American Public Television: Programs – Now, and in the Future

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Contents

There are very few valid comparisons to be made between American public television and noncommercial networks in other countries. The American system is based on localism – 347 separate stations, individually licensed, having very varied purposes (some of them are specifically educational institutions, some are community stations, some are part of state-wide networks). There is very little central direction or intent. Most European and Asian systems, by contrast, are specifically designed to be national in their scope and centralized in their direction.

Public television came into being in the United States as an afterthought – it was grafted on to a flourishing commercial system whose purpose was to make money. In Europe, and in some other countries where public television came first, the full spectrum of programming was always part of the remit of noncommercial broadcasters. It was not even an option in America, where public television never had the resources or the opportunity to compete for the more expensive and profitable areas of programming that commercial stations had already colonized – amongst them, sports, feature films, comedy, and fully-equipped news services.

The earliest noncommercial stations in America, long before the system was codified as "public broadcasting" in 1967, were educational stations, pure and simple. To this day, public television is sometimes referred to as "educational television," and that remains its most powerful contribution. But it is much more, and it is the thesis of this chapter that, in the digital age, it could become *a great deal more*, if it seizes its opportunities.

1. Public television programming – today

An enormous amount of programming is available to the 347 local stations. There *is* such a thing as local programming, but few stations are equipped (or can afford) to do much of it. So they rely very largely on packaged feeds from central sources, and on programming they buy in from individual suppliers, both within and without

the system. The best known of these feeds is the National Program Service (NPS) which is supplied by PBS, the stations' membership organization in Alexandria, Virginia. NPS provides the stations with their basic primetime schedule, and daytime children's programs as well.

1.1 Quantification and categories

In 1996, PBS distributed over 25,000 hours of programming to the stations, of which only 7.5 percent was accounted for by the National Program Service.[1]

- American Program Service (APS), which is an additional and alternative source of programming for the stations, currently lists 250 titles (mainly multi-part series) in its syndication service, a further 350 titles in its exchange service, and rights to about 100 specials and special series in its premium service.

  The National Instructional Satellite Service feeds 1,400 hours of K-12 programming to stations, for use in schools.
- The most recent figures available for purely local production are those issued by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for Fiscal Year 1994.[2] Of the 197 licensees surveyed, the *average* amount of locally produced programming, per station per year, was 154 hours, broken down into 135 hours of "general production," 15 hours of K-12 programming, and 4 hours of post-secondary production.
- These are the principal sources of programming, but there are many other additional sources, including (for instance) the Program Resource Group (PRG) for stations overlapped by larger stations in the same market, the Lark Group (a production and acquisition cooperative created by stations in Seattle, Houston, St. Louis, and Detroit), the Central Educational Network (CEN), and the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

1 *Americans Like What They See*: PBS Annual Report, 1996, p.12.
2 *CPB Research Notes* (No. 88, April 1996), p. 12.

– The main categories of programming are education (both formal and informal), children's programs (especially pre-school), public affairs, documentaries of all kinds, science and nature programming, and cultural affairs. American public television has no news service of its own, and no central production facility (both PBS and APS are acquirers and distributors of programming, not producers). National production is concentrated in a very few major stations.

1.2 Comparison to commercial television and cable television

Public television programming is narrower than that of the commercial networks – no sports, no comedy, very few feature films (and generally only "golden oldies"), no news bulletins, a scarcity of drama, no game shows, very few daytime talk shows. On the other hand, it is more broadly based than the cable channels, most of which are concentrated in individual "niches." To the extent that public television is also a niche broadcaster, it inhabits a variety of different niches – children's programming, science, arts and music, public affairs, etc.

Many of public television's traditional niches have been occupied by cable channels – Nickelodeon for children, The Learning Channel for education, Discovery for documentaries, Bravo and Ovation for the arts, and so on. The most obvious "competitor" to public television is Arts & Entertainment, which combines popular documentaries (e.g. the successful nightly *Biography* series) with PBS-type drama, and tactical use of high quality former network series (*Law and Order,* etc.).

