

**National Forum for Public Television Executives
1999 White Paper**

**Forging a Future for Public Television
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I. The Local Station

When the FCC set aside the first "noncommercial, educational" channels in 1952, there were mixed opinions as to how the new kind of television would thrive. Two critical items were missing from that Sixth Report and Order: a clear means by which the non-profit licensees across the country might subsist, and a precise role they were to play in their communities. The vague "meet educational needs" was the positive regulatory mandate, and the others were negative --no commercials and no profit.

Nevertheless, educators and institutions responded, and stations came on the air -- owned and operated by state agencies, universities (just about all of which were public), boards of education and new, private, non-profit corporations. It's noteworthy that all but those in that final category planned to use tax dollars, in one way or another, for basic support. That reliance on public money has been an important factor in the lives of stations since then.

The diversity of local stations, missions, services and programs has been seen over the years as a detriment to the movement, at least by those who prefer American public broadcasting to be a single national entity rather than a collection of local institutions. (Interestingly, over the years that very diversity has proven to be a lasting and formidable strength.) Regardless, the phrase "bedrock of localism" was born, and the protection of individual station prerogatives has long been the basis of agreements and disagreements in the world of public television.

The original four licensee types have persisted, as have their traditions. As the new century looms, there exist both the historic imperative for local station independence and the obvious need for station collectives and national organizations. However, because the exploding world of telecommunications is beginning to threaten local public stations, licensees must now focus --as they did in the very beginning -- on providing services that other agencies do not provide. If public broadcasting is to survive locally, then stations must emerge as *indispensable* in their communities. This will mean fewer "entertainment" programs, especially the kind that migrates among various broadcast and cable channels, and more projects implemented by institutional partnerships, aiming at education and training. Only when fire departments, boards of education, libraries, the police, the judiciary, professional associations, business and industry, local colleges and other community agencies turn to their own *educational telecommunications centers* for help in education and training -- only then will what is now public television have moved from what it was in the 20th century to what it must be in the 21st.

The challenge of the local licensee at this point is to build lasting, operational relationships with other institutions in its community -- trusting relationships that will allow for experimentation and sharing in the provision of *real* services. The other agencies have the educational or service missions; the local station must promote its special skill in helping those agencies -- expertise in the use of media and in distribution. (The only enviable and negotiable item a local station brings to the table at this point is its broadcast signal -- the ability to distribute information efficiently -- and how that signal is used during the next few years will determine the station's future among so many emerging telecommunications ideas.)

The local licensee, no matter how small or large, must be self-sufficient and independent, within the obvious parameters of public ownership, where it exists, and should strive to provide *indispensable* services.

II. National Organizations

Since the very early days, when the Ford Foundation established and funded the *National Educational Television and Radio Center* and videotapes were mailed around the country for stations to play locally, it was clear that at least some programs for Americans should be national in design, scope and appeal. NETRC was the first "national organization," and its role was clear: *it provided for many stations what they could not provide individually for themselves*. That may seem simplistic, but it remains the critical condition in thinking about what national agencies should be and do. Institutional egos are quick to incubate, and it wasn't long before NETRC (later the "RC" was dropped), and other centralized programming agencies began to think of themselves not as programming services for the stations, but as powers that "serve the American people," and in that idea, an echo of the commercial model, the stations became mere "outlets." The stations organized their own programming agency, PBS, with the demise of NET and the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967. Then, as educational stations began to proliferate in the 1970's, smaller and weaker stations found themselves more and more dependent on the national agencies for programs as well as other services. That, in turn, led to the growth and expansion of PBS, which was cheered as it played an increasing role in the lives of stations. The establishment of CPB by Congress encouraged the power shift from local communities to the central agencies, so that by the 1990's the system amounted in essence to a large collection of *users* -- the stations -- and the *providers* -- basically PBS and CPB. The latter was a federally established and funded agency, over which the stations continue to have no control. The former was technically an agency of the stations, but its size and power -- reflected in good measure in its Board structure -- were such that constructive and meaningful dialogue between PBS and its "member stations" became less effective than it might have been.

The collective of stations must be the core of the system if American public broadcasting is to thrive, and the ultimate power -- cumbersome, to be sure -- must lie with that collective. The role of national organizations, therefore, must be defined, controlled and monitored by the licensees. The guiding principle should remain as it was so many years ago: **the centralized efforts should provide services to the stations that most individual stations cannot provide for themselves.** Some national services should be curtailed; some should never be started, and some should be strengthened. The licensee collective alone must make these determinations.

