A New Role for Public Broadcasting?

Howard Husock

By any number of standards, American journalism is in trouble. The Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project has reported that the newspaper industry has lost over half of its advertising revenue since 2006—dropping from $50 billion to $22 billion. As a result, news-gathering capacity has declined. The American Society of News Editors reports that, between 2003 and 2012, staffing in newsrooms fell by fully 16,000, even as newspapers cut back their publication schedules and mounted paywalls for their online versions. Many others have ceased publishing altogether. Local television news, although highly-profitable, is not picking up the resulting slack: The Pew project has found that traffic, weather, and sports comprise 40% of the typical local newscast, while a mere 3% is devoted to government and politics.

This combination of changes has created some significant coverage vacuums, most clearly at the local level. For instance, the Pew Journalism Project has found a steep drop in the number of reporters in state capitals. The papers surveyed “lost a total of 164 full-time statehouse reporters—a decline of 35%—between 2003 and 2014. That percentage is slightly higher than the decline in newspaper newsroom staffing overall.” Commercial replacements for traditional newspapers haven’t done well, either; AOL recently gave up on its Patch project, which the company had hoped could

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help fill the local-news gap by pairing hyper-local coverage with an identifiable brand.

The decline of local reporting is not simply a commercial matter affecting only newspaper owners and employees. In a federalist system like ours, information about the issues and conflicts faced in local jurisdictions is essential to self-government. The American system of governance is premised on having a functioning democracy at the local level. As Woodrow Wilson observed in 1898 (perhaps with some regret), “Our local areas are not governed. They act for themselves.... The large freedom of action and broad scope of function given to local authorities is the distinguishing characteristic of the American system of government.” Because Americans have that local autonomy, an informed citizenry—one that has regular access to the debates and decisions of city councils, state legislatures, school boards, and planning commissions—is necessary for a government to be responsive to the body politic. Without local reporting, it is far more difficult for voters to make prudent decisions about local legislation and budgeting or to hold local elected officials accountable.

This understanding of journalism as an essential support for democracy is not lost on Americans today. As a result, we have seen a rise in philanthropically supported investigative-reporting services such as ProPublica, whose backers, as writer Biz Carson has observed in Philanthropy magazine, “promote [it] as a new model for convincing donors to view nonprofit journalism as a civic and cultural institution, like the ballet or a private hospital, which rely on philanthropic support.” It would, of course, be no simple matter to extend the nonprofit model as a widespread replacement for what’s being lost in local journalism; how to find a sustainable funding model for such a private, nonprofit approach is only the most obvious question.

But perhaps there is another option for local journalism, in the form of a re-tasking of public broadcasting. A nationwide network of some 364 television stations and 1,248 radio stations, most managed by independent licensees and present in every state and major city, would seem like an obvious candidate to fill the coverage gap. Public broadcasting—or “public media,” as it prefers to be called in the digital era—was not originally conceived primarily to be a provider of journalism, but it has, especially through local public radio, already begun to move sharply in that direction, as local stations across the country have become alive to
the fact that listeners will both tune in and provide financial support for newsroom operations whose work fills a role others are vacating. In New York, Boston, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Portland, St. Louis, San Diego, Cleveland, and many other cities, local public radio stations are often virtually the only ongoing sources of serious non-print journalism. (Indeed, in New York, news-talk public radio station WNYC attracts a greater audience share than its two commercial competitors combined.)

The possibility of a more systemic shift by public media toward local reporting, however, raises some serious questions. This shift could come at the expense of the existing model, which supports several popular national television and radio offerings, the provision of which motivated the advent of public broadcasting in the first place. Local reporting would cost money, and some funding rules present barriers to moving public broadcasting toward local issues. And government funding could imply government influence—which could undermine the integrity and credibility of public broadcasting’s journalistic efforts.

Despite these issues, local journalism is a need the public broadcasting system could help meet. Public broadcasting was originally conceived to fill a gap in broadcasting, but because of the seismic shifts in the media landscape, new and different gaps have emerged. To stay relevant and continue to promote the public good, public broadcasting should shift its focus, too.

**Building Public Broadcasting**

Today’s public broadcasting system emerged from debates in the first part of the 20th century over how to use the new radio and television broadcasting technologies. Networks of non-profit “educational channels,” perhaps most notably the Eastern Educational Network, began to pop up in the early decades of radio, as many saw great potential for the broadcasting mediums to be sources of widely accessible educational programming. Some of these educational channels—especially Boston’s WGBH—had already begun to emerge as production powerhouses by the 1950s, and many were part of a long tradition of philanthropic efforts promoting broad education. WGBH itself was a byproduct of the 19th-century Lowell Institute, founded by the Lowell family as one of the nation’s earliest adult-education institutions, focusing on public lectures.

