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Attempting an Affirmative Approach to American Broadcasting: Ideology, Politics, and the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program

In many parts of the world, public broadcasting is an enduring national presence in the lives of citizens. Agencies such as the British Broadcasting Corporation in the United Kingdom, and Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) in Japan, are embedded in the structures of their parent democracies, and in the patterns of peoples' daily lives. In the United States, however, public broadcasting has not achieved a similar status. America's more limited efforts were first associated with investments in education.¹ The most visible outcome of this movement was the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 and the subsequent establishment of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which remains the primary support agency for public radio and television in the U.S.² However, the CPB was not the only agency established to encourage American public broadcasting, or even the first one.

From 1963 to 2010, the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program (PTFP) played a significant role in bringing radio and television services to millions of Americans. Primarily as an agency of the Department of Commerce (DOC), the PTFP distributed more than \$800 million in matching funds to noncommercial educational broadcast licensees in all fifty states. The PTFP was the largest single source of capital funding for public broadcasting, helping local stations to build and acquire transmission facilities, studios, remote broadcasting services, satellite operations, and other equipment, as well as the infrastructure to house, interconnect, and operate them. The leverage provided by PTFP awards impelled universities, colleges, school districts, indigenous nations, and nonprofit groups to

raise hundreds of millions of dollars in their local communities to support projects that extended the reach of public broadcasting, and enhanced the relationships that bind content providers to their audiences. But unlike the CPB, financial assistance from the PTFP was available to every noncommercial, non-sectarian broadcaster in the U.S.

The PTFP was part of President John F. Kennedy's aspiration to achieve social progress through public sector initiatives. The program persisted through decades of political turbulence and tug-of-war. What began as an effort to assist a small set of undercapitalized TV stations became part of a systematic endeavor to extend the reach of broadcasting in America. In the end, the mass communication technologies facilitated by the PTFP were eclipsed by the intersection of newer technologies, transformative circumstances, and intractable ideological conflicts over the proper role of government in the broadcasting sector.

Literature review and research questions

The First Amendment prohibits government interference in free expression, but not government assistance. Emerson catalogs a series of circumstances where government has acted to promote public communication in order to compensate for "major distortions in the system" and "the failure of the market place of ideas to operate according to the original plan."³ Comparing the electromagnetic spectrum to the infrastructure of public highways, Emerson asserts that the state has an obligation to make communication channels "available to potential participants in the system, both communicators and listeners."⁴ Emerson includes public broadcasting among "certain types of governmental participation, such as education

and public libraries" that are intended to "promote expression on the part of others."⁵ Specifically, Emerson finds that, "as economic and technical developments make access to the media of communication more difficult for individuals or groups without financial resources," the "voluntary furnishing of facilities by the government,"⁶ is necessary and appropriate.

In the 1920s, advocates for noncommercial and educational interests articulated this affirmative view, as debate proceeded over how the emerging radio broadcasting system might best serve the interests of the American public. The affirmative view was generally opposed by advocates of limited government and commercial interests, who favored approaches to broadcasting that relied on private enterprise. This "instrumental view," according to Avery and Stavitsky, equates "the interest of the public with that of the industry being regulated."⁷ McChesney documents how advocates for commercial broadcasting systematically marginalized the interests of educators, religious institutions, labor unions, and other noncommercial agencies during broadcasting's formative years.⁸ Between 1928 and 1935, the U.S. adopted an instrumental approach to broadcast regulation that heavily favored commercial, nationally distributed operators. McChesney points to the Federal Radio Commission's General Order 40, and the subsequent reallocation of more than 90 percent of the radio spectrum in a manner favorable to commercial interests, as impediments to the development of European-style public service broadcasting in the U.S.⁹

Led by commissioner and public service advocate Frieda Hennock, the Federal Communications Commission acknowledged the affirmative view in 1948,

by reserving a portion of the broadcast spectrum exclusively for educational broadcasting stations. While this action prompted a reconsideration of the role of government in public expression through educational broadcasting, the debate proceeded at a glacial pace. It was another 15 years before Congress authorized a program to provide federal support for noncommercial broadcasting.¹⁰ At the time, a system of educational television stations was envisioned as the response to the “vast wasteland” of commercial television content, as criticized by FCC Chair Newton Minow.¹¹ This view held that commercial television catered to the mass audience with lowest common denominator entertainment programs, and that noncommercial media would provide content of higher quality that could uplift the tastes and sensibilities of that audience.

