



**Annenberg Study Finds Wide Variability in Stations' Fact Checking Practices  
and Understanding of FCC Regulations**

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To better understand how local broadcast stations deal with third party ads and fact checking of political content in news and on line, 260 local broadcast television station managers and executives were surveyed from March 26 through June 8, 2012. The 260 included those responsible for stations under corporate ownership and locally owned stations. Because this was an opt-in sample, we do not know whether these 260 are representative of practices of broadcast stations in general. Our focus is on the consistency or variability of practices among the 260 managers and their understanding of FCC regulations governing the airing of various forms of political ads.

**We found wide variability in the understanding of federal regulations, as well as differences in the treatment of third-party political ads, the number who engage in “ad watches,” and the treatment of product advertising and political advertising.**

**Profile of Respondents**

Station Manager/Executive Profile:

**STATION TYPE**

- 71% From corporate-owned station
- 25% From locally-owned station
- 4% could not be determined

**MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area)**

- 43% top 100 MSAs
- 42% NOT from the top 100 MSAs
- 15% could not be determined

**REGION**

- 12% Northeast
- 22% Midwest
- 44% South
- 22% West

### **Understanding the Regulations**

Because of a problem in the original wording of the question, we analyzed only 197 of the 260 responses about FCC regulations. Among these 197, we found a range of understandings of the difference between regulations regarding ads for federal office candidates in which the candidate appears in the ad, and ads for state office candidates in which the candidate appears:

- 28% say the regulations concerning the broadcasting of political ads by candidates for state office are the same as FCC regulations for candidates for federal office
- 34% say that some regulations are the same and some are different
- 27% say that the regulations governing the broadcasting of political ads by candidates for state office are different
- 11% gave no answer

Further, the 197 station managers and executives differ in the ways in which their stations treated political ads by candidates for federal and state office:

- 75% say that ads run by a candidate for federal office in which the candidate appears must be run as presented
- 14% say that stations can edit or suggest edits for ads run by a candidate for federal office in which the candidate appears
- 54% say that ads run by a candidate for state office in which the candidate appears must be run as presented
- 32% say that stations can edit or suggest edits for ads run by a candidate for state office in which the candidate appears

### **Treatment of Third-Party Ads**

Among the 260 respondents we found variability in the treatment of third-party ads, as well. While most report airing third party ads (80% of those we interviewed), and over half (52%) say they have aired one in the past 12 months, some report screening for accuracy before airing and some do not.

- 59% of the 260 we interviewed say they take some steps to evaluate or assess the accuracy of the content before airing.
- 33% of the 260 we interviewed have ever rejected or refused to air a third-party ad; 13% have rejected or refused to air at least one third-party ad in the past 12 months.
- Among the 260 we interviewed, decisions about airing third party ads are made predominantly at the station level (76%); 15% report the decision is made at the corporate level.

### **Variability in station “Ad Watching” practices**

Among the 180 station managers and executives who say they air third-party political advertising and who manage a station with a news division, most report engaging in very little “ad watching” or on the air reporting of third party ad fact checking.

- 18% of the 180 say they air reports evaluating deceptive third party ads for either most or every deceptive third-party ad that their stations’ broadcast.
- 26% air such reports for “some” of the deceptive third party advertising they air.
- 36% report hardly or never airing such reports.

### **Product ads are given more scrutiny than candidate political ads and third-party political ads**

Overall respondents indicate that product ads are subject to greater scrutiny than third-party political ads.

Of the 260 station managers we interviewed,

- 85% say their station does some screening to decide whether or not to air product ads, compared with 59% of those we interviewed who screen for the accuracy of third-party ads
- 85% say their station has ever rejected or refused to air a product ad compared with 33% who say they ever rejected or refused a third-party political ad, and 7% who say they rejected a political ad for a candidate for federal office.

### **Methodology:**

On behalf of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) interviewed 260 local U.S. television station managers and executives from March 26 – June 8, 2012. Since this is a non-random sample, we cannot generalize these findings to the larger population of all station managers or calculate a margin of error for the reported percentages. PSRAI recruited respondents via pre-notification postal letters and follow up email invitations and/or telephone contact.

