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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Representative Anna G. Eshoo (D-California 14th) introduced the Broadcast Licensing in the Public Interest Act today. This bill would strengthen public interest obligations on broadcasters.

"I've become increasingly concerned about the effect of media ownership on our democracy, Eshoo said. "The corporatization of our media and the massive consolidation of media outlets are the root cause of the erosion in public discourse in this country."

Television stations devote less than one half of one percent of total programming time to local public affairs. Four out of ten commercial TV stations surveyed in 2003 aired no local public affairs programs. 92% of the election coverage aired by the national networks in the two weeks before Election Day 2004 was devoted to the presidential contest leaving only 8% for local elections and referendums.

Yesterday, the Federal Communications Commission relaxed its long-standing cross ownership rules amid public outcry to maintain the ban on owning a radio or television station and a newspaper in the same market.

"I believe relaxed ownership rules and rubber-stamped postcard license renewals have contributed to the degradation of television and radio programming," said Eshoo, a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet. "When a broadcaster receives a license they are investing in public responsibility and service. I believe we need to reinvigorate the public interest requirement on broadcasters."

The Communications Act of 1934, as amended, requires broadcasters to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity." However the Act does not specify how the "public interest" is best served. The Broadcast Licensing in the Public Interest Act requires broadcasters to demonstrate a dedication to specified public interest obligations. The bill requires broadcast licensees seeking a renewal to demonstrate that they have made a dedication to civic affairs of its community and to local news gathering. The bill also mandates that broadcasters air locally produced programming and make a commitment to provide a public presentation of the views of candidates and issues related to local, statewide or national elections. Finally, the bill mandates that broadcasters provide quality educational programming for children and reduces a broadcast license term from eight years to three. The three-year term will bring greater oversight and scrutiny to license renewals.

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