

Public Media: Journalism When Government Supports the Enterprise

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Section 396(g)(1)(A) of the Communications Act of 1934, as amended, authorizes CPB to “facilitate the full development of public telecommunications in which programs of high quality, diversity, creativity, excellence, and innovation, which are obtained from diverse sources, will be made available to public telecommunications entities, with strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature”. As part of its efforts to carry out these duties, CPB commissioned several white papers to independently examine CPB’s objectivity and balance mandate and provide feedback on its efforts to meet those obligations. This document is one of those white papers. The views expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) of this paper and not of CPB. CPB did not contribute to the contents of this paper, does not express an opinion about the views presented herein, and does not endorse its findings.

I. Underlying Assumptions Of Public Broadcasting and Government

Historical Background and Context

There are relationships – implicit and explicit - between Congress and public broadcasting that are inherent and complex, and have been so from the beginning of public broadcasting in America. This paper will explore some of the assumptions and contradictions around government funding in support of public broadcasting specifically with regard to the roles and relationships among governments, broadcasters and the audiences. The paper will also examine the unique challenges and even contradictions inherent in the relationship, and how this dilemma has been addressed by those other public broadcasters whose values most closely parallel and resemble the American system.

The explicit relationships concerning editorial independence and public monies for the purposes of this paper are centered in two sections of the Public Broadcasting Act. In those sections, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's mandate seems clear:

In order to achieve the objectives and to carry out the purposes of this subpart, as set out in subsection (a) of this section, the Corporation is authorized to—

(A) facilitate the full development of public telecommunications in which programs of high quality, diversity, creativity, excellence, and innovation, which are obtained from diverse sources, will be made available to public telecommunications entities, with **strict adherence to objectivity and balance** in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature;¹ (emphasis added)

And a second obligation follows in stating that CPB must:

(D) carry out its purposes and functions and engage in its activities in ways that will most effectively assure the **maximum freedom** of the public telecommunications entities and systems **from interference** with, or control of, program content or other activities.² (emphasis added)

¹ Public Broadcasting Act, Sec. 396. [47 U.S.C. 396] Corporation for Public Broadcasting

² Op. cit.

The implicit relationships are harder to discern, but just as important to the effective functioning of the public broadcasting system. CPB is obliged to assure that objectivity and balance will be maintained in all matters of public controversy, while assuring a position of non-interference with the program and its producers. Can this still be done simultaneously through the involvement of government as a funder, but without generating institutional doubts? This is the heart of the matter and the dilemma within the system.

Those two emphasized elements point to the unstated tensions between the grass roots and democratic expressions of public communication versus a centralized and corporate vision of how all media should operate in America going back to the mid-19th century.

Key Developments

- The invention of the telegraph (subsidized by Congress) in 1844 brought with it the hope expressed by its inventor, Samuel Morse, that it would inaugurate a modern era of communications and national participation. Morse hoped that the federal government would purchase his invention to ensure its development as a “common carrier of intelligence.”³
- Expectations of shared and regulated communication. Scholars have noted that the amateur radio community was a “form of rebellion against the pressures of increased centralization and bureaucratization of American society.”⁴ Like the telegraph, ham radio was overshadowed and subsumed by early commercial radio broadcasting and by the opposition of a government entity (in this case, the US Navy) that believed it would interfere with ship-to-shore communication.

³ Czitrom, D.J., *Media and the American Mind from Morse to McLuhan*, Chapel Hill, 1982, p. 21.

⁴ Englemann, R., *Public Radio and Television in America*, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1996, p. 12.

- A compromise emerged prior to World War I through the leadership of land-grant universities⁵ that began to transmit regularly scheduled programs and often invited ham operators to participate. As a war measure, Congress closed down all amateur and commercial radio operation in 1917 and placed them under the control of the US Navy. Local police were order to seize and dismantle all stations that refused to co-operate.
- After the war an attempt was made by some members of Congress to create a government radio system that would openly compete with the growing commercial sector. However, that bill was defeated, led by the Marconi interests and AT&T. A Republican sweep of Congress in 1918 effectively ended that movement and in 1920, President Wilson ordered all radio stations to be returned to their owners.

In the 1920s, commercial radio began its significant penetration of the market. Efforts by advocates for some form of government oversight similarly expanded through the recently created Radio Act (1927). That same year Congress authorized the Federal Radio Commission to regulate broadcasting “in the public interest, convenience and necessity.” The deliberate vagueness of the mandate has remained the basis for all subsequent legislation. The FRC also began to regulate and grant licenses to stations that in its opinion, had a solid (i.e. commercial) financial basis and to turn down applications that it deemed narrow in their appeal.

Consequently since every group could not have its own “mouthpiece,” then, according to the FRC, no such group should be entitled to have the privilege of a broadcast license. If a group’s message was desired by the public, the reasoning went, the listeners would make this known through the marketplace and “general public service” [commercial] broadcasters would provide this type of material as part of their “well-rounded programming.”⁶

⁵ Specifically, Wisconsin, Nebraska, North Dakota, Nebraska Wesleyan and the College of Engineering and Wireless, San José, California.

