

# PUBLIC MEDIA'S MOMENT

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## INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC MEDIA IN AMERICA

The ideals of public broadcasting are deeply rooted in the principles of American democracy. From the early Republic to the present, the government has long sought to use public policy and resources to promote and sustain a vibrant marketplace of ideas. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison created public subsidies for the distribution of newspapers that enabled the cultivation of a well-informed electorate. Similarly, government long has invested in schools and universities to train a literate citizenry, and policies have been used to promote public service in broadcast radio and television. We are now investing billions of tax dollars in building out the next great communications infrastructure — the Internet.

But the United States was late to the party in creating public broadcasting, leaving us with an underfunded and structurally flawed system in need of significant reforms. When radio was invented in the early 20th century, people around the world were inspired by the educational and democratic potential of the revolutionary new technology. It is difficult to overstate the widespread belief that radio would break open the hold on information formerly held by publishers, and give everyone a voice in the public square.

Commercial concerns quickly realized the profit-making potential of the new medium, and radio companies in the United States came to dominate broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s. In Europe, public broadcasting began to develop in the industrialized nations, particularly in Britain. In the postwar period, European nations created policies that enshrined the separation of public service broadcasting from state control with a focus on independent journalism and educational programming. The model was adopted by the emerging public television systems across Europe.

Americans long have seen themselves as champions of democratic ideals, yet the United States did not create a public broadcasting system until several decades after commercial radio was well established. By the 1960s, it became clear that commercial broadcasters were not providing Americans with the informative, educational and culturally rich programming that many Europeans enjoyed through well-funded public media systems. In 1965, with President Lyndon Johnson's support, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television set about designing a new public broadcasting system.

The Commission provided the foundation for the Public Broadcasting Act, and articulated the ideals of the new system: Public media would be a noncommercial, nonprofit and independent enterprise for providing the news, educational and children's programming that enriches and informs a democratic citizenry, and it would provide the "public interest" programming that was notably absent from commercial broadcasting. As the Carnegie Commission wrote: "The goal we seek is an instrument for the free communication of ideas in a free society."<sup>1</sup>

Public broadcasting has accomplished many of these goals. On public television, we have acclaimed and far-reaching programs like *Frontline*, *Nova* and *The NewsHour*. PBS supplies curricula for K-12 educators, and *Sesame Street* is a mainstay of American childhood. In recent years, National Public Radio has become the pre-eminent source of public affairs radio programming and news, and in contrast to commercial radio, public

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<sup>1</sup> "A Proposal to Extend and Strengthen Educational Television: A Summary of the Commission's Report," Carnegie Commission of Educational Television, Jan. 26, 1967.

radio's audience is actually expanding.<sup>2</sup> From Chicago Public Radio's *This American Life* to Pacifica's *Democracy Now!* public radio programs are now household names from coast to coast.

Yet today there is a growing sense, as in the 1960s, that we can and must do better: Our contemporary challenges demand stronger efforts to inform the public and expand the marketplace of ideas. We need better media than the partisan bellowing, infotainment and sound-bite coverage that has become the norm on commercial radio and television. We need media that serve everyone in our society, not just the audiences most valuable to advertisers. With the newspaper business in crisis and TV news consumed by celebrities and crime, there is simply not enough enterprise journalism or sufficient educational, cultural and local programming to sustain an informed democracy.

### **Policy Reform: Building the System America Needs**

Upon signing the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, President Johnson said: "Our Nation wants more than just material wealth; our Nation wants more than a 'chicken in every pot.' We in America have an appetite for excellence, too. While we work every day to produce new goods and to create new wealth, we want most of all to enrich man's spirit."<sup>3</sup>

Those words still ring true. However, while public media continues to provide an essential public service, its founding mission has yet to be fully realized. There have been many conferences held and ink spilled about how and why public broadcasting has been unable to reach its potential. The reasons include chronic underfunding, undue political influence, a faulty governance structure, increasing commercial pressures, and slow adaptation to the opportunities afforded by digital technology. Yet missing from most of these debates has been a cogent discussion of the structural policy reforms that are required to bring about the necessary improvements to the public media system.

The growing crisis facing commercial journalism — and public media's unique ability to address it — makes such reform all the more urgent. Add to that the new opportunities arising from technological changes in media production and distribution, seismic shifts in the commercial broadcasting marketplace, and the changing demographics of America itself — and you have a rare opportunity to achieve real change and reinvent public media.

With better funding, stronger governance, new technology and a renewed commitment to its founding mandate, we believe public broadcasting — reborn as "public media" — can fill the void at this critical juncture. Today, the Internet is fundamentally changing the media landscape, creating unprecedented opportunities to expand access to and distribution of media content, giving anyone with a broadband connection a voice in the modern public square. At the same time, the revolution in communications is eroding long-existing business models, causing a crisis in traditional media, and calling into question how people will get the news and information they need to hold their leaders accountable and find out what's happening in their neighborhoods, their country and abroad.

Creating a more robust public media system will mean implementing significant policy changes — both in Congress and within public media institutions themselves. Fortunately, the need for these changes comes at a time of growing consensus that much of our nation's regulatory infrastructure must be reformed and modernized to better protect consumers and serve the needs of a changing society and democracy. More than at any time in decades, the public is willing to invest in the civic values and institutions that service more than the markets and yield more than financial returns. It is the moment of opportunity to reinvent public media as an essential resource that can restore and revitalize our society.

Just as the economic crisis has put an end to free market fundamentalism, so too should the failure of commercial media to adequately serve the public interest end the myth that government has no role in

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<sup>2</sup> "NPR Reaches New Audience High, As Listeners Seek In-Depth News on Election, Economy," NPR press release, March 24, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Remarks of President Lyndon B. Johnson Upon Signing the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/remarks.html>

fulfilling society's information needs. In fact, the United States has a long history of policymaking to promote a diverse and wide-ranging marketplace of ideas. Reinvestment and restructuring for an expanded and enhanced public media system for the 21st century are policies firmly within that democratic tradition.

Though public media leaders are currently engaged in productive discussions about their future, they are not moving quickly enough. Their caution is understandable. Any plan to bolster public media in the United States faces myriad political and institutional obstacles. Some will say that the goals outlined in this chapter are too lofty and unattainable. Others will argue that the urgency of the current recession requires the nation to forgo efforts outside customary stimulus efforts. Still others within the public broadcasting community will cling to the parochial concerns that have stymied public broadcasting reform efforts for decades.

We face the choice of whether to accept a mediocre status quo, and maintain one of the lowest-funded public media systems in the developed world or to aspire to become a global leader in public television, radio and the Internet. If we are to accomplish the latter, we must craft bold, strategically sound policies that address these key issues:

- **SUPPORT.** How can we significantly increase funding for public media?
- **LEADERSHIP & STRUCTURE.** How do we foster better governance while protecting public media from undue political and commercial influence?
- **TECHNOLOGY.** How can we embrace new digital technologies to expand distribution and increase collaboration?
- **DIVERSITY.** How do we broaden public media's audience, content and formats?
- **EXPANSION.** How can we redefine public media to reflect the variety of entities and individuals who create it?

## White House Commission on Public Media

We have drafted this chapter with an eye toward narrowing the range of policy options on the table and outlining a visionary-yet-viable agenda that could win the support of the American people, the public media community, lawmakers and other stakeholders. As such, it is a work in progress to initiate a more thorough policy reform proposal that will be refined through extensive feedback and discussion. But the need for public deliberation and involvement should not be taken as an excuse to delay these crucial policy decisions. It is time to move from words to action.

