DOES PUBLIC TELEVISION HAVE A FUTURE?

by Stuart Alan Shorenstein

Throughout its history, public broadcasting in America has been a medium in search of a mission.

It was born during the early 1950s as an attempt to harness the educational potential of the "electronic blackboard." It was revamped during the '60s as an institution designed to preserve and foster America's (and, cynics would add, Britain's) "cultural heritage." Over the course of three decades, public broadcasting has received lavish praise, pointed criticism, and more than $3 billion in public and private money.

Public TV now faces serious trouble. In a 1979 report, a blue-ribbon commission impaneled by the Carnegie Corporation handed down this verdict:

> We find public broadcasting's financial, organizational, and creative structure fundamentally flawed. In retrospect, what public broadcasting tried to invent was a truly radical idea: an instrument of mass communications that simultaneously respects the artistry of individuals who create programs, the needs of the public that form the audience, and the forces of political power that supply the resources. . . . Sadly we conclude that the invention did not work, or at least not very well.

The Carnegie Commission did not recommend that the whole effort be scrapped. Predictably, it put forward instead a meticulously crafted reorganization plan; it called for increased funding. But the commission's ruminations have roused little interest in Congress or the White House, both of which have lately sought to trim spending, not subsidize expensive "frills."

Public television's chronic funding difficulties and organizational headaches persist. Despite attempts to reach out to a more diverse clientele, public TV still attracts only a small prime-time audience that remains disproportionately white, college-educated, and affluent. About one-fifth of public TV's prime-time hours are taken up with shows produced abroad—in England primarily, but also in Canada, Australia, West Ger-

Advertisement for Lillie, *a popular PBS series produced in Great Britain and broadcast in the United States in 1979, thanks to a grant from the Mobil Oil Corporation.*

many, and even Japan. And now, to compound its problems, public broadcasting is facing increased competition from cable TV, satellite-to-home transmission, videocassettes, and videodiscs—competition that may ultimately rob it of its more popular offerings and of its role as the alternative to the commercial networks.

Just as serious is public broadcasting's perceived lack of purpose. ABC, CBS, and NBC are in business to make money. What is public television in business for? Instruction? Culture? Ratings? Survival? In fact, there are 280 local public TV stations across the United States, all of them autonomous. They are united by no common mission (i.e., to be "a civilized voice in a civilized society" as the Carnegie Commission put it). Rather, as former *New York Times* critic Les Brown once noted, the only joint purpose seems to be the pursuit of congressionally authorized funds.

At the same time, since none but the biggest public TV stations have the capacity to produce much original programming, local stations have come to depend on the daily PBS network "feed" out of Virginia for more than 70 percent of their shows. These programs are hatched by station executives in the flagship public stations, including WETA in Washington, WGBH in Boston, and WNET in New York. Many of these executives are veterans of foundations, or universities, or cultural institutions; a few are network refugees. Well-educated, if not intellectuals, committed to "uplift," they are responsible for the genteel, upper-middlebrow quality of public TV's typical offerings, a quality that is public television's signature and, arguably, its chief weakness. "From the very first," writes critic Benjamin DeMott, "the makers of what we've come to know as public TV have behaved as though their prime duty was to coat the land with a film of what can best be described as distinguished philistinism, lifelessly well-meaning, tolerant, earnest, well-scrubbed—and utterly remote from what is most precious and vital in the soul of this nation."

Public television started out at a disadvantage in the United States. In Britain, West Germany, Japan, and Canada, television, like radio broadcasting before it, was initially state-run. People grew accustomed to paying for TV out of their own pockets. By the time advertiser-supported television came along, public TV was already well established—not as an adjunct but as the leader in the medium.