⁶ McChesney, Robert, “*Crusade Against Mammon: Father Harney, WLWL and the Debate over Radio in the 1930s,*” *Journalism History*, 14(4), p. 120.

In this way, the federal government effectively created a separate yet parallel sub-culture of public broadcasting. University and college-run stations would exist to serve a smaller, specialized audience that was to be non-commercial and non-competitive in nature. It would target a post-secondary education audience along with farmers, the labor movement and ethnic minorities.

However the FRC further marginalized these educational stations. They were assigned to less desirable frequencies (while reserving the more powerful signals for their commercial rivals). The stations were also obliged to cede some of their broadcast day to commercial broadcasters, and were required to purchase expensive “state-of-the-art” engineering that many could ill afford. The expense of regular trips to Washington to testify before Congress and the cost of continual litigation forced many public radio stations into bankruptcy.

Growth of Public Broadcasting

Through the inter-war years educational broadcasters were increasingly reliant for their financial support on the complex support system of grants from their license holders and from a limited number of wealthy individuals, while advocacy groups and charitable foundations explored the potential of this new medium of radio.⁷ But as radio in general and public service radio in particular began to proliferate, questions of funding and governance took on an increased urgency.

An early forum for discussion of these issues was the magazine *Radio Broadcast*. In its first edition appearing in May 1922, three proposals were suggested: “The most

⁷ Opposition to a commercial monopoly of the airwaves was led by the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER) which was supported by nine leading educational organizations and was financially backed by the Payne Fund of Cleveland, OH.

attractive one (is) the endowment of a station by a public spirited citizen.”⁸ The magazine also suggested public contributions to be overseen by an elected board.⁹ And the third suggestion that the magazine openly preferred was municipal funding.¹⁰

Although WNYC was among the more notable examples of early municipal funding, the model exists well into the 1990s. They included Chicago Public Radio (supported by the Chicago Board of Education), KUCB Unalaska, AL, WRR-FM Dallas, WCPN Cleveland (supported by the Cleveland Public Library), WLRN Miami (supported by the Miami-Dade County Board of Education), WNYE Brooklyn, NY (licensed to the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications) and WABE Atlanta (licensed to the Atlanta Board of Education), to name a few.

Those three elements (public support, private philanthropy and government subsidy) have remained the essential framework for public broadcasting funding. While they have endured as a model, they also carried with them, the inherent instability of the public broadcasting funding and governance dilemmas. The role of government as a facilitator of public broadcasting remained in an uneasy role.

The Great Depression of the 1930s created the economic and cultural framework for a series of dramatic and continuous confrontations between grassroots populism and a mainstream power structure that only was resolved by the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the arrival of the New Deal. The role of educational broadcasting was one of many battlegrounds where that ideological clash was played out.

⁸ “*Radio Currents: An Editorial Interpretation*,” Radio Broadcast, May 1922, p. 3. Cited in Stavitsky, A., New York City’s Municipal Broadcasting Experiment: WNYC 1922-1940, AEJMC conference, Kansas City, Mo., August, 1993.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 4.

Populism and Public Radio

Midwestern populism and the anti-trust movement were specifically targeting public utility monopolies such as General Electric and Westinghouse – the parent companies of RCA and NBC. States with strong populist traditions like Wisconsin had the most lively educational radio stations. According to Englemann, “[t]he rhetoric of crusading populism was applied to the ‘radio power trust’ and to the critique of commercial broadcasting.”¹¹

But hopes that public broadcasting would be a government supported – or even a government sustained alternative – were dashed through a combination of hard economic times, and effective lobbying by the newly created National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) which worked tirelessly to insure that Congress would neither support nor reserve spectrum for educational broadcasters.

By the mid 1930s, in the teeth of the Great Depression, the new Federal Communications Commission was created and the passage of the Telecommunication Acts of 1934 made certain that there would be no further challenge to the private, commercial basis for American broadcasting.¹² As a result, education broadcasting would always be in a state of inherent tension by being forced to rely on the largesse of government funding in an environment. Yet government funding remained chronically insecure and unreliable because governments could – and often did - come under pressure from those segments of the population opposed to the philosophic basis and the practical reality of public service broadcasting.

Public Service Mandates and Challenges

Yet even under these circumstances, public broadcasting in the United States continued to thrive despite an ambivalent and occasionally hostile attitude from

¹¹ Englemann, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹² McChesney, *op. cit.* p. 128.

Congress, state legislators and from commercial broadcasters who often viewed public broadcasting as direct competition for a specific and elite market demographic.