Scholars of cultural studies have questioned this position. Oullette asserts that the American system of public broadcasting reflects an elitist view of commercial broadcasting, conflating “commercial hegemony with unquestioned assumptions about the social, cultural, and moral inadequacies of ‘mass appeal’.”¹² Such charges mirror one of the fundamental challenges to public broadcasting in the political sphere. President Richard Nixon raised charges of elitism against the public affairs programming on public television when he vetoed appropriations to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1972. In Engleman’s view, Nixon sought to “dismantle the newly established public broadcasting system,” based on his belief “that public television had a left/liberal agenda hostile to his administration.”¹³ In the 1980s, the assault expanded to include the PTFP, when the program was swept

up in the efforts of the administration of Ronald Reagan to defund public broadcasting.

For advocates of government investments in public telecommunications facilities, controversies over content were secondary. By providing matching support for local facilities projects, not content, the PTFP embraced the fundamental value of localism enshrined in broadcast policy since the 1920s. This differentiation has largely gone unnoticed by scholars. For example, Tressel et. al. lumped the PTFP together with the larger public broadcasting system, describing both as a "historical accident" in a 1977 report for the U.S. Office of Education.¹⁴ While the authors correctly observed that American public broadcasting reflected "the difficulty of reducing broad intangible goals to practical policy,"¹⁵ they overlooked the goals and objectives that were explicitly articulated in the documents on the PTFP. The current study examines these documents in detail.

Lacking the mandate of consensus, public broadcasting's advancement (or obstruction) has often depended on the involvement of key figures in the government. Krasnow and Longley describe Presidents Kennedy and Nixon as "actively interested in broadcast matters."¹⁶ In the legislative branch, members of Congress often play equally pivotal roles in public communications policy, they say, "because of their seniority or their influential standing in a committee."¹⁷ Krasnow and Longley specifically acknowledge the influence of Senator Warren Magnuson, a Democrat and chairperson of the Senate Commerce Committee, whose word was "practically law at the FCC."¹⁸ As one of the earliest proponents of educational television, and a sponsor of the Educational Broadcasting Facilities Act of 1962,

Magnuson was instrumental in the establishment of the PTFP and the American public broadcasting system.¹⁹

The PTFP received varying degrees of attention in some of the early histories of the U.S. public broadcasting. Burke traces the origins of the PTFP to a meeting of the board of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) in Atlanta.²⁰ Gibson documents the establishment of Educational Broadcasting Facilities Program (EBFP), the precursor to the PTFP, and observes that the program moved through the Congress with "very little opposition."²¹ Blakely recognizes the EBFP as the initiative that "to a large extent shaped public broadcasting" as the precursor to CPB.²²

Mitchell offers a detailed investigation of the political history of the PTFP, covering the period from 1963 through 1985. Her historical study demonstrates how changes in the PTFP reflected adjustments in political priorities and attitudes toward federal funding. Supported by the evidence presented in primary sources from the legislative and executive branches of government, Mitchell asserts that the PTFP persisted across the first two decades because of its "noncontroversial nature, its geographical reach, and its ability to attract money from state, local, and private entities."²³ At the same time, the study describes continuous, quiet opposition to the program for its ongoing costs, its redundancy, and its minor role in the larger public broadcasting system.

After Mitchell's study, the PTFP received little scholarly attention. Avery attributes the lack of sustained scholarly focus on public broadcasting to the demise of the NAEB, because the organization served as "the principal scholarly intersection

for broadcast educators and professional broadcasters who were following careers in instructional, educational, or public broadcasting."²⁴ In Avery's view, the working arrangements between educational broadcasters and their parent institutions grew more distant, as the educational broadcasting outlets of the 1950s evolved into the public broadcasting system of the 1980s, and each focused on core missions and services.

The present investigation provides closure to the investigations of the PTFP undertaken by Mitchell and others, and closes the gap in the literature of public broadcasting with respect to this particular policy initiative. The present research examines the contrasting views of government involvement in the media throughout the entire history of the PTFP. The study analyzes the forces at work in an expansive and sustained public initiative supported by the political system. The examination relies on historical methods to address three research questions: What happens when elected federal officials take an affirmative role in the establishment and propagation of a robust public telecommunications system? What were the arguments for and against the PTFP? What circumstances and conditions contributed to the demise of the PTFP?

