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ABSTRACT

Contending that public broadcasting has great potential to invigorate national discourses and to function as an agent of social change; at the beginning of the 21st century, many public television licensees are united solely by a core programming schedule and the need to raise funds at least four times a year. The paper traces the history of public broadcasting, noting that just as the history of United States public media is a narrative of visionary voices, it is also an American tragedy, a tale of loss, waste, and failed potential. It analyzes the "Democracy Project," Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) idea of civic journalism, an attempt at involving the American public in politics and voting, and concludes that even though the Democracy Project won an Angel Award for excellence in media in 1997, it had "underwhelming viewer responses." Public purposes formed an underpinning philosophic foundation for early public media, but after the spectrum battles of 1934 and 1950-51 and Public Television Act of 1967, a compromise in public media practice produced a narrowed institutional vision. The paper delineates a program for reform of public television, one in which public television is designed to perform public service and restore public practices. (Contains 54 references.) (NKA)

A NEW VISION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING: THE SUMMONS TO REBUILD

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A NEW VISION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING: THE SUMMONS TO REBUILD

Public broadcasting has great potential to invigorate important national discourses and to function as an agent of social change. Its earliest leaders were champions of public speech, participatory democracy, and the use of broadcasting to solve common problems. These public media visionaries included Judge Ira Robinson (3), who said radio was the "greatest implement of democracy yet given to mankind;" Richard Hull, who called noncommercial broadcasting a "social dream" (Robertson, "Hull Interview": 6); and Ron Hulbert, who employed education as social reform in the early 1960s:

> The urban areas in the state [of Alabama] had fine school systems but the rural systems in Alabama were handicapped because the better qualified teachers gravitated to the urban centers. The schools in the rural areas were not only handicapped from talent but from funds. Many did not have full terms of school each year. Certain counties of the state would start school early in the summer and then turn school out in the fall for cotton picking.
>
> The cry, and the very plausible argument that I presented to the members of the legislature and to all of the groups to which I spoke, was that equal opportunity was going to be enhanced in such a way that the people in the poor and the deprived areas of the state not only should have but they must have the access to the best that there is. And that every child in Alabama was entitled to the best (Robertson, "Hulbert Interview": 7).

Like Frieda Hennock, who led the fight for reserved educational channels in the fifties, and Lyndon Johnson, who called on the U.S. Congress to create the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, these individuals were committed to public service broadcasting--a television system that acted in the public interest, cultivated community involvement, and supported excellence in education, communication, and the creative arts. All pursued the vision that public broadcasting could invigorate discussion, engage a working democracy, and promote cultural diversity as a staple of American life. Like public sphere scholars Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, and Jurgen Habermas,

these founders of public broadcasting desired the creation of a modern polis that could transform private people into active citizens with commitments to the life of the common.

Despite these historical underpinnings of publicness, however, public broadcasting has abandoned many of its early visions of democratic media, aligning itself--not with performative speech and social reform--but rather with the goals and practices of the market. This alters public media's form and function and makes it vulnerable to attack, especially by those who would eliminate public funding. Even more critically, the absence of an institutional identity built on shared public goals and a powerful sense of its own history precludes public television from moving with confidence in the American social landscape. A system that has become increasingly timid, oriented to the bottom line, and a victim of internal struggle and infighting, public service broadcasting falters in a complicated, competitive media environment. Working without a coherent vision rooted in original purposes, public television professionals grapple with diminishing viewership, insufficient resources, and a marginalized stature for public media in the larger culture. As Aufderheide (1991: 176) has observed, public television was once the sole source for the "safely splendid," in-depth public affairs programs, and quality children's shows. Now PBS vies with a range of other niche services for the audiences once considered public TV's core constituency.

In addition, that public TV offers few programs for ethnic minorities, working people, teenagers, the elderly, rural America, and social activists further narrows public broadcasting's audience and brings into question its claim that it provides programs for all Americans. Public television, developed as the people's television, is seen as an alternative and peripheral text, operating at the edges of American social life. Lacking a unifying public vision--and seemingly

complacent in keeping it that way--U.S. public broadcasting enters the twenty-first century as a narrow shadow of the democratic media system its founders envisioned.

The critique that public broadcasting acts without a compelling mission is not uncommon. Communication scholars and PTV professionals alike argue that a lack of institutional purpose prevents public TV from moving with accomplishment in American social life. Former PBS president Larry Grossman, for example, has maintained that public television's lack of mission not only dooms it to second-class status, without mechanisms to make timely program decisions, but also keeps the system at war with itself (Sucherman 68). James Day (1995: 357), former General Manager of WNET/New York, bemoans PTV's "vanished vision" of comprehensive and diverse service; and Robert Avery (1980: 126) and Williard Rowland (157)--media scholars who have analyzed public broadcasting policy since the late 1960s--have argued the system acts only as a "palliative" to the weaknesses of commercial broadcasting.

Even the popular press has brought a critical eye to public TV practice. A 1987 drawing by nationally syndicated cartoonist Pat Oliphant depicted a desolate desert scene populated only by two vultures, an iguana, and a spindly-legged, unshaven beggar wearing nothing but a diaper and a sign that read, "PBS, Lost, Please Help" (Oliphant 69). The cartoon's critique of public TV as a bewildered and lost soul in America's "Great Wastelands" was echoed that same year by PBS producer Stuart Sucherman, who characterized public television as an

> unfocused underachiever, best known for its gigantic potential. . . .[We cannot] overlook the sad and blatant flaws in the way public TV is run. American public television keeps the phosphors glowing and occasionally sets the screen on fire. I've been proud to work in the system as a producer and a station executive from the beginning. But when I compare its output today [in 1987] with the high hopes of 1967, I can say bluntly and fairly: The system doesn't work (Sucherman 68).

Ten years later, outside consultants called in to help unify PTV would offer a similar view. BMR Associates observed in 1996:

> Public television is neither a single institution nor a community, but a pluralistic society whose members have different and often conflicting goals. . . . PTV professionals rarely sit down and face together the consequences of their views--or the consequences of their inability to agree. . . . Our present hypothesis is that, as time has passed, [a] sense of national purpose has slowly eroded. . . . As a result, local licensees feel less responsibility for the welfare of the national phenomenon we know as public television.
>
> In the past, certain external forces--most notably, the almost universal need for federal support--exerted a steadying and unifying force. The threatened absence of federal funding as a unifying issue exposes PTV's *underlying instability* ("PTV: pluralistic society": 17) (italics added).