In this insecure environment, US public broadcasters attempted to set standards and to create programs that would differentiate them from commercial broadcasters. PBS in particular was an early adaptor of program policies formulated in 1971-1972. These policies were updated in 1987 and again in 2006 by an independent outside group of academics and public broadcasting officials commissioned to insure that the journalistic standards and ethical guidelines were sufficient to the demands and expectations placed on the public television service as a whole. The latest document maintains that

While the principles embodied in those policies are enduring and remain as valid today as when they were first adopted, changes in technology, in public television, in journalism, and experience with the current guidelines necessitate, as the original program policies themselves anticipated, "periodic review of procedures to establish and implement program standards and practices, and a revision of the statement as required."¹³

The document is deliberate in pointing out how public television must abide by its high standards of editorial integrity, quality, diversity and local station autonomy.¹⁴

Public radio was slower to adapt its own ethics guide, but did so through a series of conferences (in which the authors of this paper took part) that resulted in two editions of the CPB sponsored *Ethics Guide for Public Radio*.¹⁵ NPR News also commissioned its own *Code of Ethics and Practices*,¹⁶ as has the Public Radio News Directors Incorporated (PRNDI).¹⁷

These are high standards and are widely recognized as such. But despite proclamations of integrity, it is not always possible to make public broadcasting

¹³ Public Broadcasting Policy Base, *PBS Editorial Standards and Policies*, June 14, 2006.

¹⁴ Op. cit.

¹⁵ <http://www.cpb.org/stations/radioethicsguide/>

¹⁶ <http://www.npr.org/about/ethics/>

¹⁷ <http://www.prndg.org/>

completely insulated from political pressures, financial influences and human frailty. In public broadcasting as in all media, the expectations of the major stakeholders - funders, management, producers and the public - can and do conflict often because of a lack of clarity about roles and relationships. These conflicts are not unique to public broadcasting (commercial broadcasters experience them as well). But when the source of funding is government, the criticisms are different than those besetting commercial broadcasters, in part because of a long-standing aversion in parts of American society and culture to any government participation in the marketplace.

At the same time, the public service mandate of the broadcasters has been clearly established over the years. CPB, PBS and NPR have each tried to balance their roles as broadcasters that must accept public funding by virtue of the governance model, yet are still independent, accountable and self-regulating with regard to content. Despite public broadcasting's frequent professions of good intentions and repeated commissioning of public surveys where public broadcasting is highly regarded with regard to objectivity and balance¹⁸, media critics from the left and the right regularly accuse public broadcasting of imbalance or insufficient critical content, despite or because of government funding.¹⁹

Governance Issues

Part of the reason for these criticisms from left and right can be traced to three elements: a nuanced form of governance that appears to make the system more vulnerable to criticism, a highly charged and deeply politicized Washington environment²⁰ and certain political expectations produced by a specific interpretation of

¹⁸ Roper Surveys, "*PBS is #1 in Public Trust*," PBS, 2008.

¹⁹ Mitchell, Pat, "*Public Trust is the Rating That Matters Most to PBS*," Speech to the National Press Club, Washington, DC, May 24, 2005.

²⁰ Boaz David, "*Top Ten Reasons to Privatize Public Broadcasting*," Cato Institute, July 25, 2005, http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=4002

the First Amendment to the Constitution²¹. The result is that public broadcasting can appear to be torn among the various interest, support and pressure groups, all of whom have competing visions of how public broadcasting should work, or in some cases, not exist at all.

As a consequence, the issue of public funding for public broadcasting has frequently been an issue, especially for conservatives who see public broadcasting as inherently antithetical to their stated agenda of minimal government. Some critics also have expectations that public broadcasting must, if not serve the party in power, at least not serve as a governmental watchdog. Liberals have been less hostile to the enterprise since at least? philosophically, there have been traditional historical connections between public service enterprises and liberal values.

Issues of governance lie at the heart of the issue concerning how the enterprise can best carry out its public obligations when expectations from various stakeholders may not be shared or at a minimum, are vaguely defined. While the strength of public broadcasting is found in the diversity of accountabilities and funding sources, this can also be a liability, especially in times of economic crisis or political pressures. While public broadcasting abroad tends to be supported by a combination of outright parliamentary appropriations, annual taxes for the right to own and use television sets (“license fees”) and limited amounts of commercial advertising, by comparison, the U.S. system has a much wider variety of revenue sources. This pattern of multiple public and private funding tends to protect it from direct control by any single social institution, such as government or business. It also makes public broadcasting more vulnerable during

²¹ Frank, Theodore, “*Title VI, Public Broadcasting and the First Amendment*,” Telecommunications Policy Research Conference, July, 1976. This paper explored the question of the applicability of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 to public broadcasting. Basically, those provisions require recipients of federal grants to use those funds in a non-discriminatory manner such that the benefit of the programs funded by the grants is available without regard to race, national origin or sex. The thesis of the paper was that there are some questions whether Titles VI and IX can be applied to public broadcasting under the terms of the provisions themselves.

times of economic duress should one or more of the supporting tiers reduce or withdraw its support.²²

Perceived Flaws

Critics have maintained that this deliberate but diffuse funding method has created undue complication for public broadcasting. Specifically, a lack of clarity on matters of governance has had serious consequences for the ability of public broadcasting to grow and respond more effectively to the challenges of new technologies. In addition, shifting demographics and an expanded public service model are issues around which there is little consensus. In short, the system is unable to be nimble at precisely those moments when it is most urgently required. Unconventional or experimental program efforts have been relegated to the margins of the public broadcasting system, either at the local level or on services with a narrower base of listener/viewer support, where they can eventually be quietly eliminated without much public opposition.²³ While some new programming forms may have had critical acclaim, the nature of the system overall can be highly resistant to internalizing and supporting these efforts in any substantial way. Of greater concern has been the inability or unwillingness of public broadcasting to engage in significant and high profile investigative reporting (with a few notable exceptions such as PBS' *Frontline*). The enterprise appears comfortable with a long established and often inoffensive status quo programming, yet at the same time, publicly worries about the paralysis that keeps public broadcasting appearing what the late broadcast historian Erik Barnouw called the "*safely splendid--the bland, the middlebrow, the stamped-and-approved.*"²⁴

²² Higgins, Will, *Gov. Daniels Proposes Canceling WFYI's Cash*, The Indianapolis Star, January 25, 2009.