In that spirit, we call on President Barack Obama to swiftly establish a "White House Commission on Public Media" to provide policy recommendations and a roadmap to achieve the goals outlined in this chapter. A White House Commission would provide the momentum needed to overcome internal tensions and to inspire the political will needed for expeditious legislative action. We call on President Obama to empanel the White House Commission within 30 days of its announcement and to hold the first meeting within 45 days. The commission should provide its full report within 180 days of its first meeting.

The new White House Commission must share the Carnegie Commission's breadth of vision. The Carnegie Commission said of its own 1967 report: "Although it provides for immediate assistance to existing stations, this is a proposal not for small adjustments or patchwork changes, but for a comprehensive system that will ultimately bring Public Television to all the people of the United States: a system that in its totality will become a new and fundamental institution in American culture."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A Proposal to Extend and Strengthen Educational Television: A Summary of the Commission's Report," Carnegie Commission of Educational Television, Jan. 26, 1967.

As in 1967, we stand at a major crossroads in our nation's history, and we must invoke the same lofty vision, bold leadership, and determination that established U.S. public broadcasting four decades ago.

### Public Media's Catch-22

At the same time that public media outlets are looking to deepen their roots as local community institutions, commercial media outlets are heading for the exits. Local newspapers are filled with more ads and wire-service content. Local broadcasters are eviscerating newsrooms and airing reality TV or reruns instead of public affairs. What's left of local TV and radio news is dominated by sports, weather and traffic. Laissez-faire media policies and lax oversight have enabled and expedited this process. The social contract of commercial broadcasting that traded stewardship of the public airwaves for public service programming has been crumbling for years. It is now hardly recognizable.

Meanwhile, public broadcasters and other noncommercial outlets are capable of producing some of the best reporting and programming on radio and television. In 2008, PBS won more than 30 Emmys, including 10 for news and documentaries. PBS and NPR took home a combined nine prestigious Peabody awards.<sup>5</sup> Independent, noncommercial media outside PBS and NPR have similarly been recognized for excellent reporting. *Democracy Now's* Amy Goodman has earned, among other accolades, the Henry W. Edgerton Civil Liberties Award, the Puffin/Nation Prize, the George Polk Award and the Right Livelihood Award.<sup>6</sup> Community radio stations have saved lives in times of disaster and brought countless new voices to towns and neighborhoods across the country. Public access television on cable continues to offer coverage of local government and events and gives community members a chance to make their own media.

But it's not just the awards committees that value the quality content public broadcasters produce; the American public puts a premium on their services that rivals any national institution. In 2009, Americans ranked PBS among our most valued institutions, second only to the military, and put NPR third, tied with law enforcement.<sup>7</sup> This year was the sixth consecutive year in which Americans ranked PBS as No. 1 in public trust, ahead of newspapers, commercial broadcasters, the judicial system and the federal government.<sup>8</sup>

Despite overwhelming public support, funding for public media is perpetually the subject of political fights in Washington. Politicians have long complained that public programming is biased. No matter the nature of the complaint — and despite the fact that public media content is meant to be walled off from political meddling — critics on Capitol Hill threaten congressional appropriations for public broadcasting. Virtually every year, there is a proposal to eliminate or drastically reduce the federal appropriation for public media.

Meanwhile, people from political rather than public broadcasting backgrounds are too often appointed to the board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, further injecting politics into the very "heat shield" that is meant to protect public media from political pressure. The situation hit its nadir when then-CPB Board Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson inappropriately influenced program content, going so far as to secretly monitor the shows of journalists like PBS stalwart Bill Moyers for signs of "liberal advocacy journalism."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "NPR Wins Three Peabody Awards," National Public Radio press release, April 1, 2009; "About PBS," April 2009, available at [http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs\\_awards.html](http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs_awards.html)

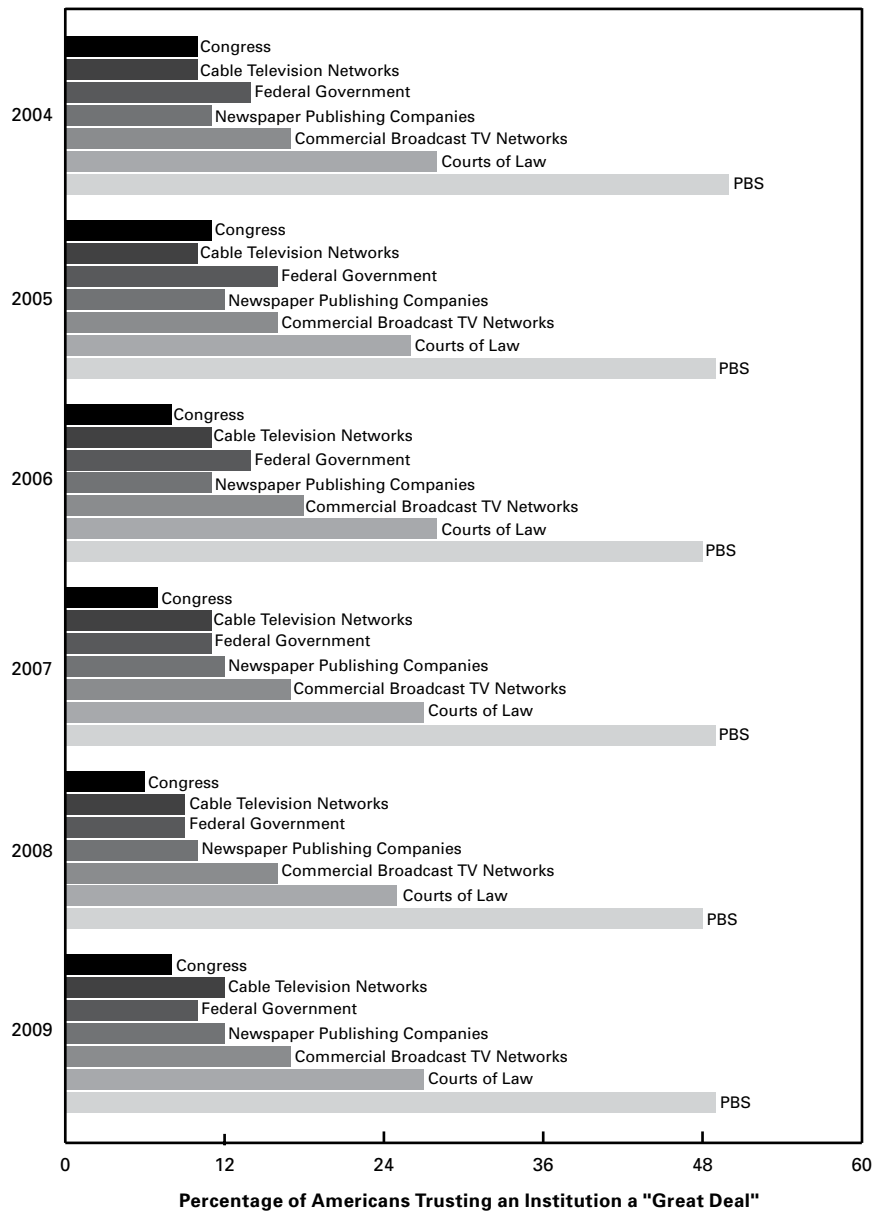
<sup>6</sup> *Democracy Now!* Staff Awards, Amy Goodman, <http://www.democracynow.org/about/staff>

<sup>7</sup> GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media Survey, 2009, [http://www.pbs.org/roperpoll2009/2009\\_RoperSurvey\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pbs.org/roperpoll2009/2009_RoperSurvey_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media Survey, 2009, [http://www.pbs.org/roperpoll2009/2009\\_RoperSurvey\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pbs.org/roperpoll2009/2009_RoperSurvey_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> "Tomlinson remarks on Senate appropriations," Current.org, July 11, 2005.