**\*This report is updated from a preliminary report dated May 22, 2012**

## Appendix—Survey Questions Included In This Report

Is your television station corporate-owned or locally-owned?  
(N=260)

%	
71	Corporate-owned
25	Locally-owned
4	No answer

Are the regulations concerning the broadcasting of political ads by candidates for state office the same as the FCC regulations for candidates for federal office, or are the regulations different?  
(N=197)

%	
28	Regulations are the same
27	Regulations are different
34	Some are the same, some are different
11	No answer

As far as you know, when a television station runs a political ad by a candidate for **STATE** office, in which the candidate appears, can the station edit or suggest edits to the content of the ad or does the ad have to be run as it was presented to the station by the candidate's campaign?<sup>1</sup>  
(Among those who were asked the question with the revised wording [N=197])

%	
32	Station can edit or suggest edits to the ad
54	Ad must be run as it was presented by the candidate's campaign
13	No answer

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "in which the candidate appears" was added during the interviewing period.

As far as you know, when a television station runs a political ad by a candidate for **FEDERAL** office, in which the candidate appears, can the station edit or suggest edits to the content of the ad or does the ad have to be run as it was presented to the station by the candidate’s campaign?<sup>2</sup>

*(Among those who were asked the question with the revised wording [N=197])*

%	
14	Station can edit or suggest edits to the ad
75	Ad must be run as it was presented by the candidate’s campaign
12	No answer

For each of the following, please indicate whether your television station has ever aired this type of advertising.

*(N=260)*

	YES%	NO%	NOT SURE%	NO ANSWER%
a. Product ads	96	3	*	0
b. Political ads by candidates for local office	91	8	1	0
c. Political ads by candidates for state office	90	9	1	0
d. Political ads by candidates for federal office	85	13	2	*
e. Political ads by third-party groups, such as PACs, that support a candidate for federal office but are not directly tied to the candidate’s campaign	80	16	4	0

In the **past 12 months**, has your television station aired any political ads by third-party groups that support a candidate for federal office?

*(Asked only of those who have aired third party ads in past 5 years, % reported based on all 260 respondents)*

%	
52	Aired third-party ads in past 12 months
15	Aired third-party ads but not in past 12 months
10	Aired third-party ads but not sure in past 12 months
2	Aired third-party ads but no answer about past 12 months
20	Never aired or not sure if ever aired third-party political ads

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “in which the candidate appears” was added during the interviewing period.

Regardless of whether your television station has ever aired any third-party political ads, does your television station take any steps to evaluate or assess the accuracy of the content in a third-party political ad when deciding whether or not to air it?

(N=260)

%	
59	Yes
32	No
10	No answer

Has your television station ever rejected or refused to air a political ad by a third-party group?

(N=260)

%	
33	Yes
54	No
13	No answer

How many third-party political ads has your television station decided not to air in the **past 12 months?**

*(Asked only of those who have aired third party ads in past 5 years, % reported based on all 260 respondents)*

%	
84	None
11	1-2
2	3-4
*	5-9
3	No answer

Who makes the decisions for your television station about airing a third-party political ad?  
(N=260)

%	
15	Corporate owner
75	Station manager or other executive at the station
1	Someone else at the station
5	Other ( <i>please specify</i> )
4	No answer

How often, during the political campaign season, does the news division of your television station air reports assessing the accuracy of the content of third-party political ads that you broadcast?  
(Based on those whose station has ever aired third-party political ads and who manage stations with news divisions [N=180])

%	
10	For every deceptive ad or almost every deceptive ad
8	For most deceptive ads
26	For only some of the deceptive ads
20	For hardly any deceptive ads
16	For none of the deceptive ads
21	No answer

Regardless of whether your television station has ever aired any product ads, does your station do any kind of screening to decide whether or not to air product ads?  
(N=260)

%	
85	Yes
14	No
1	No answer



Has your television station ever rejected or refused to air a product ad?  
(N=260)

%	
85	Yes
11	No
4	No answer

Has your television station ever rejected or refused to air a political ad by a candidate for federal office?  
(N=260)

%	
7	Yes
82	No
12	No answer

Thinking now just about political ads by candidates for federal office...

From what you know about government regulations affecting political ads, please indicate whether each of the following is a reason television stations can legally reject or refuse to air a political ad by a candidate for federal office, in which the candidate appears.<sup>3</sup>

(Among those who were asked the question with the revised wording [N=197])

[RANDOMIZE ITEMS]	YES%	NO%	NOT SURE%	NO ANSWER%
a. The ad is the wrong length.	65	16	11	9
b. The ad contains obscene content.	53	29	9	8
c. The ad has an inappropriate disclaimer.	70	15	7	9
d. The ad is not broadcast quality or does not meet broadcast standards for air.	51	31	10	8

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "in which the candidate appears" was added during the interviewing period.