1.3 "Public-interest" programming

The 1996 Telecommunications Act envisioned, but did not spell out, the idea of broadcasters having to accept "public-interest obligations." It was left to the FCC to create the necessary rules and regulations, with the Clinton Administration urging it to do so as quickly

as possible – the President himself wrote an unprecedented letter to the FCC asking it to make rules to strengthen the educational programming requirement. In October 1997, under the patronage of Vice-President Gore, an Advisory Committee on Public-Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters was convened to report by June, 1998 (it immediately requested a four month extension).

"Public-interest" in broadcasting is currently defined by a small group of objectives which have been placed at the top of the agenda by politicians and pressure groups. They include the principle that all television stations, commercial and noncommercial, should include in their weekly schedules not less than three hours of "quality educational programming for children." All the usual arguments apply – is *Mr. Magoo* "quality educational programming"? Other objectives include free airtime for political candidates, the use of closed captioning for the handicapped, the adoption of an on-screen ratings system (to forewarn of violence, nudity, bad language, etc.), the regulation (or even banning) of liquor advertisements, and the use of Public Service Announcements.

Some of these objectives have, to some degree, been put into effect voluntarily, although free airtime (which is the principal objective of the politicians) is not readily available. Public television has no problem with any of them. It is, by far, the biggest supplier of quality educational programming for children (to the extent that several commercial broadcasters are prepared to pay public television to supply their own quotas of such programming), and it has no objection to free airtime for candidates, if such a system can be worked out.

If the immediate agendas of the politicians and pressure groups are ignored, then most public television programming can fairly be labeled "public-interest." This is an important point, because the commercial broadcasters, who want to have very little to do with public broadcasting (and they certainly don't want to finance it in any way) nevertheless rely implicitly on public broadcasting to provide a stable and continuing supply of public-interest programming. When American children's programming is held up as "amongst the best in the world," it is public television's programs that are being

referred to. When regular and thoughtful public affairs programming is lauded, it is the nightly one-hour *NewsHour* that is most often given as an example.

1.4 Contributions to education

Public television's specifically educational programming is huge in quantity, and generally high in quality.

Its pre-school programming (*Sesame Street, Barney, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood,* etc.) is acclaimed throughout the world and is accessible to parents and children either on PBS broadcasts or through the *Ready to Learn* service, which includes local outreach.

Public television is the largest supplier of K-12 instructional programming for schools, although it has recently suffered inroads from commercial suppliers, many of whose products are more closely tailored to the needs of teachers in classrooms (8–15 minute modules).

- Its adult learning services include a vast array of telecourses leading to diplomas or degrees. The *Ready to Earn* banner encompasses services that prepare students for the world of work, and adults to overcome illiteracy (*Literacy Link*) and to gain high school diplomas. *Going The Distance* enables students to earn degrees through college telecourses. More than two-thirds of America's 3,000 colleges use PBS adult learning services.
- *The Business Channel* provides more than 1,000 hours of video-based training (including desktop video-on-demand) and video conferences to more than 2,000 businesses.
- More than 1,000 hospitals use PBS' video conferencing facilities and training programs to update their staff on medical issues and techniques.
- *PBS Mathline* and *PBS Teacher Connex* supply teachers with information and courses, as well as with directions for obtaining other video and on-line services.
- The *Annenberg/CPB Channel and Web Service* provides programming and curriculum courses for educators and communities through a free satellite signal and Internet web sites. Its concentration is on math and science teaching.

1.5 Contribution to political process

Public television's national programming includes both weekly and nightly affairs shows (*The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Washington Week in Review, Frontline, etc.).*

Many stations also produce their own local programs, ranging from 17 stations which have their own nightly news and public affairs shows, to the production of weekly local-issue talk shows by most stations. Documentaries and occasional specials are produced at the local level, as are occasional town meetings, "meet the mayor" programs, etc. Community and state-run stations almost always play an active part in local democracy.

Election and campaign coverage on public television is more thoughtful and more issue-oriented than it is on commercial television (which is dominated by political advertising, often of a sharp and provocative nature). PBS has established *The Democracy Project* as the flagship of its political programming, both during elections and between them. It produces documentary series, interview programs, and election coverage, strictly balanced between issues and viewpoints.

