

Adrift, mute and helpless

Why everyone but public broadcasters is making federal policy for public media

Part 1: Disengagement and its consequences

Commentary by Willard D. (“Wick”) Rowland Jr.

The FCC’s recent National Broadband Plan and its Future of the Media initiative have highlighted a chronic problem in U.S. public broadcasting: The system has no long-term policy planning capacity, and therefore it always has had great difficulty dealing with the periodic efforts by outsiders to critique and “reform” it. Public broadcasting ignores most media policy research, whether it originates in academia, think tanks or federal agencies, and it often seems out of touch with major national policy deliberations until too late.

That disengagement is highly dangerous because it allows others to set the national legal and regulatory agenda for communications without assuring adequate policy attention to public-service, noncommercial and educational goals. Such policy initiatives also can negatively affect the funding and operating conditions of every public licensee.

This article, the first of two, examines the history and recent serious consequences of that disengagement. The second article, in *Current*’s Oct. 18 issue, will suggest changes necessary in the public media approach to federal policy development.

Reports, studies and more reports

The past two years have been a period of unprecedented policy development opportunity for public broadcasting, but on the whole the system has muffed the chance.

Since the 2008 elections, there has been a notable upswing in the volume of organized commentary about public broadcasting and related public policy recommendations. During 2009 several foundations, universities and media-reform interests published similar studies of new media and communi-



Illustration: *Current*

ty information challenges that bear directly on public media (see box, next page). But public broadcasting itself provided no systematic response.

The reports derived from various inter-related concerns about the rise of web-based media, the weakening commercial media business models, the closing and shrinking of newspapers, and the decline in the amount and quality of serious journalism, with their implications for civic life.

What these documents shared, most of all, was political timing. Their sponsors and authors were trying to influence the national policy agenda at a time of significant change in the White House and Congress. The studies varied in quality and in the harshness of their treatment of public broadcasting, but to this day our system has not effectively addressed them.

That failure is regrettable, because it means that no one has questioned the reports about various problematic assumptions and conclusions:

- Lamenting the declining state of U.S.

journalism, noting the much better funding for public media abroad, and alleging shortfalls in public broadcasting journalism and local community service, the Knight Commission report incorrectly suggests that transformative change could occur “with a modest increase in federal funding.”

■ Asserting that “coordinating public media 2.0 will take . . . anchoring funds from taxpayers,” an American University study fails to indicate how much funding would be needed and how proponents could overcome the longstanding political resistance to sufficient subsidies.

■ Critiquing the dearth of public broadcasting support for journalism and urging CPB to require every public radio and television station to produce “a minimum amount of local news,” a *Columbia Journalism Review* report is likewise silent on the exact costs and political feasibility of doing so, as well as the implications of CPB dictating content to stations.

■ Proposing that increased funding — “say, to about \$5 per person” — would enable the U.S. public media system to “become the information backbone” of American communities, the Free Press study calls for

“expanding the definition of public media” without clarifying how grantees would be selected or whether supporting additional outlets would improve or undercut existing stations and services.

Yet these often critical remarks about today’s public media, and equally uncritical imaginings about new media, stand unchallenged as a new, presumably authoritative, conventional wisdom.

Three chronic failings

Whatever the merits of the 2009 reports, the public broadcasting community’s passive response has been a telling reminder of three important realities:

1. Public broadcasting has never had any organized, wide-ranging research, analytical and planning capacity to develop system goals and policy options.

2. The system likewise has no comprehensive, long-term federal policy plan for itself framed in any coherent, consensus view of U.S. communications policy at large.

3. Underlying these major shortcomings, public broadcasting has no concise, clear coordinated and integrated vision for its own role in the broadband digital future.

The first of these problems derives directly from the second and the second in turn from the third.

The first is the most apparent at the moment, because the stations and their “G-4” national organizations (CPB, PBS, APTS and NPR) have no ability to systematically address issues like those reflected in the 2009 reports. The reports were not brought up during the fall 2009 public television Round Robin meetings, and at this writing it is uncertain if they will be part of the 2010 discussions (though the reports and their consequences deserve far more scrutiny than those brief gatherings would permit).