²³ Public radio programs of an experimental nature such as Vocalo, Anthem, Fair Game with Faith Salie and the Bryant Park Project fit into this category. Public television has also tried to bring forward more mainstream but more costly programs such as Mark Twain Tonight, American Playhouse and Edge with a similar lack of success.

²⁴ Museum of Broadcast Communications, Public Television, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/publictelevi/publictelevi.htm>

Funding Relationships

The reasons for this reticence are varied and deep. But they share similar concerns about funding and governance. Specifically, can public broadcasting afford to alienate any of the three core areas of support – public subscription, private philanthropy and taxpayer support? And if it did, who or what body would rise to the defense of public broadcasting? There is no one body or authority that can fill that role in a highly decentralized system. Even so, when combined, public subscription, private philanthropy and government support have created a generous and remarkable range of programming. The brilliance of the public broadcasting system in the United States has resulted in a deep and powerful range of important cultural and informational offerings as good as any produced by any broadcasters, public or commercial. At the same time, there can be an atmosphere of programming restraint, timidity and even editorial self-censorship over a range of issues that too often are addressed in only the most oblique and tangential manner.²⁵

II. Implicit and Explicit Expectations

Evidence of direct government-as-funder intervention in the enterprise is fortunately all too rare but still capable of roiling the public broadcasting community. But in almost every instance, the issue when government exerted pressure on the public broadcasters was not to achieve a political agenda. Rather it was the implicit assumption that questionable behavior on the part of the broadcasters might jeopardize future funding. This has been the most effective form of content control in matters of self

²⁵ Foster, Alan, “*When PBS is Timid*,” *Current*, November 17, 2003. Foster, a former PBS executive claims that many inside PBS are concerned about public broadcasting’s deferential approach: “...we’ve become timid and afraid of risking negative reaction, particularly at the national level, where pressures arise from stations as well as politicians. So we allow our content to drift toward the safety of the mainstream.”

ensorship according to studies conducted at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism.²⁶

Additionally Ben Bagdikian has argued that sometimes “there will be no need for memorandums or spoken words. Subordinates, to be safe, may go even further in self-censorship than the boss requires. But no official intervention will show”.²⁷ Researchers have pointed out that in a democratic society, constraints on news media are more likely to come from corporations for economic purposes than from governments for purely political purposes.²⁸ According to Bagdikian, self-censorship in American news media is caused mainly by economic forces, due to a highly developed instinct for self-preservation.²⁹ Occasionally, the opposite occurs and political or economic pressures may not necessarily be sufficient to prevent journalists from functioning as professionals and employing basic definitions of “newsworthiness.” In public broadcasting, where the presence of government funding can replace the private sector, the effect of control and self-censorship is often the same.

Conflicts Among Congress, Broadcasters and the Audiences

In effect, there are three types of incidents where the government funders and the public broadcasters have clashed. The first occurs when the public broadcaster is accused of political advocacy or bias. The second is an appearance of a conflict of interest, which may occur when the public broadcaster appears willing to do the bidding of the funder to the detriment of the credibility and independence of the journalism. A third example is

²⁶ Zhong, Bu, Sun, Tao and Newhagen, John, “*Optimistic Biasing and Self-Censorship in US Newsrooms*,” paper delivered at the International Communication Association annual conference, New York, 2005.

http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/1/2/8/8/pages12886/p12886-1.php

²⁷ Bagdikian, B. H., *The Media Monopoly*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2000, p. 37.

²⁸ Croteau, D. & Hoynes, W., *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2001, p. 162.

²⁹ Bagdikian, op. cit.

when the values of the funder appear to be at variance with the principles of public broadcasting.

Although recent examples of government pressure are fortunately rare, examples can still be found.