Figure 1: Public Trust in Various Institutions



Source: PBS Research, GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media Surveys, 2004-2009

## PUBLIC MEDIA'S MOMENT

Over time, this harmful cycle has forced public broadcasters to make programming decisions that run counter to their mission. Although many examples of outstanding reporting on controversial issues exist, the relentless political pressure has nonetheless produced a culture of caution in traditional public broadcasting. It has also led public media executives to make the rational decision that they should always be preparing for a day when budgets are slashed. These pressures have undeniably altered media output in substantial ways, including:

- Adopting commercial funding mechanisms like “enhanced” underwriting that come disconcertingly close to traditional commercial advertisements;
- Producing safe, noncontroversial programming that satisfies corporate underwriters, often to the exclusion of hard-hitting public affairs and diverse cultural programming;
- Curtailing high-cost, long-term line items, such as the pursuit of a digital agenda, marketing to new audiences, local production; and
- Shaping and presenting programming and operational decisions to satisfy the political agendas of elected officials or appointees who hold state and federal purse strings.

Trends like these feed an overarching criticism of public broadcasting that may be the most damaging to its long-term survival: The pursuit of funding is driving public broadcasting too far from its public interest mandate. This is not an indictment of public media leaders or producers, but of the intense political pressure that interferes with public media’s programmatic mission.

Public broadcasting leaders often deny that editorial decisions are swayed by external political pressures, and they cite hard-hitting programs like *Frontline*, and testimony from their editors and producers as evidence. However, on the whole, their public affairs programming suffers increasingly from the same cautiousness that is the hallmark of commercial TV and radio.

Political pressure is part of the reason that American public broadcasting has lagged behind its international counterparts. The established culture and reputation of an entity like the BBC allows for an entirely different journalistic and programming agenda. The BBC has a global network of reporters; an adversarial attitude toward politicians that would be unthinkable in the United States; and a breadth of programming to appeal to a vast cross-section of the British public. These features are a function of adequate funding and a more robust firewall between the government and the programmers.

The problem of political pressure is compounded by a second phenomenon: competition with commercial media outlets. When the Public Broadcasting Act was signed into law in 1967, commercial broadcasters already dominated the airwaves. Consequently, public media outlets are often viewed as competitors who are subsidized with tax dollars rather than as stewards of the nation’s airwaves. Though they may not be competing for advertising revenue (although increasingly, through corporate underwriting, they might be), they are competing for eyes and ears. In response to this, commercial broadcasters have deployed a win-win lobbying argument: If public media outlets have strong ratings, then they are competing and shouldn’t be subsidized. If they are losing ratings, then they are not producing quality programming and shouldn’t be subsidized. Nowhere in that vice-grip is there room even to contemplate a robust public media system on the order of the BBC. That is not even on the table.

The truth is that most of the debate over the value of public media takes place in Washington, not in the rest of the country. Outside the Beltway, there is general agreement that public media are highly valuable and well worth support, if not expansion. The politics that have infected the system have not affected the importance of the service to the American people.

Our first order of business in revitalizing public media is to begin anew. We should start with a fresh set of questions about what the people want. It is not hard to predict what they will say: People want more public service media. They want local news. They want stronger, well-resourced partnerships with and services from



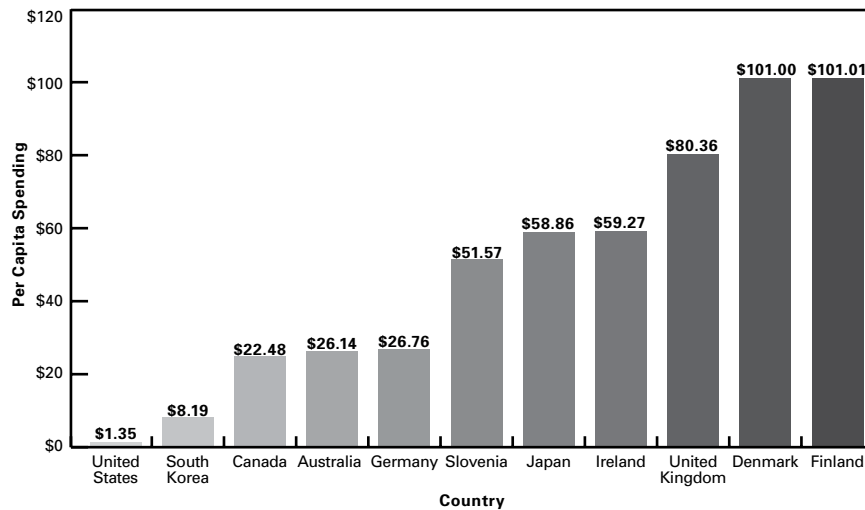
local schools, government and civic institutions. They want diverse voices and multicultural fare that speaks to their culture and communities — whether they are in Alabama or Kansas or Oregon.

Building a vibrant public media system to meet these goals and more will require a multi-pronged plan for the future that starts by correcting the problems of the past. Fundamentally, the policy changes needed to reinvent public media are straightforward. Public media require more money so that they can remake themselves to serve public needs. And they need better governance so they can insulate themselves from politics and focus their administration on their public service mission. Without these changes, the public media community will remain vulnerable to the political and commercial powers that have long prevented public media from reaching their full potential.

## Support: New Public Funding for New Public Media

Currently, the federal government provides just over \$400 million per year to support public media, doled out through annual congressional appropriations and distributed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.<sup>10</sup> That figure puts U.S. public media among the lowest-funded systems in the world, at just \$1.35 per capita — a paltry figure compared to countries like Canada (\$22.48 per capita) and England (\$80.36 per capita).<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 2: Global Spending on Public Media**



From 2000-2005, federal dollars covered about 18 percent of the public broadcasting system’s \$2.3 billion in annual revenue.<sup>12</sup> The 2009 CPB budget is \$409 million — of that, \$271.5 million goes to television; \$90.5 million goes to radio; and \$24 million goes to “system support” for the research, planning, professional development and system consultation that guides CPB decision-making in the other budget categories. Importantly, CPB funds individual stations as well as PBS and NPR’s national operations. In fact, less than 2 percent of NPR’s national budget is covered by federal funds.

Each federal dollar is used to leverage at least five more dollars from the private sector, including charitable foundations, universities, state governments, corporate underwriters, and donations from individual listeners

<sup>10</sup> Corporation for Public Broadcasting, “Federal Appropriation History,” available at <http://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials/appropriation/history.html>

<sup>11</sup> In many countries, public media funding is derived from an annual government-mandated television license fee. In general, the total amount generated through this license fee for 2007 was divided by the population of the country for the same year. The currency was converted to U.S. dollars using the relevant exchange rate from January 15, 2009. The U.S. figure was calculated by relying on the money appropriated in 2005 for the 2007 fiscal year.

<sup>12</sup> Corporation for Public Broadcasting, “2007 Public Broadcasting Revenue.” <http://www.cpb.org/stations/reports/revenue/2007PublicBroadcastingRevenue.pdf>

and viewers.<sup>13</sup> Each area of support comes with its own problems, and all are vulnerable to downturns in the economy. In December 2008, NPR laid off 64 employees — about 7 percent of its workforce — while shortfalls between \$200 and \$300 million are projected for public television and radio in 2009 due to decreases in private contributions and corporate underwriting.<sup>14</sup>

### Funding Flaws

The annual congressional appropriation is the fundamental flaw in U.S. public media funding. This problem dates back to public media's founding, when Congress chose to ignore the Carnegie Commission's recommendation to establish an independent trust fund. Instead, Congress chose to keep control of the purse strings, with a process that is inherently politicized.<sup>15</sup> This structure is different from that of other countries, like England, which levies an annual tax on every television in the home and keeps politicians out of the funding process.