The research relies on archival reports, memoranda, and other materials from agencies of the executive and legislative branches dating from 1965 to 2011. Appropriation figures were compared with reports in other documentary sources. Additional sources include papers stored in the National Public Broadcasting Archive at the University of Maryland, as well as interviews with officers of the PTFP and key figures within the public broadcasting industry. While these interviews

provided little direct evidence to the study, they provided context, and confirmed the centrality of the PTFP to the achievement of a national system of public radio and television stations.

Support for educational broadcasting facilities

The PTFP began as an idea of NAEB legal counsel Leonard Marks.²⁵ In 1956, Marks proposed that the NAEB advocate federal legislation to provide funds for the development of local educational television (ETV) stations in the United States. At the time, only 24 ETV stations were operating on the 242 channels set aside four years earlier by the FCC for noncommercial TV broadcasting.²⁶ With the nation facing growing school enrollments and shortages of facilities, Marks believed educators could successfully make the case for addressing the nation's educational objectives for children and adults through the new technology of television. Marks was the communications attorney for Texas Senator Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, whose background as an educator and a broadcast owner sensitized him to the goals and objectives of educational broadcasters and the NAEB.²⁷ Senator Johnson played a pivotal role in moving the ETV initiative through Congress. The NAEB ultimately achieved passage of the Educational Television Facilities Act in 1962.

At the outset, the federal program to support educational broadcasting was of limited scope and scale. The legislation charged the DHEW to offer grants to support "the construction of educational television broadcasting facilities."²⁸ The act authorized \$32 million over five years for projects applied for by June 30, 1968. Though Congress debated limits on eligibility, the list of qualifying agencies in the act allowed for a wide range of applications from public primary and secondary

schools; public institutions of higher education; private colleges and universities supported in part by tax revenues (such as national defense research grants); or nonprofit agencies eligible for noncommercial educational television broadcast licenses and "organized primarily to engage in or encourage educational television."²⁹

The act limited awards to up to 50 percent of the "reasonable and necessary cost of such a project,"³⁰ plus 25 percent of the costs of facilities owned by the applicant. The act limited total awards to any single state to \$1 million. The act instructed the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to develop rules and policies for the program, including the priority order for awards. Finally, the act responded to concerns about federal influence by prohibiting agencies or employees of the federal government from exercising any control over ETV facilities, or "over the curriculum, program of instruction, or personnel of any educational institution, school system, or educational broadcasting station or system."³¹

Though President Kennedy signed the act on May 1, 1962, no spending occurred until a modest \$1.5 million appropriation became available in fiscal year 1963 to the Educational Television Facilities Program (ETFP). In the first year, five awards totaling \$858,952 were given to recipients in Illinois, South Carolina, Virginia, and Utah. The following year, the program received more applications, and awards were given to 16 new ETV stations and the expansion of another ten existing facilities.³² The ETFP received \$13 million dollars for fiscal year 1965, followed by smaller appropriations in the succeeding years until the originally authorized

amount was disbursed in its entirety.

With a landslide victory in 1964, a clear mandate, and majorities in both houses of Congress, President Lyndon Johnson was a powerful advocate for big government policies and programs. As part of his vision for The Great Society, he championed the creation of a national system of educational television and radio stations.³³ Signed into law on November 7, 1967, the Public Broadcasting Act extended the authority of the ETFP through fiscal year 1971, and included steadily increasing authorizations for \$10.5 million, \$12.5 million, and \$15 million in each of the following three fiscal years. The act replaced the \$1 million per state limit with a flat 8.5% per state cap, extended grants to U.S. territories, collapsed the provisions for the maximum federal match to 75% for any award, and expanded the program to include grants to cover the costs of facility planning initiatives.³⁴ The act, however, contained no provision for long-term financing for public broadcasting, thus avoiding possible constitutional challenges associated with government involvement in matters of free expression.³⁵