For several decades, political broadcasting in the United States was based on the so-called "Fairness Doctrine." It required broadcasters to devote reasonable amounts of time to the discussion of controversial issues of public importance, and to do so fairly by affording airtime to opposing viewpoints. The Fairness Doctrine was swept aside in the 1980s, first by the courts, then by the refusal of the Reagan Administration to accept a bill reimposing the doctrine.

Absent the Fairness Doctrine, the Clinton Administration is hoping to place "public-interest" obligations on broadcasters. These might include the provision of free airtime for political candidates as a *quid pro quo* for the broadcasters having been given (for free) their new digital frequencies. The problem is that the *quo* is being demanded after the *quid* has been given.

1.6 Internal production

PBS and the American Program Service (APS) are the principal suppliers programming for public television. Neither is a producer. They acquire and they commission (often in co-production agreements with independent or foreign producers).

A great deal of public television (maybe a third) is purchased from foreign broadcasters or producers. Some of this is "reformatted" to look like American-produced programming (new narration, etc.), some of it (like the *Masterpiece Theatre* dramas) is left intact, but prefaced by an "introduction."

The principal producers of national programming are a group of four or five stations, all of them on the East coast with the exception of KCET, Los Angeles. WNET in New York, WGBH in Boston, and WETA in Washington D.C. are responsible for about two-thirds of all national production. Some of this is original production (most of the public affairs programming, for instance), but a great deal of prime-time programming is independent or foreign production syphoned through an individual station, which acts as the originator for the entire nationwide system – and takes the consequential risks (in funding or co-funding the programs).

The actual making of programs falls mostly to the independent sector – not many stations carry production staffs for national programming, and even then they are normally support staff rather than actual program-makers. Whether they are independents commissioned by individual stations (or by PBS, APS, or one of the central or regional suppliers), or they are organizations of independents formally supported by the system (like the ITVS group), they are the backbone of public television and they make the vast majority of all its programming, with the exception of local programming. The biggest of them, the Children's Television Workshop, produces almost 15 percent of all national programming.

Among the producing stations, there are pockets of expertise and experience – WGBH in Boston, for instance, is responsible for some of the most valued series – *NOVA* (science), *The American Experience* (history), and *Frontline* (public affairs documentaries) are three of the most important. WETA in Washington, D.C., has a particular

expertise in news and public affairs programming (*The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, etc.). *The Nightly Business Review* is produced by WPBT in Miami.

Among local stations, the record is spotty. Only 17 stations produce their own nightly news show.[3] Many of the educational stations concentrate on telecourse and teaching material, and most of the state networks are heavily involved in statewide activities (many of them carry coverage of their state legislatures and other events).

So far as program costs are concerned, they are dramatically lower than commercial network costs, but very often higher than cable costs. A program for A&E's nightly *Biography* series is budgeted at $130,000 – the average for *The American Experience* on public television would be several times higher. That is partly a reflection of quality, partly of the higher audience available to public television, and partly of the availability of corporate underwriting for public television programming (in addition to contributions from PBS, CPB, and occasionally the NEA and/or the NEH, as well as foundations).

1.7 Other sources of programming

Since public television is a commissioner of programs, much more than it is an actual producer, independent American production is included within Internal Production (above). Certainly, it is true that public televison has its own independent community securely attached to it, and largely dependent on it.

The main source of outside production is, therefore, foreign production. PBS statistics show that this source accounts for about 14 percent of the NPS prime-time schedule.[4] That figure is suspect because it does not include a wide variety of programs that appear in the schedule as part of "continuing series" – e.g. BBC *Horizon* programs renarrated as part of *NOVA*, productions of the BBC Nat-

3 *Current* (October 20, 1997), p. 9.

4 *Quality Time? The Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Public Television* (The Twentieth Century Fund Press, New York, 1993), p. 138.

ural History Unit which are similarly included in *Nature*, etc. The actual figure may be between 25 percent and 30 percent.

British programming forms the major part of this percentage, but there are also Australian and Irish productions, with a sprinkling of European programs in subtitled or dubbed versions.