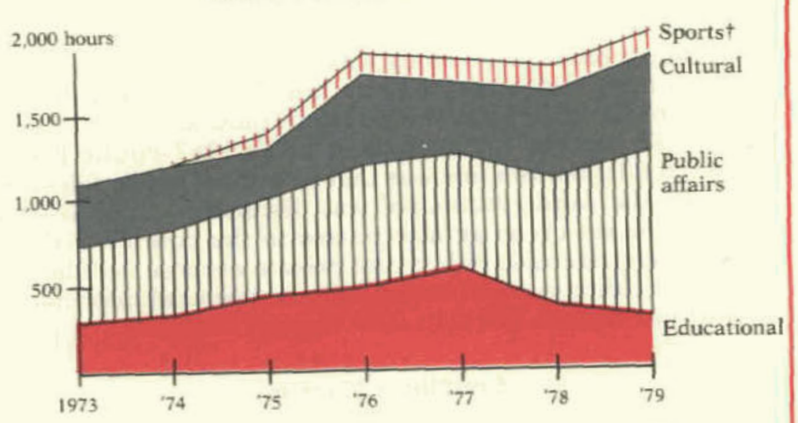
In the United States, the story was exactly the reverse. Here, commercial broadcasting was already in full bloom by the time the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1952 set aside 242 stations, mostly in the UHF frequency, for noncommercial, educational use. There was little popular demand for educational TV; the idea hadn't occurred to most Americans.

The FCC, it should be noted, was doing public television no great favor, since most TV sets were only equipped to receive VHF. The new stations, moreover, were run primarily by educators with little or no broadcasting experience. (A few were veterans of educational radio.) In contrast to the situation in Britain after 1954, when many BBC employees moved laterally to ITV, the new commercial network, few American commercial broadcasters were tempted by the low pay and relative invisibility of educational TV. By 1957, only 21 educational broadcasting stations, run by cities and towns, local school systems, or universities, were actually on the air.

With a few exceptions—e.g., *Sunrise Semester* (which made its debut in 1957), and eventually *Sesame Street* (1969) and *The Electric Company* (1971)—the promise of the electronic blackboard went unfulfilled. There was never enough money to produce good programming. Many educators, then as now, were highly skeptical of TV's pedagogic value. By the early 1960s,

Stuart Alan Shorenstein, 33, is a partner in the New York law firm of Friedman, Leeds, and Shorenstein and special professor of communications law at Hofstra University Law School. He received a B.A. from Duke University (1968) and a J.D. from New York University (1971).

WHAT'S ON PUBLIC TV*



*Hours of programming distributed annually to local stations by PBS.
†Until 1974, sports programs were included in the "cultural" category.

Source: Public Broadcasting Service.

The number of hours of original programming distributed by PBS has been growing, though internal fluctuations by category are significant. Public affairs programming now accounts for almost half of PBS's schedule; this includes 130 hours for the ABC World News Tonight *(captioned for the deaf). Educational programming—the most costly to produce—has dropped substantially. In 1979, PBS paid $9.2 million to acquire foreign programs, and earned $2.5 million from sales abroad of its own shows.*

noncommercial TV was in disarray. Fewer than 75 educational stations were in operation around the country, and the few programs they shared had to be "bicycled" from one station to the next. Their audiences were small.

Public TV got its first transfusion under the Kennedy administration when Congress enacted the 1962 Educational Facilities Act, which authorized up to $32 million in matching funds over five years to support noncommercial broadcasting. That same year, Congress required all TV sets sold after 1964 to be able to pick up UHF as well as VHF channels. The number of noncommercial stations now began to multiply, reaching 107 by 1966, when the Carnegie Corporation, intrigued by the possibility of "networking," impatient with the American system's shortcomings, and inspired by the manifest achievements of the

BBC, charged a select commission to look at the future of noncommercial broadcasting.

It was the era of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, when publishing a blue-ribbon study was often tantamount to seeing its recommendations enacted into law. Within a month of its release, the Carnegie Commission report (now known as "Carnegie I") had become the nucleus of LBJ's 1967 Public Broadcasting Act. Its bottom line was that a national *public* television network—the word *educational* was discarded as unattractive—should be set up as an alternative to the commercial networks, at considerable public and private expense, for the purpose of providing cultural enrichment and general information, not just instruction. The act sailed through Congress.