Since 1967, public broadcasters have struggled to identify viable alternatives to the current system but have been unable to advance a solution. As we look for one, it is important that proposals are judged using the following criteria:

- **POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE.** To what degree does a new plan insulate public media from undue political inference in management and content decisions?
- **ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY AND EQUABILITY.** Do the benefits of the new plan outweigh its costs? And are those benefits and costs spread across the public media community, the media industry, or the public at large?
- **PUBLIC AND POLITICAL SUPPORT.** Will the plan be acceptable to the American public, public media stakeholders and members of Congress?
- **ADEQUATE FINANCIAL SUPPORT.** Will the proposed funding levels be sufficient to adequately increase capacity?

With those guidelines in mind, we have evaluated proposals floated in past years and have come up with a short list of options that could enable U.S. public media to become a world-class system. With substantial injections of funds, there are plenty of "shovel-ready," job-creating projects that could be launched: building high-speed broadband networks between stations, educational institutions, nonprofits and other community partners; archiving massive libraries of content; and creating news and other content. The transition to digital media offers another set of projects that President Obama put on his priority list for "Public Media 2.0" during his campaign.<sup>16</sup>

### Public Media Trust Fund

An oft-debated approach for increasing public media funding and ensuring long-term sustainability at the same time is for Congress to create a trust fund for public media. We estimate that a trust fund would require \$50 billion to create sufficient revenue. If that figure seems high, consider that since last year, more than \$173 billion in tax dollars have been sunk into just one corporation, AIG. Given that Congress just passed a nearly *trillion-dollar* economic recovery package, \$50 billion for public media starts to look like a smart investment.

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<sup>13</sup> "Digital Futures Initiative: Challenges & Opportunities for Public Service Media in the Digital Age," Digital Futures Initiative, December 2005. [http://www.newamerica.net/files/archive/Doc\\_File\\_2766\\_1.pdf](http://www.newamerica.net/files/archive/Doc_File_2766_1.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Paul Farhi, "NPR to Cut 64 Jobs and Two Shows," *Washington Post*, Dec. 11, 2008. "APTS President and CEO Larry Sidman's Address at Capitol Hill Day 2009," Association of Public Television Stations, February 2009. <http://apts.org/news/Larry-Sidman-speech-at-Capitol-Hill-Day-2009.cfm>

<sup>15</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2004), 244-245.

<sup>16</sup> "Obama Innovation and Technology Agenda," Obama for America, [http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/technology/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Innovation\\_and\\_Technology.pdf](http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/technology/Fact_Sheet_Innovation_and_Technology.pdf)

Political opposition to such a proposal is inevitable, but organizing for a trust fund would raise awareness of the system's chronic funding problems and help public broadcasters build a coalition of supporters. Moreover, a victory would provide a long-term solution to public media's funding woes.

### Increased Congressional Appropriations

The simplest shorter-term answer would be to increase annual appropriations to public media. We view this as an important strategy to employ while working for long-term solutions such as the one outlined below. With increased funding — to as little as \$5 per person, increasing annual appropriations to some \$1.5 billion — the American public media system could dramatically increase its capacity, reach, diversity and relevance. At \$1.5 billion annually, the United States would still spend five times less on public media than Canada per capita and 16 times less than England.

Organizing a "Five Bucks for Public Media" campaign could be a smart short-run strategy for public broadcasters and their allies. This "March of Lincolns" provides a compelling narrative — "Would you pay \$5 for better media?" — that would buttress concurrent long-term financing efforts.

Given the crises facing policymakers at this time, public media's allies in the White House and Congress might also prefer a financing proposal that avoids, for now, a contentious debate about significantly altering the current funding mechanism. Of course, even if a simple appropriations increase were secured, it would be in jeopardy when the composition of Congress changes or if the financial crisis worsens.

### Consumer Electronics Fee

Barring the creation of a trust fund, Congress must find a significant, steady revenue stream that is not subject to annual appropriations. One such possibility is a tax of 0.5 percent of the purchase price for every home electronic device: multimedia players, cable and satellite set-top boxes, video game systems, televisions, etc. Those devices that entertain America would in turn be supporting programming to inform, educate and enlighten. And the fee would be paid by those consumers with the means to spend on new electronics.

Some frown upon proposals that ask consumers to pay for public media, but most robust public media systems have at least one mechanism for drawing support directly from the public. In England and Germany, for example, public broadcasting services are partially financed through license fees. The British currently pay about \$200 annually to watch television programming whether they use a TV set, a computer, a mobile phone or digital video recorder. German households with TV and radio sets pay about \$280 annually to support noncommercial media.<sup>17</sup>

The revenue potential of a small fee on consumer electronics is substantial. In 2008, "in-home" technology sales topped \$76 billion.<sup>18</sup> A 0.5 percent tax would bring in \$3.8 billion annually based on 2008 sales data. Under one calculation, CPB could receive \$700 million during the first year, with the remainder of the \$3.8 billion going into a Public Media Trust Fund. Each year, funds to CPB could increase by 10 percent, with a commensurate decrease in funds going to the trust fund. After five years, CPB would receive \$1.1 billion, and the trust fund would be at \$15.5 billion. After 10 years, CPB would receive \$1.8 billion, and the trust fund would have \$31.5 billion. At 20 years, CPB funding would be \$4.6 billion, and the trust fund would be at \$58.6 billion. The fee proposal would face opposition from retail and manufacturing lobbies, but such a fee would be a modest cost for consumers, and the revenue would provide the funds necessary to build a robust public media system.

Our preference for funding public media would be a direct trust fund appropriation, but there are other methods that warrant further consideration. They include reserving a percentage of all future spectrum auction

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<sup>17</sup> BBC, BBC services on TV, radio and online, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/licencefee/>; ZDF, ZDF in figures, 2009, available at <http://www.zdf.com/index.php?id=181>

<sup>18</sup> 2008 Consumer Electronics "Digital America" report.

revenue; instituting spectrum fees for commercial broadcasters in exchange for license flexibility; some form of a tax on advertising; or a fee on consumer devices that access public media that mirrors European systems.

## Better Governance, Better Public Media

Identifying and changing policies to improve system governance and efficiency is both challenging and essential. Structures, politics and needs vary dramatically between radio and television; between rural and urban stations; between traditional public broadcasters and the broader noncommercial media sector.

There have been many discussions and studies that chronicle a long list of governance problems and suggest many solutions to issues like cable and satellite carriage, digital convergence and affiliation standards. Some think that PBS should change its by-laws that prevent it from producing original national content, as NPR does. Others argue that sweeping changes are required, like mandating that NPR and PBS converge into a single brand to create administrative, marketing and operational efficiencies, as is the case in most other nations.

This chapter does not attempt to address these and many other important issues facing the system. Rather, we focus here on the most glaring governance issue — undue political interference — and why strengthening the political “heat shield” is so essential.