After considerable debate over how to use radio for educational as well as commercial purposes, the Federal Communications
Commission first set aside the lower bands of the radio spectrum for educational programming in 1938. The FCC did the same for television in the early 1950s at the urging of New York attorney Freida Hennock, a Harry Truman-appointed commissioner who is credited with pushing educational programming on dedicated spectrum rather than through educational-commercial partnerships. The FCC licensed community groups, universities, and school districts around the country to use these dedicated frequencies for educational programming.

The original Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 helped strengthen and integrate the national networks of educational stations by providing federal funding and a central body for dispensing the funds. The act was popular enough to have passed the Senate by voice vote and to have passed the House by a vote of 277 to 102. It capped the work of a blue-ribbon panel convened by the Carnegie Corporation, which, in its report “Public Television: A Program for Action,” urged the creation of “a well-financed and well-directed educational television system, substantially larger and far more pervasive and effective than that which now exists in the United States.”

The goals of public broadcasting were based on the assumption that the commercial marketplace would not likely produce serious television. “Commercial television,” wrote the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, “seeks to capture the large audience; it relies mainly upon the desire to relax and to be entertained.” At the same time, “television has been fashioned into a miraculous instrument. The opportunity is at hand to turn the instrument to the best uses of American society, and to make it of new and increased service to the general public.” Thus a medium for the masses could, like a Book-of-the-Month Club writ large, be the means of their edification through a service offering serious drama, music, and public-affairs programming that would, by statute, be non-commercial. Upon signing into law the Public Broadcasting Act, President Lyndon Johnson said:

While we work every day to produce new goods and to create new wealth, we want most of all to enrich man’s spirit. That is the purpose of this act…[to] assist stations and producers who aim for the best in broadcasting good music, in broadcasting exciting plays, and in broadcasting reports on the whole fascinating range of human activity. It will try to prove that what educates can also be exciting.
To distribute federal funds, the Public Broadcasting Act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a free-standing, non-profit public corporation created as an entity operating independently of Congress or the executive. It disburses federal appropriations both to producers of programming and individual public television and radio licensees around the country with the goal of building a broader, national system with its own substantial original programming. To try to ensure impartiality, appointees from one political party may not comprise more than five of its nine members. Each member must be nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate. (I am currently one of the board’s four Republican members.)

Taxpayer support today totals about $440 million a year. All public radio and public television licensees receive core federal support through the Community Service Grant, a pot of $315 million in grants ($223 million for television and $92 million for radio) distributed to all individual stations from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Such funds are intended “to be used to support the Grantee’s capability to expand the quality and scope of its services to the community”—including, of course, the significant expense of broadcast operations—but are also authorized to support “the production and acquisition of programming.”

The Corporation has helped to build a well-established national programming service, with a number of popular prime-time television and radio offerings. In contrast to commercial television with its high turnover, public television has been dominated by long-standing series: Nova (which has run for 41 years), Nature (33 years), Frontline (32 years), American Masters (29 years), and others. National Public Radio maintains 17 foreign bureaus, at a time when newspapers and network television have retreated from such coverage. The cable-television History Channel has long since strayed from serious documentary programming about American history, leaving the field, for the most part, to public television. The children’s programming found on PBS Kids is especially popular and hews to the original education-oriented goals of public broadcasting.

But while many of these programs continue to occupy roles not filled by others, the media world has changed dramatically in the past few decades, overtaking parts of public broadcasting’s traditional mission. For example, one of Lyndon Johnson’s original goals was for public broadcasting to showcase serious drama, or as the Carnegie Commission put it, to provide a stage for “new dimensions of artistic performance” and
“experimental drama.” But the rise of commercially produced and critically acclaimed drama threatens to make this goal obsolete. Our time is often referred to as the “golden age” for television drama, filled with compelling, well-produced offerings often focused on important American social problems, from crime and punishment (The Wire) to the drug trade in suburban America (Breaking Bad) to prison conditions (Orange is the New Black). But to the extent that public broadcasting is playing a part in that golden age, it is by bringing British programming to an American audience. It must be considered ironic that federally funded public television has come to be associated with British-produced and focused drama. As a result, federal policymakers should consider what alternate uses federal dollars might serve—and, to the extent such dollars continue to flow to public broadcasting, whether they might not be better used to enable more and better local journalism.