Creating a Monster

To oversee operation of the new system, Congress created the nonprofit Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) under a private, nonprofit board to be appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. CPB's main duties were to pay for programs and distribute funds, including an annual congressional appropriation, to member stations. CPB, in turn, spun off the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to link up local stations, creating, in effect, America's "fourth network." The purpose of this complex organizational layout was to insulate public television from White House and congressional interference.

This is the foundation on which public broadcasting, as Americans have come to know it, has grown. It has expanded rapidly. In 1967, only 119 noncommercial TV stations were on the air; by 1979, the number had climbed to 280. Over roughly the same period, public broadcasting's annual income (for TV and radio) rose from $58 million to almost $600 million, with more than one-quarter of it coming from Washington.*

Public television, however, has had its growing pains. Since its inception, it has been wracked by bitter, if tedious, jurisdictional conflicts among CPB, PBS, and the hundreds of member stations. Was PBS only responsible for the technical job of "networking," or could it select programs too? Was CPB just a funding body, or did it in fact have ultimate control over what went on the air? No one knew. In trying to insulate public broadcasting, Congress inadvertently created something of a monster.

*In 1979, public broadcasting's income was $599 million, of which 27 percent came from the federal government, 40 percent from state and local governments (including state colleges). About 84 percent of total revenues are earmarked for public television, the remainder for National Public Radio.

The "double-hull" buffer between politics and public television proved rather porous in any event. While Congress declared CPB to be a *private* entity (it is not an agency of the U.S. government), it failed to provide for guaranteed, long-term funding. Congress also left selection of the corporation's board to the vagaries of partisan politics.

Once Burned, Twice Shy

President Richard Nixon took advantage of both oversights in 1972 when he abruptly vetoed Congress's $155 million, two-year appropriation bill for CPB because he disapproved of what he saw as a certain bias against his administration in such programs as *The Elizabeth Drew Show, Black Journal,* and *Washington Week in Review.* Almost immediately thereafter, Nixon was able to make six new appointments to CPB's 15-member board, putting his supporters firmly in control. The board promptly ordered cancellation of all but one of public television's public affairs programs. (*Black Journal* was the lone survivor.) While public broadcasting's funding procedure was modified after President Nixon's post-Watergate resignation, the scar tissue remains visible—and sensitive.*

Public television's other big problem has been programming. During the late 1960s and early '70s, as public TV was beginning to take shape, critics were rather tolerant of the system's shortcomings. Give it time, they urged. A decade later, it is clear that despite some notable successes—*Great Performances, The MacNeil-Lehrer Report, Sesame Street*—public television's overall record remains uneven.

Lack of money is the biggest single factor. Public broadcasting's total revenues in 1979—some $599 million—equal about 5 percent of total *commercial* broadcast revenues. In per capita terms, U.S. public TV receives less than public broadcasting in any of the other industrialized democracies.† As a result, American public TV stations simply don't have the money to produce much original programming.

This is one reason why PBS airs so many imported shows,

*Congress in 1975 enacted a Public Broadcasting Financing Act, which provided for up to $570 million over a five-year period under a matching formula guaranteeing $1 in federal funds for every $2.50 (since reduced to $2) public TV stations could raise in funds from viewers and foundations. By providing for money over a period of years, and tying federal outlays to a matching-fund "trigger" mechanism, Congress effectively protected public television from direct financial and political pressure. CPB and PBS, meanwhile, have agreed to divide responsibilities between them. For the moment, there exists a fragile truce.

†The per capita cost of public broadcasting in the United States in 1978 was $2.53, compared with $9.14 for Japan's NHK and $20.35 for Canada's CBC.

