

# U.S. Public Broadcasting and the Business of Public Service

Alan G. Stavitsky & Robert K. Avery

To the student of European public service broadcasting, the United States system of public broadcasting must seem needlessly complex and inefficient. The U.S. model, however, should be understood in the context of the crucible of American broadcasting in which it developed. That context situated U.S. public broadcasting on the margins of American media and disenfranchised the noncommercial sector from its very beginnings, more than eight decades ago. The mission-versus-market issues that vex contemporary U.S. public broadcasters are rooted in this history, and it has shaped their response to the challenges and opportunities of digital convergence.

## Mission, market, and media at the margins

American radio emerged in a period of great faith in the social responsibility of private enterprise. As Rowland has noted, during the 1920s the assumption reigned that “the best public services would emerge in a largely unfettered private enterprise” (1993: 158). The structure of U.S. broadcasting was locked in during this formative period: a privately controlled, entertainment-driven commercial system, dominated by national networks, accompanied by an under-funded, widely dispersed group of noncommercial stations, generally based at universities and acting, in Raymond Williams’ words, “as a palliative” (1974: 37). Though critics soon began to challenge the public service performance of the commercial broadcasters, the regulatory authority, the Federal Communications Commission [FCC], governed with a light touch. The approach emphasized technical matters and trusted largely in networks and private stations to police themselves in matters of content. This was mainly to be handled through the National Association of Broadcasters [NAB] trade group.

It’s interesting to note that Charles Siepman, a former BBC programmer, oversaw one of the FCC’s most significant broadcast reform initiatives. He

was charged with developing standards for FCC regulation of public-service performance in what came to be known as the ‘Blue Book,’ so called for the color of its cover (Federal Communications Commission, 1946). When the Blue Book was published in 1946, it was attacked by the NAB as an attempt to bring BBC-style “state” broadcasting to the United States. Indeed, the values of the British, European and Canadian public-service models were seldom understood by American broadcasters and policymakers; they tended to be dismissed as systems captured by government, as opposed to the “free” system of U.S. broadcasting (Avery, 1993).

While commercial radio cultivated an audience with mass appeal entertainment fare, noncommercial stations, known as “educational radio,” emphasized instructional and high-culture programming. But unlike their international counterparts, U.S. educational broadcasters seldom produced the range of program genres that would attract a broad, general audience. Accordingly, when federal succor came to noncommercial broadcasting as part of the “Great Society” social-policy initiatives of the 1960s, advocates renamed the enterprise *public* broadcasting. With the semantic shift came the assumption that public radio and now TV would reach a larger audience with more diverse, attractive programming, fueled with the federal funding from the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967.

Though this seminal legislation vitalized a moribund, *ad hoc* collection of educational stations into a functional public broadcasting system with shared national programming, the 1967 act failed to address questions of mission. In contrast to the charters of European public-service broadcasters, which spoke of social goals and outlined responsibilities, the U.S. law essentially told public broadcasters what they were *not* to be: commercial.

This was largely a function of history, law and culture. American broadcasting, of course, developed in a manner quite opposite the European case. While in most European countries, public-service systems were well established before commercial broadcasting was introduced, commercial radio and TV had ruled the U.S. airwaves for decades by 1967. Commercial broadcasters acquiesced to the establishment of a noncommercial adjunct with the understanding that public stations would generally provide serious, high-brow program fare that did not represent a major competitive threat in terms of audience and advertising revenue. (Consider that then-U.S. President Lyndon Johnson himself owned commercial broadcast stations in Texas). This helps explain the historical resistance in the United States to using direct advertising to fund public programming, which is part of the funding mix in many other countries, as near as Canada.

The lack of mission guidance in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, and its amendments through the years, also flows from the U.S. legal tradition of free expression. “Congress shall make no law”, reads the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, “...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press”. Though politicians have a long history of intervening in the editorial affairs of public broadcasters, they have done so primarily by threatening – whether

explicitly or implicitly – to cut funding. Given the expansive way in which U.S. courts have generally interpreted First Amendment protections over time, legislators are loath to enact laws that may be seen as proscribing media behavior.

Further, the United States lacks a strong tradition of discourse about the role of media in the national culture. While nations in the European Union, for example, debate the cultural implications of media products, parallel U.S. discourse is less sophisticated and more episodic, usually occasioned by some case of media excess, such as offensive antics by radio disc jockeys seeking to attract attention. As such, commentary about public broadcasting is limited to reviews of programs in the popular press, polemics by critics on the political left and right, and periodic academic analysis (cf. Avery, 2001). This situation is exacerbated by the schism between U.S. public broadcasters and the academic community in the wake of the 1981 demise of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, the trade association that linked the two (Witherspoon, Kovitz, Avery & Stavitsky, 2000: iv-v). Whereas European academics often interact with their public-service broadcasters, in the manner of the RIPE conference that spawned this volume, American academics seldom have such opportunities.