1. In the first instance of implicit political bias, there was the accusation in 1999, that three major public stations, WGBH, WNET and WETA had traded or sold their membership lists to the Democratic Party.³⁰ Other stations admitted that they had also engaged in the practice. The error or lapse in judgment by the public broadcasters was quickly corrected and banned any further trading, but Congressional scrutiny was heightened through House sub-committee chairman Billy Tauzin (R-La.).
2. The second example of a lack of journalistic independence occurred in 2002, when WHYY accepted state funds to do positive stories on the environment activities of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. The story revealed that due diligence as to the source of the funding and the expectations of the funders had been poorly articulated. The result was the dismissing of the news director and a black eye for the station.³¹
3. The third example of a clash of values between a government funder and a public journalism entity occurred at Wake Forest University in 2001. The university attempted to ban all news coverage of an impending gay marriage in a university chapel (Wake Forest University is a liberal arts college with a strong Baptist campus life). The result was a mass resignation from the station. But the university responded with an affirmative response by drafting a Statement of Integrity about WFDD that redefined the roles and relationships between the

³⁰ <http://www.current.org/mo/mo913s.html>

³¹ Everhart, Karen, "Disseminated as News," WHYY Took State Funds to do Positive Stories, Current, November 18, 2002.

public funder and the public broadcaster. Wake Forest said it "is committed to maintaining the full confidence of the public in the editorial integrity of our news and programming, and to assuring all citizens that station management has the freedom necessary to provide WFDD's services effectively."³²

Other examples can be found, but on questions of journalistic integrity and undue influence, the role of the local, state and federal government funding toward the enterprise is less an explicit threat than an implicit one and often is presented as an unstated warning to the public broadcasters.

Public broadcasters in other countries often encounter similar pressures and influences. Yet differences remain between the U.S. public broadcasting system and how other English-language public broadcasters respond.

III. The Experience of Non-US Public Broadcasters

Much has been written about the complex and often shifting relationships that exist among public broadcasters, funders and their political masters. This is especially true in developed countries and especially among English-language broadcasters. In those non-U.S. public broadcasting environments, the issues usually revolve around how the government has allowed its fiduciary obligations to the broadcaster to become enmeshed with the political coverage of a specific event. The BBC and the Blair government frequently clashed over the public broadcaster's pre-Iraq war coverage.³³ The CBC has often been accused of "insufficient patriotism" on questions of national unity concerning the role of the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec inside the Canadian

³² Behrens, Steve, "*Hasty Mistake*" at WFDD Prompts Talk of Ideals, Current, February 21, 2000.

³³ Lezard, Nicholas, "*BBC vs Blair – I know whose side I'm on,*" The Independent on Sunday, July 6, 2003.

confederation.³⁴ And the Australians frequently criticize the AuBC for how it promotes or minimizes Australian culture.³⁵ There remains a certain vigor, even fearlessness, in how these public broadcasters deal with their political and fiduciary masters. It's worth exploring some of the reasons for that.

The Arm's Length Relationship

One concept that has emerged that is of singular importance to these public broadcasters is the concept of the "arm's-length relationship," a notion that has become widely accepted by many public broadcasters. The idea has had some currency for years, but only in 2000 did the idea become part of the pre-suppositions of public broadcasting when it was introduced at the World Radio and Television Council in 2000.

The question was raised as to how can the necessary independence of public broadcasting from government, and its equally necessary accountability, be reconciled? Dealing with this complex question, the British researcher, Nicholas Garnham summed up the situation as follows:

The search for an answer to the paradox of how to combine freedom for broadcasters from undesirable state control, while at the same time, ensuring the necessary level of desirable political accountability...In practice, of course, this circle cannot be squared, so that any structure and practice of accountability has to be a balance between the two.³⁶

The arm's length relationship is an essential aspect of the governance issues of many English-speaking public broadcasters. It is predicated on the assumption that public

³⁴ Sawyer Park, Jill, "A Tough Act To Follow: Under the Broadcasting Act, the CBC was asked to be something it couldn't be – the glue that holds Canada together," Ryerson Review of Journalism, Summer, 1991.

³⁵ Howe, David, "Does Aunty Really Deserve More Money?", newmatilda.com, January 23, 2009.

³⁶ Garnham, Nicholas, UNESCO Public Broadcasting: *The Challenge of the 21st Century*, Paris, UNESCO (Reports on Papers on Mass Communications #111), 1997, p. 64.

broadcasting must ensure that it has sufficient autonomy to distinguish in its administration structures between the two levels of management: day-to-day business on the one hand and long term decisions on the other. The goal is to make the relationship between the public broadcaster and the government as transparent as possible and to discourage any attempt by the government to intervene in the journalism or the programming.³⁷

In so doing, the board of directors of the public broadcaster and its chair act as a buffer between the CEO and the government. For example in Australia, the Board of Directors of the AuBC has an affirmative obligation to preserve the independence and the integrity of the public broadcaster.

There has been widespread acceptance of the concept of the arm's length relationship between the broadcasters and the government. The New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, which has been through frequent bouts of privatizing and subsequent government support, has continuously found usefulness in maintaining the arm's length relationship with both government and private funders.³⁸ The New Zealand government clearly states that:

In establishing support for the cultural sector, New Zealand has favoured [sic] the "arm's length" model followed in other English-speaking Commonwealth countries. According to this model, the government owns and funds cultural agencies and appoints their governing boards, which are required to perform functions prescribed by a Parliamentary statute. Within the limits of this statute, each agency acts autonomously in determining and implementing policy. At the same time such activity must have regard to central government policies. The model allows the sector to develop without undue government interference, and therefore serves to protect freedom of expression.³⁹

³⁷ Price, Monroe and Raboy, Marc, eds., *Public Service Broadcasting in Transition*, Kluwer Law International, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2003.

