

Rx FOR PUBLIC TELEVISION

Reprinted from the 1972/3 Annual Report
of The John & Mary R. Markle Foundation

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R_x FOR PUBLIC TELEVISION

It is hardly necessary to say that public television is in crisis. Public television has been in crisis ever since it first started as educational television. Troubled by insufficient financing, lack of attention to its potentialities, and few operating stations, educational television limped through the 1950s into the 1960s. Then, helped by the continued infusion of Ford Foundation funds, increased public support and the growth and spread of all television broadcasting, public television began to assume real importance. The biggest boost at this period came from the investigation and subsequent report of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television.¹ In spite of all this, public television continued to be plagued by its heritage and by new disputes that developed within its ranks.

The purpose of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television was to examine the financial base of educational television and recommend remedies for insufficient financing. Although several of the Commission's recommendations including the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have been carried out, the recommendations concerning financing have not been followed. Thus today, as before, public television is in a continuing financial squeeze.

In addition to financial difficulties, public television is also faced with internal disputes. Some would prefer more centralized control of programming while others believe that programming decisions should be made at the local or station level. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Public Broadcasting Service are in the process of defining their respective roles, and it may be expected that this process will continue for some time. There also have been ideological disputes within the public television ranks concerning the alleged control of public affairs programs by liberal-oriented producers and directors. Finally, there has been a running battle between

¹Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action*, Harper and Row, 1967.

the adherents of public television and some spokesmen of the Nixon Administration over the proper role of public broadcasting.

All of these internal disputes are exacerbated by the lack of sufficient funds. While it is true that more money would reduce or eliminate many of these frictions, it is not necessarily true that more money alone would enable public television to attract a larger audience.

The potential audience for public television—those people who can receive a clear signal from their public television station—is smaller than the commercial broadcast audience of sixty million homes. The potential public television audience is smaller because some viewers are not within range of a public television station. Others are in areas served by UHF public television and own sets which are not equipped for UHF reception or receive the UHF signal poorly. Typical estimates of the true potential audience for public television range between 50% and 60% of American homes, which equals thirty to thirty-six million homes or over one hundred million people.

Taking the smaller potential audience of public television into account, the distressing fact remains that few people in the United States who are able to receive a public television station are frequent viewers of that station. Robert Bower, a sociologist who conducted a recent survey of the audience for commercial and public television, was able to say in *Television and the Public*: "ETV has not seriously altered the over-all viewing patterns even of the college educated." If public television had won a large, fanatically loyal audience, then it would be incomparably easier to justify increased financing. The rather lonely ranks of public television advocates would then be filled by people who were regularly utilizing this public service. So far public television has not won a large, fanatically loyal audience, and few plans have been suggested to show how such an audience might be gained.

DOES PUBLIC TELEVISION NEED AN AUDIENCE?

Although it seems frivolous to ask this question, an argument can, in fact, be made that public television should exist and be adequately financed

regardless of the size of the audience. Indeed, there are times when proponents of public television have seemed to advance this idea.

One side to this argument is that public television should exist primarily in order to provide flexible standby television facilities to be used when needed. There are, for example, instances when events of great public importance are occurring but are not presented by the networks at times of the day convenient for a majority of the population. Public television can provide coverage as in its replay of the Senate Watergate hearings in prime time. The standby facilities of public television can also be used for other types of programming that are deemed socially valuable or for events that should be covered but are not or cannot be broadcast commercially.

Looked at in this way, public television is the luxury in the American broadcasting system. However, there is little evidence that society is ready to support such a luxury at this time. The networks and independent stations clear time for events they believe to be of overwhelming national importance as in the broadcast of the Kennedy funeral, presidential speeches, and the Watergate hearings. There are very few instances when such events were not adequately covered in one way or another by the commercial broadcasting system. The coverage might not have been as extensive or at the time of day that the newscaster or public affairs expert would like, but in most cases it did bring the essential character of the events to public attention. The costs of public television would appear to be exorbitant if both capital and operating costs were to be justified solely by the times when the system was being used for events of national significance not adequately covered by the commercial system. If unlimited funds for broadcasting were available, it might be reasonable to look at public television as a standby luxury. Today this is an untenable view when many public priorities are underfinanced. Financing is unlikely ever to be so plentiful as to make such a luxury view of public television reasonable.

There is another side to the argument that public television does not need to concern itself with the existence of a large audience. Some feel that there should be a noncommercial outlet for talent as well as a place where people can air unpopular

¹Bower, Robert T., *Television and the Public*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973.

views. These claims have merit. The national system of commercial broadcasting has tended to diminish the importance of the outlets for local talent that at one time existed in small clubs, theaters, and places where people went simply to be entertained by whatever talent was available. Public television could replace those outlets by providing a vehicle for talent to develop away from the tremendous exposure and harsh spotlight of commercial television. This reasoning may make sense, but the public now has such a high national standard of talent appearing nightly that it isn't interested in watching performances of lesser professional quality.

