

Stewards for the media future

What public broadcasting can do to plan for its own future and for federal policies that serve the public interest.

Part 2: Re-engagement and fulfillment

In the first part of this commentary in *Current* Oct. 4, Wick Rowland, an early PBS planner and now a station leader in Colorado, said that public broadcasting's failure to put time and money into formal research and planning has left it "adrift, mute and helpless" on the periphery of federal policymaking about media and spectrum. Pubcasting was slow to respond to the journalism crisis, aloof from the Obama administration's big commitment to give the public universal access to broadband Internet service.

In Part 2 he suggests how the system could equip itself to develop a more coherent, visionary agenda for its own future and the nation's media policies.

Commentary by Willard D. ("Wick") Rowland Jr.

At this extraordinary moment, when so many outside observers and critics are simultaneously trying to define a national agenda for public media — when we should be confidently helping to guide those debates — we seem unprepared for the task.

Public broadcasting can deal with narrowly focused emergencies such as appropriations shortfalls or some FCC rulemakings — and it has had periodic success in legislative and regulatory firefighting — but such victories have achieved relatively minor gains and have largely protected only the status quo. For a truly expansive future the public media policy agenda must be much broader and more transformative.

No structure, resources or time for policy

The regrettable state of policy development affairs for the system outlined in Part 1

should not be construed as a dismissal of the people or institutions of public broadcasting. Over the years, many dedicated professional and lay colleagues have endeavored to overcome the system's structural dysfunction in policymaking.

But at nearly every stage it has been difficult for leaders to break out of their institutions' historically circumscribed roles and prepare the system for the future, usually because many of our policy options are internally divisive and beyond our complete control.

Public broadcasting's statutory mandate has been limited, and the system's complex structure, essentially unchanged for nearly a half century, has discouraged consensus-building. Further, we have had no spare resources to invest in the long, hard, process of research, analysis, focused discussion and planning necessary to participate effectively in federal communications policymaking. That process has gone on, and continues to do so, largely without us.

We know some policy priorities — but not all

Public broadcasters generally know what their own important policy issues are. For instance, they want to see Congress establish an adequate, permanent funding mechanism, protect and expand public media access to digital bandwidth on cable, satellite and mobile carriers, and support their special role in culture, the arts and education and reporting on issues in public affairs, the economy, health, science, international affairs and security.

What is less clear is whether public broadcasters have connected those specific challenges to the over-arching context of national communications and media policy issues. Those include broader federal policies for broadband development, spectrum allocation, public culture generally, media ownership, and sustaining the "public-interest" standard in communications regulation. More specifically they include policies on net neutrality, political campaign financing and its role in subsidizing commercial media, the "culture wars" and struggles over decency, and the future of journalism.

Without a clear plan for itself, and in light of its other constraints, public broadcast-

ing seldom has time to address that larger context and frame major, comprehensive, long-term policy principles and objectives.

Even when it has a good internal sense of what it could do at a pivotal point, such as in the recent digital conversion, public broadcasting never quite gets to the stage of proposing wholly different levels and means of public funding and more integrated, public-service friendly federal regulatory provisions.

If that missing background capacity persists, public broadcasting is likely to remain at sea with regard to such matters as the 2009 studies and 2010 federal initiatives, and most others in the future. The danger, of course, is that at moments of significant social, technological, economic and political change — as in 2010 and the foreseeable future — there will be no effective voice for public-service ideals and institutions at the center of the debates.

If public broadcasting is not there with a wide-ranging, comprehensive set of policy goals, it cannot speak coherently to the various studies and most importantly to its own relatively marginal status in the U.S. media environment. Moreover, it will continue to cede its policy development place to others who, as always in the past, will either presume to speak for it or see to it that its interests are ignored.

That is a particularly serious situation at a time when stations face federal policymakers' determined effort to reduce their precious spectrum assets and to invite other players into the public media tent without credibly clarifying what changes in mission and funding they will propose.

What can we do about this?

The challenge is two-fold — to develop a wide-ranging, research-based and integrated understanding and critique of the entire U.S. communications policy regime and to articulate within it a more central place for public-service media policy. The system must develop a process for comprehensive analysis and involvement in policymaking. This is necessary in the short term to deal with impending immediate policy initiatives, such as the broadband challenge. But it has much more far-reaching implications — it is about fundamentally repositioning public broadcasting in the U.S. media policy environment.