### Building a Better CPB

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting is a private, nonprofit corporation with an administrative budget of approximately \$20 million (not including the funds it grants). Historically, 15 to 20 percent of the aggregate revenues of all public broadcasting stations have been funded from federal sources, principally through CPB. It has nine board members who are appointed by the president and serve six-year terms. The board hires the president of CPB.<sup>19</sup>

The events of 2005 illustrate why there must be structural changes in CPB governance. In a series of developments that led to his resignation, former board Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson hired, without authorization from the rest of the CPB board, a consultant to monitor the political leanings of guests appearing on Bill Moyers’ PBS show and the public radio programs of Diane Rehm and Tavis Smiley.<sup>20</sup> Despite rules preventing board members from interfering with the development of programming, he also pushed for a program by the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board to be included in the PBS lineup.<sup>21</sup>

A report by the CPB’s Inspector General determined that Tomlinson violated statutory provisions and the “Director’s Code of Ethics,” and that he used “political tests” as criteria for hiring the president of CPB. The IG report observed: “While we believe the aforementioned violations were primarily the result of the former Chairman’s personal actions to accomplish his various initiatives, our review also identified serious weaknesses in the corporate governance system.”<sup>22</sup>

The IG report also recommended a series of changes, many of which have already been implemented.<sup>23</sup> In our

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<sup>19</sup> 47 USC Sec. 396 Corporation for Public Broadcasting (k)(3)A(i)(I).

<sup>20</sup> Office of the Inspector General, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, “Review of Alleged Actions Violating The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, as Amended,” Report No. EPB503-602. November 15, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> However, one key recommendation that hasn’t been acted upon deals with “objectivity and balance.” The Inspector General’s report calls for CPB to:

*Establish formal policies and procedures for conducting regular reviews of national programming for objectivity and balance. This policy should be developed in conjunction with all significant stakeholders in the public broadcasting community to ensure transparency and agreement on the criteria to be used to evaluate objectivity and balance.*

There are many ways to interpret this directive — which is shaped in part by the Public Telecommunications Act of 1992 that

view, the most important changes are:

- **PROGRAMMATIC INTEGRITY.** All programming decisions, including those about objectivity and balance, must be in the hands of professional programmers with input from the Ombudsman. Board members should have no role in programming and content.
- **DEPOLITICIZED, PROFESSIONAL STAFFING.** Provide policy guidance to CPB management for designing procedures to prevent personnel decisions from being made on the basis of “political tests.” Establish a policy to require corporate officers to inform the full board of all new policy initiatives, significant deviations from accepted operating practices, and any inappropriate action or behavior by any CPB official (board members, executives, directors and employees) involving the commitment or expenditure of CPB funds.
- **ETHICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY.** Revise the CPB’s “Directors’ Code of Ethics” to include provisions for the board to discipline members who violate the code.
- **IMPROVED TRANSPARENCY.** CPB meetings should be fully open to the public and ideally televised or webcast. Decision-making should not take place behind closed doors.
- **BIPARTISAN BOARD LEADERSHIP.** The chair and vice chair of the CPB board should be from different political parties.
- **BOARD APPOINTMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY.** The traditional presidential nomination and Senate confirmation process used to fill seats on the CPB board has failed to create the type of professional, qualified leadership an agency like CPB needs.

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 calls for a CPB board comprised of individuals “eminent in such fields as education, cultural and civic affairs, or the arts, including radio and television,” and stipulates that board members represent “various professions and occupations, and various kinds of talent and experience appropriate to the functions and responsibilities” of public broadcasting.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the CPB board has too often been comprised of political appointees who do not sufficiently fit that description.

In 2005, the Association of Public Television Stations (APTS), which represents PBS affiliates in Washington, proposed comprehensive board changes aimed at enhancing professionalism.<sup>25</sup> Under this plan, the board would be expanded from nine to 13 members. Five members would be leaders from the major cultural institutions — the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Science Foundation and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. The White House would have eight appointees, instead of nine, with no more than four from either party. The APTS proposal also called for doubling the number of representatives from PBS and NPR, giving two votes to each. The White House would consult with these institutions before making those appointments.

Other proposals to improve the CPB board have included inserting a nominating step into the process, whereby an independent nominating panel of “university presidents, leading writers, artists, scientists and citizens of accomplishment” would vet potential board members and provide the president with a group of candidates recommended for Senate confirmation.<sup>26</sup>

We agree with the idea of expanding the board and would amend the APTS proposal to also include

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requires the CPB to review, on a regular basis, national broadcasting programming for quality, diversity, creativity, excellence, innovation, objectivity and balance. Given the nebulous nature of these directives, current CPB leadership should not be faulted for failing to act. Rather than chase elusive standards of “objectivity and balance,” the CPB can and should utilize its ombudsman, as is done by NPR and commercial companies like the *New York Times*.

<sup>24</sup> 47 USC Sec. 396 Corporation for Public Broadcasting (c)(1)

<sup>25</sup> “Local Public Television Stations Call for Major Reform of the CPB Board,” *Television Broadcast*, November 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic* (Penguin Non-Classics, September 1996), 215-216.

representation from noncommercial media makers who are not part of PBS and NPR and from leaders in the field of journalism such as a representative from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

### Technology: Embracing the Era of Digital Opportunity

Having embraced the collaborative, democratic nature of the Internet, today's media consumers are more sophisticated, vocal and demanding. Audiences now expect to be able to get their media when and where and how they want it, and they expect to consume media for free — or with limited commercial interruption. They increasingly want to contribute their own content and opinions; many are becoming collaborators as much as consumers.

Commercial TV, radio and print executives are busy experimenting with emerging information and communications technologies, hoping to find the new digital platforms that will yield the most robust revenue streams. Such digital convergence challenges will continue to test the agility of the media industry for some time.

An energized public media system — with its massive amount of original, high-quality content — could claim considerable digital terrain. Even more, perhaps, than public broadcasters have been able to claim on TV and radio. England's BBC and Canada's CBC are among the most highly trafficked news Web sites in those nations. Public media is the only institution that could build an effective, interactive and substantive information backbone for both local and national public service.

The idea of bringing public media into the 21st century with new technologies builds upon the founding vision of public media. President Johnson called "a great network for knowledge — not just a broadcast system, but one that employs every means of sending and storing information that the individual can use."<sup>27</sup> In fact, public broadcasters can already boast a strong record of technological innovation. PBS led the media industry in closed-captioning and video-descriptive services, and CPB played a key role in the development of the nation's first satellite broadcast system. If public media have proved innovative and responsive to the challenges of the past, couldn't they do so again in the digital age if endowed with adequate resources and guided by enlightened leadership?

Public media can begin moving into the future by implementing important smaller-scale changes, while working to develop an overall digital public media plan that would make important programming universally available on user-friendly, standardized platforms that engage the public.

A promising roundtable series on public service media, hosted by CPB and the Aspen Institute and attended by top leadership, has drafted a useful vision statement:

Public Service Media 2.0 will be a multichannel network of diverse non-profit creators and distributors of high-quality non-commercial content that informs, educates, inspires, engages, promotes democratic governance, provides access to arts and culture, and builds capacity in the diverse American people in their homes and communities throughout the nation. This network, building on the assets of existing public media, will use digital tools to be universally accessible and engaging.<sup>28</sup>

To realize this vision and avoid deal-breaking conflicts, public media stakeholders should adopt a flexible approach that balances the need for common digital portals and platforms with the need to ensure democratic engagement and buy-in from local member stations.

### National Public Lightpath

One innovative proposal that gives public media a role in connecting citizens, educational and civic institutions is the National Public Lightpath (NPL). A proposed partnership between public broadcasters, education centers and the technology industry, NPL would create a high-speed fiber-optic network between

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<sup>27</sup> Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Remarks of President Lyndon B. Johnson Upon Signing the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/remarks.html>

<sup>28</sup> Michael Levy, "Memo Re: Aspen Institute Roundtables on Public Service Media," March 1, 2009.

public media outlets and their local partners for real-time online collaboration.<sup>29</sup> Today's Internet is not fast, affordable or reliable enough to allow people to connect and work together in real time across great distances. NPL could enable that kind of collaboration, by connecting member stations and content producers with the innovative capacity of local and national allies. It would provide the backbone to create a clearinghouse for all public media, thus vastly expanding content distribution. An NPL system would also help increase a national public media presence online and strengthen local member stations.