It is also apparent that many people today feel that they cannot reach society with their ideas. Public television could remedy this by enabling people of diverse views to have an access to broadcasting that is apparently not now available.

While neither of these proposals depends directly upon a large audience for public television, they both suggest the need for some audience. Talent requires recognition. An unpopular view will merely be unknown if it is not heard. Regardless of the merits of the argument, there is little evidence that the public will support public television for these purposes alone.

PUBLIC TELEVISION AND ITS AUDIENCE

After examining alternative arguments and on the basis of simple common sense, it seems that public television can be justified only on the basis of serving an audience. The questions are: Where is the audience for public television? How should public television go about acquiring its audience? One way for public television to attempt to acquire an audience is to compete with commercial broadcasting and the networks for a share of the mass audience. Although public television was not created to do this, competing for a share of that mass audience is exactly what public television has done and does do much of the time. Unfortunately, it does not do this very successfully.

The viewing audience for television in the United States tends to be divided approximately equally among the three networks. If public television were to attempt to gain a proportionate share of the mass audience, it would need to present much

the same fare that is currently on commercial television. There are several lines of evidence which support this conclusion.

The experience of the commercial stations shows that any great deviation from the normal diet of programs tends to lose audience for that station at that time period. Through long experience the networks seem to have found what the public wants to see during prime time. A special documentary program or a program of topical interest that deviates from the regular schedule will almost always attract a lower share of audience (as measured by the Nielsen and Arbitron polls) than that normally obtained by the network at that time. In cities in which there are independent television stations as well as network affiliates, the successful independent succeeds by providing programming like that on the networks.

A survey conducted by Gary A. Steiner¹ in 1960 showed that viewers who wanted a greater variety of programs tended to want them in the already popular categories—action programs, comedy and variety programs, the assorted panels, game shows, and melodrama—that make up the typical fare of commercial television. When this survey was repeated in 1970² people were spending more time watching television than in 1960 and reported a more favorable assessment of the programs they saw. Only a small fraction of the additional six hours per week the average family watched television in 1970 can be accounted for by public television. The tentative experience of pay television also shows that people are most willing to pay for the same kinds of programs they already receive on commercial television.

There is no evidence whatsoever that public television could gain a proportionate share of the mass audience unless it produced the same kind of programming already available on commercial television. Of course, public television programming would not have commercials, and it would be produced somewhat differently. However, if public television were to take this road, its fare would necessarily consist largely of light entertainment, action, and variety programs. In competing for the mass audience, the cost to public television would be similar to the networks' costs under present conditions.

¹Steiner, Gary A., *The People Look at Television. A Study of Audience Attitudes*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.

²Bower, Robert. Op. cit.

Some proponents of public television believe, or at least have seemed to believe, that public broadcasting should attempt to obtain a share of the mass television audience and become a standard-setter for commercial television. In Great Britain, the government-funded British Broadcasting Company competes very successfully for a share of the mass audience. It does so by presenting a wide variety of programming, including much in the light entertainment categories. There is evidence to suggest that this would be a viable course for public television in the United States. According to the available surveys and rating systems, the public favors more choice within the present range of program categories. Thus, on the basis of what the public seems to be willing to pay for and what the public says it wants, public television might try to be a "fourth network."

Ranked against these arguments, however, are strong reasons why public broadcasting is unlikely to become a "fourth network." First, direct competition between a publicly-oriented broadcasting organization and the commercial broadcasting system is simply not in the tradition of private enterprise in the United States. It would be vigorously resisted by commercial broadcasters as well as many others who would consider such competition plainly wrong. More important, perhaps, is the fact that this is not the role that Congress or the Federal Communications Commission envisaged for public broadcasting. It is not the concept that has been used to justify public television to the American people.

The rules and regulations of the Federal Communications Commission covering the licensing of educational television stations state: "Non-commercial educational broadcast stations will be licensed only to non-profit educational organizations upon showing that the proposed stations will be used primarily to serve the educational needs of the community for the advancement of educational programs and to furnish a non-profit and non-commercial television broadcast service." While non-commercial public broadcasting stations may transmit educational, cultural, and entertainment programs, there is nothing in the FCC rules and regulations that would suggest direct competition with commercial broadcasting for a proportionate share of the mass audience. Similarly, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television stated that public television "includes

all that is of human interest and importance, which is not at the moment appropriate or available for support by advertising and which is not arranged for formal instruction."