As a result of these forces, taken together and in the absence of a detailed articulation of what constitutes public service, how U.S. public broadcasters have come to interpret their mission has largely been shaped by funding imperatives. True, European public-service broadcasters face many of the same competitive pressures as do the Americans. However, most U.S. public broadcasters were cast into the market without a heritage of mission and audience loyalty.

### The problem of ‘the public’

The increased money and attention wrought by the 1967 act forced public broadcasting to confront the problem of its ‘publicness.’ That is, educational broadcasters had previously felt beholden primarily to the university presidents or charitable foundation heads who were their benefactors, as opposed to listeners and viewers. Post 1967, as the recipients of public tax dollars and with a mandate to serve a wider audience, public broadcasters had to be accountable to a variety of constituencies: notably Congress, which authorizes federal support, and an amorphous ‘public,’ in whose name they were licensed.

Assuring accountability has proven awkward. Congressional oversight of public broadcasting has regularly wandered into areas of editorial interference with programming, despite institutional ‘heat-shield’ structures intended to keep legislators at arm’s length. For example, a July 2002 legislative hearing ostensibly to assess public broadcasting’s transition to digital transmission devolved into Congressional criticism of National Public Radio’s cover-

age of the Middle East; this followed a vocal campaign by American Jewish groups that blasted NPR journalism as pro-Palestinian (U.S. Congress, 2002). Parallel scrutiny of public television programming by Congressional Republicans followed disclosures that some public television stations had made lists of station donors available to Democratic candidates.

Though many Americans consider U.S. public broadcasting to be publicly funded in the manner of European systems, most U.S. public radio and television stations actually receive most of their funding from non-tax-based sources. On average, allocation support (which may include funding from state and local governments, as well as universities) accounted for about 40 percent of station funding, according to the most recent data. The rest came from listener and viewer contributions and from corporate underwriting – quasi-commercial on-air mentions of businesses that pay fees to stations to get their names before public broadcasting's upscale audience (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2002). Because government support of U.S. public broadcasting has waned during the past two decades, congruent with global trends, private funding has become critical for operational success. This has brought increased attention by public broadcasters to what listeners and viewers *want* to hear and see.

The emphasis on audience measurement data (the 'ratings') has resulted in changing models of public broadcast programming (Stavitsky, 1995a, 1998). Many public radio stations have 'focused' their formats, in the manner of commercial radio, stressing their core service, such as news or jazz music, and eliminating programs seen as ancillary, including those that serve fringe or minority communities (Stavitsky, 1994; Witherspoon, Kovitz, Avery & Stavitsky, 2000).

In public TV, notably the stations affiliated with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), audience and underwriter awareness has prompted an emphasis at many stations on non-controversial, corporate-friendly fare. Examples would include Ken Burns' epic historical documentaries, 'how-to' programs about cooking and home repair, and musical extravaganzas aimed at baby boomers (Bullert, 1997; Hoynes, 1994; Witherspoon, Kovitz, Avery & Stavitsky, 2000: 101-106). In addition, many long-running, classic PBS programs are being reevaluated to assess their appeal to younger viewers who tend to spend most of their screen time watching cable channels, if not videos or DVDs.

Further, public radio and television stations have generally reduced the amount of locally based production to invest more resources in national programming. This change is linked with audience researchers' claims that such is more attractive to listeners and viewers, even if incongruent with public broadcasting's heritage of 'localism' in which broadcasters speak to their communities about local issues in local voices (Stavitsky, 1994). In addition, as satellite distribution costs come down and broadband offers new transmission channels, it's often less expensive for stations to broadcast programs produced elsewhere.

However, these market-driven changes have drawn fire from some producers and critics. They argue that public broadcasting's attempts to become more popular run counter to its mission of providing an alternative to commercial media, i.e. to serve unserved audiences, to elevate the democratic discourse, and to provide an outlet for cultural expression. "I think we have to stay true to our mission," says veteran public TV programmer Peter McGhee. "Our mission is different than commercial television and cable. Their mission is to run a profitable business. Our mission is to inform, educate and inspire" (quoted in Ryan, 2002: L1).