³⁸ Gregory, Robert John, *The Rise and Fall of the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, 1962-1973: a Study in Political and Administrative Relationships*, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand, 1979.

³⁹ Cultural Policy in New Zealand, 2007, <http://www.mch.govt.nz/publications/cultural-policies/index.html>

This is among the standard assumptions for the BBC, the CBC, the AuBC and others that take the arms' length relationship as the model under which they must operate in order to maintain sufficient credibility and integrity.

Despite the existence of the arm's length relationship, all public broadcasters have experienced, at some time or another, attempts by governments to influence programming or the course of coverage on specific issues. Such is the nature of modern watchdog journalism. While the existence of an arm's length relationship between government and a public broadcaster is no guarantee of non-interference, it does raise expectations on the part of the broadcasters and their employees that a more professional relationship of accountability and transparency is expected.

IV. Social Media, the Internet and Public Broadcasting

If the problematic relationship between public broadcasting and government funding was complex, recent developments involving new media forms, social media and the role of the Internet make that original relationship exponentially more uncertain yet at the same time, present significant challenges as well as opportunities for public broadcasting.

Broadcasting on public radio and public television was and will be the predominant method for reaching both core and new audiences. While other media organizations find their audiences fragmenting and even abandoning legacy media, public broadcasting remains relatively intact with a large, loyal and distinctive audience that deeply values thoughtful and civic-minded programming. This is an immediate advantage in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

Effects of Audience Fragmentation

Audiences are fragmenting in part because of the growth of media choices. A recent survey in the US and the UK by Ketcham shows that "...this melding of media means the content deliverables that were once owned by a specific medium are now found on nearly all platforms – a shift that has helped create an increasingly participatory and fragmented media landscape."⁴⁰ While this may empower the media consumer, the consequences for media organizations are financially destabilizing because consumers are shifting their loyalties to a larger number of media choices. At the same time, media fragmentation is creating a similar sense of civic fragmentation that appears to have serious consequences for journalism and our democracy.

Public broadcasters have been quick to adapt to this environment. Stations, content providers and networks are all moving rapidly to stake their claims to Internet content, even as the economy of mass media is undergoing an enormous transformation which sees traditional funding patterns recede and governmental priorities move elsewhere to stanch the financial bleeding caused by the market collapse and the credit crunch. Many of the difficulties encountered by other media organizations in the US and elsewhere can be attributed, in part, to the proliferation of content that by some accounts has been increasing by 30% every year, even as the potential audience remains the same.⁴¹

At the same time, public broadcasting has over the past few years moved to consolidate its hold and stake its claims in the new cyber-terrain. Some efforts have been more successful than others. Unfortunately, the very same issues of unclear governance and diffused accountability may make a coordinated approach to the possibilities of new media forms equally difficult.

⁴⁰ http://www.ketchum.com/media_myths_and_realities_2008_survey_news_release

⁴¹ Patino, Bruno, "*Etat des lieux du secteur de la presse écrite*," Livre vert, Etats-Généraux, Paris, p. 37.

The deepest values of public broadcasting that go back to the beginnings remain. Just as WNYC in the 1920s envisioned the growth of the nascent station as a method to connect citizens' concerns via a new technology, so should public broadcasting in a new century view social media as a new technological opportunity to curate and convene with the new media citizenry. But in order to do this effectively, some previous assumptions and even some contradictions in public broadcasting will need to be addressed.

Public broadcasting, as with many public institutions, has evolved with its own unique culture in which professional communicators are motivated by “pride in a job well done, or a sense of civic duty”.⁴² They have insisted on keeping the government, philanthropic organizations and even the public at an “arm’s length” to avoid the appearance or the reality of undue interference in their professional obligations. While this has had some real and important consequences that have assured journalistic and programmatic integrity, that same distancing has too often excluded sustained contributions from outside sources on the grounds that they were amateurish and unprofessional. When ordinary people were allowed to be part of programs, it was only under strict conditions determined by program makers. These include interviews with ordinary citizens (the so-called *vox pop*), or any other expressions deemed to be “safely splendid.”

Recently, the ability of the public to gain access to program makers, journalists and managers through the interactive quality of public broadcasting’s online presence has changed the dynamic in powerful ways. Too often this has resulted in a somewhat lopsided arrangement in which the public is allowed to express their ideas and opinions to the public broadcasters but only in a highly mediated form. Letters to programs or complaints to the CPB, PBS or NPR ombudsmen have allowed for an increased level of transparency and accountability in exchange for a modicum of participation in the process of public broadcasting interactivity.

⁴² Marquand, David, *Decline of the Public*, Cambridge, 2004, pp.1-2.

While this has been effective in diminishing some of the accusations against public broadcasting concerning its alleged “elitism,” at the same time, the arrival of these new media forms presents significant opportunities and challenges.

New Digital Ventures

The British sociologist Graham Murdock has written extensively on the idea of creating a “new digital commons in which the notions of “representation and participation” become the key elements in how public broadcasting can use these new media forms to evolve.⁴³ Murdock suggests that public broadcasting is better able and better situated to change the dynamic of how the public perceives and presents itself through digital technology and new media forms. In part this is because public broadcasting everywhere already enjoys a high level of public trust. The prospects of a new administration, beset by economic crises of unanticipated proportions, may also prove to be public broadcasting’s best method for achieving this breakthrough.