With the expanded mandate to serve both television and radio, the ETFP was renamed the Educational Broadcasting Facilities Program (EBFP) within the DHEW. The program was nested within the department's Office of Education as one of several federal programs supporting adult education. But alongside continuing education, public library services, and initiatives in the arts and humanities, the EBFP was an outlier. Opinions varied in the agency and in the administration about the proper role of the facilities awards and the relationship of the projects to those being undertaken by the CPB. Even as the Nixon administration accused public

broadcasters of political bias, the facilities program remained relatively noncontroversial because it was more closely identified with locally autonomous stations. Though Nixon vetoed CPB financing in 1972, touching off a battle with Congress that continued for months,³⁶ EBFP appropriations remained untouched. The program was extended through 1975 in Public Law 93-84, and again for another two years by President Ford in the Educational Broadcasting Facilities and Telecommunications Demonstration Act of 1976.³⁷

President Carter's budget for FY 1979 recommended transferring the EBFP to the CPB in order to resolve the apparent redundancy, and included a corresponding increase in CPB funding.³⁸ Though the plan was supported by DHEW and CPB, Congressional conservatives challenged Carter's proposal. Unlike the relatively non-controversial infrastructure initiatives, the CPB remained closely associated with politically charged content in public television. In the view of longtime public radio and television manager Dennis Haarsager, EBFP's specific focus on local infrastructure appealed to key members of Congress in both parties, who saw an opportunity to extend the program to cable, satellite, and other telecommunications technologies for public and educational services.

One such legislator was South Carolina Senator Ernest Hollings. As governor, Hollings had worked with public broadcasters in his state to acquire EBFP funds to expand the South Carolina Educational Television network.³⁹ Under the circumstances, it became more politically feasible to keep the program independent of the CPB by transferring it to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, a new agency in the Department of Commerce. The proposal

became reality in the Public Telecommunications Act of 1978. The act also reauthorized the program at a level of \$40 million through fiscal year 1981.⁴⁰

Educational broadcasting becomes public telecommunications

With the move to the NTIA, the EBFPP was renamed the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program. The scope of the initiative widened to include nonbroadcast projects in addition to those for planning, broadcasting, and interconnection. Under the rules and policies adopted in 1979, the PTFP gave highest priority to projects that provided "telecommunications facilities for first service to a geographic area," followed in priority order by projects to activate or extend "significantly different additional services" to geographic areas; projects to improve existing station facilities; and projects to add new capabilities to existing stations.⁴¹ Congress appropriated and President Carter approved \$24 million for fiscal year 1980, the highest level of financing since the program's inception. The new priorities touched off a flurry of comments from noncommercial broadcasting interests, including National Public Radio, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, and the Moody Bible Institute.⁴² Across the nation, hopeful broadcasters and planning groups jockeyed for priority status as they identified first-service opportunities in unserved and underserved localities.

The political environment of the PTFP changed dramatically with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. The philosophies of the New Deal and The Great Society were replaced in the executive branch by a staunchly conservative ideology, and deep commitments to smaller government and lower taxes. Reagan's initial budget proposed a cut of almost \$30 million to the CPB as part of a broader

effort to "encourage direct beneficiaries and the private sector to make larger contributions to cultural activities."⁴³ The budget included no funds for the PTFP after FY 1982.⁴⁴ Reagan offered no plan to transfer the activities of the PTFP to CPB. Instead, to serve the broader goal of reduced government spending, the program would simply be eliminated. While the budget document offered no justification for zeroing out the program, the prevailing posture of the administration toward public broadcasting implied that the PTFP was considered to be an unnecessary burden on the public treasury.⁴⁵ The FY 1983 proposal was the first of twelve consecutive annual executive budgets that sought to eliminate funding for the PTFP.

In March 1982, with the country in the grips of the most sustained economic recession in fifty years, the administration proposed another round of budget reductions. Reagan asked the Congress to rescind the PTFP's existing authorization and terminate the agency outright. Immediately, the program had to stop processing applications. But once again, the grassroots appeal of the program proved hard to overcome. Local interests lobbied their representatives and senators to stand up for projects in their districts and states. Congress responded by disapproving the administration request. The action allowed PTFP to resume its activities.⁴⁶

With the immediate crisis averted, a diverse group of legislators, including conservative Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona and liberal Democratic Representative Timothy Wirth of Colorado, stepped forward with bi-partisan plans to ensure the future of the PTFP and reauthorize funding for the coming years. Though Wirth's attempt to reauthorize the program in a new version of the Public Telecommunications Act failed, some of the provisions of Wirth's proposal survived

in the Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, including the reauthorization of the PTFP through FY 1984.⁴⁷ While this made the survival of the program more likely, the subsequent appropriation for FY 1983 was reduced to \$15 million. The \$12 million appropriated the following year cut the program to half of its size under the Carter administration.

