

# FCC Queries TV Stations On Video News Releases

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The Federal Communications Commission has sent letters to 77 television broadcasters, asking whether their stations had properly labeled "video news releases" -- video press releases that sometimes are aired and presented as news reports -- before broadcasting them.

Video news releases became a hot political topic last year after it was discovered that the White House paid to produce public relations spots for its initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind, and then gave them to television stations, some of which aired them as authentic news broadcasts.

The FCC inquiry follows an April study by the watchdog group Center for Media and Democracy that found that 77 stations had aired video news releases without properly labeling them. The stations are owned by major broadcasters, such as CBS Corp., Walt Disney Co.'s ABC and Maryland's Sinclair Broadcast Group.

The survey's "fake news" spots, as the center calls them, were produced by corporations, such as Panasonic Corp. and General Motors Corp. and trade groups, such as the American Dental Association and the Flower Promotion Organization.

None of the releases in the study were paid for by the federal government.

In January, for example, three television stations -- in Virginia, California and South Carolina -- aired a video by Robin Raskin from the Consumer Electronics Show. Raskin is an author and former technology magazine editor who also consults for several technology companies. In the report, a satellite media tour transmitted to several TV stations, she promoted gadgets made by Nokia, Motorola Inc., Texas Instruments Inc. and Swiffer, owned by Procter & Gamble Co. The spot was paid for by the four companies. Only one of the three stations told viewers at the end of the segment that "this interview with Robin was provided by vendors at the consumer trade show," the Center for Media and Democracy's survey found.

Some stations air the spots as is, while others use them as raw material and add their own reporting and video. Under FCC regulations, stations must label the video news releases much like infomercials, where viewers are told that the show they are about to watch

has been paid for by a sponsor and is a lengthy advertisement for a product or service.

"We think that the investigation is really important because otherwise stations won't take seriously the disclosure laws that are already on the books," the study's co-author, Diane Farsetta, said in an interview. "The current practice is such a flagrant breach of the disclosure laws, we're happy that it looks like the FCC is putting some teeth in them."

If stations do not label the video news releases, they can be fined up to \$32,500 per incident and face a revocation hearing for their FCC-issued broadcast license.

"The public is misled by individuals who present themselves to be independent, unbiased experts or reporters but are actually skills promoting a prepackaged corporate agenda," FCC commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein, a Democrat, said in a statement yesterday. "The public has a legal right to know who seeks to persuade them so they can make up their own minds about the credibility of the information presented. Shoddy practices make it difficult for viewers to tell the difference between news and propaganda."

Last April, the five-member FCC unanimously passed a notice reminding broadcasters that they must label video news releases. Included in the vote was FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin, a Republican. The FCC is made up of three Republicans and two Democrats.

The National Association of Broadcasters, the trade group of television and radio station owners, declined to comment on the FCC inquiry, but the association "previously recommended that stations tell viewers in advance if they are about to watch government-supplied VNRs," said Dennis Wharton, a spokesman for the association.

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