NPL could be built on the backbone of the National LambdaRail, an existing super-high-speed, 12,000 mile network that connects the U.S. educational and research community.<sup>30</sup> It includes some 400 universities, and its capacity is already supporting demanding research projects across the country. For public media, this sort of infrastructure could increase interaction with many existing partners as well as forge new productive relationships and enable the discovery of untapped resources.

One of NPL's most attractive characteristics is its ability to build the capacity for regional engagement, which would help member stations move into the digital age while preserving their local character. NPL could provide low-cost and easier access to production tools and resources for a wider range of voices, thereby diversifying media content. The Bay Area Video Coalition, one of NPL's proponents, addresses these goals by providing training and support to artists, nonprofits, and other producers to foster social change and debate through diverse independent media.<sup>31</sup> The Ford Foundation is currently supporting several communities in Washington, Chicago, San Francisco and Louisiana that are working to implement the NPL model.<sup>32</sup>

### Robust Digital Platforms

The public broadcasting community has been slow to adopt a standardized platform for digital distribution of content to the public. This is due in part to the sheer logistical and financial scope of such an effort; to the fear that such plans would marginalize member stations; and to the difficulties presented by legal issues of content ownership and distribution rights. These are significant obstacles, but the longer the system goes without a streamlined, user-friendly digital platform, the more difficult these problems will become. Without comprehensive digital distribution mechanisms that engage the public, local stations and producers will squander their vast content resources and grow less and less relevant.

NPR has had more success in this area than PBS for good reason. Unlike PBS, NPR is allowed to produce extensive national content. It enjoys a lesser degree of political scrutiny, lower production costs, and fewer distribution obstacles. Founded in 2002 by the Station Resource Group and Atlantic Public Media, the Public Radio Exchange has made more than 20,000 radio programs from approximately 1,000 producers available on their Web site.<sup>33</sup> This online marketplace for distribution, review, and licensing of public radio programming has proven an innovative model for content distribution. Arguably, public radio has also had a greater incentive to move into the digital era given its highly educated audience and the fact that radio, as a more mature medium, faced its own inherent broadcast limitations earlier than television. With the recent launch of PBS Video, public television may be starting to catching up. PBS' new national portal offers access to most of its national programming along with show Web sites, blogs and interactive tools.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Patricia Harrison, Paula Kerger, Dennis Haarsager, Joint Letter to President-Elect Obama, January 2, 2009. available at <http://www.current.org/pbpb/documents/stimulus-request-Jan09.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> National LambdaRail, *About NLR*, available at <http://www.nlr.net/about.php>

<sup>31</sup> Information about Bay Area Video Coalition's National Public Lightpath Project is available at [http://www.bavc.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=551&Itemid=718](http://www.bavc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=551&Itemid=718)

<sup>32</sup> More detailed information about the Ford Foundation's grant to San Francisco State University to develop the National Public Lightpath is available at: <http://www.fordfound.org/grants/database/detail?107593>

<sup>33</sup> Information about Public Radio Exchange is available at their Web site, <http://www.prx.org/>

<sup>34</sup> PBS Video programs are available at <http://www.pbs.org/video/>

While the development of centralized distribution platforms is a key first step toward building the new public media America needs, public broadcasting also needs to build out the infrastructure to amplify the interactive, community-building potential of such platforms. Public radio has been able to invest in experiments that could bring digital improvements to the entire public media community. For example, the application service provider Public Interactive has created a menu of back-end software options to build up the Web sites of smaller member stations, which are particularly vulnerable to the restructuring effects of digital convergence.<sup>35</sup> Creating standardized but customizable local platforms could help stations take advantage of national content streams while maintaining their local character and providing access to public media's resources.

Because the Internet offers member stations audiences beyond the reach of their traditional broadcasts, developing a set of digital best practices that standardizes station portals will better serve the public. It would help public broadcasting become a network of digital resource hubs that curates and cross-references local and national content in useful ways. It also invites the kind of interactivity with audiences that will tap the Internet's resources for collaborative production. This represents a significant shift from the one-way provision of broadcast programming to a collaborative, many-to-many model. With sufficient support and leadership, member stations can use this technology to become the pre-eminent sources of regional public affairs, cultural programming and democratic engagement.

Developing such a comprehensive public media network that addresses the needs of many stakeholders will take time, but public media can start by studying successful platforms like the BBC's iPlayer, which makes available the previous week's broadcast programming online.<sup>36</sup> The "American Archive" project, outlined in a letter the heads of CPB, PBS and NPR sent to President Obama, is a similarly laudable goal.<sup>37</sup> A vast amount of public broadcasting content needs to be transferred to digital formats, cataloged and made available. Establishing a mechanism for dealing with property and distribution rights for these items is essential.

### Democratic Engagement

Just as the National Public Lightpath system could help build a national public media presence and strengthen local member stations, other tools and resources could help foster democratic engagement. Consider, for example, the success of *World Without Oil*, "the collaborative imagining of the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis." An Independent Television Service production, the Web site hosted an interactive game that challenged players to seriously consider what the world's dependence on oil means. Lasting 32 weeks, the game had thousands of players who contributed through a variety of online applications.<sup>38</sup> As a crowd-sourcing effort, *World Without Oil* raises many questions for the public media community: How could similar projects be integrated with traditional broadcast programming? How can we support such policy discussions at the local level?

One local NPR program, WNYC-FM's "The Brian Lehrer Show" has created a model that answers both of these questions with its "You Produce Wiki," which asks listeners to contribute story ideas, suggest guests, and identify story angles. Currently, the show is using the wiki to gather stories of "Uncommon Economic Indicators" in New York City, as observed by listeners. Submissions are mapped by location, categorized and mined for broadcast material, all in an effort to explore the local complexities of the economic crisis.<sup>39</sup>

Bright spots like these show how effective and relevant public media can be in the digital age. They also underscore how chronic funding problems have exacerbated public broadcasting's sluggish adoption of existing technologies that could raise its profile in public debates and within the media world at large. *World Without Oil* cost less than \$100,000 to develop, and wiki software similar to what "The Brian Lehrer Show" uses is available at very low cost. The strapped system needs to find new ways to fund such essential experiments, but that is

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<sup>35</sup> Pat Aufderheide, Jessica Clark and Jake Shapiro, "Public Broadcasting & Public Affairs," Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> BBC iPlayer Homepage, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/>

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Harrison, Paula Kerger, Dennis Haarsager, Joint Letter to President-Elect Obama, Jan. 2, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> World Without Oil Homepage, available at <http://worldwithoutoil.org/>

<sup>39</sup> WNYC Radio, "Your Uncommon Economic Indicators," [http://www.wnyc.org/shows/bl/economic\\_indicators/](http://www.wnyc.org/shows/bl/economic_indicators/); "The Brian Lehrer Show You Produce Wiki," [http://issues.wnyc.org/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://issues.wnyc.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)



easier said than done. CPB's new effort to support experimental station-based online programs will only provide \$650,000 in grants its first four rounds. This Public Media Innovation Fund is a step in the right direction, but it is also a discouraging indicator of public media's limited financial capacity to support digital creativity.<sup>40</sup>

A discussion of the participatory potential of digital public media would be incomplete without mentioning NPR's 2008 release of its model API, or "application programming interface." The API allows programmers to design new ways for the public and member stations to access NPR's library of content. Not only does NPR's open API allow stations to better integrate NPR national programming into their local Web sites, it allows the public to design applications that match their specific needs. Examples of new applications include widgets that collect independently produced NPR stories, map world news on a globe, and play podcasts on Facebook; each of these tools expands the reach of NPR's programming.