The second problem is more challenging, because we have not developed our own set of public policy recommendations for enhancing public service objectives in the new media world. Without a clear understanding of the broader national policy context and without our own considered goals, it is difficult to articulate a coherent critique of any report making policy recommendations that affect us.

The third is the most difficult because it reflects the continuing planning disorder in our own house — our persistent inability to frame a vision and practical forward steps for

public media. Despite fitful attempts since the late 1970s, including various “digital future” initiatives during the past decade, public broadcasting has been unable to outline a coordinated, systemwide strategic plan for itself (i.e., not just a PBS or NPR corporate plan) that makes a compelling case for more sympathetic federal policy and substantially improved funding.

It’s not as if any public broadcasting sub-cultures lack ideas for such plans or couldn’t implement them. But agreeing on common principles and strategies, or any systemwide actions, proves difficult. As usual, we are split among different station licensee types, various degrees of distrust between the stations and their national organizations, and differing perceptions of emerging new public media institutions and possible partnerships. The system’s nominal leaders have neither a clear mandate nor the resources to confront big issues with the confidence that inspires followers. The stations regularly shrink from exercising that authority as well, even though they have created entities such as the Affinity Group Coalition and the Station Resource Group. Altogether, we appear to be rudderless and therefore are believed, however unfairly, to have no vision.

Immediate policy challenges

The consequences of these problems became especially apparent early this year, when the system mustered minimal responses to three of its biggest policy challenges:

■ charges that public broadcasting has failed to contribute sufficiently to American journalism,

■ the dozen or more core questions about noncommercial and public media posed by the FCC in its Future of Media inquiry, and

■ the threats to television broadcasters’ frequencies implied in the National Broadband Plan.

The G-4 and some stations and affiliated groups have tried to address these topics, but their responses have appeared harried, uncoordinated and superficial, and they have not fully engaged the system in the effort.

CPB’s response to the critique of the system’s role in journalism was to allocate \$2 million for public radio’s Argo project and only \$10.5 million over two years to create seven Local (actually regional) Journalism Centers. In a nation with nearly 600 CPB-assisted stations, the

Argo project amounts to little more than a dozen bloggers, and the LJC initiative involves only about 40 licensees, largely focused on radio and without a counterpart RFP for television.

Any serious attempt to build a truly effective nationwide public media capacity in news would at the very least involve CPB, station leaders and a consortium of national foundations in building a program of hundreds of millions of dollars over a much longer period, to support many smaller, more manageable local collaborations, and to assist hundreds of individual licensees.

If the initiative was truly intended to be transformative for journalism, it also would address the reality that such public media efforts will need continuing public funding and philanthropy-based support for operations over the long run — not just small seed grants.

For its part, the FCC presented an initially unrealistically short timetable for its Future of the Media examination, announcing it on Jan. 21 and expecting comments by March 8. It subsequently extended that deadline to May 7, but for an inquiry with 42 major, complex, penetrating questions ranging across all aspects of media technology, economics, structures and service forms, the time available was still too little. The G-4 scrambled to respond by the new deadline, commissioning white papers and submitting various comments, and CPB tried to inform its submissions through a “dynamic inquiry” process among the stations. Throughout the period, however, it remained unclear how systematic and broad-based that inquiry ever was going to be and how its findings were going to be vetted. Previous CPB dynamic inquiries had proven to be highly filtered by management and not really re-verified among the licensees in anything like a 360-degree consultation.

As for the National Broadband Plan, public broadcasting had no concerted and comprehensive involvement in most of the year-long deliberations that led to the report. At the 11th hour, late in 2009, the G-4 organizations hurried to provide input to the FCC’s process, but that intervention was not rooted in any systematic research or consultation with stations. To date it seems

to have had little impact on the results.