THE SPECIAL INTEREST AUDIENCE

If public broadcasting must be justified on the basis of serving an audience yet can't compete with commercial television for a share of the mass audience, public television must then attract its primary audience by presenting material aimed at subgroups of the population that share special interests. In fact, this direction for public television has already been proclaimed, even though the record of success is mediocre. Aside from a very few programs such as "Sesame Street," there has been little attempt to define specific audiences, discover material that satisfies specific interests, and present that material in highly attractive formats. The relatively few shows aimed at special interests—such as in painting or gardening—were produced without any thorough audience assessment and usually on low budgets. Where relative success has come—as with Julia Child's "French Chef"—it is a tribute to the flair of the performer.

Again excluding the success of "Sesame Street," the audiences for public television programs have been extremely small by normal broadcasting standards, and they have not been growing rapidly. The average weekly audience in prime time of the most popular public television programs between 1970 and 1972 was approximately 1,000,000 television households, or 3% of the audience reached by public television stations. This is a tiny fraction when compared to the audience share of a low-rated commercial network program—one that could not be sustained by the network—which may reach 10% of the broadcast public, or 6,000,000 television households. Further, these average weekly public television audiences have not changed substantially in this three-year period. Although public broadcasting now reaches more American people than ever before, by any normal standard of commercial broadcasting in the United States the total audience is extremely small.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOCALISM

Much of the difficulty in finding an audience can be assigned to the fact that public television is still pursuing an uncertain philosophy. This is, perhaps, to be expected. In the early years of any

evolving system its philosophy is likely to undergo changes and be subject to the uncertainties of development. Historically the philosophy of public television in the United States has evolved from educational broadcasting and the concept of localism—the idea that a public television station should be a servant of its community and provide programming designed to serve that community. On the surface the localism concept seems entirely meritorious. However, it suggests that geographical interests unite and motivate television audiences so that locally produced programming can therefore be the staple of public television. This is *not* the practice of public television, yet this philosophy persists and is stated and restated.⁷

The Carnegie Commission Report says, for example: "Committed to diversity and to the differentiated audience, public television is deeply reliant upon the vigor of its local stations. Admittedly, like commercial television, it must have central sources of programming, but unlike commercial television, it will depend also upon a strong component of local and regional programming, and it must provide the opportunity and the means for local choice to be exercised upon the program made available from central programming sources." Similarly, Hartford Gunn,⁸ President of the Public Broadcasting Service, in his plan for public television program financing states, "The single most important attribute of the approach suggested is that it would maximize financial and program decision-making at the point closest to the individual communities and their citizens, namely the local public television station..." Presley D. Holmes,⁹ of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, in his presentation of a financial plan for public broadcasting, makes much the same point when he says, "Both the decisions on national programming and the day-to-day mechanics in operational responsibility of program acquisition, production, promotion, publicity, and distribution can and should be in the hands of the stations and an operational agency responsible to the stations." Finally, Wilbur

Schramm and Lyle Nelson³ of Stanford University, in their report on the financing of public television, reiterate the point: "The primary objective of non-commercial television, in its truest form, is to cater to *all* of the audience...*some* of the time... This obviously requires special concern for *local* audiences and local programming needs."

The idea of localism, or local control over broadcasting, is rooted deeply in the history of radio and television in the United States. Roger Noll, Merton Peck, and John J. McGowan,⁴ economists at the Brookings Institution, in their study of the economic aspects of television regulation, show how the Federal Communications Commission's vision of broadcasting developed and reached maturity on the basis of a special view of a local television station. The FCC sought a broadcasting system in which there would be a local television station in as many communities as possible. These stations were to be instruments for community development, education, and enlightenment, and would serve much as the small town newspaper of the preceding century.