This improved capacity requires an entirely different order of focus and interaction among the national public broadcasting entities (the G-4 — APTS, CPB, NPR and PBS), the stations and their own agencies (the public television affinity groups and their Affinity Group Coalition — AGC), public radio's Station Resource Group (SRG), the Integrated Media Association and other public media forums, as well as such external entities as foundations, universities and appropriate think tanks.

In certain respects, these recommendations derive from prior articulations of the problem, most notably by Jim Fellows in the early 1990s for the Hartford N. Gunn Institute and more recently by the late Winter Horton for the Frieda Hennock Institute. The two proposals were never widely understood and therefore did not engender sufficient support from within the system or by others to allocate even token resources to national-level policy analysis. The difficulty in focusing attention on those visionary recommendations speaks volumes about the internal and external strictures that handicap public broadcasting.

The following suggestions resurrect some of those ideas and add others:

1. Create a permanent Policy Development Council of representatives from all major interests in public broadcasting to coordinate and lead the system's policy development. The council could be formed, funded and regularly refreshed by CPB, with foundation assistance, in open, continuing consultation with the other national entities and authoritative, representative station groups. It would be charged with:

- Developing and periodically updating the guiding principles, system plan and case statement for Public Media 2.0.

- Scanning and, where necessary, critiquing the overall U.S. media policy environment and significant trends.

- Laying out the longer-term, comprehensive policy agenda for public media and framing the more immediate, short-range policy goals in that light.

- Monitoring the system's progress in addressing the overall national media policy agenda and regularly reporting on the results.

- Promptly analyzing and establishing the terms of debate around think-tank, academic and governmental research that deals directly or indirectly with public media policy.

- n Getting ahead of foreseeable issues with regular reports on others' findings and trends, focusing on implications for public media.

- Leading a regular, permanent series of consultations among the stations and throughout the system, including with lay leaders, on policy trends and specific options for public media.

- Determining areas that require further research and helping secure the resources needed to conduct it.

This process implies much more than attending private meetings with FCC and White House officials, in which system representatives, without much prior station consultation, react to developments in federal policy without much prior station consultation.

The process also would help CPB better fulfill its statutory mandate to consult with the stations on major funding matters, by being much more transparent and interactive (systemwide) than those "consultations" often tend to be. It also would be ongoing, not an ad hoc reaction to the crisis of the moment. We would expect it to perform at such a high level of policy analysis and authority that it would much reduce the likelihood of the crises that periodically befuddle the system.

The Council could be aided by G-4 staffs and outside consultants commissioned by CPB and others, but it must be led so as to provide substantive, iterative engagement for the stations. That is, it must regularly check back and openly refine conclusions with all elements in the system, including the stations and their representative groups, much as the AGC and SRG do and as the former APTS Legislative Advisory Group (LAG) did. The policy development process must not be a top-down, irregularly one-off exercise by frequently uninformed outside management consultants brought in after things have gone wrong. It also would require the stations to invest more of their own resources in the process and to authorize necessary staffing and leadership in their affinity and professional groups, over and beyond what they now modestly provide.

2. Establish permanent capacities for independent, well-informed public media research in a few national think tanks and universities, to encourage an extensive research and publication effort that tests the system's assumptions and plans, bringing both confirmation and alternative critiques to the surface.

This kind of research and analytic capacity is central to all major professions and industries. For us it would produce a continuous stream of research and data about pertinent issues and discussions outside of public broadcasting itself, with an eye to better analyzing and interpreting the system's needs, problems and opportunities and relating them to the broader national communications policy agenda.

Although this might take public broadcasting outside the comfort zone of its routines, it is not unusual in public-policy-making circles. It constructs the intellectual and research platforms upon which specific detailed policy recommendations are built. Done effectively it also engages the press and thereby helps define and market issues to the public. Public media journalists also could improve their reporting on communications policy issues.