In a recent proposal to the Obama administration⁴⁴, the public broadcasters have proposed government funding for significant efforts to renew the infrastructure:

- CPB, NPR and PBS, in consultation with the Association of Public Television Stations, have asked the Obama Administration to include \$550 million for noncommercial public-service media in his far larger package of spending and tax cuts to stimulate the economy and upgrade the nation’s infrastructure.
- The national organizations propose federal aid for six projects involving public radio and TV that will create jobs and “produce sustainable improvements to the nation’s communications infrastructure.”
- One project would entail a one-time federal investment in “support for station capacity.” This project admits the public broadcasting system “is showing signs of

⁴³ Murdock, G., *Building the Digital Commons: Public Broadcasting in the Age of the Internet*, Spry Memorial Lecture, 2004.

⁴⁴ Sefton, Dru and Behrens, Steve, *System Suggests Projects for Stimulus*, Current, January 12, 2009/

stress,” with this year’s revenue losses estimated at as much as \$300 million and some 1,000 station jobs “now at risk.”

In addition to the financial support for stations, public broadcasters suggest these areas for “a stimulus investment in public media”:

- National Public Lightpath, a proposed “super-high-speed” interconnection of schools, nonprofits, public broadcasting stations and government agencies using light waves over optical fiber cables. Construction of “last mile” connections to regional fiber backbones would create 1,800 jobs for a year as well as jobs in manufacturing. Operation of the network would create 270 permanent jobs.
- Development of the “American Archive,” which would preserve, index and clear rights for access to “billions of dollars worth” of historically significant public TV and radio programs.
- A preschool “Teach for America” program, focused on 100 economically troubled communities, to improve children’s reading ability by training teachers and caregivers to use new-media–based educational tools.
- Building a crisis-response capability in 75 communities and creating about 750 positions, including producers and community-engagement staffers. The proposal cites KETC’s CPB-supported work with the mortgage foreclosure issue in St. Louis, MO.
- “Access 2.0,” a campaign to expand access to media for disadvantaged groups especially in Native communities.

These are important ideas especially when combined with the idea that public “representation and participation” could give public broadcasting a key role in helping Americans re-shape and re-imagine their lives through public media. As has been previously mentioned in our White Paper on “Conceptual and Practical History in

American Journalism,”⁴⁵ we appear to be witnessing the beginnings of a “wisdom of the commons” approach in the efforts by Oregon Public Broadcasting and Minnesota Public Broadcasting through the development of “public insight journalism” to involve public the process of identifying and creating media products and outcomes that were once the exclusive purview of the journalistic culture.

Creating a “Digital Commons”

This may not be easily done and the prospects for success remain as unclear as the eventual outcome of our present economic uncertainties. Some important obstacles will have to be addressed if a successful outcome can be envisioned. These include 1) greater access to the Internet that in spite of phenomenal popularity remains a highly stratified environment and still excludes large numbers of poor, elderly and rural Americans, 2) Internet audiences that are fragmenting even more rapidly than are audiences for traditional media. This makes it more likely for audiences to watch only what they already know and to be exposed to opinions they already agree with and 3) the increased corporate presence online is resulting in a further “hollowing out” of the digital commons, according to Murdock.⁴⁶

There are positive aspects as well. Balancing this is the increased presence of a cultural or digital commons on the Internet. Public libraries and universities are already making what was once private content publicly available online. The massive amounts of intellectual and cultural offerings now accessible have changed the way in which Americans now share and explore issues and ideas. The role of public broadcasting seems ready-made to help the public deepen their sense of one another as citizens who now exist in a shared common space. Public broadcasting can now become the premier method by which ideas are shared in the sense of being curated and convened on behalf of the public. New social media forms can be aggregated and selected by public

⁴⁵ Stavitsky, A, & Dvorkin, J, *Conceptual and Practical History, CPB White Paper on Objectivity and Balance*, Washington, 2008.

⁴⁶ Murdock, op. cit., p. 14.

broadcasting on behalf of citizens who are hungry for the best information and cultural presence that is now available to them because of public broadcasting. Some examples can be found in how media organizations extend the usual journalistic offerings to include bloggers, wikis, moderated UGC (user generated content) and hyperlinks to other sources – even those over which public media has no editorial control or input. The goal is to extend the community of knowledge on behalf of the citizens. This is increasingly being done by NPR, especially for breaking news events.

The expectation of all media and of public broadcasting especially is to be more “public” in every sense. Community broadcasters and those on the margins of the public radio system need to find a place at the larger broadcasting table based on an ethic of reciprocity. The best example of this is Wikipedia with its unstated social contract of virtual transactions. The role of public broadcasters as a mediator in this new “digital commons” becomes even more essential, but would in effect change the nature of the dialogue between content creators and recipients. In effect, the distinctions would be increasingly minimized, even if they don’t completely disappear.