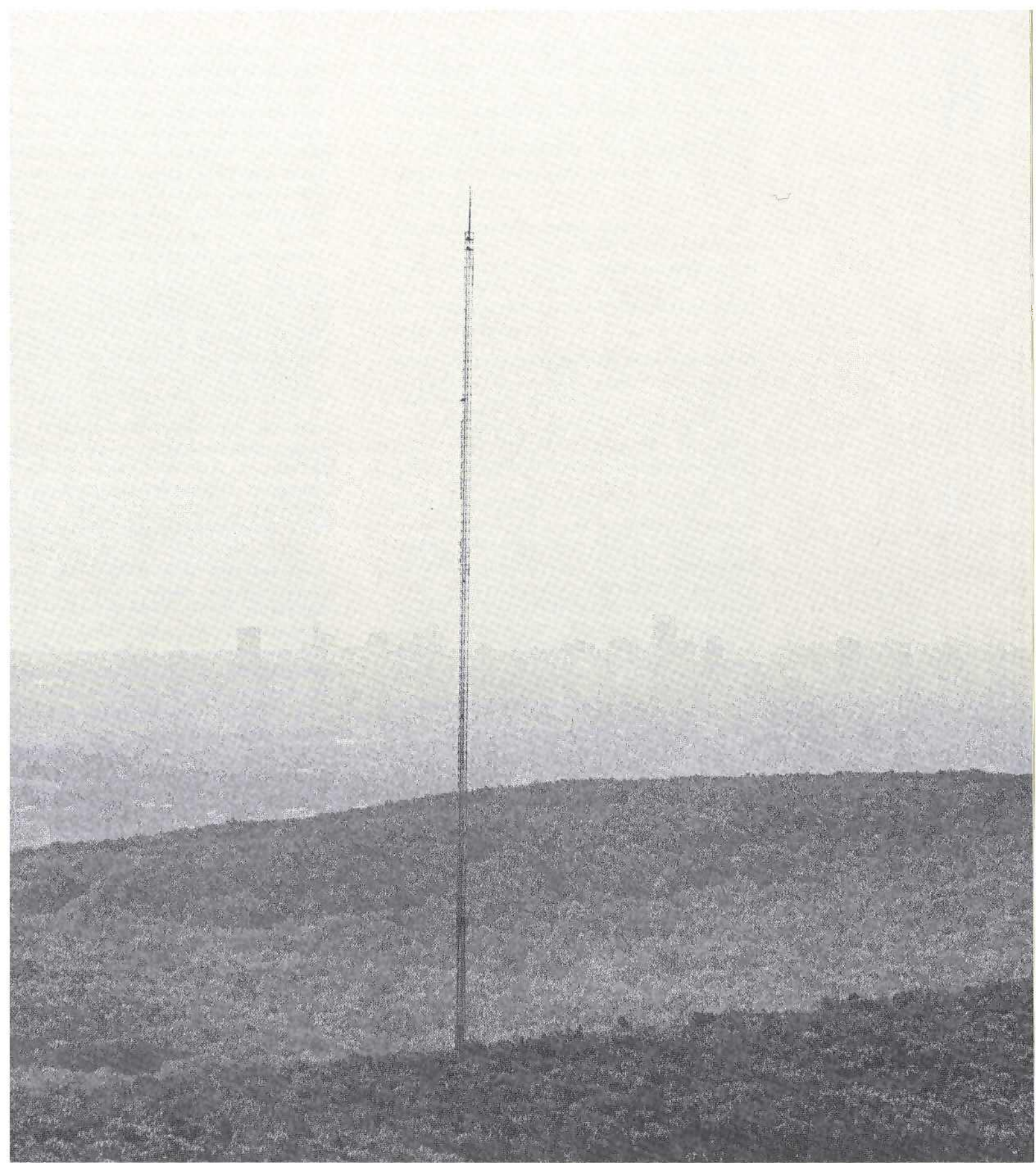
The localism philosophy in television naturally derived from an earlier localism doctrine in the granting of radio licenses. It was more strongly developed in the television broadcasting system in the United States. In resolving the issue of regional stations and national networks, the Federal Communications Commission said in its Sixth Report and Order, "In the Commission's view, as many communities as possible should have the opportunity of enjoying the advantages that derive from having local outlets that will be responsive to local needs." FCC Commissioners Kenneth Cox and Nicholas Johnson, in a study of broadcasting in Oklahoma, stated the objectives of the Federal Communications Commission as follows: "Congress created the present scheme in order to promote specific policies in specific kinds of programs. The system of locally based stations was deemed necessary to ensure that broadcasting would be attentive to the specific needs and interests of each local community. It was also consid-

⁷Gunn, Hartford N., Jr., "Public Television Program Financing," *Educational Broadcasting Review* VI, 5, October 1972, 223-308.

⁸Holmes, Presley D., "Public Broadcasting Development—The Next Step," *Educational Broadcasting Review*, VI, 6, December 1972, 423-433.

³Schramm, Wilbur and Nelson, Lyle, *The Financing of Public Television*, Aspen Program on Communications and Society, 1972.

⁴Noll, Roger G., Peck, Merton J., and McGowan, John J., *Economic Aspects of Television Regulation*, Brookings Institution, 1973.



ered a guarantee to local groups and leaders that they would have adequate opportunity for expression. Ultimately, our broadcasting system is premised on concern that the very identity of local states and cities might be destroyed by a mass communications system with an exclusively national focus." The Carnegie Commission on Public Television appears to have based its case for public television on this Federal Communications Commission view. For example, The Carnegie Commission says: "Educational television is to be constructed on the firm foundation of strong and energetic local stations. The heart of the system is to be in the community. Initiative will lie there. The overwhelming proportion of programs will be produced in the stations, scheduling will be performed by the local station and staff, local skills and crafts will be utilized and local talents tapped."