But how to achieve such high purpose remains contentious. One high-profile theatre of conflict during the 1990s was Pacifica Radio, the avowedly left-wing chain of community radio stations, which was rocked by lawsuits, death threats and heated protest over management's plans to professionalize and streamline programming to reach a larger audience (Janssen, 2002). The architect of the radio reform, Pat Scott, was vilified as a "Yuppie Stalinist" (Stavitsky, 1995b: 90). Public radio personality Garrison Keillor, speaking of public radio generally, lamented the influx of "(g)uys in suits with charts and pages of numbers. I think this is a pretty dreadful development" (*Thoughts from Lake Wobegon*, 1994: 58).

Still, leaders of U.S. public broadcasting stress that they are not providing a significant public service if they fail to reach a significant audience. And, they note, in the absence of abundant public funding they must attract an audience sufficiently loyal to personally donate money, and also sufficiently upscale to please corporate underwriters. They refer to the contemporary situation as "viewer sensitive", meaning that the economy of public broadcasting today is sensitive to the size of the audience and its satisfaction with the product. Further, striking a balance between remaining true to traditional mission goals while meeting market goals is made more difficult by the challenges of multi-channel, multimedia competition.

### Turf wars

Commercial media have laid siege to program genres that once were the domain of public broadcasters. Given the plethora of video channels wrought by cable and satellite, U.S. media have become *demassified*, focusing on narrow audience segments, including the upscale viewers of public TV. No longer is PBS the only place to find children's fare, or public affairs, or historical or science documentary. Disney and Nickelodeon program for kids, the History Channel and Discovery target the documentary audience, while numerous cable channels provide news and talk around the clock. It should also be noted that new PBS President Pat Mitchell, a former CNN documentary producer, was promising at this writing that public television would upgrade its news-gathering capabilities and address more hard-hitting public-affairs topics in the post-9/11 environment.

While in-depth news and ‘serious music’ formats were largely unique to public stations on the radio dial until recently, the launch of two new satellite-radio services poses a threat from space. XM and Sirius Satellite Radio each offer up to 100 niche audio channels – from classical music to comedy to car racing – delivered to your car or home for a monthly subscription fee. Though the new services have been slow to catch on, there’s concern in public radio circles that the satellite subscriber drawn to all-opera and business-news channels, to name but two, may decide to stop supporting her local public radio station.

In this mediascape, it is not surprising that public broadcasting programmers seek to “super-serve the core,” a catch phrase for targeting those people most likely to listen and watch public stations – and to support them financially. Public radio research guru David Giovannoni describes it this way: “The way to serve your public better? Focus on a single audience and serve that audience extremely, insanely well” (quoted in Freedman, 2001: 32).

### Social capital or market capital?

The concept of ‘social capital’ has emerged as a guiding principle for many U.S. public broadcasters in this challenging environment. The idea was popularized by scholar Robert Putnam’s influential book, *Bowling Alone* (2000). The title was based on the decrease in the number of bowling leagues in the U.S., which Putnam traced to a general decline in community life. Putnam stressed that social capital is accumulated through social interaction, makes our lives more productive and rewarding, and fosters the development of civil society. He cited public broadcasting as a “classic example of a public good” and noted that communities with high levels of social capital, as measured by civic participation, provide strong support for public stations. Why? Because, Putnam argued, “civic norms sustain an expanded sense of ‘self-interest’ and a firmer confidence in reciprocity” (pp. 348-349).

Key public broadcasting leaders have thus seized the notion that their stations can play a role in rebuilding a sense of community. A consultant’s report advised American public TV to “identify opportunities in which content and services can be leveraged to build social capital and stimulate civic engagement in your community” (*CPB Future Fund*, 2001: 6). In the same document, Putnam himself noted a payoff for public broadcasters “(i)f they can figure out ways to get people to engage in community life, that will solve their problems because those kind of people will be involved” with their local stations (p.6). The concern is that some public broadcasters, in lieu of striving to actually *make* themselves more relevant in their communities, will just *market* themselves as such.

However, the social capital movement, along with other progressive strains of thinking about public media, *has* spawned numerous high-profile attempts

at developing innovative content and services. These include “civic journalism” projects that aim for substantive political coverage, focused on campaign issues rather than simply campaign strategy, often in partnership with local newspapers and civic groups. Public TV has ‘rediscovered’ its educational roots and is proposing new instructional services, especially utilizing the added bandwidth offered by digital TV. Public radio, mindful of the need to lure younger listeners and minorities, developed a “Youth Radio” series produced by teens, as well as talk programs on African-American, Latino and Native-American topics. Further, some public broadcasters are swimming against the national tide by rededicating themselves to localism markets – in realization of the fact that most new satellite- or web-driven media are centralized (cf. Stavitsky, Avery and Vanhala, 2001).

Such projects reflect a new understanding that *it is public service that makes public support possible*. So, it could be said that public broadcasters should engage vigorously in the *business of public service*, not merely by supervising the core or obsessing over new revenue streams, but rather by developing new programming forms and services that engage people.