THE PROMISE OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

Local journalism may not have been at the heart of the sort of public broadcasting system Lyndon Johnson or the Carnegie Commission envisioned. But an emphasis on local journalism could help meet some of the broad goals set out by the commission, which urged that there be “programs prepared to meet the direct needs of the local community” and argued that “[t]he greatest practical diversity of program production sources is essential to the health of the system.” An investment in local journalism holds the potential to strengthen the health of the entire public broadcasting system.

A system-wide emphasis on this purpose would not be entirely novel; many public broadcasting stations have recently begun doing more local news coverage. In St. Louis, the public radio station has merged with a group of former print reporters who had started a nonprofit online news site. On a recent fall morning there was coverage of local transit-union negotiations, a public-school protest, and a story about whether the same state agency that regulates cattle should also look after the health of wild deer. In Denver, Rocky Mountain PBS, which collaborates with a local philanthropically funded investigative-journalism project, was covering the question of how to regulate marijuana sales, as well as the looming area shortage of volunteer firefighters. In upstate New York, North Country Public Radio covered the fiscal problems of St. Lawrence County; Oregon Public Broadcasting was
continuing to follow the slow clean-up of the Hanford, Washington, nuclear-weapons facility; and Minnesota public radio has covered the efforts of the local Somali community to combat terrorist recruiters.

Radio and related digital platforms are the most common (though not exclusive) vehicles for such local reporting, but the stories are often linked to online video, suggesting a future in which news dissemination is “platform agnostic.” Moreover, local television stations are, in some cases, mounting their own nightly local news programs, such as that of NJTV, a string of local public-media licensees in New Jersey where, in the shadows of New York and Philadelphia, robust local reporting has historically been lacking. Other public broadcasting licensees are establishing partnerships with non-profit journalism sites, such as that between Boston’s WBUR and the New England Center for Investigative Reporting.

What is notable about much of this new local journalism is its regularity. Many of these stations have reporters with subject-area specialties (what newspapers once called beats). Public hearings and press conferences that other news providers may ignore are now covered by public broadcasters. Occasional special programs are no substitute for regular local news coverage that allows citizens to follow the issues. This kind of engagement is the lifeblood of democracy.

While several stations around the country have begun to invest in local news coverage, public broadcasting’s movement toward local journalism is nevertheless a relatively new phenomenon, and it is a sharp departure from a time not long ago when local public radio often carried little else besides national programs and jazz or classical music. The trend is by no means universal: The most robust public-media local news operations are still exceptions, radio does more than television, and some stations still do little but serve as signal carriers to deliver national programming. But the trend toward local news coverage, set in motion some two decades ago by Boston University’s public radio station WBUR and San Francisco’s KQED, is blossoming widely. Programming frequently includes not just news reports but interview-based programs focused on local issues.

It is likely that technological change of the sort that has disrupted so many industries is disrupting public media as well — leading broadcasters to conclude that their comparative advantage lies in local journalism. It is increasingly possible for viewers and listeners to get access to their favorite national programs directly through, for instance, their
smartphones and program-specific applications. The decision to make *Downton Abbey* available at PBS’s website is just the latest sign of this trend. As it becomes possible to access national programming without going through a local television or radio station, local broadcasters face pressure to develop their own original programming that is not available elsewhere. Local journalism is an obvious option.

Such an emphasis on local reporting stands to benefit the entire national system of public broadcasting. More local journalism should, over time, lead to more local producer-journalists whose work develops from knowledge of local issues or who apply a local lens to national issues. Their work could be showcased through the major national series such as *Frontline* or *PBS NewsHour*, which have a financial incentive to seek out new work and to encourage it if they can acquire it without cost.

Greater emphasis on, and encouragement for, local journalism would also increase the likelihood that issues, perspectives, and sensibilities that might not be known to assignment desks in Washington will bubble up and gain visibility. Calvin Trillin’s long-standing “U.S. Journal” stories in the *New Yorker*, which spun great narratives of national importance from often obscure local events and issues, could be a model here. These local stories would likely feature voices not typically heard in the Acela corridor — and both help public media reach new audiences and address the concern that it does not reflect the full spectrum of political and cultural views. Further, local producers from all backgrounds will have a new point of entry into journalism — a career path that could lead to producer roles for PBS and NPR national programs.

One can imagine, over time, production centers dispersed around the country like the 12 branches of the Federal Reserve System, whose research staffs often focus on issues of special regional interest but who bring their work to the attention of the system as a whole. Notably, the original Carnegie Commission advocated for at least two national public broadcasting production centers — but that was certainly seen as a floor, not a ceiling. Simply put, more journalism born in more geographic areas could trigger renewed creativity in the public-media system broadly.