There is great need for a considerably larger body of published research on public media history, economics, programming, audiences, structures, case histories and policy options. The current volume and range of such work is limited, irregular and uncoordinated, reflecting public broadcasting's marginal status in both the society at large and the primary forms of discourse in media and communications studies. There are a few scholars in the country whose work bears significantly on public media, but, as good as much of that work is, too few are involved, they are under-funded and their product is too sporadic. Unlike the situation in most other industries, including the commercial media, those efforts do not add up to the concentrated body of argument that can lead to any comprehensive understanding of the issues that can be focused on policy solutions.

By raising resources to support more university and think-tank research on public media and attracting more scholars to the subject, the system could begin to address that vacuum. However, if that work is to influence the public media policy agenda, it will have to be widely available. Products of research would be targeted for publication and online discussion in various popular, professional, academic and policymaking circles. It also would be actively plugged into the social media universe.

The ultimate goal is much more popular and political familiarity with and willingness to address the contradictions in mainstream U.S. communications policy, especially as they bear on public media. While this recommen-

dation also may seem unfamiliar to the public broadcasting community, it is standard in most other major private and public sector interests. Nearly all major, successful industrial, social and political causes are directed so as to build the volume of sponsored research and manage its interactions throughout its own constituencies, the academy, the press and all relevant political forums.

3. Ensure that public media leaders and advocates participate regularly in national communications policy forums, conferences and public, private and academic deliberations.

As noted in Part 1, powerful interests in the mass media, telecommunications, computing and web industries have invested substantial resources over the decades in shaping the national communications policy agenda.

They exercise that influence in large part through a steady drumbeat of carefully fashioned conferences, symposia, workshops and other forums. Often rooted in sharply competitive objectives, such deliberations nonetheless have the effect over time of building up a conventional wisdom among policy followers that assumes the primacy of commercial media and market forces.

In that setting, there is little incentive to raise public-interest issues and consider non-commercial options. Representatives from public media are the appropriate parties to attempt to overcome that resistance, but the system has not insisted on having a serious presence in those core elements of the policy formation process.

Public broadcasters cannot easily compete with commercial interests' ability to buy attention through their lobbying and PAC campaign donations, but the public entities, and particularly their local lay leaders, can much more assiduously inject themselves into formative industry-government policy deliberations. They also should be much more engaged in formal media scholarship, conferences and publications. The foundation community could help considerably more in this regard.

Efforts such as the recent CPB-sponsored Aspen conferences are certainly part of what

is necessary for the long-term effort, but the track record for such irregular, high-level national meetings about public broadcasting over the years has not been good.

Since the first Carnegie Commission in 1967, none of the Aspen meetings, including several in the 1980s and 1990s, has had any effect on the federal policy agenda. Such meetings typically have provided invigorating discussions for those involved, but most have not included many public broadcasters, or an adequate cross-section, and none have led to significant legislative or regulatory changes.

Nor have the few national commission studies specifically focused on public broadcasting had much impact. The Carnegie II report in 1978 and the Twentieth Century Fund report in 1993 were largely ignored by both public broadcasting itself and the federal policy establishments of the day.

The only exception to that pattern was the first Carnegie Commission report in 1967, which led to passage of the Public Broadcasting Act that very year, largely because of a strong inter-linkage of forces among local public broadcasters and key congressional and administration figures that was able to state a vision that was congruent with the contemporary political and social climate.

The inability of public broadcasters and their friends to recognize that they have never replicated the success of Carnegie I demonstrates how thoroughly the system has been marginalized.

Open our eyes and think

The set of recommendations outlined in this commentary can surely be improved upon; they need considerably more organizational and funding detail than space here permits. This summary proposal is designed simply to get the conversation going.

The important first step now is to establish consensus that public broadcasting has, indeed, had a chronic macro-level policy development challenge that must be addressed and that it needs (a) a comprehensive system plan and case statement, and (b) an integrated,

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.

iterated and much more ambitious set of federal policy goals consistent with that plan.

The long-term goal is to put the proponents of public media on a much stronger permanent footing with the larger commercial media and electronics industry interests that otherwise tend to control the national communications policy agenda.

Many have heretofore seen this need as either unrealistic or just an unnecessary luxury, or that someone else would take care of it.

One hopes that it is now apparent that, in light of all that has gone on during the past two years and how little public broadcasting has been able to engage and influence it, such steps, and real ownership of the process, are central to the system's survival and any hope it has of leading the transformation into Public Media 2.0. We owe our successors no less. n

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