



The Museum of Broadcast Communications

Museum

Collection

Exhibitions

Education

Events

Get Involved

Publications

News

ADVOCACY GROUPS

Advocacy groups—also called public interest groups, citizen groups, consumer activist groups, and media reform groups—have existed since the 1930s as consumer checks on a broadcast industry where decisions quite often have been based not on public interest standards but rather on economic incentives and regulatory mandates. Advocacy groups have carved a niche for themselves in the broadcast industry's policy-making apparatus by first defining key public interest issues and then by advocating ways by which broadcasters may address these issues.

Advocacy group characteristics have varied widely. Some have operated nationally with or without local chapters, and some have operated only locally. Some have remained active for many years, whereas the life span of others has been brief. Some advocacy groups have been well-financed, often receiving substantial foundation funding, while others have operated with little financial support. Practically all advocacy groups have relied on newsletter subscriptions, video purchases, and lectures as means of raising money. Finally, some advocacy groups have devoted exclusive attention to the broadcast industry, whereas other groups with a more varied menu of concerns have developed subsidiary units to deal with broadcast-related issues.

The total number of advocacy groups, past or present, is difficult to determine, given their ephemeral nature. However, a 1980 publication listed some 60 national and 140 local advocacy groups. Some of the more prominent groups have included the National Association for Better Broadcasting, the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, Action for Children's Television, Accuracy in Media, the National Black Media Coalition, and the Coalition for Better Television. Besides these, the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ has been a particularly effective advocacy group as have the Media Task Force of the National Organization for Women and the National Parent Teachers Association. Assisting these groups in legal, regulatory, and legislative matters have been pro bono public interest law firms such as the Citizens Communication Center.

Advocacy groups did not disappear; rather their issue emphasis took a decidedly conservative turn. Groups such as Accuracy in Media and the Coalition for Better Television gained momentum in the 1980s with a large constituency, substantial funding, and a focus on ridding the airwaves of programs that either were biased in news reporting or contained an excess of sex and violence. Extensive mailing lists also helped these groups to quickly galvanize public support for their causes.

Advocacy groups promoting a liberal agenda and with sights set on molding public opinion on a more tightly focused set of special interests than in the past also began appearing in the 1990s. These interests included gun control, AIDS awareness and prevention, abortion rights, world hunger, and the environment. Led by Amnesty International, The Environmental Media Association, and Center for Population Options, these advocacy groups succeeded to some extent by convincing a number of television network producers to insert messages in prime-time entertainment programs that addressed the advocacy groups' concerns.

The role of advocacy groups through the years has engendered a mixture of praise and criticism. While the objectives, methods and zealotry of some groups have met with scorn, the efforts of others have been viewed as beneficial for, at the very least, making the broadcast industry sensitive to public needs and concerns.

-Ronald Garay

FURTHER READING

Bittner, John R. *Law and Regulation of Electronic Media*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982; 2nd Edition, 1994.

Branscomb, Anne W., and Maria Savage, *Broadcast Reform at the Crossroads*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Kalba Bowen Associates, 1987.

Brown, Les. "Is the Public Interested in the Public

Early advocacy groups such as the Radio Council on Children's Programming and the Women's National Radio Committee, both formed in the 1930s, were concerned with program content. Group members monitored radio programs, reported their opinions on acceptable and unacceptable content in newsletters, and gave awards to radio stations and networks airing exceptional programs. That practice and mode of consumer/broadcaster interaction continued until the 1960s when the broadcast industry became caught-up in a sweeping consumers' movement. During the latter part of the 1960s, advocacy groups, led most effectively by the United Church of Christ, began challenging television station license renewals through a legal instrument called a "petition to deny." Such petitions were aimed at denying license renewal for television stations whose programming or employment practices were considered discriminatory. Advocacy groups also were successful in forcing broadcasters to accede to programming and minority employment demands contained in "citizen agreements." When such unprecedented public access into the regulatory and station decision-making process won approval of both the federal courts and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), advocacy groups blossomed.

The most common targets of advocacy groups during the 1970s continued to be minority programming and employment practices. However, violent program content, children's programming, and general public access to the airwaves also took on significance. Advocacy group tactics during this period included the petitions to deny and citizens agreements noted above as well as participation in FCC rule making and congressional hearings, actual or threatened program sponsor boycotts, and publicity. Advocacy group achievements during the 1970s usually came in small doses, but major successes included the improvement in broadcast station employment opportunities for women and minorities, greater public participation in the broadcast regulatory process, improvement in children's programming, and the banishment of cigarette advertising from the airwaves.

The nature of advocacy groups began to change during the 1980s. A more conservative political agenda derailed the consumers' movement that had bolstered the more liberal-minded advocacy groups of the 1970s. Moreover, public interest law firms and foundations that had funded many of the more prominent advocacy groups during the 1970s began either disappearing or turning their attention elsewhere. Changes in the broadcast industry itself—deregulation, the rise of cable television, and changing station/network ownership patterns—also reversed many of the early advocacy group achievements and left the leadership as well as

Interest?" *Television Quarterly* (New York), Fall, 1979.

Cole, Barry, and Mal Oettinger. *Reluctant Regulators*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Company, 1978.

Friedman, Mel. "Will TV Networks Yield to New Pressure Groups?" *Television/Radio Age* (New York), 4 May 1981.

Garay, Ronald. "Access: Evolution of the Citizen Agreement." *Journal of Broadcasting* (Washington, D.C.), Winter 1978.

Guimary, Donald L. *Citizens' Groups and Broadcasting*. New York: Praeger, 1975.

Hodges, Ann. "Pressure Group Crusade Seen as Top Problem by Networks, Producers." *Houston Chronicle*, 19 May 1981.

Krasnow, Erwin, Laurence D. Longley, and Herbert A. Terry. *The Politics of Broadcast Regulation*. New York: St. Martin's 1978, 3rd Edition, 1982.

Leddy, Craig. "Probing a Pressure Group." *Electronic Media* (Chicago), 26 April 1984.

Mahler, Richard. "How the Crusades Became Prime for TV." *Los Angeles Times*, 14 April 1991.

Montgomery, Kathryn C. *Target: Prime Time: Advocacy Groups and the Struggle over Entertainment Television*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting. *Citizens Media Directory, 1980 Update*. Washington, D.C.: National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, 1980.

Rowe, Chip. "Watchdog Watch." *American Journalism Review* (College Park, Maryland), April 1993.

Shapiro, Andrew O. *Media Access*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1976.

Smith, F. Leslie, Milan D. Meeske, and John W. Wright, III. *Electronic Media and Government*. White Plains, New York: Longman, 1995.

See also [ACT \(Action for Children's Television\)](#); [Experimental Video](#); [Public Access Television](#)

membership of many of the groups in disarray.