Although the philosophy of localism in public broadcasting has long roots and is reiterated frequently, the practice of public broadcasting has been quite different. Schramm and Nelson show, for example, that between 1962 and 1970 the number of broadcast hours over public television rose steadily. During this same period, however, the hours and proportion of local programming fell steadily. Despite the philosophy of localism, the fact is that for one reason or another during the decade of the 60s, public television stations came to depend more and more on nationally produced programming and less and less on locally produced programming. The models for the financing of public television presented by Hartford Gunn, Presley Holmes, and Wilbur Schramm and Lyle Nelson all take this into account. In the Schramm and Nelson model only six hours out of the total of twenty-eight hours per week of prime time are designated for local and regional programming. Thus, the facts of public television broadcasting differ from the philosophy on which public broadcasting is based.

Although local programming will continue to be an important part of public television, it is not and cannot be the basis for public television in the United States for two primary and overriding reasons. First, viewer preferences are almost inevitably for national programming. Second, broadcasting costs make it much more efficient to produce high quality national programming than to produce high quality local programming. These two factors hold whether one looks at the history of commercial broadcasting or whether

one looks at public broadcasting. The experience of commercial television stations shows that audiences overwhelmingly opt for highly professional talent and highly professional production methods when they have a choice between national programming utilizing those ingredients and local programming that must draw upon smaller pools of talent and smaller budgets. The only major exceptions are local news, weather and sports programs. These programs can be produced cheaply and are popular for some stations.

Although public broadcasting is not supported by advertising and therefore does not share all of the economic characteristics of commercial broadcasting, the same viewer preferences and cost factors hold true. As in commercial broadcasting, it is much more efficient and economical to produce a high quality show for national production and distribution than to produce a high quality local show. A single station that might be able to afford \$1,000 for an hour's production can, when combined with many stations, afford a \$50,000 show. That show is almost certain to be preferred by viewers to the \$1,000 show that one station could afford.

This analysis shows that public television is unlikely to attract a large audience if it depends primarily upon locally produced materials directed at individual communities. This does not mean that localism does not have a place in public broadcasting. It simply means that the philosophy of localism cannot serve as the basis for audience attraction in public television.

MOTIVATION FOR VIEWING

Based on the experiences of both commercial and public television, the primary audience motivation for watching television is the desire to be entertained. The desire to know what is going on in the world and the desire to learn are much weaker motivations for viewing. The shows that attract the largest audiences in prime time television are usually light entertainment including melodramas. Some sizable audiences are attracted by the news and information show or the special documentary that informs about a particular topic. Further down the list are programs that attempt to teach the audience. These are consistently less attractive than the other types of programs unless they include important elements of entertainment and information as well as pedagogy, as, for example, "The National Driver's Test."

People who watch a specific television show do so with their free time. There are many other things that compete for the use of that time—first of all other television shows, then possibly books, music, movies, exercise, extra work, or household chores. If a television program is to be watched, it must command the viewer's interest more than the competing options.

The most important questions that public television can ask are: (1) What audience interests can be capitalized upon to draw significant numbers of viewers to public television programs? (2) How can these interests be characterized? (3) What determines these interests?

Where a person lives may have some influence on his interests, but as we have seen, this influence is likely to be small. People who live in Chicago are not very different in their viewing interests from those in New York, Miami, or Seattle. Geography is not a very good descriptor of audience interests. More important factors include the traditional sociological attributes of age, sex, occupation, ethnicity, income level, and education. Countless numbers of sociological studies have shown these and similar characteristics to be determining factors in explaining a person's interests and attitudes. As a result, specific interests influenced by these general characteristics—such as interest in sports, in drama, or in children—are much more likely to create an audience for television than is geography.

FINDING AN AUDIENCE

Since public television ought not to compete with commercial television for the mass audience and cannot do so successfully, and since it cannot attract a sizable audience with locally produced and locally oriented programming, it must find its audience by appealing to special interests and special tastes. To do this successfully public television must have leadership and inspiration based on a sound understanding of special audience interests and tastes. Also needed are criteria for determining which interests and which tastes are to be satisfied first. Finally, a measure for judging the degree of success in satisfying those interests and tastes is needed. Together, these elements provide a new prescription for public television—a procedure by which public television may be able to find its audience and begin to achieve its potential.

By experience as well as trial and error, commercial broadcasting has developed programs to ap-

peal to the mass audience. The economics of commercial television, dependent upon advertising revenue, dictated a simple criterion for choosing programs—the largest number of people possible should be satisfied. Several rating systems were devised to indicate how many people watch commercial television. Using samples composed of a cross section of households, these ratings show which programs please and interest the most people. Those that are successful (defined currently as programs attracting approximately 17% of the total audience) are retained; those that achieve lower ratings are dropped. To the extent that the rating systems accurately measure public preferences, commercial television is an honest system. It attempts to satisfy the majority of the audience; it has techniques for measuring the degree of success it achieves; those measures are used ruthlessly to weed out programs that are not up to the rating par.

