

# ONE MISSION, MANY SCREENS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Synopsis

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In the digital age, six fundamental elements define public service media and its provisions for children. They are:

*Depth and focus of educational commitment;*

*Choice of technology platform driven by content and goals;*

*Financial models that place public trust before return on investment;*

*Partnerships that support young people as emerging citizens;*

*Risk-taking subject matter, formats, genres and technology applications; and*

*Measures of effectiveness uniquely calibrated for every offering.*

### “One Mission, Many Screens” / The Context

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American public broadcasting and its counterparts worldwide increasingly operate in a social, economic and technological framework best described as *public service media*. Far more than a non-commercial broadcast or Internet alternative, the term denotes coherent and wide-ranging multi-platform content driven by community or national interests.

*Public service media are essential to maintaining democracy, for they regard the audience not as a mass market, but as lifelong learners and engaged citizens seeking thoughtful, involving entertainment. Given a shifting media environment, “One Mission, Many Screens” seeks to provide U.S. public broadcasting with enduring strategies for fulfilling this vision in its service to children.*

American youth are growing up with near-ubiquitous media at home, at school and – with increasing wireless services – everywhere in between. According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s “Media in the Home 2000” report, the average family with children 2-17 had almost three television sets. 97% of those families had VCRs, 78% had basic cable and 31% took premium channels.

70% owned a computer and 52% were connected to the Internet. The Kaiser Family Foundation, in its 1999 “Children and Media at the New Millennium” study, found that 70% of children ages 2-18 lived in homes with at least one video game player, and that older, male, minority and low income children were more likely to own a video game player.

The next frontier is wireless devices, incorporating phones with Internet or other interactive services. A November 2001 study by Upoc/Frank N. Magid and Associates (<http://www.genwireless.com/downloads/mobilestatsummary020802.ppt>) found that just over 50% of US teens (more than 12 million) own a mobile phone, 5.5% own a pager, and 7.3% have a PDA or personal organizer. Europe is well ahead of the US in this field: some estimates put wireless penetration among United Kingdom teens at more than 90%.

In this environment, children are their own program managers and producers, migrating effortlessly among multiple technologies. Many simultaneously use television, computers, games, phones, radios, music, books, magazines, and more.

A range of for-profit businesses deliver content to these devices, including services once unique to public media: educational, sometimes even non-commercial programming; instructional technology and applications; outreach and educator support. That these companies see value in such services is great news for families, but also a powerful challenge to public broadcasters to sharpen their focus, emphasize originality, and state their distinctive attributes more boldly.

Commercial media companies are combining and recombining into global conglomerates. Diversity of outlets may appear to be rising, but is in fact narrowing at the corporate level. By owning means of production *and* distribution, these businesses distribute costs and cross promote, keeping young people’s attention on one or another of their own brands. Thus, the need for strong, independent public service media has never been greater.

## **The Process**

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“One Mission, Many Screens” reflects the expertise, opinions, practices and principles of people and organizations engaged in public service media and related professions worldwide. The conclusions and recommendations are based on interviews and panel discussions with over 100 professionals, conducted in person and online between July 2001 and April 2002. The work takes into account current research, journalistic coverage of children’s issues and media trends, and both lay and professional writings on youth, media, education and entertainment.

The report’s characterizations and proposals are germane at varying organizational levels. As a result, the terms *public service media*, *public broadcasting*, and *PBS* or *PBS Kids* are used to convey different, complementary and important meanings:

- *PBS* and *PBS Kids* refer specifically to the US Public Broadcasting Service and to the varied services that comprise and accompany its distribution of children’s content.
- *Public broadcasting* refers to the many national, regional, state and local organizations responsible for commissioning, development, distribution and utilization of non-commercial, educational, multi-platform content.
- *Public service media* reflects the evolving complexity and linking of distribution and receiving technologies; the growing possibilities for viewers and users also to be producers and programmers; and the increasingly borderless nature of media. It exists across digital and analog electronic platforms and in print. It takes varying forms and structures worldwide. It may be non-commercial or commercial; education-based or broadly informative; global, regional, national or local. The common bond is a commitment to serving audience needs rather than business imperatives.