Journalism in public broadcasting would also be similarly affected as a system of collaborative exchange would produce new forms of information and commentary as “citizen journalists” become the sharp edge of the information gathering lance, leaving public broadcasting’s professionals to assess the usefulness and reliability of the incoming material. Just as “Public Insight Journalism” in Oregon and Minnesota has resulted in new ideas and issues previously overlooked or dismissed by traditional journalistic techniques, the creative “digital commons” has the potential to re-create how Americans imagine themselves and communicate. This is not the so-called “wisdom of crowd,” but a more informed and more adept “wisdom of communities” enhanced by the legitimacy of the public broadcasters.

Public broadcasting has the opportunity to create a link among the various cultural and informational elements in American society. This idea of a so-called “Notional [sic]

Public Media”⁴⁷ moves beyond the still effective idea of public broadcasting delivering news, information and culture to Americans, but doing even more for the benefit of Americans as citizens as well as consumers of high quality media offerings. Public broadcasting then becomes a two-way street delivering and receiving content that “informs, educates and entertains” Americans deeper and more concretely than every before.

Public broadcasting will not only reflect communities to each other, and will undoubtedly in the process invent and discover new communities of interest. These communities may coalesce and disband over specific issues, perhaps involving local idea and controversies or on issues of national and international importance.

This is an example where the role of government in supporting this particular enterprise will offer a distinct opportunity for public broadcasting for many years to come. As public opinion appears to be more open to new approaches especially on questions of government intervention, this is an opportunity for the public broadcasting community to be less defensive on this matter.

This means that the public broadcasting community needs to take advantage of the apparent willingness of the American public to support government involvement in many areas of American life – including public broadcasting. While this new openness may present opportunities for renewed funding and a revitalized public broadcaster, the issue of editorial independence is still real. The idea of the “arm’s length” relationship between public broadcasting and government still requires maintenance and vigilance to avoid suspicions that public broadcasting might become a form of state broadcasting.

If successful, it would situate public broadcasting in a unique vantage point and perspective in American media and could enhance the purpose of public service

⁴⁷ Stavitsky, A., “*Notional Public Radio: Toward a New Conception of Non-Commercial Media*,” paper presented to the Broadcast Education Association, Las Vegas, NV, April, 2008.

broadcasting. It will not be without its challenges: public broadcasting will need to discover a new approach to government that links both institutions to shared values of public service and citizenship. In addition, there will be complications arising from issues over support of non-broadcasting new media forms. This will eventually involve the public broadcasting community into issues of definition over “who is a journalist” in this new media environment. In the welter of concerns over government support, this brings us closer to involving the government in framing that debate and definition – something that First Amendment proponents of all stripes will approach with understandable caution.

V. In Summary

Public broadcasting in the 20th century brought public television and radio in the United States beyond its original roots of local service through information and cultural programming. By the beginning of the new century this service has become a significant element in how America sees itself and the world. Yet over the years, public broadcasting has not forgotten that its identity is profoundly connected to the communities that it serves.

These and other values are the deepest expressions of a new form of public broadcasting that both can share without fear of being compromised. This would be both a way forward and an acknowledgement of future best practices in a way that would, at the same time, be true to the vision first articulated by the original pioneers of public broadcasting.

Public broadcasting appears to be on the verge of new era in terms of its relationships with government, now in the unaccustomed role of supporter and enabler of the values of the enterprise. While these are early days in the Obama administration, it seems apparent that much of the adversarial tone which often placed public broadcasting on the defensive, seems have been muted, if not completely subsided.

These circumstances present important opportunities and challenges for public broadcasting. These include: how best to determine what should be the new roles and relationships with government in a partnership based on the deepest shared values of public service and citizenship? How should a partnership be carefully planned and broadly discussed among public broadcasting stakeholders in order not to deform or deflect the mission of the enterprise?

While there are evident possibilities for growth and expansion in this environment, there are evident dangers as well. It would be advisable to remember that in the past, an over-reliance on, or identification with government can do damage to the reputation of public broadcasting as an independent agency. The capriciousness of the times and the whims of the electorate can easily rebound against public broadcasting and undo much of the careful work that has gone into creating this unique and valued American institution. A too-eager embrace of the administration by public broadcasting could have serious and long-lasting consequences should the Obama administration fail in its attempts to correct the economic problems besetting the nation.

With those caveats in mind, here are our recommendations that are predicated on the assumption of obtaining additional federal funds:

- Define the “arm’s length” relationship between public broadcasting and government funders in order to assure independence, accountability and transparency for all stakeholders, including the public.
- Increase CPB support for new content forms, especially at the local and station level.
- Create a CPB initiative for national coordination to ensure stable, robust platforms for new public social media to ensure that commercial social media don’t monopolize the new media landscapes.
- Create mechanisms to allow citizen journalism to partner with established brands (PBS, APTV, PRI, NPR) to create a more democratic media.

- Seek opportunities for private/public media partnerships to deepen educational content, journalism, documentaries and performing arts.
- Encourage more training and outreach to clarify the role of public broadcasting in a multi-media, multi-platform environment in order to keep pubcasting cutting-edge, innovating and relevant.