NAEB, a forum for innovative approaches and the publisher of several public media journals, disbanded in 1981. The PBS annual meeting, once a debate of vision and direction, has disintegrated into a series of sales and marketing workshops. Lacking consistent goals, commitments, definitions of service, and even a common conversation, public TV flounders. As we enter the twenty-first century, many PTV licensees are united solely by a core programming schedule and the need to raise funds at least four times a year.

MOMENTS OF COMPROMISE AND CONTAINMENT

Engelman (1996: 13) and Welling (21) suggest that U.S. public media originated in early public notions of American broadcasting that not only viewed the airwaves as a tool for participatory democracy, but also bound broadcasters in a "direct creative relationship to the communities they serve[d]" (Welling 21). The concept that radio and television should enable public speech, community attachments, and democratic practice resonates with the primary documents I encountered in public broadcasting archives. Numerous memos, reports, letters, speeches, diaries, news accounts, and videos position public broadcasting as an institution with

responsibilities to public life. For example, Hartford Gunn (WGBH/Boston), Donley Feddersen (WTIU/Indiana University), and a small group of station managers worked together to refine the system's "Declaration of Principles" in December 1978. Their report described the value of cultural diversity, commonness, and democratic discourses:

> The strength of our nation depends on the ability of our people to govern themselves wisely. Only an informed and enlightened citizenry can shape its own future and assert the inalienable rights of individuals while guarding the essential interests of society. Knowledge and understanding are the foundations of a democracy.
>
> Public television offers a unique means for ensuring the integrity of these foundations. Owned and governed by nonprofit public institutions and motivated by the desire to respond to the needs of the public, it attempts to reflect the diversity of our people, the richness of our heritage, and the vitality of our culture; to provide a forum for many points of view; and to illuminate the common bonds that tie all mankind together.
>
> We believe it is to the benefit of the American people. . .to ensure that such service shall exist to give voice to the needs, the interests, and the aspirations of all the people, and that they shall be free and independent from interference or control by those who would use them for their own purposes ("A Declaration of Principles" 10).

Robert Blakely (1971: 10) adopted the term "broadcasting for public purposes" as the most descriptive name for public broadcasting; he argued for community governance of the airwaves:

> Broadcasting for public purposes is new, incomplete, malnourished and neglected. But it holds the seeds of larger things. Its potentialities will be discovered and developed only as large numbers and many groups of the American people come to regard it, not as an *institution*, but as *their instrument* to use for the purposes that matter most to them (Blakely 1971: 10) (italics included in original).

Ira Robinson (9) was committed to popular expression: "To my mind the radio is the voice of the public."

Just as the history of U.S. public media is a narrative of visionary voices, however, it is also an American tragedy, a tale of loss, waste, and failed potential. During three historical moments--Wagner-Hatfield in 1934, the FCC allocations of 1950-51, and the Public Broadcasting

Act of 1967--the philosophy and structure of nonprofit media took center stage; and the national conversation turned to issues of spectrum control, educational reform, and popular community. Despite the promise of the moment, broadcast reformers fumbled, hedged, and compromised. Making choices in 1934, 1950-51, and 1967 that satisfied the status quo, their chances for increased resources and greater social influence slipped away. As the following synopses of these three important periods reveal, the Great Depression, the Red Scare, and the 1960s each provided a rich and complicated social landscape in which to debate democratic media. Even more importantly, each also challenged public media to action, to hone its vision of service through service. In each instance, the road taken abdicated public media's responsibility as change agent and narrowed the public sphere.

Wagner-Hatfield and Section 307(c):

Written by a Catholic priest and a Labor lawyer and sponsored by two leading New Deal Progressives, the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment was introduced from the floor of the U.S. Senate on May 15, 1934. This legislation proposed the reservation of a fourth of all radio allocations for noncommercial use. Despite an ardent defense by Senate sponsors Richard Wagner (D-NY) and Henry Hatfield (D-WVa), the amendment did not pass; four hours of debate resulted in a disappointing vote of 42-23. Later that afternoon, legislation creating the Communications Act of 1934 and mandating the status quo for commercial broadcasting passed the Senate on a voice vote. A congressional opportunity to establish a protected space on the spectrum for the diverse and multi-vocal voices of non-profit radio had been defeated by commercial interests.

Section 307(c) came before the American public and the Federal Communications Commission five months later. Offered as a sop to proponents of Wagner-Hatfield, this

amendment to the Communications Act of 1934 called for a regulatory study into the set-aside of channels for nonprofit radio. Appearing before the newly-formed Federal Communications Commission, noncommercial broadcasters made their case for reserved spectrum in the last public battle over control of U.S. airwaves until the FCC allocations of TV frequencies in 1952. In hearings that produced 14,000 pages of text, broadcast reformers failed before a tightly orchestrated opposition by commercial broadcasters. Even so, the concepts underpinning nonprofit radio--commitments to a participatory public, cultural diversity, education, vigorous public discourse, and citizen access to voice and governance--were not inappropriate to the historical moment; and the possibilities for media reform were significant. Importantly, the noncommercial set-aside represented an effort to challenge the hegemony of for-profit media through federal statute.

Although noncommercial radio would face an unsympathetic FDR administration, a devastated economy, and the lack of a unifying network, there was nonetheless significant popular and legislative support for reserved nonprofit frequencies. As Variety reported on May 8, 1934:

> Wagner-Hatfield Amendment, most serious threat encountered in years of warfare with educational groups, has strong backing and was believed today to have better than a 50-50 chance of being adopted. Catholic church, National Grange, assorted radio-education groups, and many lesser but potent organizations are riding the bandwagon and threatening to apply heat to Senators who turn thumbs down on scheme ("Air Enemies Unite Forces": 37).