Educational programming is almost entirely produced in America – much of it by independent producers specializing in the genre.

1.8 Quality of programs

A perception of quality – high quality – is generally attached to public television programming. It is seen in the respect accorded it by reviewers, and in the way most viewers distinguish it from the rest of television programming available to them. A Roper Starch tracking study for PBS[5] showed that the adjectives most often used to describe public television were "educational," "interesting" and "informative." Widely, but less often, used were "generally good," "important," "imaginative," "stimulating".

A 1996 Total Research Corporation survey[6] gave PBS less comforting news. Asked which channel respondents associated most directly with certain types of programming, the survey showed that niche cable channels – such as The History Channel, The Travel Channel, Nickelodeon, Bravo, Arts & Entertainment, The Home and Garden Channel, and others – had made small, but distinct, inroads on public television's perception as being the preeminent supplier of these programs.

5 Quoted by Robert Ottenhoff, Chief Operating Officer of PBS, in *Television Industry Scan* (February 1, 1997), an internal PBS document, p. 12.

6 Ibid. p. 13.

1.9 Impact on journalistic standards

American public television came into its own as a journalistic medium at the time of the Watergate hearings in 1973/74. Following hard on a blatant and fierce attempt by the Nixon Administration to stifle its independent reporting, public television not only carried the hearings gavel to gavel, but distinguished itself by the depth and fairness of its reporting and comment.

The nightly MacNeil/Lehrer programs, which had their origins in those anxious days, and which eventually developed into *The NewsHour,* established journalistic standards that quickly won the respect of politicians, commentators, and viewers. The refusal to surrender to the 20-second "sound bite" philosophy, and the determination to give ample space to the hearing of both sides of controversial issues, has made *The NewsHour* a model of what television can do, and what public television must do.

The other regular program to impact journalistic standards is *Frontline*, whose fearless, and often brilliant, in-depth reporting of important issues has won it many prizes, and the respect of both television and newspaper journalists.

In one important field, public television missed out. It was ideally suited to be the vehicle for what is now C-SPAN – the cable network which relays live (and "live on tape") coverage of Congressional proceedings and committee hearings, as well as important events from all over the nation (speeches, press conferences, etc.). This is an information service many rely upon, especially the opinion-formers, but it was a service PBS decided against supplying in the late 1970s[7], leaving the option available to a consortium of cable operators who supply the service without cost.

What all this amounts to is a very large and impressive supply of programming that is primarily educational and informational in intent. The prime-time National Program Service supplied by PBS,

7 The PBS System Planning Project, 1978/79, consisted of a series of project papers issued by Hartford N. Gunn, Jr., then the Vice Chairman of PBS. Project Paper No.10 (Dated May 23, 1979) recommended that PBS should develop and launch a channel which would do more or less what C-SPAN does today.

which is what most Americans recognize as "public television," is short on entertainment values and somewhat aged. It includes many fine series – *Frontline* (investigative journalism and public affairs documentaries), *The American Experience* (history), *NOVA* (science), *Nature* (natural history), *Masterpiece Theatre* (British drama), *Great Performances* (music and the performing arts), and *The NewsHour* - but all these series have been in the schedule a long time, some of them for more than a quarter of a century. Refreshment is badly needed; it requires an injection of new money and an equal injection of new imagination. The occasional fine series that come from independent producers (Ken Burns, for instance, from *The Civil War* to the upcoming *Jazz* series) do not compensate for the old-fashioned feel of the schedule – and that is a problem. The same might be said of instructional programming for the classroom (still much the same as it was in the 1970s and 1980s). Only in its children's programming has public television continuously been on the cutting edge of both popularity and educational thinking.

Nevertheless, there is a launchpad here. Public television is embedded in the consciousness of Americans. For all its clumsy structure and perennial shortage of funds, it has the makings of an organization that can flourish in the digital age. It is already a $1.5 billion industry. It has a brand image (PBS's) that is recognized nationwide. It has a wonderfully efficient satellite delivery system. And it has this vast network of local stations from coast to coast. What it needs, and what it is about to get, is a digital revolution.

