

What makes pubcasting ‘public’ is engagement

By Pat Aufderheide
and Noëlle McAfee

Public engagement is the semi-secret success story of public broadcasting, and it shouldn’t be. The many community partnerships that flourished with public TV’s June broadcast of the special on caregiving for seniors, *And Thou Shalt Honor*, and the amazing insights that Story Corps brings to public radio shouldn’t be heartwarming, exceptional stories. They should be the norm.

It is becoming clear that public engagement is the heart of public broadcasting—and the best argument why taxpayers as well as donors and foundations need to support their public media.

Public media are media whose mission is to serve, build and nurture an informed, engaged public. They include pubcasting stations, cable-access centers, DBS set-aside channels, low-power stations and even media arts organizations and museums.

Even commercial media—such as prestigious journalism or commercial cable’s prestige projects—sometimes fulfill public missions.

Some public media are big institutions; some are so informal that they come out of people’s living rooms. What they have in common is that they serve and need the public. That makes them different from other media, which serve and need customers.

Public broadcasting is the crown jewel of American public media. It serves, for better and worse, as a model and example of what public media can be. Public broadcasters need to play a leading role in cultivating the public media landscape. Yet too often the daily business of survival keeps pubcasters from designing public engagement into their core activities. Too often, good-works afterthoughts tag along after programs. Even with the valiant work of the National Center for Outreach, outreach is still treated as an add-on. Programmers talk of viewers and listeners rather than members of the many publics in the communities and the society we share.

Public media deserve public support



The New Americans introduced others to the lives of the 21st-century immigrants and, like other pubcast programs, enlarges our shared understanding of the public. (Photos: Kartemquin Films.)

and investment. Why? It’s not just because of excellent content—commercial media can also have excellent content. It’s not just because anyone can receive the signal or post to the blog. That makes media merely available, not public.

It’s not even because some public media receive tax-based funding, although that gives them crucial breathing space while giving the public a way to hold them accountable. Still, that doesn’t make a medium public.

What makes public media essential is that they treat people as active learners in and builders of society. They honor the promise of American democracy—that people can assert themselves not only as individuals but also, if they work with others, as decision-makers and mobilizers of the public will. They respect this capacity in the people who use and contribute to their services. Public media are at the heart of a democratic society.

People use the word “public” to mean many things—audiences, consumers, the masses. These kinds of publics are usually too uninformed, uninterested or unengaged to decide on the future of the society. They’re out at the mall or otherwise out of it. At the same time, inside-the-Beltway operatives specialize in manufacturing outcries and outrage that masquerade as public will. Their work ironically shows us how important true public will is—even fake versions of it have political effect.

Here is another way to imagine the public, borrowed from the great American philosopher John Dewey: as a living social phenomenon. This kind of public isn’t an interest group or the docile beneficiary of a think tank’s idea of what the public inter-

est is. It is people who know enough about what they have at stake in their world (whether it’s about traffic or health care or arts in the schools) to form opinions, and who have a way to find other people affected by the same issue. They have confidence that others will listen to them and vice versa. That could embrace all of us if we had pervasive public media that respects the civic role anyone can play as needed.

We don’t have a healthy public now, and most media, especially in the commercial sphere, aren’t helping. Politicians, interest groups and public relations professionals expertly spin media. Media businesses seize upon fake controversy, cheap crises and polarized portrayals of issues to grab audiences in an ever-more-fragmented ratings environment. Meanwhile, the deluge of unsorted information in our blogs and websites and downloads increases our daily cynicism.

Public media, often operating under the radar, take on the public engagement challenge surprisingly well and often. Consider:

■ **Turning data into stories.** A public needs to be able to really understand what is going on—why people do what they do and what the consequences are. This is not just about getting more and better facts, because we know people don’t even hear or see facts they can’t understand. It means telling stories that can make sense and finding other people to share and discuss them with. Public radio storytellers are famous not just for good stories but for smartly framing them, so that new understandings emerge. “Driveway stories” make connections. They make sense.

■ Linking knowledge to action.

Members of a public need to know what they can do and the implications of their actions. When the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* not only reports about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur on television but also gives teens more background on the program's website plus a chance to debate what they can do about it, that's giving the public a way to turn democratic ideals into practice.

■ Finding stories that enhance and even change our shared understanding of who we are, have been and can be.