The following week, James Hanley, member of the Federal Communications Commission, was quoted in the New York Times as calling for new radio allocations, "using as a yardstick in the New Deal the welfare of all listeners" ("Hanley Suggests a New Deal"). Later that summer, a letter to WOI/Ames General Manager W. I. Griffith from station engineer Andy Woolfries suggested support for set-aside spectrum space was still active:

> As you know, the Wagner Bill disigned (sic) to give 25% of available channels to educational and religious stations, showed surprising strength at the last session of Congress. The radio section of the Federal Communications Commission is known to be in favor of a definite percentage assignment and is (sic) called for hearings to begin on October 1. This, of course, is exceedingly disquieting to commercial stations, since the allotment would be on a state quota basis (Letter to W. I Griffith; 8/20/34).

One cannot discount the resources employed by CBS and NBC lobbyists in the campaign against protected reservations for nonprofit broadcasting use. Equally damaging to the broadcast reform movement, however, was its own internal confusion, lack of organizational unity, and failed commitments to creative and widespread spectrum use. Lacking substantive commitments to popular voices, nonprofit radio could neither develop nor sustain a powerful, persuasive argument for public channels. Ironically, the hearings' most eloquent witness for popular access to radio may have been William S. Paley, who appropriated ideas of a participatory public to cement the dominance of for-profit media:

> Educational, informative, and generally cultural programs have played a large part in these broadcasts which have attracted and held our millions of listeners. They are not there because they elevate and improve people's minds, according to special standards prescribed by radio executives. They are there, rather, because they reflect the interests of a very important number of groups in the community. They are there because our constant policy is to give such groups a voice, and these groups cooperate with us constantly in creating these programs (Paley, Statement 5).

The hearings on Section 307(c) resulted in a Commission ruling that denied noncommercial broadcasters reserved radio frequencies. Even more critically, however, the choices and ambivalence of nonprofit media in 1934 also set in place containment practices that have since allowed the FCC, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and free market PTV professionals to limit public media's structural access to the public sphere. Not only do new CPB regulations tie federal allocations to marketplace goals, they also threaten to reduce the number of

public TV stations receiving Community Service Grants and promote talk of selling off spectrum assets (Bedford 10). These moves to downsize the system reduce public broadcasting's base and are further evidence of public media's failed commitments to diversity and minority audiences. It is ironic that CPB, once the shield for public broadcasting, and a group of public broadcasting professionals have joined in action that narrows the potential and reach of public TV. Assuming new affiliations with the market, they function--like the FCC in 1934 and 1950-51--to limit the airwaves, privilege the mainstream, and exclude minority voices.

Debated in Washington, D.C., hearing rooms in October and November of 1934, Section 307(c) was the final act in broadcast reform's seven-year struggle to challenge the advertiser-supported funding paradigm that became the standard in American broadcasting. This contest over spectrum control set in place a policy that effectively denied noncommercial radio access to the AM band for the long term. Importantly, it also established powerful, taken-for-granted parameters for public broadcasting's future defense of public channels, encoding the system's silences about diverse spectrum control as an enduring argument for mainstream, representative public speech.

FCC Hearings for Educational Frequencies, 1950-51:

In 1950-51--as the country worried about Communism, Korea, the Bomb, large organizations, television, and its children--almost a hundred proponents of nonprofit broadcasting took the stand for educational television. An old conversation about control of the airwaves--talk of facilities, frequencies, and access to the spectrum--had opened; and this time nonprofit broadcasters were ready, claiming 242 reserved channels for educational TV stations. The determination to offer a viable alternative to commercial programming, coupled with the window

of opportunity provided by the FCC post-war freeze on allocations, enabled public media to seize and hold the rhetorical moment, ultimately gaining 11.7 percent of the spectrum.

The 1950s campaign for public frequencies was a lively and persuasive discourse produced largely by educators who were convinced that U.S. education would be significantly improved through the use of television technology. Many also believed that their efforts were nonprofit television's last chance for spectrum space, and they joined in a national effort to produce the electromagnetic framework that stands today as channels for public television. Even so, the strategic decision by the JCET (Joint Committee on Educational Television) and NAEB (National Association of Educational Broadcasting) to promote a specialized, in-school use of noncommercial TV was a move that once more abandoned the constituencies of the 1930s and narrowly defined educational television as instructional. A public service became a teaching tool; and the cost was a public mission, a broad-based audience, and an enduring institutional identity.

The losses of the fifties continue to frame the practices of public broadcasting. Not only did the FCC's 1952 spectrum allotment restrict noncommercial broadcasting to the edges of public life by denying it the available and preferred broadcasting technology of VHF, the system's own limited self-definition has produced a public media system incapable of sustained public work. Especially troubling is the reluctance of public broadcasters to apply the lessons of progressives such as John Dewey to solve social problems, develop innovative teaching, and create public spaces for dialogue. Like other progressives, Dewey maintained that education was a process of social life and the means for social change. Education became not only the necessary precondition for societal reform, but was actually the foundation of democratic practice. He advocated experiential engagement and the "busy workshop;" and he was adamantly opposed to top-down teaching and passive reception. Dewey's was a pedagogy of social life and classroom

activity, a theory with commitments to daily life; neighborly ties; and interactive students, teachers, and texts. His work stands today, as it did in 1890 and 1950-51, as a standard bearer for innovative, student-based education.

Public TV's efforts in education are also rightly and widely acclaimed. On average, U.S. public stations air five and a half hours of instructional broadcasting every day, with 24 million American schoolchildren receiving some part of their curriculum from television and video. Since its introduction in 1950-51, educational TV has become an indispensable player in the classroom:

> Public television's instructional programming has been popular with teachers from the beginning because almost all of it is custom-made and curriculum-driven. Accompanied by printed teaching materials and other aids, much of it is of high quality. . . . Nor is there a lack of quantity; in the summer of 1992, more than 120 new instructional series were available to schools for the first time. As a producer of instructional programming, the public television community has no peer (Quality Time 24).

As innovative and successful as these programs, most of them are clearly instructional materials, not interactive lessons for living. Described as "aids to education," "tools for teachers," and "technologies in the classroom," these are the late twentieth century's version of the top-down, ready-made, teacher-directed materials Dewey opposed. A student, his writing reminds us, should not be "one who stands at the end of a pipe line receiving material conducted from a distant reservoir of learning" (Dewey, 1931: 34). Whether the reservoir is the superintendent's office, the local university, or PBS, the result is the same: programs built for "listening."