2. Programming for the digital future

Already, the principal tool for this revolution has been supplied. Every television station in the United States, be it commercial or noncommercial, has been given (for free) an additional frequency on which to begin digital broadcasting in parallel with its existing analogue service. Every station is required to be broadcasting in digital format by 2003 at latest; analog frequencies will have to be returned

to the government by 2006 (there may well be some slippage on this latter date if digital television sets have not been sold to at least 85 percent of households by that time; a study by Forrester Research of Cambridge, MA, in November 1997 reported that local broadcasters expect 19 percent of their viewers to have made the switch by 2001[8]).

The government's principal objective in giving stations these frequencies is to promote High Definition Television (HDTV), but nowhere is it written that stations *must* broadcast in HDTV, now or in the future. All that is certain is that they must get digital services on the air within five years (and many of them will be doing so within a few months). So, whether or not HDTV takes off, we can anticipate a great deal of Standard Definition Television (SDTV), which is also digital, though inferior to HDTV, but which has the great advantage that it uses only a small part of the digital frequency allocated to each station. Multiplexing will therefore become commonplace – the transmission of several (maybe as many as a dozen) different signals on the same frequency. For commercial stations, this is an opportunity for greater profit; for public stations, it is an opportunity – finally – to realize their mission.

Crystal ball gazing is a dangerous activity in these days of leapfrogging new technologies, but it seems fairly safe to predict that the broadcast firmament of the next ten years will include a slowly increasing amount of HDTV programming (particularly in primetime and sports time, picking up speed as and when consumers start buying new sets in real numbers), and a great deal of SDTV multiplexing. All this will have to take place in the context of the most dramatic development now on the drawing board, which is the convergence of the TV and the PC (itself made possible by digital transmission). What it all means is that *now* is the time to be developing new services – multiple services – to make proper use of the new capacity.

8 Reported in *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 17, 1997, p. 10.

2.1 A public telecommunications alliance

The possibility American public broadcasters are presently considering is the creation of a large-scale alliance of users of public telecommunications, both nationally and (in literally hundreds of mirror images) locally. Such an alliance would include state and local governments, museums, libraries, civic institutions, public health networks, schools, colleges, distance learning providers, the not-for-profit community, businesses, and homes – and public broadcasters, too, for they, with their ability to distribute high speed voice, data, and video over any distance, large or small, have the potential to be the hubs of such an alliance.

On paper, it looks rather a far-fetched vision, a good talking point. But I think it is a practical possibility – because all the potential players have a need for it. All of them are under pressure to make use of the new technologies. What they lack (but what public broadcasters have) is a distribution system. Yes, it's true that they all have access to the Internet, but that is a clumsy, indiscreet, and often unreliable carrier compared to the high speed, direct, and exclusive distribution that can be obtained through public broadcasters' digital frequencies. Cable operators will be able to provide the same sort of service, but they reach less than 70 percent of homes – moreover, they will need to make handsome profits. Public broadcasters' twin strengths – a national satellite distribution system, and a local presence in practically every significant community in America – give them a considerable advantage, as does their ability to provide services at cost (or, let's be realistic, slightly above), but without having to make substantial profits.

What this posits is a public broadcasting service with two distinct roles. Broadcasting will remain the most important mission, along with the production and distribution of an increasing amount of non-broadcast programming. But public broadcasting will also become a digital services provider on a considerable scale, both locally and nationally. It has the means to do this – but does it have the will? At this moment, following the effective, but discreet, leadership of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), it is considering the option.

2.3 Nonbroadcast services

A surprising amount of public television programming is not designed for broadcast "over the air." Schools and colleges with receiving dishes take instructional programs directly from the satellite. *PBS On-Line, PBS Electronic Field Trips, PBS Mathline, PBS Teachers Connex, the CPB/Annenberg Satellite Channel* are all examples of valued services for students and teachers which have no broadcast function (though some of them certainly could have). *PBS Plus* and *PBS Select* (which will shortly include *PBS Classics*) are syndicated services used by stations to augment their schedules. *The Adult Learning Service* includes such services as *Ready to Earn* (of which *Going The Distance* is a part, giving students the opportunity to gain a degree through college credit telecourses) and *LiteracyLink* (which uses video, on-line, and computer technology to help adults receive literacy instruction and gain high school diplomas). *The Business Channel* provides businesses and other organizations with teleconferencing and desktop video on demand. All these are examples of non-broadcast services already in place and expanding year by year.