**Funding Streams**

While local journalism holds great promise in strengthening the public broadcasting network, it faces one large implementation challenge: cash
flow. The vagaries of how public broadcasting is actually financed are the greatest barrier to thriving local journalism on public broadcasting.

As noted above, the Community Service Grant is meant “to be used to support the Grantee’s capability to expand the quality and scope of its services to the community.” Such programming could well include local journalism—and, indeed, sounds as if it should. Despite this goal, in practice a significant portion of the grant is effectively returned to Washington in the form of member assessments (dues, if you will) and the purchase of the right to broadcast specific television and radio programs. While in 2014, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting directed $223 million in television community-services grants to individual stations, the Public Broadcasting Service—a private, non-profit corporation that produces content for its member stations—assessed those stations $186 million. The largest portion of that assessment supports the infrastructure of program distribution—but some $35 million in PBS funds (along with $26 million from CPB) supports something called the National Program Service, which, in turn, provides support for the production of programs familiar to all public broadcasting viewers: Sesame Street, PBS NewsHour, Washington Week, Frontline, American Experience, Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood, Nova, and other prominent series.

These programs, as well as original programming not part of an established national prime-time series, rely on additional support from grants from private foundations and individual donors, along with other federal entities, such as the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and the Department of Education. These donations mean that, technically, the Community Service Grant that a television station receives is not itself the direct source of funds used for PBS-related costs. The Grant becomes part of the overall total of funds raised by a local station from all sources, including viewers or listeners and local philanthropies. But, absent the CSGs from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, it would be extremely difficult for the national PBS and NPR programming to maintain a core means of support. And, indeed, under the terms of the Public Broadcasting Act, 25% of the Community Service Grant to radio stations (known as the “restricted” portion) is required to be used for acquiring or producing national programming; this federal grant to local stations is thus the lifeblood of NPR.

As a result of this byzantine financing structure, there are a number of claims on the federal funds disbursed as Community Service Grants
to local stations, and, their name notwithstanding, they indirectly support national as well as local programming.

Even if local licensees would prefer to reserve more of their funding for original local programming, local station managers have found it difficult to set money aside for that purpose. Like the managers of commercial television local affiliates, local public broadcasting managers have historically felt pressure to feature national television and radio programming both because of audience expectations and as key engines of their own fundraising for costs not fully covered by federal funding. *Downton Abbey* (especially), *Frontline, Nova, American Masters*, and other familiar offerings attract the support from “viewers like you,” which local licensees must have. (Even this money often isn’t sufficient, however; many stations also turn to so-called “pledge programming” not typically shown on public television in order to raise funds.) Shifts in content delivery will change this dynamic, but national programming remains a driver of fundraising.

How then to finance local journalism, if it is to be an ongoing and central part of public broadcasting? A few alternatives, stemming from the current funding arrangement, present themselves.

One possibility is to dedicate more of the existing federal funding stream, especially the money not given to local stations, for this purpose. There are formal obstacles to such an approach, however. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s charge is to direct funds not distributed through the Community Service Grants toward the support of national programming. It has, rather creatively, tried both to serve that goal and to encourage more local journalism through the advent of its support for Local Journalism Centers, regional consortia of stations that focus on key issues of both local and national interest. For instance, one Local Journalism Center, including Colorado and Wyoming stations, focuses on energy issues. Another, a consortium including Cleveland and Chicago stations, focuses on the future of manufacturing. Yet another, based in the Southwest, focuses on immigration-related issues. All of these issues are important to the country as a whole, even while they are more focused in certain regions. Its virtues notwithstanding, however, such an approach is not the same as the sort of regular, comprehensive news coverage that is essential to thriving local journalism.

Another possibility comes from the opposite angle: Broadcasting stations could support local reporting by keeping more of their existing
Community Service Grants from the CPB. Such an approach would clearly risk cutting the financial support directed to major national programs and their producers through PBS—which is funded by the dues from local stations. This approach might be viewed as heresy in the public-media universe, but the idea of shaking up existing arrangements should not be off the table.

While technological innovation is challenging the current models for delivering content, other shifts in technology may actually provide, at least in some cases, a substantial new means of financial support for local program production. Local broadcasting stations are currently sitting on underused portions of the electronic spectrum coveted for their potential use by wireless service firms such as Verizon and AT&T. The FCC plans a two-stage auction in 2016 that could potentially mean significant payments to public-media license-holders for parts of the spectrum that have largely been sitting idle.