Further, lacking a reform agenda, educational television offers up materials that illuminate teacher lesson plans, not democratic process and community life. The decision in 1950-51 to settle for a depoliticized, school-centered, and distinctly secondary service was a compromise that limited public television's early mission to instructional programs. In the years since, it has crippled the system's internalized sense of confidence and purpose; and as a result, Dewey's

beliefs in schools that enable democratic practice and social reform fail for lack of a corresponding vision:

> I believe education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. I believe that all reforms which rest simply upon changes in mechanical or outward arrangements are transitory and futile (Kloppenberg 374).

Despite public broadcasting practice that prescribes in-school TV as largely illustrative and classroom-bound, models do exist for Deweyian approaches to educational television. Just as the terms "engaging," "interactive," and "experiential" invoke Dewey's theory of education, they also describe film producer Steven Spielberg's StarBright World, Project IMPACT, and Breakthrough to Literacy, an innovative early reading program developed at the University of Iowa. StarBright World is an interactive, in-hospital computer network that allows seriously ill children from across the nation to interact with one another. Engaging in educational activities and conversation, they help each another cope with the day-to-day realities of illness. Through information, entertainment, and dialogue, StarBright enables a community of kids and addresses the core issues they face everyday--loneliness, pain, fear, and depression ("Starbright World" 1). Project IMPACT was developed by Los Angeles County Public Schools as a way to provide quality science instruction in urban and rural schools. Included in the U.S. Department of Education's Star Schools initiative, IMPACT uses video lessons and student-driven experiments to make science curricula accessible to elementary school students ("Senator Edward M. Kennedy Announces Star Schools" 1). In order to utilize the materials, however, teachers frequently find they must re-tool their teaching styles, developing new strategies that enable student voices and participation (Interview, Powell). Finally, Breakthrough to Literacy was founded on the premise that each child learns to read differently; and this interactive software allows children to master early reading skills in the privacy of their own computer work stations. The project has

proved especially successful with children from at risk environments, who often encounter challenging home situations and life experiences that define them as failures before they even enter kindergarten (Interview, Carolyn Brown). Each of these projects brings individualized, interactive, and student-driven approaches to mediated lessons. Importantly, each also addresses serious social issues, ranging from re-training teachers to granting children new definitions of self-worth. Employing new technologies and exploring bold concepts, each strives to make a difference in the lives of children.

Similarly, the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and the California Center for Civic Participation not only encourage young people to become involved in the democratic process, but also teach them how to do it. Seeking to advance the civic education of American young people, PBS could partner effectively with such organizations, pursuing projects to help children and teens develop skills in critical thinking, democratic discourse, and community leadership.

A hypothetical project might find broadcasters working in collaboration with the California Center to advance high school students' knowledge of water policy. Public broadcasters would produce video segments and accompanying printed materials dealing with the history and practices of water use in California. These materials would be distributed to the state's high schools; and policy experts, fishermen, historians, politicians, and lawyers would be summoned to present their views and answer students' questions through an interactive broadcasting format. Students would be encouraged to develop their own texts--radio and television programs, CDs, web pages, and public speeches--about water policy. They would debate the issues with one another in class. On a given day, all participating students from throughout the state would convene in a free discursive space comprised of an interactive chat

room, television studio, phone lines, and ITFS (Instructional Television Fixed Service) studio facilities. The resulting conversation--a vigorous discussion of the use and regulation of California's water--would be facilitated, not by a teacher, but by student peers trained in group discussion. Key witnesses would include students who had actually spent time on the river in recreation and research (a regular feature of the California Center). The objective would be a recommendation on water policy, written by high school students and presented to the California state legislature. Students would be encouraged to attend and participate in legislative hearings and committee meetings. This hands-on, experiential engagement with public work would hopefully result in knowledge of policy making, confidence and expertise in political discourse, and a desire to participate in democratic process. Education, in this scenario, becomes an instrument of citizenship and community.

The human and technological resources required for such a program are easily availed. Even so, such projects are rare to nonexistent on public television. Instead of developing "busy workshops" for students, station instructional TV directors are more often seen hawking their products as "best buys" in the educational marketplace. The following announcement appears on the KERA/Dallas web page:

> Attention Teachers--The KERA/KDTN Educational Resource Center (ERC) has worked with teachers and administrators throughout North Texas for more than 35 years. We offer member school districts nearly 2,000 hours of curriculum-based instructional programs for only $1.50 per student. This fee includes printed support materials, correlations with TAAS and essential elements, broadcast schedules and on-site workshops. It is THE most economical educational programming service around ("Educational Services" 1).

Public Broadcasting Act of 1967:

Wagner-Hatfield died on the Senate floor in mid-May 1934, taking with it the broadcast

reform movement that had battled network radio and the American political system for space on the spectrum. When the mike opened in the 1960s for a discussion of public media in America, the concepts offered up were essentially those that gave rise to the broadcast reform movement of the thirties. As demonstrated by such documents as the Carnegie Commission's Public Television: A Program for Action, the conversation coalesced around issues of alternative programming, vigorous debate of public issues, and protected airtime for the minority voice. The Carnegie report championed cultural diversity as a staple of American life, public television as its instrument of expression, and community as the heart of the nation.

Lyndon Johnson introduced the Public Television Act on February 28, 1967. Wrapped in an appeal for schools, hospitals, and the arts was a recommendation that Congress develop a "vital and self-sufficient noncommercial television system. . . to instruct, inspire and uplift our people" (Cong. Rec. 28 Feb. 1967: 4642). The specifics of Johnson's recommendation were two-fold: establishing a Corporation for Public Television and funding it initially at $9 million; and increasing Educational Television Facilities Act funding for 1968 to $10.5 million (Cong. Rec. 28 Feb. 1967: 4642). Although the failure to plan for long-term financing would be devastating to the new cultural institution, the Public Television Act of 1967 was ground-breaking legislation that pushed noncommercial broadcasting into new and uncharted terrain. Almost overnight, educational television evolved from an informal group of local stations to become, at least conceptually, a network with a national purpose. No small part of that purpose was the development of local and national community. Following the tradition of the system's first national television series, The Whole Town's Talking, the Carnegie Commission proposed that public TV become a modern-day polis, stimulating popular talk and decision making through the technology of broadcasting. Privileging local performance and grassroots democracy, these early

conceptions of public broadcasting sought to construct a problem-solving and participatory community through engaged civic discourse:

> Public television programming can deepen a sense of community in local life. It can show us our community as it really is. It should be a forum for debate and controversy. It should bring into the home meetings, now generally untelevised, where major public decisions are hammered out, and occasions where people of the community express their hopes, their protests, their enthusiasms, and their will. It should provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard (Public Television: A Program for Action 92).