That's what *Eyes on the Prize* did, with such great effect that it became a model for other historical series. It's why *The New Americans*, a three-part series on the lives of immigrant families, was so important. It's the purpose of ITVS's *Circle of Stories*, an interactive project that features a half-dozen Native Americans telling stories of their culture and history while inviting web visitors to upload their own. That's what *This American Life* and StoryCorps do, by finding new voices and new ways to tell and hear stories.

■ **Fostering talk that leads to solutions.** People need to have more and better opportunities to find each other, in actual places where they can meet face to face. If their knowledge stays locked up in their heads, it can't help feed the public as a public. After *P.O.V.*, a pioneer of public engagement, showed *Farmingville*, a documentary about community conflict in Long Island, N.Y., over illegal immigration, the film triggered talk at community meetings all over the country, including places where the same conflicts were brewing. The film helped officials and community leaders meet with people they might never have met and to search out better answers together.

■ Building a community's civic capital.

When ITVS hosts community screenings, when the American Library Association arranges partnerships with public TV strands such as *P.O.V.*, when local stations such as the Twin Cities' TPT work with nonprofits to co-produce programs, relationships open doors for public engagement. In Austin, Texas, KLRU is not only planning in-depth coverage of the growth challenges facing a region that is expected to double its population by 2040, but it is putting together a community governing board. Local organizations—including KLRU—will convene members of the public to discuss and decide what ought to

be done.

■ **Turning audiences into sources and partners.** Minnesota Public Radio's Public Insight Journalism project draws on a network of thousands of Minnesotans to get a public take on issues and ideas for stories. Thanks to e-mail and the Internet, MPR can supplement its small newsroom with a gigantic database of voices and insights from across the region. Its listeners are experts.

■ **Nurturing cultural expression that helps people participate in their own culture.** Global music—on public radio, low-power stations and satellite TV among other public media—has entertained people while inspiring them to broaden their sense of global community. Local arts efforts, including youth media, abound. And those who watched the public TV show *Continental Harmony* saw what happened when, around the country, composers and community organizations worked together and created new compositions.

■ **Modeling respectful and engaging conversation.** Public broadcasting is full of good examples of people cutting through the coolly ironic sheen of commercial mass media to communicate—especially on public radio's talk shows.

Public media makers intuitively know all this already, and often do it. The field's pioneers, visionaries and gurus, from E.B. White and Bill Siemering on, have celebrated its role in the public sphere. It should be the prime reason public broadcasters give—when talking to potential donors, taxpayers' representatives and strategic planners—why the field deserves to survive the digital hurricane. But too often nurturing public culture is not seen as the central work of public broadcasters—by both their potential publics and their own executives.

Putting the project of public engagement at the center of public media addresses several nagging problems for broadcasters. It shows why public broadcasters are different from other media that may be noncommercial but not necessarily public—for instance media produced by religious groups or nonprofits. It also shows the difference between having lots of information (which generates media smog) and having information that matters.

Putting the public in the center also demonstrates how public broadcasting is a nonpartisan and unapologetically vigorous advocate of public life. It's the exit from

the squirrel-cage discussion of fairness and balance. As members of the public, we need to know more about the underlying problems of our society and government. We don't need someone to calibrate neatly between two extremist opinions or stake a middle ground between predetermined left and right positions. We all need help cutting through the noise created by loud, unproductive arguments.

Public engagement is also the answer to those who ask why public media require taxpayer support. Ever since 1794, when Congress granted special low postal rates to newspapers so that members of the new nation could understand themselves in relation to far-flung compatriots, this nation has recognized the link between communication and community. In a deafeningly raucous media environment we need media whose loyalty is not to their shareholders or to an ideology but to the building of public understanding and engagement.

Finally, a focus on public engagement makes it easier for broadcasters to grasp opportunities of the digital era. A democratic public needs public media, in whatever forms of communication are available. For pubcasters, the digital challenges are only worth confronting if they help to address the challenges of public engagement. ■

Pat Aufderheide directs the Center for Social Media in the School of Communication at American University in Washington, D.C., and Noëlle McAfee is deputy director there. The just-launched Public Media ThinkTank, a project of the Center with resources from the Ford Foundation, focuses on public media for a digital age.

The project's goal is to develop and share a rich understanding of how media are and can be public in the great sense that John Dewey gave it—feeding the social phenomenon of people actively learning about and acting in their own communities and society. The first task it faces will be to understand the many ways that dedicated public media professionals practice this project today, to share the best of those experiences for a vital public media for tomorrow. The Public Media ThinkTank welcomes comments, reactions and contributions at socialmedia@american.edu.