Though the authorization lapsed in FY 1985, members of the divided Congress declared administration proposals to zero out the PTFP "dead on arrival," and managed to restore the program to previous funding levels through a series of continuing resolutions.⁴⁸ When the broader issue of the federal role in public broadcasting resurfaced in the 100th Congress, the grassroots appeal of the PTFP manifested itself again in the Public Telecommunications Act of 1988, which included authorizations for both the PTFP and the CPB through FY 1991.⁴⁹ As the executive branch passed to the administration of George H. W. Bush, the sharp ideological confrontations that threatened the PTFP in the early 1980s gave way to a less confrontational period. While the administration continued to advocate the elimination of the PTFP, Congress continued annual appropriations at levels comparable to those established in the decade before. With the passage of the Public Telecommunications Act of 1992, the reauthorization of the program through FY 1994, and the subsequent election of Democrat Bill Clinton, it seemed that the future of the program was more secure.⁵⁰ The 1992 act, however, marked the last time the PTFP was granted the security of a multi-year authorization.

The long denouement

During the Clinton administration, the PTFP reappeared as a line item in every executive budget. The final appropriation for 1994 restored the program to \$24 million. But the following fall, federal politics underwent another dramatic shift, as conservatives took control of both houses of Congress for the first time in four decades, re-awakening the partisan divisions of the early 1980s. Guided by the policy goals of the Reagan years, energized Congressional conservatives took up the causes of smaller government, lower taxes, and the privatization of cultural programs, including public broadcasting.⁵¹ The political conflict over the federal budget led to a shutdown of non-essential federal agencies for six days in November 1995. Unable to agree on a budget, the Congress resolved the stalemate by a series of continuing resolutions that allowed government agencies to re-open for twelve months. In the aftermath of the battle, the PTFP appropriation was reduced to \$13.5 million.⁵² Following another, longer shutdown the following year, the appropriation was reduced again by continuing resolution to \$13 million.⁵³ The PTFP was restored to pre-shutdown levels after Clinton's 1996 re-election, but continuing divisions in the government made it impossible to achieve the compromises required to reauthorize the program.⁵⁴

Even without an authorization, other actions of the 104th Congress supported the continuation of the PTFP. Under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, television broadcasters were given ten years to convert their transmission systems from analog to digital technologies.⁵⁵ Subsequently, as part of the Clinton Administration campaign to develop the National Information Infrastructure (NII), the PTFP received appropriation increases between 2000 and 2003 to assist

stations with digital transmission conversion.⁵⁶ The additional funds helped hundreds of public television and radio stations in most U.S. states to upgrade to digital transmission. The promise of digital television service for all Americans, and the momentum of digital conversion initiative, helped to sustain the PTFP in the Congress, and through the change of administrations in 2001.

In FY2003, the program was again eliminated in the executive budget proposal of Republican President George W. Bush. As before, a combination of grassroots lobbying by public broadcasters and citizen groups, and actions by key legislators, managed to sustain the PTFP as it was swept up in annual fights over CPB funding. In 2005, with long-time public broadcasting advocate Republican Ted Stevens of Alaska serving as president of the Senate, the PTFP was sustained even after the Republican-controlled House Appropriations Committee voted for its elimination. Public television manager Steve Bass attributed the victory to the efforts of individual constituents, and the leadership of members of Congress.⁵⁷ Subsequent battles took place with regularity in the following years, even as the makeup of the Congress shifted. Stevens of Alaska, Hollings of South Carolina, and other longtime members of the Congress who had worked with public broadcasters to bring PTFP projects to their constituencies, were voted out or retired.