## **The Mission for PBS Kids**

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This statement is unique to PBS Kids, but closely linked with the overall core purpose of the Public Broadcasting Service:

**PBS Kids educates, enriches and entertains all of America’s children,  
employing the full spectrum of media  
to build knowledge and critical thinking;  
to empower children as citizens of their communities, nation and world;  
and to welcome parents, teachers and caregivers as learning partners.**

## **Fundamental Principles and Recommendations**

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*Underpinning this Mission Statement are six fundamental principles to guide and govern public service media for children. Each and all are vital to fulfilling the mission. They are not intended to constrict public broadcasting in any way, but to provide a solid foundation for needs analysis and development of new services; evaluation and refinement of existing works; promotion and outreach to children, families, caregivers and educators; and assessment of successes.*

## **Public service media recognize education as the driving force in all decisions.**

Public broadcasters' choices of target audience, content, format, medium (or multiple media), partnerships, and even marketing or licensing must be driven by developmentally-sound goals. Commercial media can pick and choose educational themes that are best suited to mass appeal. Public service media need to set and steer a course defined by coherent, comprehensive objectives, devising engaging approaches to "hard" learning.

*PBS must gain greater control over its commissioning of children's content than it currently exerts. For every target audience, it must detail and defend specific formal educational objectives and a timeline for fulfilling them, then pursue a focused multi-platform development strategy. This process would be aided by research to determine kids', parents', caregivers' and educators' expectations from educational media. Their views would also aid efforts to communicate more clearly public service media's distinctive aims and benefits.*

*Children's fluency with media doesn't necessarily mean that they are always thoughtful about media. Critical thinking regarding media content and technology use is among the most-needed skills for 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners; therefore, public broadcasting should devote special attention to developing lifelong media literacy skills for children and parents.*

*To be prepared for digital delivery of educational media, PBS must begin now developing strategies for metadata tagging and archiving of its programs and interactive services.*

## **Public service media reach out to young people wherever they are, and are committed to universal access.**

Public media must be present on young people's favored media devices and platforms. While universally-available free services are the foremost priority, if public broadcasters wait to claim space until a technology is ubiquitous, all the prime "real estate" will be held by commercial interests. Still, an ecumenical approach to delivery mechanisms is wise, and should be dictated by educational goals and the preferences, access, needs and abilities of the intended audience.

*Interactive digital technologies do appear to hold particular promise in certain areas. They may draw older children to sample public service media content, or help create an 'always on' image, at least while PBS Kids TV remains a block on a broad-audience channel for most homes.*

*Technologies are as likely to diverge as to converge. Young people seem to prefer multi-tasking with dedicated devices that do one thing well, over those that do many things just adequately.*

*Because PBS is not a big enough investor to influence public adoption of new technologies, it should use its trusted brand to leverage early or favored access to distribution. While its first obligation is to universally-available free services, strategic use of emerging platforms or 'premium' services may be advisable to secure favorable positioning or to capture young people's attention in venues they frequent.*

**Public service media are often non-commercial, but not anti-commerce.**

Thoughtful, limited merchandising to parents around public broadcasting's children's content can extend learning and enjoyment beyond the screen. Still, a more secure base of financial support is vital to protecting public service media's essential non-commercial core. US public broadcasting can make a strong, timely argument that expanded federal funding is needed to ensure that the communications infrastructure built by government "digital divide" initiatives will be endowed with high-quality, educational content.