Should PBS be encouraged to provide online educational services for stations to distribute? Should PBS explore new media for stations to use in the new century? Should PBS help stations develop local institutional partnerships -- with workshops and consulting assistance? Should PBS be the voice of the stations in dealings with CPB? Should PBS initiate national educational projects such as a "virtual college" or a country-wide "GED Equivalence" program? Should PBS merely provide excellent national programming and abandon all other activities and services? These are the questions that a national forum of public television executives must face and then answer. After that, **the stations must be the parties that make changes in those national roles and missions.**

Historic mistakes lie in the governance structures that evolved over the decades. Where the PBS Board is independent, and where it includes "public members" or "lay representatives," a dangerous communications gap can result, as we've seen over the past twenty-five years, with PBS making its own decisions as to its direction and operation -- sometimes exclusive of station needs or desires. On the other hand, when the stations themselves directly dictate the roles and responsibilities of PBS, albeit with a cumbersome voting process, a more functional system will emerge. Just as American freedoms must constantly be monitored and protected, so also must the link between the stations and their service agency, PBS. The ultimate power must lie with the station collective or history will be repeated.

III. Funding

If the stations are in charge, then they must be the funding source for their service agency. The station collective might find additional money from outside sources or grants for national projects, but if PBS is given fundraising authority for its own sustenance, then its separation and independence from the stations is all but guaranteed, as we've seen. To encourage PBS to find support beyond the stations is to encourage a structure that we've learned is not helpful to the PBS owners.

Regardless, the financial support of American public television has been discussed and argued from the beginning. The FCC established the noncommercial use of television without any hint as to how it might sustain itself, the apparent assumption being that it would thrive on foundation support and other means commonly associated with non-profit efforts. For almost half a century, public television has stayed alive through a number of ingenious techniques, some of which are innovative and clever, and some of which border on the shameless.

Since the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act, federal tax money has been allocated to the educational use of television, and the "CPB appropriation" each year or two has been the subject of public and private debate for decades. That appropriation is made with a worrisome philosophic axiom: *it is appropriate for the federal government to help to support a medium of public communication*. But should the government be in the business of paying for television in a free society? Some argue persuasively that it should not, and that doing so sets a bad precedent in American public policy. Indeed, we've experienced the troublesome aspects of that support – in Congressional hearings during which public television is warned about its programming, its hiring, its equipment purchases and its other fundraising techniques. Historically, public broadcasters have tried to heed these finger-wagging admonishments, since appropriations are assumed to be tied to them.

If it's not right for the federal government to support public television, then it should be stopped – in favor of something else, of course. On the other hand, if the current system of federal support is deemed to be practical and appropriate, then it should be increased, perhaps with some new mandates to assure minimal Congressional interference with the running of the system. The important need as the new century begins is for the stations to answer the question forcefully and then to act on it, because the current status is precarious. (Congress tried to end federal support a few years ago, and it might just be successful next time.)

If the stations can agree that federal funding is improper, then a unified and powerful lobbying effort is in order, to establish a trust fund, a tax on advertising, a tax on the sale of television sets, or some other mechanism among those that have been studied and discussed for thirty-five years. If, however, the stations feel that the current system is fine, then the challenge will be to win Congressional support for increased appropriations. That can be done by helping to provide needed and valuable educational services to Americans.

Education in America is suffering at all levels. The need for formal and informal training across every possible population is intense, and those who operate mass media have a unique opportunity to try to help. If public broadcasting stations -- individually and collectively -- were to turn their attention to new educational partnerships and projects, aiding in the solutions to some nagging national problems, then the Congress would applaud and reward them. What it would take is a *collective will* among the stations and a commitment to action that has never been seen in the history of the medium. It would take a new kind of group courage but it is eminently possible.

Beyond federal funding, local support has always provided the bulk of station budgets. "Memberships" are usually the leading item, and the care and feeding of those mailing lists is an accepted and common science in public television. With new educational services, offered through traditional and new media, however, it will be possible to institute "user fees." These will be charges levied upon those who learn and advance through the services of public telecommunications. Educational services, formal and informal, can be packaged as units, with beginnings and ends, and with "credit" of one sort or another being granted by partnering institutions and agencies and with fees that are paid by the students. Examples: continuing education for lawyers, as required in some states and as administered by bar associations; GED packages; professional training in CPR and other life-saving techniques for fire-fighters or rescue volunteers; distance learning for college students (in partnership with local universities); training for paraprofessionals who care for the elderly. The list is virtually endless, and those who benefit from such training, if it is real, valued and rewarded, will be perfectly willing to pay for the services. These are the activities of a 21st century educational telecommunications center.

Corporate "underwriting" has had a colorful history in public television, "enhanced" or not, and it's clear at this point that noncommercial television is actually quite commercial, despite the vocabulary used to insist that it is not. The trend and pressures are for more, with some stations pushing the envelope at every opportunity, since money is always a great motivator. It may well be time to face the question squarely, perhaps in cooperation with the FCC and CPB, and to decide just how commercial public television should and can be. To continue with complex "guidelines" and official but fuzzy definitions of what's allowed or forbidden, is to extend an unworkable system. As it is, stations are pretending to be one thing while they are actually another, and of all the characteristics that can be attributed to public television, hypocrisy and deceit are the least desirable. It's clearly time to get hold of this question and to take it to operational closure.