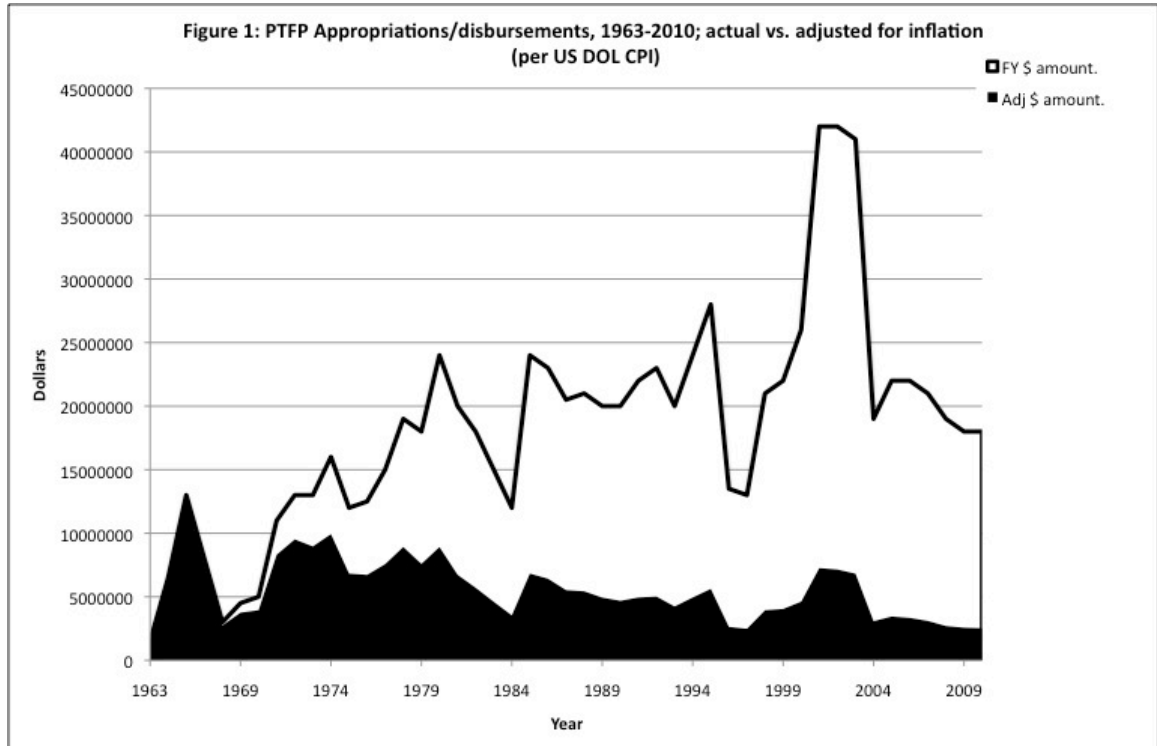
In 2008, the U.S. was thrust into the largest financial crisis since the Great Depression. PTFP's project of digital conversion was largely complete, and the long-simmering issues of cost, redundancy, and federal support for social programs returned to the forefront of the debate over public broadcasting. The forces of fiscal conservatism unleashed in the aftermath of the crisis proved to be more than any

constituency, individual, or group of legislators could overcome. Even the election of Democrat Barak Obama could not stop the momentum toward fiscal austerity. In May 2010, the director of the chief executive's Office of Management and Budget cited the PTFP as an example of federal spending that was "not merit-based" and "plainly wasteful and duplicative."⁵⁸

In February 2011, the Obama administration informed Congress of its intent "to terminate new funds for the Public Telecommunications Facilities Grant Program."⁵⁹ Asserting that the CPB was the more appropriate agency to assist capital projects, the proposal allowed the President to appease fiscal conservatives with a budget cut of \$18 million. Members of both political parties, in both houses of Congress, accepted the proposal virtually without debate. Retired former PTFP director Dennis Connors commented that the program "was an easy target" in the arena of federal politics.⁶⁰ In a few trade journals, a handful of public station managers conveyed anxiety about the erosion of federal support, and some engineers expressed concern for the replacement of aging infrastructure,⁶¹ but no general outcry arose in the broader press. After nearly half a century, the primary program that helped to build America's system of public radio and television stations passed quietly into history.

Looking back on the PTFP

Figure 1⁶²



For the purpose of comparison over the 48-year history of the PTFP, appropriations adjusted with reference to the value of the U.S. dollar in 1963.

The trajectory of the appropriations to the PTFP offers some insight into the history of the program (fig. 1). When the effects of inflation are accounted for, the data show that the largest investment of government resources was made at the outset, when policy makers embraced Johnson's lofty goals. After the reauthorization of 1967, conservative policy makers attempted to substantially reduce or eliminate the PTFP in fiscal years 1975, 1983, and 1996/97. Each of these efforts took place at a time when policy makers were engaged in ideological debates about the affirmative role of the federal government in the advancement of a national system of public broadcasting.

