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SCHOLARSHIP

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THE RECOVERY OF INSTITUTIONAL VISION FOR U.S. PUBLIC MEDIA: THREE MOMENTS OF PURPOSE AND FAILED RESOLVE

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This project explores three moments in U.S. public media history—the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment of 1934, the FCC allocations for ETV in 1950-51, and the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. I argue that all three events engaged a national audience in efforts to further the interests of public broadcasting in America; and that each contained the seeds of compromise that prevented public media’s full development as an agent of the public sphere. This effort to reclaim the central arguments of collective vision for American noncommercial broadcasting is also a critique of the institution’s failed promise. I maintain that broadcast reformers compromised, making choices in 1934, 1950-51 and 1967 that satisfied the status quo; and their chances for increased resources and great social influence slipped away. Each event provided a social landscape in which to debate democratic media. Even more importantly, each also challenged public media to action, to hone its vision of service through service. In each instance, the road taken abdicated public media’s responsibility as change agent and narrowed the public sphere.

The dissertation closes with a five-pronged plan for change. I maintain that public media reform depends on the system’s willingness to reinvent itself as a national institution of public life, making commitments to broad-based control of the spectrum, social reform, and popular community.

The public media concept advanced by this dissertation is framed within the philosophic commitments of Arendt, Habermas, and Dewey, whose work speaks to the great value of vigorous discourse, community ties, and the protected spaces of a working polis. In my analysis, democratic media are not only directly connected to practical application, but are also critically defined by an allegiance to engaged public talk; the use of broadcasting to advance social reform; and efforts to cultivate a broad-based, popular community. I maintain that public broadcasters must have deep commitments to public and performative speech, citizen participation, and inclusive and talkative communities. They must desire the “stretchable nets of kinship” that embrace the wide range of human differences and shared experiences. They must acknowledge and pursue the use of broadcasting to advance the public good; and importantly, they must recognize that the recovery of public mission for U.S. public media requires its reconstitution through altered practice.

Throughout this analysis, public service broadcasting is perceived as a vehicle by which private individuals become public citizens who seek to advance the common good through action; and although local voices are seen as critical for democracy and citizenship, public television’s special contribution is the weaving of these voices into a national conversation. Finally, this plan for reform is not presented as a plank-by-plank platform for restructuring U.S. public media; it is offered instead as a dialogic and process-oriented contribution to talk about how

public television can become a vital and functioning agent of public life in the next century. The central points of this plan for reform follow:

1. Public television must find new ways to grant individuals and constituencies space on the spectrum, access to public speech through public media. The work of the polis, underpinned by commitments to public talk, is the work of public television. The needs of American people to speak and be heard in matters of national and local import must become a priority for public broadcasters. It is not enough to subtitle *Sesame Street* and the evening news. Public television must, instead, wire the neighborhoods. This can involve commitments to microradio, PEG channels, and closed circuit cable. It can manifest itself in the dedication of specific blocks of public television airtime or a second channel to constituency groups. This is practice, however, that flies in the face of public television's sustaining self-identity as teacher and expert. To wire Cabrini Green is to grant its citizens the rights to produce and distribute their own messages; and to enable this action, public television must not only relinquish its position as a sole proprietor of the public airwaves, but must also reinvent itself as an agent of diversity.

2. Public television must encourage popular performance and televisual literacy. Public television should act on its ability to develop self-reflexivity, critical inquiry, and eloquent discourse. Collaborating with community networks and local storytellers, public TV must find ways for local people to perform as citizen producers. Further, issues of media, culture, democracy, and the economy — as well as textual strategies of script, framing, representation, lighting, and program scheduling — should become common discourse among Americans.

3. Public television must make a commitment to invigorated, broad-based national-local discourse. As an agent of authentic public life, this institution should attack the trends that have allowed a shrinking public sphere to become the norm throughout American culture, in small towns and our nation's cities alike. Educational broadcasters addressed this in 1952, when they enabled, through television technology, a vigorous discussion of common problems and then broadcast the program — "on television film" — throughout the country. The Runnells, Iowa, water supply was a local problem, solved through local discourse; but the processes of the solution — spontaneous, vigorous, and performative speech — was a nation's solution.

4. Not only must public television lose its timidity and learn to take programming risks, but public TV should also accept an overtly reformist vision. Public television is more than a workplace culture; it can and should make a difference in individual lives and U.S. culture. This was clearly the vision of many public broadcasting pioneers, but as the numbers of public TV visionaries have declined — either through death or disillusionment — recollections of their aims and purposes have grown dim.

Efforts to rebuild this old passion could legitimately begin with programs for children at risk. Public TV should not only adopt a national agenda of change for American children, but should also allocate real and substantial resources toward development of programs, research, and outreach projects in media literacy and performance. By networking with innovators and other activist groups, writing legislation, developing funding, and granting youngsters a public voice, public television could help kids at the margin survive and prosper.

5. Public television must develop a proactive vision of its own that is more than an alternative to commercial broadcasting purpose and practice. There have been useful and legitimate contributions by noncommercial broadcasting in addressing deficiencies of a market-driven commercial system. At the same time, educational broadcasting's assumption of a distinctively alternative mission allows commercial broadcasting — not public media — to define the parameters of its identity and service. Pursuing a cautious internal self-definition of purpose defined as counter to another's institutional practice, public broadcasting has failed to evolve into a truly unique media service.

The arguments embedded in its discursive history position public media as an institution of public life. Visionaries past and present have believed public broadcasting could provide a space for vigorous and reflexive discussion, enable social reform, and bind Americans together as a Public. Public television's future as an agent of the public sphere is bleak and uncertain, however; the internal resolve and external resources required for such a mission must be cultivated. Lacking new practices, old commitments are lost.