Public television faces a more complicated task: how to measure the appeal to special audiences and special interests. Commercial broadcasting's simple methods for defining audience interest, for determining which interest should be initially satisfied, and for measuring the degree of success cannot be directly applied to the problems of public television. Nevertheless, the procedures public television devises will have similar objectives. First, public television will need to define the size and strength of special audience interests. Talented producers and television executives already do this on the basis of experience and intuition. There is, however, a great deal of evidence available that could be used along with experience and intuition to provide a sound basis for the development of public television programs.

A REPORT ON AUDIENCE INTERESTS

What the industry needs is a systematic report on the special interests of Americans. This report should be periodically updated so that a body of information is available to the television executive or producer when he begins to determine that portion of the audience to which he wishes to appeal. Program ideas will not spring automatically from the report; television executives will still have to call upon their full creative potential to choose target audiences and to develop program ideas. In this way there will be a foundation on which creativity can build.

No one can simply ask people what they are interested in and expect an accurate guide to special interest audiences. Interests are related to what is available. In the absence of experience, a person tends not to know his own interests. Also, there is often a discrepancy between what people *say* they are interested in and what they actually *do* with their time. Thus while any report on audience interests should utilize direct questioning, it must also utilize other sources of information to try and portray the size, strength, and diversity of special interest audiences. One basis for the report on audience interests should be the experiences of commercial and public television. The experience of commercial television is particularly valuable in defining or beginning to define the *size* of some potential special interests. Unfortunately, commercial television experience provides very little information on the *strength* of those audience interests. Since the audience does not have to pay for commercial television programs, there is no way for it to register effectively the strength of its interest in any individual program. A second source for the report on audience interests will be the mass of surveys conducted by commercial and non-profit polling organizations. Over the years these surveys have included many questions that can be used to define both the strength and size of special interest audiences. A third source may be studies of voter behavior and the factors that tend to determine voting outcomes in local and national elections. Examination of these studies may show enduring themes that motivate voting decisions—themes that are indicative of compelling interests.

In the 1960 presidential election a number of social scientists were brought together to collate the information from past elections and surveys in a form that could be used to determine which issues were of paramount interest to particular segments of the voting population. The resulting model of voting behavior was quite accurate. This Kennedy campaign model cannot be transferred directly to the problem of defining special interest audiences for television, but some of the techniques can be utilized.

The initial cost of a periodic report on audience interests would be high—perhaps on the order of half a million dollars. The periodic updating of the report, however, would be considerably less costly. These updating costs have to be considered

against the probable gains from having such a report available. A report on special interests should greatly reduce the number of public television programs that are designed for audiences that actually do not exist or for audiences that are not sufficiently interested in the subject to turn on a public television program. Thus, although the initial cost of this report would be high, it would reduce overall production costs by reducing expensive programming failures. Some of the research sponsored by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is already headed in this direction.

Having a systematic report of audience interests available will not completely solve the problem of what programs should be produced by public broadcasting. In all probability there are many special interest audiences of considerable size and strength. The choice of which of these audiences to serve with a program will depend on value judgments as to the social importance of the program as well as broadcasting judgments as to which subjects can best be treated by television. Choices must also be made between serving an audience of substantial size but which has only average interest in a subject and serving a smaller audience which is highly interested. Again, value judgments as well as broadcasting judgments will enter the picture. Successful choices in the design and development of programs will depend, as they always have, on the experience, talent, imagination, and intelligence of the people involved in production. A report on special interests would, however, inform that talent, experience, imagination, and intelligence so that choices might be made on a more rational basis than in the past.

In contrast to what one might think, special interest audiences are not necessarily small. Some evidence is available which shows that at least some of the special interest audiences for public television are likely to be on the order of 10% of the total broadcast public, or between six and seven million American homes. One example would be the American Broadcasting Company's "Stage 67," a program aimed at those interested in serious drama. On a commercial network this special interest program attracted about 10% of the potential audience. This example, as well as others, suggests that reaching 10% of the people who receive public television stations on a regular basis should be the goal of many programs. By commercial television standards these audiences would be

insufficient to justify the continuation of a prime-time program. By public television standards, however, these audiences are many times the size of those that are currently reached.

Under the system suggested here, the production of most public television programs would begin with the definition of a specific audience plus the definition of a specific job to be attempted for that audience—entertainment, information, or instruction, or some combination of the three.

A RATING SYSTEM FOR PUBLIC TELEVISION

The final element in the system being proposed for public broadcasting is the design and operation of a rating system that can be used to measure how successfully individual programs attract and satisfy their particular audiences. By the analysis being used here, public television ought to be just as interested in attracting its special audiences as commercial television is in getting the mass audience. The difference is that a rating system for public television should be created to measure special interest audiences. For example, if a program were designed to reach those people seriously interested in tennis, and it were known that about 10% of the broadcast public fit this definition, then the rating used for that program should be based on the number of serious tennis lovers attracted.

