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Murdoch TV Station Moves from NYC to NJ...in Just 2 Hours!

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On Wednesday night at a [public hearing](#) held at Rutgers University, two Federal Communications Commissioners, Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and scores of activists berated Rupert Murdoch's WWOR-TV, Channel 9. Purchased in 2000 by Murdoch's NewsCorp., the Secaucus, New Jersey-based station has operated as if it were based in New York City. Independent studies confirmed that the station devotes over 80 percent of its news coverage to New York and less than 20 percent to New Jersey.

Here's where it gets interesting: Less than two hours after the hearing began, Channel 9 launched a new brand on its Web site, and the New York skyline was replaced with a photo of the George Washington Bridge that connects New York and New Jersey.

Clearly, Channel 9 staff rushed to their computers after getting beat up at the public forum, but as I write this post, New Jersey still appears [nowhere on the site's home page](#) -- and clicking on the weather link still takes you to the forecast for Central Park. At the hearing, when WWOR-TV showed up with the nightly news anchors and camera crews, they carefully placed [masking tape to cover up](#) the words "New York" on their gear. They were obviously feeling the heat.

Earlier this year, when WWOR-TV's license first came up for renewal, New Jersey citizens came together under the umbrella of [Voice for New Jersey](#) and filed a petition with the FCC to deny the renewal. This effort was bolstered by another petition from Rainbow PUSH and the United Church of Christ, Office of Communications Inc. Senator Lautenberg demanded that the FCC hold Wednesday's hearing.



At the hearing, members of Voice for New Jersey presented damning evidence of WWOR-TV's utter lack of coverage of New Jersey's issues. In fact, among all the stations broadcasting into northern New Jersey, WWOR provided the least amount of local news for New Jersey communities. The station carried virtually no coverage of local and regional elections. In the 30 days prior to the 2005 elections, WWOR ran only 10 stories focused on the New Jersey election -- and nine of those focused on the governor's race, almost totally ignoring local races. Seven of the 10 stories aired in the final week before the election.

This hearing was a rare event for an FCC that has turned the license renewal process into rubber stamp. The agency used to require media companies -- who use the valuable public airwaves for free -- to renew their licenses and document their service to local communities every three years. Industry lobbyists with bags of campaign cash have since extended that timeline, giving stations eight years between license renewals and removing any teeth the agency once had to enforce stations' public interest obligations. Pretty much all they have to do now is send in a postcard.

On paper, all stations that broadcast over the public airwaves are required to serve their local communities, but a special set of circumstances surrounds WWOR-TV. Prior to 1982, no VHF broadcast TV stations were located in New Jersey. WWOR-TV became the first after Congress passed a law that required the FCC to automatically renew the station's license if WWOR-TV moved to New Jersey and agreed to "operate in New Jersey for the benefit of the people in our State."

This gave local citizen groups even more ammo when they argued that WWOR-TV -- with a congressional mandate to cover New Jersey -- failed to uphold its obligation to serve local needs. Judging by the station's desperate efforts to change their brand on the heels of the hearing, I would say that the citizens of New Jersey made an impact. But a new brand does not a local station make. WWOR-TV has been [called out](#), and the FCC has taken notice. But if last night is any indication, it is going to take more than a new Web site graphic to satisfy New Jersey citizens.

Josh Stearns co-authored this post.

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