IV. Programming Purposes

It's the national programming that has always attracted most attention, but in the new century local service will make an important difference in the lives of stations. With that treasured "diversity" among station types and missions, it's inevitable that different program schedules will exist, and this must be encouraged. (A re-examination of "co-branding" is surely in order if local presence is to be stressed.) In building a station's *indispensability* in the community it will be the local programs -- services that fulfill real needs -- that keep a station alive and well.

However, it's clear that the expensive and attractive national programs will continue to be critical, just as a "national presence" for public broadcasting will always be important. The challenge in the new century will be to balance two program types that at first glance might appear to be in contradiction. The first program type is "audience building." These are the bright and publicity-grabbing offerings that have always made public broadcasting so exciting in America, and these are the programs that have brought attention and large audiences to the noncommercial channels. The other type is "audience serving," and it's this kind of program that will help to make stations indispensable in their communities. These are not necessarily large audience programs, but they are the programs that provide real services in education and training. Some of them might be national in origin and production, but the service provided, the geographic point of value, will be at the viewing end, with the local *educational telecommunications center* as the provider. This new kind of program commitment -- *service* -- is what will allow what we now know as public television to become public telecommunications.

V. Program Production

The tradition in public broadcasting is to allow excellence in programming to surface as it will. Popular and helpful series have been produced by the smallest of stations, and some licensees continue to think that producing and selling a "national" program is somehow a sign of success. It's a tradition that deserves protection and continuance.

Regardless, producing national product on a sustained basis takes immense amounts of money, and so there are only a few such producers. They're the large stations, which have the power to raise the money required, and PBS, which has historically been granted the power to dispense money -- mostly to those same large producing stations.

Decisions as to what will be produced for national consumption have historically been in the hands of the producers, and the most "successful" programs have been the audience-attracting big ones. Those jewels of entertainment have been important in the growth of public broadcasting popularity, and should clearly be continued.

However, in the new century the success of some programs will be measured by the quality of the *service* they provide. In that service lies the critical *indispensability* factor, the quality that will be the hallmark of educational telecommunications. That means that some national projects should come about through the examination of the country's educational needs and a concerted effort to fill them. It would be helpful, for instance, if a national forum were to explore just these issues on a continuing basis -- finding services that might be helpful nationally and then forming the necessary national partnerships that could mount projects to meet those needs.

(The National Education Association, for instance, could work with public stations in a nationwide teacher-training project. A national law enforcement association would be a natural partner in a series on crime prevention. A consortium of art museums could be attracted to a possible project for colleges. The American Red Cross, in conjunction with the nation's public television stations, could provide continuing information on how Americans can help others. The American Management Association might work with public television in a nationwide series on improving the workplace. The list of possibilities is a long one.)

VI. New Technologies

Many years ago, it was "audio-visual education," and it amounted to assorted types of projectors and images. The establishment all but ignored it. In the late sixties, the buzzwords were "computer assisted instruction," and futurists began to foresee the electronic storage and distribution of information as a boon to teaching and learning. Still, even with declining educational quality in our schools and colleges, the establishment paid scant attention. Even today, classrooms are only starting to be wired, and there is still widespread ignorance and resistance on the part of faculties.

Public broadcasting matured during these years, and the natural partnerships that might have developed between educators and noncommercial broadcasters never really took hold. Today, the educational establishment, at all levels, remains largely locked in the old ways of doing things. American education is beginning to include more and more -- professional and occupational training and updating, career-shifting education, informal education for all ages, plus the traditional K-12 and higher education efforts -- and the need for professional telecommunications services will grow. Those who have been in noncommercial, educational television all these years are most naturally positioned to fill that need.

As the telecommunications era unfolds there will be some scrambling and we'll surely soon see electronic machinery in everyday educational settings. That spells *opportunity* for today's public broadcasters, many of whom will expand their bases of operation as new media are introduced, and many of whom will forge those links -- finally -- between education and telecommunications.

The responsibility for public stations, then, is to stay at the front edge of the telecommunications revolution and to take the lead in the introduction of new ways of doing things in education and training. (Interestingly, it was PBS that first took up the idea of national distribution via satellite, and the public stations were among the first in the nation to be in wireless interconnection.) It won't be enough to respond to changes; public stations, as they become *indispensable* in their communities will have to help to *make* the changes. That amounts to taking leadership in most cases, and opportunities will abound.

The future of today's public broadcasting will lie in the decision of the stations to recapture control of their own collective destiny and to take leadership positions -- together and individually -- as the new century begins.