The future of public media depends on its ability to foster robust public conversation about public affairs and cultural issues. With its vast body of high-quality content, public media can improve public discourse by providing the 21st Century tools to access, consider and analyze the best available information.

### Diversity: Public Media for the People

The public media system should be, in the words of its founding legislation, an "expression of diversity and excellence" that specializes in the development of programming that "involves creative risks and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities."<sup>41</sup> Given America's changing demographics and the world's cultural challenges, public media's mandate to strengthen the nation's social fabric remains paramount.

The PBS audience profile is skewed to the under-7 and over-46 demographics, with viewers a decade older than the nation's median age of 36.<sup>42</sup> And while the ethnic diversity of PBS viewers roughly matches that of the nation in terms of percentages, minority audiences largely tune in for children's programming. These numbers pose specific challenges for public broadcasters that will only increase as America's demographics change dramatically over the next few decades. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the Latino population will grow to 30 percent of the total population by 2050. The African-American population will be 15 percent; Asian Americans will be 9 percent; and the non-Hispanic white population will be a minority of 46 percent.<sup>43</sup> Public media need to move toward better serving these underserved, growing populations.

CPB has made efforts to prioritize the needs of minority communities through the National Minority Consortia. Since 1979, the CPB has funded the efforts of the Consortia, an umbrella organization consisting of the Center for Asian American Media, National Black Programming Consortium, Native American Public Telecommunications, Native Public Media, Pacific Islanders in Communications, and Latino Public Broadcasting. Each of these groups funds a diverse array of programming, training and outreach efforts that appeal to a broader audience and harness the talents of minority communities.

Specific public media programs — such as *POV*, *Independent Lens*, *Story Corps*, *Griot* and *Tell Me More* — have a solid record of reaching out to communities of color and seeking new voices, but there are a number of recent examples that demonstrate the system's need to better incorporate diverse programming across the board. From the short-lived "American Family" drama — the first broadcast program to feature a Latino cast — to the criticism surrounding the lack of Latino veterans in Ken Burns' *The War*, the public broadcasting community has struggled to find effective ways to create programming that accurately represents America.

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<sup>40</sup> Public Media Innovation, *About the Program*, <http://publicmediainnovation.org/sections/1/about-the-program>

<sup>41</sup> Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, as amended, 47 U.S.C. 396, Subpart D, available at <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/text.html>

<sup>42</sup> Larry Irving, "Keynote Speech to the Beyond Broadcast Conference," June 17, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> "An Older and More Diverse Nation by Midcentury," U.S. Census Bureau, Aug. 14, 2008. <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>

In addition to these programs and organizations, the congressionally mandated Independent Television Service was created in 1990 to “to expand the diversity and innovativeness of programming available to public broadcasting.”<sup>44</sup> ITVS also works in partnership with a number of other public broadcasting organizations, including the National Minority Consortia, and is exploring ways for public media to best utilize new digital technologies.

### Diverse Staffing and Programming

In the media industry at large, minority owners are the most vulnerable to the effects of consolidation. Less than 4 percent of commercial TV stations and less than 8 percent of commercial radio stations are owned by people of color.<sup>45</sup> Women own less than 6 percent of television and radio stations nationwide.<sup>46</sup> As a result, minority communities have fewer media outlets to cover their issues, and public broadcasting largely has failed to fill the gap.

Diversity of staffing is a concern throughout the public broadcasting system. When communities are insufficiently represented in leadership and employment, they are insufficiently represented in programming. This is not to say that public broadcasters do not have the right intentions — they do — but in a strapped system, the best chance for improving diversity will come from within. It is promising that CPB made diversity a 2009 strategic priority, and they have made some significant minority hires and created and filled a new administrative position: the senior vice president for diversity and innovation.

Increasing the number of people of color working in public media will be challenging, particularly when the future of the economy and of the media industry is unclear and many public media institutions are making cuts. Still, public broadcasters should prioritize and expand production and leadership training programs for targeted communities. Public media institutions should also set benchmarks for improving minority employment and programming.

Funding for programs serving minority audiences needs to be dramatically expanded, and more minority programming needs to appear during primetime hours. Over the years, promising diversity proposals have included expanding the national programming lineup to include new series that offer more opportunities for minority producers, and creating a packaged feed of minority programming for member stations to use on multicast channels.<sup>47</sup> The PBS Diversity Initiative on Content also proposed developing a “national database of minority talent and subject matter-experts.”<sup>48</sup>

### Digital Diversity

The case for building strong local and national digital opportunity agendas for public media is about going beyond the current audience and reaching out to new audiences where they are. We only have to look at the success of PBS.org, especially of PBSkids.org, to see that adding new Web-based and mobile technologies better reaches minority communities, despite the lower percentage of minority communities with broadband. In March 2009, compared to usage across all U.S. Web sites, Latino use of PBSkids.org was 98 percent higher, African-American use was 16 percent higher, and Asian Americans use was 142 percent higher.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, digital technology can draw new age groups to public media. Consider that 75 percent of PBS.org’s audience is under 50 years old, and American teenagers would rather give up television than Internet access.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.current.org/pbpb/documents/ITVSincorp.html>

<sup>45</sup> S. Derek Turner and Mark Cooper, “Out of The Picture 2007: Minority & Female TV Station Ownership in the United States,” Free Press, available at [http://stopbigmedia.com/=out\\_of\\_the\\_picture](http://stopbigmedia.com/=out_of_the_picture); S. Derek Turner, “Off The Dial: Female and Minority Radio Station Ownership in the United States,” Free Press, available at [http://stopbigmedia.com/=off\\_the\\_dial](http://stopbigmedia.com/=off_the_dial)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> “Seize the Diversity Market: a Pragmatic View,” *Current*, November 1999.

<sup>48</sup> “Diversity: More than Good Intentions?” *Current*, April 14, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Quantcast.com, “Four Month Trend” for PBSkids.org and PBS.org for period ending March 31, 2009. <http://www.quantcast.com/pbs.org#summary> and <http://www.quantcast.com/pbs.org#summary>.

<sup>50</sup> OTX and Intelligence Group, “Teen Topix,” Consumer Research Study, June 18, 2008.

Efforts like Blackpublicmedia.org and The Katrina Project should only be the beginning.<sup>51</sup> New public media — focused on providing diverse voices in diverse formats — should strive to build life-long relationships with these communities that are looking for quality digital content.

### Expansion: Building a Bigger Tent

NPR and PBS represent just one part of the nation's vital noncommercial media infrastructure. The advent of the Internet has expanded the range of independent media outlets that are serving the public interest and creating new ways to engage the public. Many of today's best newsgathering and cultural projects are collaborations between such independent organizations. If we can significantly increase the funding and reach of public media, we also must expand our definition of public media to include community radio, Low Power FM (LPFM) radio, public access TV, independent print publications, viewer-supported satellite TV, and nonprofit Internet-based outlets.

In local communities where commercial media are failing to provide quality public affairs and cultural programming, independent, noncommercial media are often the only outlets filling the void. They have deep connections to the community, are often volunteer-driven, and produce diverse, original content. As we work toward policy solutions that will strengthen and protect these entities, it is crucial that we also work to expand the definition of public media — both in the minds of the public and within public broadcasting institutions.