I maintain that two major factors worked to alter the community-centered institutional character of public television in the 1960s, robbing it of foundations in bottom-up governance, local debate, and popular expertise. The first was tied to the social, political moment in which the Public Television Act was introduced. Offered up by Lyndon Johnson as a tool of enlightenment, public TV reflected the centrist liberalism and top-down federalism of his administration. The public TV bill was also introduced late in the decade, coming before the American people in a moment of social upheaval, presidential decline, and, critically, past the 1964-66 window of Great Society social reform. Partnered with more peripheral efforts to enhance the humanities in the U.S., public broadcasting's failure to align itself with movements tied to fundamental social change kept the new system at the edges of American social life, outside the loop of community building.

Just as the Great Society shaped the new media system and contained its potential as a change agent, the Ford Foundation also limited the scope and audience of public television. Moving through a liberal arts initiative into public policy and taste engineering, Ford put millions of dollars into educational TV's coffers and then called on public media to help advance the Foundation's agenda for U.S. society. Not only did this emphasis on liberal arts education and elite culture work to authorize the discourse and expertise of the educated classes, it also

contained diversity, silenced popular speech, and entrenched a class-based hierarchy of knowledge and taste. This is not to discount the value of liberal education in governance and everyday life. The focus of the liberal arts on life-long learning, appreciation of the arts and humanities, and critical thinking positions liberal training as particularly useful in democratic practice; and public television has provided significant service in offering a broader and more egalitarian access to this educational tradition. At the same time, the Ford Foundation's sole emphases on liberal education and teaching narrowed definitions of political and cultural expertise and limited the voices, perspectives, and program types of public television.

As the influences of the late sixties, Johnson's Great Society, and the Ford Foundation culminated to shape the institutional character of noncommercial broadcasting, public TV evolved to become not an advocate for participatory democracy and community ties, but rather a paternalistic voice of authority. With this shift in focus, the goals of the system's first national series--to employ television technology in inventing an interactive, community-based public sphere--have largely evaporated.

This can be seen through analysis of the PBS Democracy Project. Addressing Americans' general lack of interest in election campaigns and low voter turnouts, public broadcasting has joined with other advocates of civic journalism in efforts to improve democratic involvement and reportage ("Renovating democracy's feedback loops" 1). Even as the Democracy Project calls for viewer participation, however, critical judgments about the agenda are determined by public television professionals. The decisions of topics, speakers, and salient issues are made not by the public, but rather by project staff. Further, the language of project memos betrays a well-intentioned, but lofty and distanced attitude by project editors and reporters, who are urged to *choose stories carefully*, based on their *faithful reading* of the citizens' agenda. *Whenever*

possible, advises public broadcasting staff, *stories should include citizen voices* and *descriptions of citizen attitudes*. One project editor encourages his reporters to make at least one call a week to a randomly chosen citizen to ascertain his or her concerns. Finally, reporters are cautioned not to write and report for other journalists. The Democracy Project rules stipulate, "Always remember--*the listener is a citizen*" ("Citizen-Oriented Reporting" 6) (italics added).

The goals of the Democracy Project would seem to cohere with other discourses of civic journalism that call for citizens who are "reengaged in public life" and "participants in a self-governing society" (Martin 158; Schaffer 3). Even so, old roles of teachers and passive, listening students emerge again in a public broadcasting project bound by noble objectives but contained by representative speech and carefully edited public voices. As valuable as the impulse to enable citizenship, public television's fall-back response to agenda-setting and top-down reporting styles fails to invigorate an engaged and useful conversation with American publics. Developed within the system's long-standing self-identity of teacher, authority, and expert speaker, the Democracy Project's goals of participation are eclipsed by public TV's failure to collaborate with American people as interactive citizen producers. Michael Schudson's 1998 critique that "nothing in public journalism removes power from the journalists or the corporations they work for" clearly extends to public television as well (as quoted in Martin, 160).

Even through the Democracy Project won an Angel Award for excellence in media in March of 1997, it had "underwhelming viewer responses" ("PBS Democracy Project Wins Angel Award" 1; "Hume will be 'choreographer' of Democracy Project" 18). Constituencies could conceivably respond more positively if public television followed the lead of WBUR, a Boston University radio station that shared control of the spectrum with its listeners in the early 1970s. Project Drum was innovative public media practice that allocated a portion of air time each week

to inner city residents. Local people acted as producers and speakers, as WBUR created a "radio station within a radio station" and granted the neighborhood performance rights to the air. The project was critically acclaimed: "[WBUR has] met the needs of the ghetto's audience in a dynamic and compelling way. Much that has been learned in Boston could be applied in other places" (Henderson 29). That this practice has not been generally repeated speaks to public broadcasting's lack of commitment to popular speech. Despite opportunity, public television has not granted American publics working access to the spectrum or any real control in station policy, programming, and production; nor has it put broadcast technology to use in enabling a diverse and talkative public sphere.

This essay has argued that public purposes formed an underpinning philosophic foundation for early public media. Genuine commitments to vigorous public discourse, cultural diversity, citizen access to voice and governance, and service to underserved constituencies motivated the spectrum battles of 1934 and 1950-51; they formed the basis for PTV legislation in 1967. In each case, however, a compromise in public media practice produced a narrowed institutional vision. Losing important battles for spectrum access, social reform, and community, public broadcasting has been shaped, silenced, coopted, delimited, and commercialized. Financially strapped and philosophically bankrupt, public broadcasting sits at the periphery of social life, unable to creatively, and with conscience, confront the issues of American public life. Lacking a reform agenda, deep and specific connections with local constituencies, and a mechanism to talk about itself as an agent of the public sphere, public television can neither pursue a national program of social change nor create multi-vocal democratic talk. In 2000, public broadcasting's old narrative of publicness and community has virtually collapsed. New funding strategies and a deeply

internalized complacency replace an institutional mission of service; and the casualties are performative speech and an engaged citizenry.