Freeing up portions of the spectrum currently owned by public broadcasters for commercial use could lead to some significant payouts: A consulting firm retained by the FCC released a report in October 2014 that included estimates of potential spectrum prices as high as $570 million for spectrum in Los Angeles, $490 million for spectrum in New York, and $400 million for spectrum in Philadelphia. But such significant potential payments were not confined to major markets. The report by Greenhill & Co. estimated that spectrum could attract $280 million in Hartford, Connecticut; $180 million in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; $170 million in Detroit; $160 million in Providence, Rhode Island; and $130 million in Cleveland. In effect, public-media license-holders could find themselves with de facto endowments to help support the original programming they need to fulfill their mission of public service.

Such an infusion of money could well enable more and better local journalism. Of course, it is also possible that school systems and universities—that in some cities own the public-media licenses—could choose to devote such windfalls to other purposes. And it’s possible that Congressional appropriators might choose to cut back federal support because of the infusion of funds into the public broadcasting system, which would hurt smaller stations with smaller payouts from spectrum sales. But the public-media financial landscape is facing a significant change that, if leveraged properly, could help kick-start and sustain local journalism across the country.
government control

One other, even more fundamental issue stands as a potential barrier to a focus on local journalism for public broadcasting. Public broadcasting receives public funds, which at least implies that the government has a measure of control over its activities. For journalism to be trustworthy, it must be independent from the powers that it so often holds accountable through its reporting. Thus, even the appearance of dependence on the government can undermine the credibility of news organizations.

It is true that local license-holders who receive government support for a portion of their expenses are not necessarily under direct government control. Public television and radio licensees are typically independent non-profit organizations, whose executives answer to their own boards of directors. But there are important exceptions to this general rule of independent control. In some instances, local school districts, controlled by elected school boards, are the license-holders. There are also some state public-television networks, such as those in Alabama and Wisconsin, that receive state as well as federal funds and whose directors, in some cases, are appointed by governors. This kind of state- and local-governmental control could easily chill robust local reporting on the very institutions that fund the journalists in the first place.

It is important not to forget, however, that all local public-media licensees must answer primarily to their local communities, on whom they rely for the vast majority of their operating funds. Put another way, there is a form of market discipline to which public media is subject, thanks to the fact that it receives a relatively small portion of its operating budgets—on average 15%—through taxpayer support. In fact, the Public Broadcasting Act did not include a BBC-style television excise tax on every household, which would have provided a far richer (and guaranteed) funding stream, even though the Carnegie Commission endorsed such a tax.

The reality of local support does not completely mitigate the dangers posed by public funding, however. This conflict of interest should not be taken lightly, but one network provides a possible way to resolve the dilemma for stations with close ties to local authorities. The state-governed New Jersey Network became an independent non-profit organization, NJTV, shortly after the election of Governor Chris Christie, as it faced looming state budget cuts. Many states and localities have faced budget crunches over the last few years, and spinning off the public broadcasting unit into
an independent non-profit provides one way to both save the government money and give the broadcasting organizations greater independence.

The issue of control or influence by the federal government matters too, even if the dangers are less acute than those posed by local authorities’ control. Local issues are often of no interest to the federal government, though they can matter a great deal to some federal officials (perhaps especially those elected in the relevant locality). The safety created by the distance between the federal and local level is effective — right up until it isn’t. In other words, the federal government should not be trusted never to interfere in local reporting. The structures that promote the independence of local public news coverage are no less valuable when applied to the federal government. If public broadcasting is to provide robust and credible local reporting, its integrity must be ensured through structures that maintain its independence.

**Supporting Local Journalism**

Public broadcasting began as an effort to supply the country with the serious television and radio programming, both fiction and non-fiction, that many thought commercial stations would not produce. That assumption may have been true in the 1960s, but, at least in some respects, it certainly is not true now. Serious drama especially is flourishing on commercial television, and it is not difficult to find balanced and nuanced analysis of news events and public affairs on the internet — the medium that is upending the established media universe most of all.

If the original reasons for public broadcasting are now obsolete, the service itself does not have to fade into irrelevance. The very changes that have upended traditional media are generating a new gap in local news coverage that public media may be well positioned to fill.

The vast network of local public broadcasting stations across the country could become even more relevant today with a renewed emphasis on local reporting. Indeed, some have already started to move in this direction. But federal policymakers could help encourage the public-media system as a whole to adopt this goal. Doing so would require re-examining entrenched approaches to funding and carefully balancing the need for financial support against the need for editorial independence. But public media, and the country as a whole, stand to gain from a renewed emphasis on local journalism.