THE BBC: FEELING THE PAINS OF COMPETITION

American critics and audiences, impressed by British Broadcasting Corporation programs aired on U.S. public television (such as *Great Performances* and *I, Claudius*), commonly regard the BBC with a certain reverence. Yet British audiences have lately grown more critical of the publicly financed broadcasting empire once known fondly as "Auntie." While the BBC's TV offerings arguably remain the "least worst" in the world, like Britain's economy, they have come down in the world.

The BBC was established under royal charter in 1926 as a combination national radio network and British "Voice of America." The corporation was shaped from the outset by Director General John (later Lord) Reith, who saw broadcasting as "a drawn sword parting the darkness of ignorance." Reith gave the public what he thought was good for them—classical music, lectures, drama, public affairs programs, and the like. By the time he retired in 1938, Reith had ensured that the BBC's fledgling television arm would be formed in the image of BBC radio.

BBC television remained a "drawn sword" for as long as it remained a monopoly. But in 1954, in a move Reith likened to "smallpox, bubonic plague, and the Black Death," Parliament created the commercial Independent Television Authority and its 13-station (now 15-station) ITV network. Unburdened by an elitist legacy, unabashedly pandering to mass tastes, ITV had a firm hold on 70 percent of Britain's TV viewers by the late 1950s. As its audience dwindled, the BBC found it increasingly hard to justify an annual subsidy (currently $690 million) based on license fees paid by all TV households.

despite complaints from talented American writers, producers, and actors. Purchasing a series already produced in, say, Great Britain, may cost 10 percent of what it would cost to produce it in the United States. The low price tag attracts corporations such as Mobil and Exxon, which underwrite almost all of the imported programs shown on public television. Public broadcasters would *like* to produce more blockbusters like *The Adams Chronicles.* They can't afford to.

Public television suffers, too, from a certain inevitable timidity. It is quite all right to be an "alternative," but *too much* of an alternative might not sit well among benefactors on Capitol Hill or in the White House or in the local community. Public affairs programs are especially vulnerable. Initially, public TV

Under Sir Hugh Greene, a veteran broadcaster who was appointed Director General in 1960, the BBC began to fight back. Greene was willing to take risks in current affairs, dramatic, and comedy programming; it was he who introduced *The Forsyte Saga* and the satiric *That Was the Week that Was.* "With [Greene] in command," a colleague recalled, "Auntie changed its sex and for the first time in its life was young." Sir Hugh got a vote of confidence in 1964 when Parliament awarded the BBC a second channel and slapped a stiff tax surcharge on ITV's "immorally" high profits. By the mid-1960s, BBC-1 and 2 had won back half of Britain's viewers.

But competition has had its sour consequences. To maintain its share of the audience, the BBC ultimately was forced to evolve from educator into mass entertainer—in short, to emulate its commercial rival. Today, 14 percent of the BBC's schedule consists of movies and American imports like *Starsky and Hutch* and *Dallas.* While a substantial 18 percent is still devoted to public affairs and documentaries, and 14 percent to the pedagogic Open University, music and ballet offerings have declined to about 1 percent of total programming, drama to about 5 percent.

The BBC labors under other burdens. Production costs have risen with inflation, and the BBC does not have as much control over license fees (currently about $80 per year for color TV, $28 for black and white) as ITV does over its advertising rates. The affluent commercial network, meanwhile, has been able to lure away top BBC stars and executives, and, with such programs as *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy,* even to erode Auntie's near-monopoly on respectability. In 1980, Britain's Conservative government, committed to free-market principles, awarded a second channel to the commercial network over the protests of the BBC.

was a pacesetter, airing more documentaries in the 1968–69 season than ABC, CBS, and NBC combined. Some, such as those in the *Behind the Lines* series, were highly controversial. Then President Nixon cracked down. Once burned, twice shy: While PBS eventually got back at Nixon by broadcasting gavel-to-gavel coverage of the 1973 Senate Watergate Committee hearings, public TV's news record since then has been undistinguished.