RE-FORMING PUBLIC TELEVISION

I have argued that the absence of a deep, enduring, and systemic support for public life brought with it compromises that cost public broadcasting not only key fights for resources, but also its internal struggles for identity and institutional purpose. The losses of 1934, 1950-51, and 1967 jeopardized public broadcasting's sense of itself, and the organization that survives today is almost unrecognizable as the talkative, diverse, and public service-oriented medium begun in the 1920s. Even if unrecognizable, however, public television is not unredeemable. My research has convinced me that despite public media's failings, reform is possible. By pulling from discursive resources of the past and by forming a commitment to viable civic action in the present, public broadcasting can yet become an organization of public purpose.

The public media concept advanced here is framed within the philosophic commitments of Arendt, Habermas, and Dewey, whose work speaks to the great value of vigorous discourse, community ties, and the protected spaces of a working polis. In my analysis, democratic media are not only directly connected to practical application, but are also critically defined by an allegiance to engaged public talk; the use of broadcasting to advance social reform; and efforts to cultivate a broad-based, popular community. Public broadcasters must have deep commitments to public and performative speech, citizen participation, and inclusive and talkative communities. They must desire the "stretchable nets of kinship" that embrace the wide range of human differences and shared experiences. They must acknowledge and pursue the use of broadcasting

to advance the public good; and importantly, they must recognize that the recovery of public mission for U.S. public media requires its reconstitution through altered practice.

What follows is a program for public media work designed to perform public service and restore public practices. Addressing ways public television can develop as a national institution of publicness, these five concepts work to enable the public speech of American constituencies, to build inclusive communities, and to employ broadcasting as a change agent. Throughout this analysis, public service broadcasting is perceived as a vehicle by which private individuals become public citizens who seek to advance the common good through action; and although local voices are seen as critical for democracy and citizenship, public television's special contribution is the weaving of these voices into a national conversation. Finally, this plan for reform is not presented as a plank-by-plank platform for restructuring U.S. public media; it is offered instead as a dialogic and process-oriented contribution to talk about how public television can become a vital and functioning agent of public life in the next century.

1. Public television must find new ways to grant individuals and constituencies space on the spectrum, access to public speech through public media. For the ancient Greeks, writes Arendt (18), the human condition was a public condition; and to lose one's right to public speech was tantamount to death. Central to her analysis is civic discourse, conducted within a protected public space that promotes participation, difference, and shared commitments to the body at large.

The work of the polis, underpinned by commitments to public talk, is also the work of public television. The needs of American people to speak and be heard in matters of national and local import must become a priority for public broadcasters. It is not enough to subtitle Sesame Street and the evening news. Public television must, instead, wire the neighborhoods. This can involve commitments to microradio, PEG channels, and closed circuit cable. It can manifest itself

in the dedication of specific blocks of public television airtime or a second channel to constituency groups. This is practice, however, that flies in the face of public television's sustaining self-identity as teacher and expert. To wire Cabrini Green is to grant its citizens the rights to produce and distribute their own messages; and to enable this action, public television must not only relinquish its position as a sole proprietor of the public airwaves, but must also reinvent itself as an agent of diversity.

That this model resembles cable access practice seems clear; but to offer up this challenge to public television in 1999 is not to appropriate the public access mission, but rather to reclaim an old project of public TV. Experimentation with portable video and a commitment to diverse local voices--both defining characteristics of access TV--were taking hold in the early 1970s at several PBS stations. Programs such as San Francisco's Open Studio and Take 12 in Philadelphia invited local groups to broadcast their views free-of-charge; and Boston's Catch 44, begun in 1971, is seen as a particularly "important precedent in public access television" (Engelman, 1990: 4). Public television's commitments to access TV would peak and fade quickly, however, forcing U.S. community television to look elsewhere--primarily Canada--for early leadership (Engelman, 1990: 4-10). In the years since, public speech and cultural diversity have been sustaining commitments of public access television and community radio. Both have sought to invigorate democratic media practice in the U.S. Indeed, the credo of the public access channel in Saratoga, California, coheres with the intent of my plan for public television stations:

> We provide facilities, training and time for members of the community who wish to use this medium for the free expression of ideas. We seek to diversify the voices heard, educate the uninformed, embrace the disenfranchised, convert the cynical, and (adding a touch of humor) entertain the inscrutable (Briller 51).

Despite the similarities between the public access model and my own ideal for public TV, important differences of resources, distribution structure, viewer access, and mission exist. Engelman (1996: 264-265) notes that public access was a "historical accident" of the 1970s, growing out of the intersections of technological development in portable video and the expansion of cable TV. Seeking to legitimate and differentiate itself in U.S. culture and following FCC directives to provide free channels for public use, cable took on the promotion and support of public access. In 1999, this support has dwindled, resulting in precarious funding and threats of cancellation. Since almost all funding for access is provided by cable systems and is capped at five percent of gross revenues, funds for these stations and their projects have been minimalized (Briller 56).

Further, public access channels are subject to change or even removal from the air. TCI Cable in Westchester County, New York, recently canceled the county-wide access channel on grounds that the cable system did not have adequate assignments to carry local broadcast stations, pay-for-view, a shopping channel, and public access. Because it neither fit FCC "must carry" rules nor provided income, cable access was the one to go (Briller 57). Finally, although community TV operates in a number of American cities and towns--serving a cultural mix in Manhattan; the Lakota, Dakota, Mandan, and Annishinable Indian nations; the City of Chicago; and rural Montana--public access is largely unused. According to the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Public Television, between 80 and 90 percent of all PEG assignments are as yet unclaimed (Quality Time 20). U.S. public access is severely underfunded, underutilized, and at risk of being denied channel assignments. Although underfunded and underutilized itself, public television may be seen as better equipped for serving some broadcast needs in a community, simply because it has a larger resource base.