There are approximately 800 LPFM radio stations across the country. These stations transmit a diverse range of programming, from shows broadcasting in indigenous languages to farm workers in Oregon to the Zydeco music heard in Opelousas, Louisiana. LPFM stations — which broadcast at 100 watts or less with a range of 3 to 5 miles — are not licensed to individuals or corporations but to nonprofit organizations, such as schools, labor unions, churches, or community groups. LPFMs not only provide information and promote local culture; they have saved lives during natural disasters, as in the case of the WQRZ-LP, a local station that stayed on the air to provide disaster relief information during Hurricane Katrina. Or consider WCIW-LP, an LPFM in Immokalee, Fla., which broadcasts in Spanish, Haitian Creole, Zapotec and Quiche. This station alerted the local farm worker community to seek shelter before Hurricane Wilma.<sup>52</sup>

The LPFM service was created in 2000, largely in response to the rampant consolidation in the radio industry. Commercial broadcasters, with the unfortunate support of NPR, lobbied Congress to limit the service over concerns about interference with their own signals. The interference issue was thoroughly investigated in a taxpayer-funded, \$2.2 million study, and the results were conclusive: LPFM station signals do not interfere with full-power station signals. NPR should recognize that LPFMs are not competition — their stations serve different purposes in the public media sphere. New bipartisan legislation in Congress, the Local Community Radio Act, would create thousands of new LPFM stations in communities across the country. NPR should reverse its stance and join advocates for noncommercial, community radio in supporting the bill.

Public access television (or PEG, short for public, educational and governmental channels) has been a beacon of independent media in American communities. Many public access facilities are open to anyone interested in producing and sharing video. They provide valuable training on media production and often represent the only cameras with their lenses trained on local government. Today, PEG stations are facing a crisis of funding and technology. Their traditional revenue source, cable franchise fees, are either being diverted to municipal budgets or drying up completely as city budgets tighten, and cable companies negotiate less favorable franchise agreements. PEG channels lag in digital transition because of insufficient funding.

Apart from PEG's recent troubles, there is a promising opportunity for collaboration between PEG and local PBS stations, which are looking to expand their crowd-sourced newsgathering efforts and are exploring how best to utilize user-generated content. PBS channels seeking new material to fill their digital channels could partner with PEG facilities. With increased funding for public media, PEGs and PBS stations could forge a mutually

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<sup>51</sup> For more information, visit the Web sites <http://www.blackpublicmedia.org/> and <http://www.katrinaproject.net/>

<sup>52</sup> Testimony of Gerardo Reyes Chavez of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Federal Communications Commission, Tampa – St. Petersburg, Fourth Public Hearing on Media Ownership. <http://www.fcc.gov/ownership/hearing-tampa043007-transcript.pdf>.

beneficial relationship. They could, for example, work together to run community media centers. And PEG stations are constantly producing local content that may benefit from broader distribution via a local PBS station, which could also provide training and skill development for new documentarians and storytellers.

Public media also includes viewer-supported satellite TV networks like Link TV and NASA TV, which broadcast on the 4 percent of channels allocated for noncommercial programming of “an educational or informational nature.”<sup>53</sup> Link TV’s mission-driven programming focuses on providing a global perspective on “news, events and culture.”<sup>54</sup> NASA TV airs 24-hour content about space exploration.

Then there’s Internet-based public media. New online journalism enterprises are popping across the nation. *Voice of San Diego* has gained significant attention in the past year, operating on some \$1 million per year of grant money and offering impressive, credible reporting local issues. And other online journalism ventures — nonprofit and for-profit alike — are popping up across the country, using varied funding models and structures.

Just as public broadcasting is seeking ways to increase community involvement with local stations and harness the potential of participatory journalism, these alternative outlets are teeming with local talent and great potential. Finding new ways to work with these organizations will ensure public media’s relevance, increase its pool of allies and resources, and help to develop new models to support quality public affairs programming. While there are legitimate concerns about how to protect the integrity of content and the public media “brand,” we believe there are ways for public media to be an inclusive curator and distributor of content. In addition to content production, noncommercial search engines, indexes and online aggregation tools are vitally needed as well.<sup>55</sup>

With dramatically expanded funding for public media, financial support should reach an enlarged network of public media makers. Community radio and television stations producing noncommercial content should be able to apply for grants for content and infrastructure. And institutions should be encouraged to share resources — be they broadband networks, public computers or multimedia equipment for local journalists. Such partnerships are more in line with the sector’s needs than the current system of silos and segmented operations.

## Conclusion: The Path to New Public Media

The American public broadcasting system is at a crossroads. It has an unprecedented opportunity — and obligation — to move into the digital age as the nation’s pre-eminent source of high-quality journalism, education, arts, cultural and local fare. If public media leaders and public interest advocates are visionary and courageous, the system could reinvent itself with significantly increased funding, diversity, improved governance, leadership, and expanded partnerships. It could pioneer educational and community media content and technology, becoming a beacon of innovation and quality.

Though this renewed vision poses many challenges, the combination of digital convergence, commercial journalism’s decline, and the nation’s collective desire for strong civic institutions suggests that the timing is right for public media to live up to its founding vision. What’s missing is the leadership and political will to bring everyone to the table and turn aspiration into reality. Public broadcasting’s institutions and allies have been gathering input from their members, their leaders, and from experts. Now is the time to move beyond defining the problem and toward a plan of action. Advocates must build formidable coalitions, and rally strong grassroots support while gaining support from the top.

The “White House Commission on Public Media” must have a timetable that reflects the need to move quickly. It should bring together a range of stakeholders, public interest leaders, and savvy media and technology experts who can identify the best ways to achieve the goals outlined in this paper.

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<sup>53</sup> “Commission Implements Public Interest Obligations for Direct Broadcast Satellite Service,” FCC press release, Nov. 19, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> Link TV, “Who We Are,” <http://www.linktv.org/whoweare>

<sup>55</sup> See Ellen P. Goodman, “Public Service Media 2.0,” in *...And Communications for All*. (Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 263-280.

## PUBLIC MEDIA'S MOMENT

President Obama's campaign platform and public statements support such an effort. He has expressed an interest in creating "Public Media 2.0," a new system that "will create the Sesame Street of the Digital Age and other video and interactive programming that educates and informs." Obama pledged to "support the transition of existing public broadcasting entities and help renew their founding vision in the digital world."<sup>56</sup> The White House Commission will be essential in pushing public media institutions to redefine and expand their mission, objectives and direction in collaboration with public advocates and other experts.

But the most important component in this process should be *the public*. As policymakers consider the changes needed to recharge public media in America, we must solicit public input to determine what America needs and wants from public media and receive public feedback on any proposals for reform. This could take place in a number of ways, including nationwide public hearings and innovative online survey tools.

Town hall meetings could be run by local stations, or in partnership with leading public interest groups at the local and national level. These hearings will provide public media institutions and public media makers with an opportunity to tell their constituents what they are doing, what they can offer, and what they are planning for the future. But they will also give the general public an opportunity to express their needs and recommendations for strengthening public media in their communities. These meetings should highlight public participation and discussion, not feature long speeches by policymakers with short bursts of time for public comment.

Building on the work the Obama administration has done with [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) and showcasing public media's embrace of digital technology, this process should also involve online discussions, surveys and other opportunities for the public to engage. The full range of documents being used or written by the commission should be placed online for public feedback.

Despite its myriad challenges, the U.S. public media system is comprised of thousands of skilled, dedicated professionals providing a vital service to millions of citizens. They play an essential role in American life; they have given us much, and they have even more to offer in the future. Now is the time to renew our nation's values and build the institutions required to fully inform and serve the public interest. Our democracy simply can't wait.

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<sup>56</sup> Obama for America, Obama Innovation and Technology Agenda, 2008, available at [http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/technology/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Innovation\\_and\\_Technology.pdf](http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/technology/Fact_Sheet_Innovation_and_Technology.pdf)