Without a rating system of this type, there is no way for public television to judge the degree of its effectiveness. In this sense, public television should be just as ruthless as is commercial broadcasting in judging its success. If a program is designed to reach a special interest audience and fails to do so, or if it fails to reach as large a percentage of that audience as the typical public television program, or fails to satisfy the people it does reach to the degree that public television programs normally do, the program should be dropped or revised so that it will meet normal standards of success. Without a way of judging successes or failures, public television cannot improve its programs or weed out the unsuccessful ones. Given an appropriately tailored rating system, public television will have a way to justify its work and thereby the public investment of money.

Until an appropriate rating system is developed, it will be difficult to spell out precise goals for successful public programs. But again, on the basis of commercial experience coupled with the limited

experience of a public program such as "Sesame Street" (which was designed for a special interest audience), it might be argued that a public program should attempt to reach at least 50% of its potential audience. Experience may modify this standard, either upward or downward, but this suggests a goal towards which public television might initially strive.

A rating system for public television will be a costly operation. It is difficult to estimate in advance how costly it might be, but something on the order of \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 per year would not be surprising. Ratings for public television need not be nearly as frequent as those used for commercial broadcasting. The goal is not to get an overnight rating of a show so another show can replace it but to judge whether or not a public television program is meeting its objectives over the course of a season. This might mean that the ratings could be on a monthly, quarterly, or even less frequent basis. At the least, they would have to be done annually. The cost would be high because it will be difficult to develop a survey technique that identifies correctly special interest audiences and polls them reliably.

INCENTIVES FOR GOOD PROGRAMMING

Public broadcasting currently has few incentives for producing improved programming. Producers, directors, and writers try to meet professional standards (enjoying the accolades of their peers and critics) but tangible rewards for better programs are rare. In part, this is because there is no agreement on what constitutes a better program. With a proper rating system it would be possible to define a better program as one that reaches more of the audience for which it is designed and/or which satisfies that audience in greater degree. With a rating system public broadcasting can introduce rewards for better production into its system.

One possibility that seems entirely natural—and long called for—in public broadcasting is a financial award or fee to be added to the cost of program production. Organizations or stations which produce successful programs could receive fees depending upon their degree of success. Perhaps a standard fee of, for example, 2% might be given to any production organization in addition to the costs of production and normal overhead. The organization might receive additional fees

of up to 5% of the total budget depending on the proportion of the audience that is attracted or success in meeting other objectives.

A system of fees, while entirely foreign to the public broadcasting field, is normal in many other areas of enterprise—both public and private, commercial and non-profit. The inclusion of a fee would give producing organizations some flexibility in developing new programs, in improving facilities, or for other uses. This ought to serve as an incentive for the production of better programs.

THE COST OF SPECIAL INTEREST PROGRAMMING

Judging by present operating budgets, the average hourly cost of developing quality, special interest programming will be high—probably a minimum of \$100,000 per hour, and perhaps higher. Can these costs be justified when they are not amortized over as large an audience as that reached by commercial broadcasting? The answer here depends upon the degree of success that public television has in satisfying its audience. If enough special interest audiences are defined so that when they are added together public television programming reaches most of the American public with an assortment of programs designed for diverse special interests, then public television will be serving its audiences in ways that commercial television does not, and cannot.

Experience with commercial broadcasting and experiments with subscription television show that the public is willing to pay for programs that meet its interests. Even though the per-hour costs of public television will not be low, they will still be relatively insignificant when spread over the sizes of audiences being considered here. Although only a fraction of the total program hours of public television would meet the interests of any individual, in aggregate the programming would meet the interests of a majority. In this way a large and loyal audience for public television might be formed.

Such an audience would immediately transform a sick industry into a healthy one. Public support for public television could be expected to be translated into Congressional support, and the amount of money available for developing public television programming would be expected to increase severalfold. The costs of operating pub-

lic television would not be greatly different from the costs of operating a commercial network, but the money would be spent quite differently.

ADDITIONAL FORMS OF PROGRAMMING

Given a large, loyal audience and sufficient funds, public television could then produce and broadcast certain other kinds of programming in addition to what would be the staple fare of the system—special-interest audience programming. Other types of programming could include experimental programming, talent promotion programming, and local programming.

Experimental programming is important for the improvement of television. Experiments, however, are certain to involve failures, and it is unlikely that experimental programming can be expected to command much of an audience. The cost of experimental programming can be regarded as a research and development expense for public broadcasting. It is an important investment for indicating new directions, but one that can be made only when both the audience and economic base of public television are more secure than at present.

One of the major complaints about commercial broadcasting is that creative people do not have the opportunity to try new directions and to express ideas in their own ways through the broadcast medium. Many people from commercial television have turned to public television for exactly this purpose. It is important that public television continue to serve this purpose by providing an outlet for creative talent—actors, dancers, musicians, composers, writers, directors and producers. Again it will be much easier for public television to support this type of programming when its audience and economic base are secure.