To be blunt, PBS has neither the freedom nor the resources to compete with the commercial networks in news or public affairs programming. It has no overseas bureaus, no central news desk, no equivalent of the networks' evening news programs. PBS barely covered the 1980 Republican and Democratic conventions. Even the best of public TV's news shows, like *The MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, do not approach the popularity or the visual range of CBS's *Sixty Minutes*.

Ratings are not PBS's strong point, either. PBS's prime-time ratings share is about 3.5 percent; even the most popular shows on public TV, such as the periodic *National Geographic* specials, have never reached more than 16 percent of television households. A commercial show with that rating would be canceled at once.

No Place To Go

Public broadcasting's failure to achieve "parity" with commercial television is understandable. It was, first, a late starter. By the time PBS came into existence, Americans had already become conditioned—by radio even before television—to free, mass-appeal programming. Second, public television was created as an alternative. Unlike commercial TV, it deliberately does *not* aim at the lowest common denominator. Thus, say PBS defenders, there is no point in analyzing public TV's record in terms of commercial TV's Nielsen ratings. (PBS press releases, of course, take a different view of the ratings when a public television program scores high.)

Public television's dilemma is that if it can't attract large enough audiences, many of its funding sources—e.g., corporations, foundations, and the federal government, not to mention the audience itself—may dry up; if it gears its programming to the ratings game, it will betray the principles on which it was founded (and may not increase its ratings anyway). There may be no middle ground, to judge from reaction to the announcement last year that a consortium of public TV stations was planning to air, for about $1 million, 13 reruns of the acclaimed but canceled CBS series about Harvard law students, *The Paper Chase*. "If we're going to keep blurring the line between commercial and public TV," wrote Tom Shales, television critic for the *Washington Post*, "why have public TV at all?"

What complicates matters for public television is that the programs that do make it distinctive—the concerts, operas, dramas, and imported specials—are among the kinds of programs most threatened by cable television, videocassettes, and videodiscs. To be sure, PBS has been in the forefront of some of the new technologies. It began broadcasting to local stations via the Westar satellite in 1978 and will soon divide itself into three distinct networks (PTV-I, II, and III) offering three simultaneous program services for local public broadcasters to pick from.

This will give PBS a certain flexibility—assuming it can find the money to pay for all the new programming—but that may not be enough. Viewers, after all, will still have only one public TV channel in their area, not three.

Cable operators, by contrast, can offer their subscribers as many as 80 channels. According to one recent study, the availability of cable TV tends to cut proportionately far more into the time spent watching public television than into time spent viewing network fare. By decade's end, it should be commercially profitable to market, over cable, everything from *Live from Lincoln Center* to shows like *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Indeed, commercial pay networks will probably be able to outbid PBS for the best programs. Public television could become a "second-string" market, airing programs only after their commercial potential has been exhausted. How will Congress justify using tax dollars to support a system that the market has replaced?

If the new technologies do indeed siphon off PBS's more popular offerings, public television's strategic choices will be limited. It could move into programming that is not yet commercially acceptable, thereby becoming the risk taker of the TV industry, the developer of new talent, the bold experimenter. Unfortunately, it isn't likely that this kind of TV is going to attract a broad audience, or a broad coalition of backers in Congress.

Another possibility is a return to "localism." By shedding the mantle of CPB and PBS, public television stations might focus on serving the communities to which they broadcast—airing low-cost documentaries on local issues, presenting programs sponsored by the local school board, and so on. This notion, too, is probably doomed. First, public TV's centralized "national" bureaucracy is unlikely to phase itself out of existence. Second, how would Washington equitably funnel money to 300 local public TV stations, all of different sizes and with different audiences? Third, as cable owners have discovered, a steady diet of local programming does not hold viewers.

In the end, none of public television's options seem very promising. Billion-dollar injections of federal funds are unlikely. Yet, without them, public TV cannot stay where it is and has no place to go.