Second, public broadcasting is a network that offers a national substructure for acquiring, distributing, and promoting programs. With 351 stations in all 50 states, public TV is capable of achieving almost 100 percent saturation into U.S. television markets; a text broadcast nationally has the potential of being viewed by millions of people. Public television's multi-station organization--with its satellite interconnections, state networks, ITFS links, and ethnic consortiums--offers a broad-based structure for joining many voices in local, regional, and national conversations. Cable access stations, on the other hand, are expressly local, tied to specific markets.

Third, although public signals are at times distributed by cable systems, public television is rightly seen as broadcast service, not cable service. Public television broadcasts its programs free over the public airwaves. It is not a subscription service; and its programs are, therefore, more broadly available than those of public access, which air solely on cable systems. Although cable television is an industry with outlets throughout the United States, there are still thousands of people who do not subscribe to cable TV. Black and Bryant (374) estimate that almost 40 percent of the U.S. population does not receive cable; this includes many rural residents, single parents, elderly people, and lower income families. Community television producers face the dilemma that confronted early access organizers almost 30 years ago; their programs had been developed to serve the needs of poor people, who were unable to receive them due to the cost of subscribing to cable TV. Public television, broadcasting an over-the-air signal, becomes a more universal medium, serving more of the social spectrum.

Finally, public television has an explicitly public mission, for which it has received public funds and has public obligations. These obligations include not only widespread public access to expression through broadcasting, but also responsibilities to address a public agenda. The public

sphere theorized by Arendt, Habermas, and Dewey has commitments to individuals who speak and act on behalf of the common good. A polis is seen as a protected zone where private individuals develop solutions to public problems; and this essay seeks ways to put public television to work in that community endeavor. Even the empowering of individual voices, as proposed here, is seen as public work, since it advances the larger collective good. I envision, for example, children who gain a sense of their self worth by producing videos set to their own music and Hispanics who articulate the politics of the border through the *corrido*. These independent creative projects--originating from a sense of publicness--differ from the performances often seen on public access, which privileges the goals of first amendment speech and the politics of individual expression.

Engelman (1990: 1) writes that public access began in the 1970s as a way to use television as a direct means of communication without interference from professionals such as journalists, directors, and producers. It represented an extension of oral culture, as common people produced and controlled their own news systems. Access was also a form of social intervention, as shown by the Fogo Island film shorts, which worked to articulate the social problems and collective identity of the Islanders (Engelman 1990: 9).

In the years since, public access has developed as an important site of protected speech, where individuals and groups can present their views without censorship. Battling problems of dwindling resources and visibility, however, cable access stations have been unable to sustain a coordinated public effort. As Aufderheide (1992: 62) has observed, "Access--lacking a national substructure as public television did until 1967--is still in its prehistory." What remains is sporadic, inchoate, and splintered, programs that function more as electronic soapboxes than as cohesive social argument. That these broadcasts of individuals and individualized groups

contribute usefully--and oppositionally--to the public sphere is unquestioned. As an "unfettered conduit of people's opinions" (Briller 53), public access works in important ways to grant voice to many who would not otherwise have a forum. Critically absent from public access practice, however, is a mechanism of engagement, a means by which voices not only speak, but also speak together, with others. Lacking this component of public deliberation, cable access is unable to move powerfully in problem solving or meeting the common needs of the collective. It becomes, ultimately, a medium of private voices, not the larger public good.

Service to a range of publics, cultural diversity, freedom of speech, and programs for people at the margin are concepts of a public vision; these concepts sustain both the ideal presented in this essay and the public access station in Saratoga, California. It is only appropriate that Americans should have more than one outlet for democratic speech in their communities, and the overlapping visions here would seem useful. At the same time, public broadcasting has the resource base, technological structure, and underpinning public vision necessary to support the engagement of many voices debating the public good. As Dewey (1927: 126) suggested 70 years ago, this kind of cohesive public program, employing public resources and public talk, is necessary if the Public is to call itself into being through a recognition of common problems and shared, indirect consequences.

2. Public television must encourage popular performance and televisual literacy. Public television should act on its ability to develop self-reflexivity, critical inquiry, and eloquent discourse. Collaborating with community networks and local storytellers, public TV must find ways for local people to perform as citizen producers. Further, issues of media, culture, democracy, and the economy--as well as textual strategies of script, framing, representation, lighting, and program scheduling--should become common discourse among Americans. Public

television professionals should encourage this critique within both the public media community and the broader culture. Children, especially, should come to understand the role television plays in shaping their perceptions, perpetuating stereotypes, and narrowing diversity. They should also be encouraged to do public-spirited work and to appreciate the potential of public media for social change. Finally, like all Americans, young people should learn to use public media as a means of self expression and growth, a vehicle for learning to command an audience and to invent new ideas through discourse.

Long an advocate of "outreach," public TV can play a vital role in this enterprise, working to increase individuals' media literacy, video and multi-media production skills, and everyday access to media technology. By putting portable video cameras on the streets, making public TV studios and staff available to local people, and helping people learn to express themselves adequately--even eloquently--on television, public television can enable the voices of the community.

Enhanced private speech will surely benefit from this performative venture. The artistic expressions of individual media producers will improve; individuals will be encouraged to invent and reinvent their own subjectivities as they speak themselves into new roles and realities (Richards 42). More important, however, private people will gain skills in articulating and negotiating the needs of the collective through the dominant media. Striving to help people develop social eloquence--the ability to speak well in public--public broadcasting can also help improve the quality of public discourse in general and political discourse in particular. As individuals become more articulate--developing more egalitarian, persuasive, and powerful rhetorical skills--they may also become more civil. This has potential for not only enhancing social life, but also for improving the quality of political processes. As Pearce suggests:

> At least part of this intangible barrier [between citizens and political life] is a pattern of discourse so fractured that citizens are frustrated in their attempts to take a turn in the public conversation. The quality of public discourse. . . drives the people out of politics (Pearce and Littlejohn 90).

