tribune Co. As the FCC well knows, in 2002 and 2003 there was a lively public debate in this country about proposed new media ownership regulations that would have directly benefited the Tribune Co by eliminating the newspaper/broadcast outlet cross ownership ban. According to Robert McChesney, citizens sent the FCC and Congress some 2.3 million messages opposing the FCC's proposed regulations, by any measure an unprecedented outburst of public concern over an issue before the Commission (Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, p. 289). While the Tribune's paper *The Chicago Tribune* did carry occasional stories and updates on the controversy over media ownership rules—usually in the business section—WGN ignored it altogether until the day the FCC passed the new regulations over the objections of an angry public. Symptomatic of this failure to cover the “media ownership fight” of 2002 and 2003 was WGN refusal to cover an April 3, 2003 public forum on the issue held at Northwestern Law School in downtown Chicago. Even though the forum was attended by FCC commissioner Michael Copps, and even though a Tribune Co. executive was actually included as a panelist, WGN did not bother to send a camera crew (and, it is worth noting, *The Chicago Tribune* didn't carry anything about it until several days later, despite the fact that they had a reporter in attendance).

## **2. Trashy Entertainment.**

WGN's failures to serve the public interest go beyond the problems with their news and public affairs programming. The viewer mail I reviewed on my August 16 visit to the station included repeated complaints about the “trashy” nature of the station's entertainment programming, in particular the daytime talk show, “Maury,” which consumes two hours of the station's daytime schedule. One long, hand written 2001 letter singled out the station's daytime programming for perpetuating a “Sodom and Gomorrah” type of society and particularly took issue with one episode of “Maury” which featured a mother and daughter who were both strippers. Another 2004 e-mail labeled the show “disgusting” and yet another 2004 message chastised the station for its “vulgarity” and “immorality.”

## **3. Grossly Inadequate Children's Programming**

My viewing of WGN public file revealed that the station has been inundated over the past several years with mail complaining about the cancellation of the children's show “Bozo” and by more general complaints about the poor quality and lack of variety of its

children's programming. Moreover, according to the Children's Programming portion of the public file, WGN claims mindless cartoons such as "Baby Looney Tunes" and "Sabrina, the Animated Series" as part of the three hours of core educational children's programming it is required to air each week. To be sure, the show "Liberty Kids"—which they also claim as educational—does enlighten young viewers about life in colonial and revolutionary America. But what exactly, one wonders, is "Sabrina" educating them about? To treat such a program as fulfilling the educational obligations for TV license holders makes a mockery of the requirement.

#### **4. Hypercommercialism**

Anyone who has watched WGN in recent months cannot help but be struck by the number and frequency of commercials carried by the station. Coupled with the endless promos they carry for their news shows and for their sports coverage (especially of the Tribune Co.'s professional baseball franchise, the Chicago Cubs), these relentless commercial messages are not only annoying to adults but exert an unhealthy influence over children in the viewing audience who lack the maturity and rationality to see through advertising's manipulative persuasive tactics. As such, WGN is contributing to the commercial victimization of America's youth. This alone should be sufficient reason for the FCC to prevent them from continuing to using the public's airwaves.

For all the reasons cited above, I ask that the FCC deny WGN-TV's pending application to renew its broadcast license. At very least, we deserve an open hearing on WGN's application, held here in Chicago, so that Chicagoland resident can weigh in on the station's dismal performance.

**Date:** October 27, 2005.

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