Though the PTFP was politically popular and noncontroversial, after 1967 the program was regularly hobbled by its association with the CPB, and more fundamentally by the marginal and controversial status of public broadcasting in the U.S. The mission of the PTFP was limited to the broadly accepted tasks of supporting the construction of local facilities and the acquisition of equipment, making the program popular with legislators. But the funding was often tied to the political fortunes of a larger and more politically volatile agency, the CPB.

The significant increases in PTFP appropriations coincided with key developments in the construction of the public broadcasting system. At each of these points, politically powerful individuals advanced the cause of the PTFP through the political system. With Johnson's leadership at the outset, the program reinvigorated the nation's existing educational stations, and established new ones. In the 1980s, the PTFP was bolstered by the bipartisan actions of Wirth and Goldwater, extending broadcast services into unserved and underserved areas, and linking stations to distribution networks through satellite and other interconnection facilities. In the 1990s, within Clinton's national telecommunications infrastructure, the PTFP's digital transition initiatives touched practically every federal district, and provided legislators with an easy justification to overlook the fiscal concerns of the moment in order to accommodate immediate, one-time projects that benefitted their constituents directly.

Blakely and Mitchell give credit for the popularity and success of the PTFP to the contributions of private, local, state interests. By requiring local participation in projects, the PTFP engendered grassroots investment in and support for the

agencies that received PTFP awards. The financial exigencies of 2008 greatly reduced funding and support from these constituencies. State and local government revenues plummeted. Contributions from private foundations dried up as they lost investment income. Private citizens worried about the economy, and reduced donations to charitable causes. As long as some combination of non-federal resources could be cobbled together to support PTFP projects, federal policy makers had reasons to contribute to the success of the initiatives. After 2008, the grassroots momentum that sustained the PTFP for decades dissipated against the prevailing forces of the recession.

In the view of NTIA Associate Administrator Bernadette McGuire-Rivera, digital transition was the PTFP's greatest achievement. But once the transition was complete, there was "no further need for" the PTFP in the view of the Obama administration and the Congress.⁶³ The transition became the program's endgame. Six decades after the establishment of the PTFP, the CPB counts more than 900 public radio and 350 public television stations in its sphere.⁶⁴ More stations operate without CPB assistance. These numbers suggest that for policy makers, the mission of the PTFP was substantially fulfilled at the time the program was terminated. Moving forward, the future of terrestrial broadcasting is intertwined with the regulatory, economic, and technical conditions associated with broadband delivery.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The Public Telecommunications Facilities Program played a significant role in the establishment of public broadcasting in the United States. Though several

attempts were undertaken, federal policy makers were never able to agree upon a set of principles and policies to establish a more permanent approach to funding the public telecommunications facilities system. Consequently, the PTFP remained a program that served the short-term interests of policy makers and their immediate constituencies. Mired in the conflicts and constraints embedded in the American approach to public broadcasting, the PTFP operated under a narrow directive to encourage investments in the hardware and infrastructure associated with homegrown capital projects.

As the EBFP, the initiative had connotations of individual empowerment and local control that dovetailed neatly with commitments to localism contained in the Communications Act of 1934. The PTFP skirted around the more controversial issue of direct federal involvement in broadcasting. With the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, and the emergence of the CPB, the politics of the PTFP became entangled with those of the larger, more controversial agency. The shift from "educational" to "public" broadcasting represented a significant expansion of the federal government's role as an affirmative force for public communication. Thereafter, the fortunes of the PTFP were connected to the more erratic politics of the CPB.

The ideological battle lines have been apparent from the beginning. When the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 was passed, minority Republicans in the House led by Samuel L. Devine of Ohio argued that the "economic system is on the verge of collapse and many desirable things must be put aside indefinitely. Could anyone seriously argue that this program to enhance public broadcasting is

indispensable?"⁶⁶ In the early years, the conflict was muted by the noncontroversial rhetoric of public education, and mitigated by the economic buffer of the postwar boom. Over time, calls for fiscal restraint merged with other apprehensions. Even under these challenging circumstances, the PTFP accomplished a series of important objectives, including the build-out of transmission and production facilities, the interconnection of broadcast stations to content distribution systems, and the conversion from analog to digital transmission technologies. Time will tell if a more permanent approach to the American public media system will emerge in the future.

Notes

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