The report signaled the government's intention to make the most sweeping set of spectrum reallocations since the dawn of FM radio and television (generally, moving spectrum from TV broadcasting to cell phones and other mobile devices).

Yet the G-4 was unprepared and appeared confused about how to react. Outwardly they offered cautious but inconsistent praise for the report and have expressed interest in remaining involved, but they still have no organized analytic capacity to involve the stations in assessing the Broadband Plan and developing counter options.

At this potentially unprecedented turn in U.S. media policy — soon after taxpayers and public broadcasting donors spent \$1.5 billion on a digital broadcasting infrastructure — the system has little sense of how to respond to all the pressures upon it and to try to harness those developments to the interests of a significantly enhanced public-service ecology.

The long look back

These problems are not new. There is longstanding evidence of public broadcasting's chronic absence from the world of policy development. During the past three decades, its institutions have been ignored in virtually every major piece of federal communications legislation and related FCC rulemaking.

Nowhere in the major cable, broadcasting and telecommunications laws of the 1980s and 1990s, most notably the Telecommunications Act of 1996, can one find the words "public broadcasting." The system also was oddly uninvolved in the Clinton-era debates about the digital divide. Throughout those major national policy debates, and as the nation moved toward the digital age, there were no references to the need to preserve and expand public, noncommercial, educational interests as a central tenet of federal communications and cultural policy.

In other advanced democracies, by con-

trast, it is difficult to imagine the government engaging in such sweeping legislative and regulatory changes without placing public-service media issues squarely at the center of the national debate.

More recently, during the year of the FCC's work on the Broadband Plan there were several major, well-funded, national conferences, think-tank initiatives and public-private working groups on broadband policy and spectrum use issues intended to shape the report and the long-term future of communications policy. Yet it appears that public broadcasting was neither involved as a participant nor much discussed as relevant.

The system also seemed to avoid involvement in the Obama administration's ongoing \$7.2 billion investment in broadband infrastructure for underserved Americans. Even when stations' fiscal health was immediately at stake, the system's national agencies failed to seek a second round of federal stimulus funding for them.

G-4 leaders and others now come and go frequently at the FCC and White House, trying to play catch up on the Media Future and broadband initiatives, but they have no system-vetted plan upon which to ground their representations. The planning efforts continue to be dominated by K Street lobbyists.

Public broadcasting's marginal role in policymaking is, of course, a reflection of its congenitally peripheral place in the nation's media culture. Public-service institutions arrived relatively late on the U.S. media scene. From the outset, federal policy had been closely aligned with the interests of commercial media. For all of its path-breaking significance, the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967 and its many amendments have never given the system the mandate or resources to take the lead on public-service issues in U.S. communications policy.

Over the years only one or two academic centers have seriously focused on public media issues. None of the major public policy think tanks has taken on the issue and

Major recent reports referring to public media

Downie, Jr., Leonard and Michael Schudson, *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Oct. 19, 2009.

Center for Social Media, American University, *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*, Washington, D.C.: Future of Public Media Project, February 2009.

Free Press, *Changing Media: Public Interest Policies for the Digital Age*, Washington, D.C.: Free Press, May, 2009.

Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2009.

appointed qualified scholars or professionals to them; nor have they regularly sponsored relevant conference series and publication programs.

With few exceptions, system leaders and the stations apparently have assumed that some invisible hand in the private marketplace and benevolent forces within the political, foundation and academic sectors would take care of these matters. It is now painfully evident that this faith was misplaced. What is perhaps most disturbing, though, is that while public broadcasting is continuing to be marginalized in the major national policy debates, it does not itself appear to be aware of that fact, and it remains unaware of the consequences. ■

In the Oct. 18 issue, Part 2 will offer suggestions about how public broadcasting finally can begin to remedy this situation.

The writer, Wick Rowland, is president of Colorado Public Television, KBDI, in Denver, and dean and professor emeritus of the University of Colorado School of Journalism and Mass Communication. In PBS's early days, he was its first research director and director of long-range planning. E-mail: wrowland@kbdi.org.