



News Release

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Television Donates an Average of 15 Seconds an Hour to Public Service Advertising; 43% of Donated Time is in Overnight Hours

Children's and Health Issues Receive the Most Free Airtime

Washington, D.C. – A new national study on public service advertising finds that broadcast and cable television networks donate an average of 15 seconds an hour to air public service ads (PSAs), representing just under one-half of one percent (0.4%) of all airtime. By comparison, 25 percent of airtime is filled with paid advertising and promotions. A significant portion of the donated airtime (43%) is during the late night hours between midnight and 6 a.m.; nine percent is in prime time.

Shouting to be Heard: Public Service Advertising in a New Media Age was released today by the Kaiser Family Foundation at a forum of nonprofit groups, policymakers and media leaders brought together to discuss the future of public service advertising. The findings are based on one of the most comprehensive studies of PSAs ever conducted, including an analysis of a week's worth of programming from each of ten broadcast and cable networks in seven different markets.

More than one in three (37%) PSAs that receive donated airtime address a child-related topic, such as children's health care, parenting, education or mentoring. One out of every four donated PSAs (27%) is on a health-related topic.

The top four broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC) donate an average of 17 seconds an hour to PSAs, including 5 seconds an hour during prime time (for a total of 15 seconds per network during the three hours of prime time). Cable networks donate an average of seven seconds per hour to PSAs, including eight seconds an hour in prime time. Univision, the dominant Spanish-language network, donates 48 seconds per hour, including 49 seconds an hour in prime time.

"PSAs have been critical to groups trying to reach the public on issues from putting on seatbelts to putting out cigarettes," said Drew Altman, Ph.D., president of the Kaiser Family Foundation. "Whether you think the time donated to PSAs is a lot or a little to expect from the television industry, it's definitely an uphill struggle to reach the public and have an impact with the amount of time available."

In recent years, some groups have protested the use of network-sponsored campaigns featuring their own stars, calling them PSA-style promos, while others have defended this practice. The study found these PSAs account for 25% of all donated PSAs on the major broadcast networks. It also examined the length of PSAs and found that more than a third (37%) of the donated PSAs on the top four networks are 20 seconds or shorter in length.

When broadcasters are granted the use of public airwaves, they are legally required to "serve the public interest." Although there is no mandate that PSAs be a part of this public interest requirement, they have long been considered one way to meet it. Cable networks have no legal obligation regarding the public interest.

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BUYING AD TIME FOR PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGES

Some public education campaigns are buying ad time rather than relying solely on donated airtime to get their messages heard. The study found that one in three (36%) TV spots that have public service messages are paid for (these paid ads are not included in the totals cited above). High profile campaigns that have turned to buying time include the 'truth' antismoking campaign and that of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"As audiences scatter, TV and the Internet converge, and the use of paid PSAs grows, public service advertising may look very different in the future than it does today," said Vicky Rideout, a vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation. "Opportunities to reach mass audiences may be more limited, but opportunities to target messages to particular groups may grow."

SURVEY OF PUBLIC SERVICE DIRECTORS

In a companion survey of public service directors at local TV stations, also released today by the Kaiser Family Foundation, one in three (35%) say they are more likely to donate airtime to a group that also buys ads. According to this survey, which included interviews with more than 500 officials at affiliates of the top broadcast networks around the country, other factors that help a public service ad get on the air for free include being sponsored by a local organization (75% say this is a "major" influence), being sponsored by the station's parent network (36%), and allowing the local station to co-brand the spot or receive cross-promotion benefits in exchange for airing it (30%).

Speakers at today's forum in Washington, D.C. include FCC Members Kathleen Abernathy, Michael Copps and Kevin Martin; MTV president Judy McGrath; former UPN president Tom Nunan; and top representatives from AOL Time Warner and Microsoft. **The conference can be viewed live on www.kaisernetwork.org, beginning at 9 AM EST.**

Copies of the executive summary (#3152), content study report (#3150) and survey toplines (#3151) cited in this release are available, along with other relevant documents, on the Kaiser Family Foundation's web site at www.kff.org or by calling the Foundation's Publication Request Line at 1-800-656-4533.

Methodology: The study of television content was designed by Foundation staff in consultation with Professor Walter Gantz and Nancy Schwartz of Indiana University and was conducted by Professor Gantz and Ms. Schwartz. It analyzes a week's worth of programming on each of ten different channels: the broadcast networks ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC; the Spanish-language network, Univision; and the cable networks CNN, ESPN, MTV, Nickelodeon and TNT. For each channel, programming was sampled in seven different markets across the country. To avoid seasonal fluctuations, a composite week of programming was drawn for each network during the period from February – July 2000. A total of 1,680 hours of programming was analyzed, including 906 PSAs for which stations donated airtime and 520 paid PSAs, for which sponsors bought time. For each public service message identified, both the sponsor and the local station or franchise were contacted to determine whether the spot was a donated or paid PSA. The study used an inclusive definition of donated PSAs, including most community calendars, all network-branded campaigns, and spots run for free as part of the Office of National Drug Control Policy's requirement that stations donate time in exchange for ads purchased by the agency.

The survey of public service directors was designed and analyzed by Foundation staff, and fieldwork was conducted for the Foundation by International Communications Research between June 13 and July 10, 2001. Telephone interviews were conducted with a total of 513 public affairs directors and other involved in public service placement at affiliates of the six leading English-language broadcast networks around the country (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, and WB).

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