Yet, for all the efforts touted by public broadcasters as evidence of their public-service commitment, some critics remained intractable. In the spring of 2000, a grassroots movement, Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting [CIPB], emerged, supported by foundation grants and determined to pressure PBS and NPR to restore diversity as a programming ideal, even at the risk of offending mainstream audiences. CIPB sought to mobilize local chapters of activists to engage station management, and filed comments with the FCC to challenge the national organizations’ efforts to use part of their allocations of digital spectrum for commercial, revenue-generating purposes.

Academic critics added to the debate. Avery and Stavitsky (2003) analyzed the FCC filings of the America’s Public Television Stations [APTS] trade group and found APTS’ rhetorical arguments were incongruent with contemporary public TV programming, with its mainstream, upscale appeal and ties to enhanced underwriting. Similarly, Hoynes (2002) argued that the “new PBS brand,” which was promoted as meeting public-interest obligations of diversity and service to marginalized audiences, instead reflected movement in the direction of service to elite viewers whose donations were critical to system survival.

## Digitization and convergence

The transition to digital transmission modes represents a defining moment for public broadcasters. Added bandwidth may be viewed solely in terms of its revenue-generating possibilities, such as leasing airspace to commercial operators or transmitting data for businesses. Such is fast becoming the nature of telecommunications in the so-called “Network Economy” (cf. Lessig, 2001; Rifkin, 2000). Indeed some public broadcasters who control multiple broad-

cast licenses are considering selling off secondary stations to commercial entities to raise funds for program production and the digital transition for their primary channels. Such measures are understandable, given U.S. public broadcasting's chronic under-funding, but the industry must tread carefully.

Two issues in the summer of 2002 demonstrate the conundrum. Leaders of the public television system agreed to relax their rules governing corporate underwriting announcements (Everhart, 2002). Corporate mascots will now be allowed in Public Broadcasting Service underwriting 'spots,' closing the gap between the look of such announcements and full-fledged commercials. Making public television more 'friendly' to corporations is seen as necessary in the face of commercial competition and declining numbers of station contributors. Yet at the same time, the U.S. Congress was considering legislation that would create a trust fund to support "public interest" digital media. The endowment would be funded by proceeds from spectrum auctions and would help public broadcasters make the transition to digital transmission and fund educational programming. With many competing demands for the expected windfall from the sale of spectrum to telecommunication providers, the case for public broadcasting in this and similar initiatives would be weakened by quasi-commercial activities.

Viewed in this light, the value of public broadcasting would be measured not only by the number of people who tune in but also, to use a museum analogy, by the 'quality of the collection.' This fits well with talk of the 'reinvention' of U.S. broadcasting in the digital age, from providing a flow of programs that aggregates audience members to providing an array of programs and services on audience demand (cf. Lessig, 2001; Murdock, 2000). Former PBS President Larry Grossman has proposed a so-called "Grand Alliance" to accomplish this, in which public broadcasters partner with local museums, libraries and schools to produce and make available educational and informational programs, both on air and online.

Other thinkers seek to exploit digital plenty. PBS is experimenting with promoting its programs on TiVO, a video-storage platform that enables viewers to manage their TV watching by designating not only their favorite programs to record, but also their favorite program genres. Public radio futurists are investigating an audio equivalent. Further, public radio networks are programming channels for the two new satellite-radio services, mentioned earlier, even though the sat-casters are seen as a threat to terrestrial radio. Such initiatives, coupled with public broadcasting's extensive web-based services, represent important attempts to innovate with the mode of transmission.

Without a doubt, attracting ears and eyeballs to public broadcasting today requires careful attention to audience analysis, to effective program scheduling, and to sophisticated utilization of digital tools. Ultimately, however, it comes down to *content*.

At their best, American public broadcasters have been celebrated for incisive, responsible journalism and creative, accessible cultural fare. Today's

market-driven exuberance must be tempered by realization that it's the role of public broadcasters to provide a place of measured thought amid the cacophony and hype of the multi-channel U.S. mediascape. They must distinguish themselves from their commercial counterparts, to engage listeners and viewers as citizens and as individuals seeking enlightenment, and, yes, even entertainment.

In sum, a public broadcasting system that is important in the lives of people will be supported by those people – whether directly by contributions, as in the U.S. model, or indirectly in the form of political capital that assures tax-based support. Such a system will be true to the spirit of the public service mission, even if the letter of that mission, in the U.S. content, is lacking. In the final accounting, however, until the stewards of federal communication policy seek to articulate clearly a remit for U.S. public broadcasting – and provide sustainable financial support – its practitioners will continue to struggle in search of mission.

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