Finally, and perhaps most important, social eloquence can enlarge the environment for difference. According to Sennett (268), a casualty of a disintegrating public sphere is tolerance for difference. With a diminished public culture, relationships and discourses of difference cannot be maintained (Sennett 61). Humans discover they lack the mechanisms by which to communicate with individuals who vary in culture, ethnicity, or ideology. Social eloquence--the learned skills of quality public discourse--can help carve out a space for tolerance, a zone in which "people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue" (Evans and Boyte 63).

3. Public television must make a commitment to invigorated, broad-based national-local discourse. As an agent of authentic public life, this institution should attack the trends that have allowed a shrinking public sphere to become the norm throughout American culture, in small towns and our nation's cities alike. Educational broadcasters addressed this in 1952, when they enabled, through television technology, a vigorous discussion of common problems and then broadcast The Whole Town's Talking throughout the country. The Runnells, Iowa, water supply was a local problem, solved through local discourse; but the processes of the solution--spontaneous, vigorous, and performative speech--was a nation's solution. As people in rural Iowa gathered to talk, it was participatory democracy in action. To watch from elsewhere, even on kinescope, was, and is, to affirm allegiances to a civil civic life.

As humans, we are members of many communities. They are defined by interests, history, geography, and the elastic spaces of our minds and imaginations. They are local and national,

some are both, and one of public TV's great contributions would be to help us know our world, understand our neighbors, and experience the life of these communities through television. Local and national communities are not bi-polar entities, but are rather connected to one another on a shifting continuum; their borders blur. Public television, unlike public access, has a structure of stations, satellite interconnections, and national program centers in place that could allow us to share meanings, debate common problems, and talk about differences across space, in time.

Curran (105) has suggested that effective public service broadcasting may be tied in the next century to a new model that organizes outlets for private enterprise, social market, professional, and civic sectors around a core of general interest TV channels. The structure, he says, will satisfy "minority concerns" and "majority pleasures." This concept also seems helpful in discussing how public broadcasting can situate itself in the social landscape and contribute usefully to public life. Communities, whether local or national, are sites of struggle and difference. They represent a range of voices and experiences, often in tension with one another. Curran's model would not only allow the voices of these many constituencies to be heard, but would also facilitate public debate over causes of and social solutions for injustice. This public service paradigm not only produces and distributes programs for specific audiences, but also employs interactive media to develop a broad-based, national conversation.

Writing in the late 1950s, Williams (1958: 334) suggested that a "good community, a living culture, will. . . make room for [and] actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need." As public television enters the twenty-first century, it stands uniquely poised to enable solidarity, justice, and the "good community" in American culture--producing a common stock of shared experiences and putting into place mechanisms that encourage social critique and engage difference.

4. Not only must public television lose its timidity and learn to take programming risks, but public TV should also accept an overtly reformist vision. Public television is more than a workplace culture; it can and should make a difference in individual lives and U.S. culture. This was clearly the vision of many public broadcasting pioneers, but as the numbers of public TV visionaries have declined--either through death or disillusionment--recollections of their aims and purposes have grown dim. Efforts to rebuild this old passion could legitimately begin with programs for children at risk. Public TV should not only adopt a national agenda of change for American children, but should also allocate real and substantial resources toward development of programs, research, and outreach projects in media literacy and performance. By networking with innovators and other activist groups, writing legislation, developing funding, and granting youngsters a public voice, public television could help kids at the margin survive and prosper.

That public television was not included in most important social reform legislation of the 1960s--especially civil rights--speaks to its neglect of that work in the 1950s. Noncommercial broadcasters skirted opportunities to address "separate but equal" education practices in the early fifties, opting for a mainstream service instead. Those choices, which distanced public broadcasting from important social reform activity of the 1950s, would haunt public television a decade later, when the system that developed was seen as peripheral in many Americans' lives. As opportunities emerge in the coming decade for substantive social change, public television may again find itself outside the loop because it failed to network with other change agents in the present. Only a dedication to social action now can deter a future spent at the margins of American political life.

5. Public television must develop a proactive vision of its own that is more than an alternative to commercial broadcasting purpose and practice. Certainly, there have been useful

and legitimate contributions by noncommercial broadcasting in addressing deficiencies of a market-driven commercial system. At the same time, however, educational broadcasting's assumption of a distinctively alternative mission allows commercial broadcasting--not public media--to define the parameters of its identity and service. Pursuing a cautious internal self-definition of purpose defined as counter to another's institutional practice, public broadcasting has failed to evolve into a truly unique media service. As Rowland (254) writes, the label "noncommercial" has "implied a negative definition in terms of something else--the dominant, other, commercial system. As such, it [has] carried no sense of positive vision." Lacking a proactive mission of its own, noncommercial educational TV has developed as the virtuous--and oftentimes boring--cousin of commercial broadcasting, defined as alternative, supplementary, and secondary.

The construction of a coherent, proactive vision within public television could usefully begin with the resurrection of a national organization that facilitates a conversation about mission, vision and visionaries, and programs for action. With the dismantling of NAEB in the early eighties--and the subsequent loss of its conferences, seminars, and publications--public television lost a way to talk meaningfully and collectively about the system's history, failings, and prospects. Its regional organizations have closed; individual stations operate in isolation; opportunities for special production funding dry up. Without a mechanism for institutional self-reflexivity and a forum for debate of public purposes, public television lacks a way to address differences among its membership or to invent innovative approaches for public media service. Cast as other to commercial broadcasting but without a blueprint uniquely its own, public television assumes, ironically, the shape and substance of its old nemesis. As television producer Bill Kurtis reports:

> Several executives told me that they didn't regard PBS as a charitable contribution anymore, and they thought cable was filling PBS' programming niche. I could have had any number of corporations underwriting my series (New Explorers) if I could have offered them two 30-second spots--then it becomes an advertising buy, like cable, not a charitable donation. How is it 'corrupting' PBS when stations already run 15-second 'enhanced underwriting' spots? (Hall 2)

The arguments embedded in its discursive history position public media as an institution of public life. Visionaries past and present have believed public broadcasting could provide a space for vigorous and reflexive discussion, enable social reform, and bind Americans together as a Public. Public television's future as an agent of the public sphere is bleak and uncertain, however; the internal resolve and external resources required for such a mission must be cultivated. Lacking these new practices, public media will be bound to reinvent the course that has compromised its public mission and institutional viability over the years.

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