The new digital capacity will enable PBS and other providers to increase both the number and the effectiveness of these services. The new "push" technologies (data and video streaming to the desktop) are already in demand, and will become a potent tool during the next few years. As television and computer technologies converge, so will the requirement for distribution of digital signals – and it won't always be by the Internet, which is a crowded and very public carrier, unregulated, and somewhat unreliable. Indeed, one of the services already being pioneered in Utah and Virginia is the use of public television stations as "safe" (and very high speed) access routes to selected web sites – thus reassuring anxious parents about what their children may, or may not, see on the Internet.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg, because if public broadcasters (radio and television) are truly to become the hubs of telecommunications networks, then they will have to become digital services providers to a great many institutions and organizations they have not previously worked with. Some of them (libraries and museums)

they have often thought of as competitors, but now the concept of an "electronic public library" can become a reality, and the combined resources of libraries, museums, and public broadcasting can make it a powerful tool for learning and information. The concept of an "electronic republic" (articulated by Larry Grossman, a former President of PBS, in the 1997 Webb Lecture[9]) is another viable idea – the proposition that telecommunications technology can be used to meld the United States' traditional form of representative republic with new elements of electronic direct democracy. Some would argue that it is a dangerous concept, bordering on anarchy if it is totally unregulated, but it is nevertheless something that has to be experimented with.

These are some of the more glamorous examples of digital services provision – the ones that will be debated in newspaper editorials and legislative forums – but there are many more of the "bread and butter" variety. State and local governments, for instance, forced to accept new and burdensome duties previously performed by the federal government (administration of funds for welfare, transportation, and other largescale budgetary items) are going to require high-speed and confidential transmission of information by data, voice, and graphic means. Public health networks need to inform their users, update their administrators, doctors, and nurses, and educate the population as a whole in methods of disease prevention and healthy living. In all these areas (and they are only examples) effective public telecommunications is a vital resource. Public broadcasters may be surprised to find they are the key to it – and no one can force them to become a part of it – but it is a fact that their contribution to the sort of public telecommunications alliance envisaged for the next century will be pivotal, both for them and for the other participants.

There is another good reason why this should be so. Public broadcasting needs to earn its living. Ever since its conception, it has relied on a form of public begging that is both demeaning and unpopular. "Pledge weeks" have become so deeply embedded in the

9 Lawrence K. Grossman, Webb Lecture, the National Academy of Public Administrators, Washington, D.C., November 14, 1997.

world of public television that few station managers or senior officials can envisage a situation in which they will be able to escape from the awful thrice-yearly penance. The gross amount raised in this way by stations in 1997 was in excess of $300 million – but no one has ever, or will ever, tell us what the *net* figure is. When you take away the cost of the studios (which some stations use only for pledge programs) and the staff and the extra programming costs, what is the actual value?

Participation as the hub of a grand public telecommunications alliance might very well enable public television to foreswear its mendicant status. As a provider of digital services, it will be earning revenues – not huge ones, but sufficient, in all probability, to pay for its expanded role as a broadcaster and program-maker – and it is quite possible that stations which choose to play an active and constructive role in the alliance, as digital services providers as well as broadcasters, will be able to abandon "pledging" altogether in a few years.

The last significant revolution in American broadcasting – the coming of cable – was blithely ignored by public television, to its great cost. Its refusal to react in any way – neither by making use of the so-called PEG channels (the public, educational, and government cable channels provided for by the 1984 Cable Act), nor by adapting and developing its own programs and schedules in the face of cable's concentration on niche programming – doomed it to what was, at best, a stand-still during years in which other broadcasters and narrowcasters thrived.

A repetition of that mistake would certainly be disastrous, possibly fatal. The more reason, therefore, to face the digital future with imagination. The technology and the means are at hand. Is the will there, too?

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