Finally, the development of a large, loyal audience will make it possible for public television to include local programming aimed at individual communities. While the above analysis shows that local programming cannot be the basis for securing a large audience for public television, local audiences do have legitimate interests that can be met by public television, and these interests should be served.

REACHING THE SPECIAL AUDIENCE

Once special interest programming becomes the staple of public broadcasting, there will be some

important implications for the entire broadcast operation. Under this scheme most of the programs broadcast would be designed for particular special interests—tennis, money management, serious drama. There will be little reason to expect that one individual will have all or even many of these interests. It will be much more likely that an individual will find only an occasional program on public broadcasting which he or she wants to watch.

Public broadcasting stations will certainly attempt to schedule programs at times when most interested individuals can see them, but the audience in a given evening is likely to change radically in composition from one program to the next. If a program for serious music lovers is on from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m., it is unlikely that that audience will wish to continue watching when the station then switches to a program on business administration from 8:30 to 9:00. Because of this varied schedule, public television will tend to lose one of the important assets of commercial broadcasting—channel loyalty. People will not turn on their public television channel expecting to watch for several hours in the evening. Rather, the audiences developed for public television are likely to be much more selective, tuning in only when programs meeting their own interests are being shown. Public television will, therefore, have a greater need than commercial television to let its audience know when a program of particular interest is going to appear.

To reach and attract special audiences public television will have to promote programs heavily. Advertising in other media, on television and on radio, will become much more important. In the current development of public television, advertising has been used only to a minimal degree and, for the most part, it has not been used in very inventive ways. If in the future a program for serious music lovers is developed for public television, it should be advertised not only in the general interest publications and newspapers, but it should be advertised in those publications and in other ways that reach the music lovers directly—magazines written for music lovers, the program guides to symphony concerts and operas, and on FM radio concerts.

Advertising costs should be considered a regular part of all public television budgets. Perhaps 10% to 20% or more of the program budget for an indi-

vidual show should be set aside for promotion. Reaching the special interest audience for which each show is intended will be difficult. It will take ingenuity in the expenditure of funds, as well as a consistent advertising program, if the proper public television audience is to be successfully alerted.

A second requirement for attracting an audience to public television is that programs be on regularly—with a frequency of at least once a week—in order for people to develop the habit of tuning in. If a program on money management is developed, people need to know that every Tuesday at 9:00 p.m. they can turn on their public television channel and watch the program.

ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS

The answer to the question, "Does public television need an audience?" is simple. The answer is an overwhelming "yes." Without a large, loyal audience public television will continue to flounder in the trickle of funds it has so far received. Moreover, it will continue to be fraught with ideological and political controversy. On the other hand, a plan to develop a large and devoted audience will at least give public television a consistent vision of its future. To the extent that this audience is attracted and satisfied, public television will emerge from its period of inadequate financing and internal strife.

The prescription for successful future public television has three requirements:

1. The first requirement is that public television release its hold on the myth of localism. Local broadcasting is important and will continue to be important; however, the experiences of both commercial and public television indicate that local broadcasting can never win a large, loyal audience for public television. Audience preferences and economics both require that public television depend largely upon nationally produced programming. The myth of localism may have some political importance for public television, and it certainly gives the local station manager a rationale for what he is doing. The retention of this myth is likely to do more harm than good. Continuing to cling to it can only divert public television from realizing its essential purpose in serving special interest audiences. Without this clarification it is extremely unlikely that public television can begin to reach its full potential.

2. The second requirement is the development of a method to define special interest audiences and then to determine how well those interests are being met. What is proposed is an annual report on the special interests of audiences that might be served by public broadcasting combined with a rating system to determine the degree of success individual programs have in meeting the interests of those audiences. Developing these techniques will be expensive and will also demand a large investment of intellectual effort. This system, however, will show public television the way to improve itself and it will show the American public how well public television is succeeding in its mission. Public television must be at least as honest in its self-criticism as commercial broadcasting. The commercial rating systems give commercial broadcasting a relentless way of weeding out programs that are not up to standard in the current commercial context. Public broadcasting needs a similar system designed and constructively applied for its own purposes.

3. The final requirement for public broadcasting is the development of an incentive system for stations and production companies to create programs that meet the needs of public broadcasting. In the long run, it is not enough for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting merely to pay the costs for program production. Successful programming that meets the interests of large audiences should be rewarded. Payment of a fee, over and above production costs, and based on the success of the program, is an entirely appropriate way for public broadcasting to continue in a non-profit framework and yet build in an incentive for the improvement of its product.

Ingredients of this prescription are already at work in public broadcasting, but these ingredients need to be pulled together to give public broadcasting a consistent and coherent philosophy. Then public broadcasting must remain steadfast in pursuing that philosophy until it wins the audience it needs by satisfying special interests with high quality programming.