*In order for PBS Kids to sustain its "we're not selling anything but learning" message, it must place educational necessity before merchandising potential in commissioning, development or acquisition of multi-media content. Except for works based on pre-existing, education-based content (e.g., books, software, learning tools), merchandising should never precede the public broadcasting premiere.*

*PBS should initiate research into parents' and educators' practical expectations about its non-commercial stature, to guide financial models and rules for branded merchandise, strategic alliances with for-profit companies, and supplementary 'premium' services.*

*Digital devices that can bypass advertising increase pressure to embed product references in on-air and online content. Public broadcasting must set strong standards against such commercial 'creep,' making itself distinctive not only for uninterrupted content, but for uninfluenced content.*

*The content development and re-branding necessary for PBS Kids to reach older youth will require substantial increase in financial commitment. Ready to Learn funds can underpin young children's content, but this doesn't reduce the need for growing National Program Service support. Public broadcasting needs to advocate vigorously for a 'second generation' of federal funding based on coherent, innovative strategies for endowing the communications infrastructure (built by government investment) with wide-ranging multi-platform content that will pay long-term dividends in education, civil society and a capable workforce.*

**Public service media organizations are the hub of a wide-ranging network of partnerships. They use local, national and international alliances to welcome and prepare children as citizens of their communities, nation and world.**

The ability to navigate in a diverse "global village" will be a key skill for 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens. Public broadcasting -- locally owned and operated, but with strong national content and a coherent array of community, national and international partners -- is uniquely suited to help children explore and expand their world in developmentally-appropriate ways.

*Local presence is public broadcasting's defining distinction. Licensees will increasingly become digital hubs for extended community information, resource and action network. Doing so depends on long-term strategic partnerships with a limited number of organizations, rather than sequential ad hoc alliances that serve short-term or single-program purposes.*

*Public broadcasting's national content must examine, explore and reinforce – not simply reflect – American diversity. Currently, PBS Kids is heavily weighted toward animated fiction. It will be difficult to present themes of cultural diversity with sufficient depth and context without additional live-action and non-fiction content. Achieving genuine diversity of perspectives and voices demands also that PBS Kids engage a broader range of American producers.*

*Post-September 11 research for PBS by its advertising agency stated it clearly: globalism is now a forced perspective. Yet, almost no US television programming explores or contrasts how young people live elsewhere in the world. Public service media can distinguish itself by creating regular and ongoing on-air and online vehicles for presenting world cultures. A focus on world youth and popular culture, in particular, could be an attractive means for extending the age range of PBS audiences. Digital media offer special opportunities to facilitate exploration by older children across borders and cultures.*

### **Public service media take creative content and programming risks.**

Because they are accountable to community needs, not investors or shareholders, public broadcasters have the unique opportunity – if not obligation – to defy common wisdom and test new boundaries of technology and content, in the service of their mission. Risk-taking may entail presentation of ‘challenging’ topics or themes, innovation in format or genre, development of timely or culturally-bound content with limited shelf life or potential for return on investment, or appeal to a narrow but highly engaged audience.

*PBS Kids needs greater genre diversity. It is impossible to imagine PBS prime time without live action drama, without news or current affairs, without examination of American, world and popular cultures. Yet, these are major gaps in the PBS Kids lineup.*

*Even as it offers a ‘safe haven’ for young children, only public service media are likely to take on challenging themes or ideas important to older youth. For parents, teachers and caregivers to have confidence that risk-taking offerings will be thorough, thoughtful and fair, all public broadcasting children’s services must be appropriate, trustworthy and never trivial.*

### **Public service media employ multiple measures of success.**

Traditional audience measures – ratings, demographics, web site “hits” – are important to public broadcasters as indicators of effectiveness in reading and responding to the public interest. Public service media apply other measure of success, as well, including social capital indicators, educational benchmarks and signs of deep engagement by the public.

*Every offering from PBS Kids deserves specially-tailored goals. Setting these multifaceted measures should be an essential part of the negotiation process for development, acquisition or acceptance of any work, and evaluation using these goals central to renewal or rescheduling.*

*With its member stations and community/national partners, PBS Kids should develop replicable systems for gathering quantitative and qualitative data toward gauging success. These might include a combination of social capital indicators like participation in community partnerships or membership growth; educational benchmarks including adoption of materials by schools and caregivers; business measures like returns from related merchandise or continuation of projects beyond the R&D phase; or signs of deep engagement such as time spent online or audience submissions.*

*Independent peer review would bring fresh eyes to assessing consistency and quality. PBS Kids should consider a children's media advisory committee of producers, advocates, researchers, journalists, artists, authors, teachers and others.*

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