

**Public Television in a Time of Technological Change  
and Socioeconomic Turmoil:  
The Cases of France and the United States**

**Part I**

**Looking Back:  
The Theory, The Promise, and The Contradictions**

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This two-part article compares the different histories of public broadcasting in France and the United States in the context of their different national sociopolitical cultures. It reviews the contemporary conditions facing public broadcasting in the two countries and examines what the common and different elements reveal about the future of public media. Against the backdrop of serious threats to both traditional media and public service systems, the paper inquires into the sustainability of the two models. Part I relates how public broadcasting came into being in each country—with what missions, funding, and structures, and with which built-in contradictions. Part II examines how current changes in technology, social uses of media, and broader policy deliberations are affecting public broadcasting's goals, as well as how the current challenges and opportunities they establish are being met. The papers find that historical patterns of national policy and public broadcasting organization and funding have persisted and have systematically run counter to important elements of the core public media missions and have thereby inhibited the prospects for real reform and full realization of the public service ideal in both nations.

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*I do not conclude . . . that we shall ever be necessarily led to draw the same political consequences which the Americans have derived from a similar social organization. I am far from supposing that they have chosen the only form of government which a democracy may adopt; but as the generating cause of laws and manners in the two countries is the same, it is of immense interest for us to know what it has produced in each of them.*

**~ Alexis de Tocqueville**

## Part I

### Looking Back: The Theory, The Promise, and The Contradictions

#### 1. Introduction and Overview

In the early part of the 21st century, public television (PTV) is once again facing a series of crises, and, as so often before, powerful political and social forces are raising questions about its legitimacy and future, all in the context of serious challenges to traditional media. The current manifestations of this phenomenon seem to be worldwide and are a consequence of converging technological, social, and market changes—the advent of digital television, the Internet, and mobile media; a new order both of broadened content and more engagement of users and the public at large in its construction; and heightened commercial expectations. All these developments strike directly at the question of public service broadcasting's role and authority in early 21st-century democracies.

The literature about public broadcasting revolves around three enduring issues: (1) the question of its mission in the cultural discourse of its host societies; (2) the means for supporting it, while also protecting its independence from political and commercial influence; and (3) the nature of its governance, its organizational and distribution structures, and its programming and services (Achille & Bueno, 1994; Avery & Pepper, 1980; Bardoel & d'Haenans, 2008; Briggs, 1961; Day, 1995; Engleman, 1996; Regourd, 2008; Rowland, 1993, 1998, 2002; (Vedel & Bourdon, 1993; Vedel, 2005). These questions remain central in the policy debates about public media, and they also are now being infused with inquiry about the implications of rapidly changing new digital and broadband technologies and related socioeconomic models.

In light of increasingly global questions about technology, economics, and cultural issues, there will be more attention to comparative questions in all aspects of media research. Heretofore, such an approach has not been a major emphasis in public broadcasting inquiry. Regardless of the exact topics or themes, the tendency has been to examine public broadcast systems unilaterally, as case studies of an aspect of the media in just one institution's own nation. There are journal and book-length anthologies that provide individual treatments of particular issues or histories of public broadcasting in different societies (Atkinson et al., 1997; Avery, 1993; Browne, 1989; McCauley et al., 2003), as well as some that mix treatments of public, state, and private systems globally (e.g., Emery, 1969; EUMAP, 2005). But, with few exceptions (e.g., Palmer & Tunstall, 1990; Sergeant, 1999), there is little that attempts to stand the public service analyses side by side, explicitly contrasting the developments, structures, problems, and performances of the separate public media systems.

Further, much of the comparative research is descriptive and relatively atheoretical. That is, it tends to be written without direct reference to its underlying social and political perspectives. It therefore has difficulty placing its individual narratives in any framework that comparatively explains the sociocultural and political economic conditions that define particular media histories, structures, and services, as well as the relevant communications policy contexts.

A goal of these two papers is to contribute to broadening the public media literature by more directly comparing public service broadcasting institutions in a common framework, while also projecting that analysis in light of a more self-conscious social theory. The tack taken here grows out of various elements of a wide-ranging set of critical, institutional, and cultural approaches that have energized much of communications studies globally in the past generation (e.g., Carey, 1989; Habermas, 1976; Hall et al., 1980; Hoggart, 1971; McQuail, 2000; Mi  ge, 1989; Postman, 1993; Smith, 1973; Williams, 1980). From such perspectives, it is possible to better understand the relationships among the media, government, and society.

Much of this work derives from and differs internally on the age-old Western struggles between materialist and idealist world views, ascribing different priorities to institutional issues (ownership; forms of production; and sources and deployment of fiscal, technological, and social resources) and cultural matters (questions of interpretation, meaning, and belief systems). There also are important international distinctions among those polarities. But for the purposes of this project, with its emphasis on media policy, the collective value of the critical and cultural perspectives is that they point to the social construction of the public and private spheres within which media structures and content are built, by critically examining the political, economic, social, and ideological histories that shape those forums and policy outcomes.

Albeit often indirectly, those debates have framed the core issues raised by and about public service media in every society, including the meaning and character of the public, markets, the state, technology, independence, and quality. The intent here is to bring those arguments to bear directly on the experiences and struggles over public broadcasting in two nations, with an eye to such approaches being more systematically used in the international, comparative study of public media and communications policy more generally.

The Tocquevillian interest in comparing the parallel emerging democracies of the United States and France has persisted as an enduring subject of comparative political and social analysis in the two countries (Aron, 1967; *Journal of Democracy*, 2000; Kaid et al., 1991; *The Tocqueville Review*, 2006). Its relevance has spread across various subjects over the years and now can be brought to bear directly on the question of each society's contemporary media systems. Nearly two centuries later, the different general media policy histories and the separate public broadcasting experiences of the two nations offer telling insights into how the two political systems have evolved and have come to represent major poles of perspective on the core issues facing public media in the early 21st century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Comparisons between French and U.S. public media, however, are uncommon. Most of the comparative studies, perhaps because of the language barrier, have focused on the BBC. We attempt here to look

Nearly all governments initially decided that broadcast media should provide for far more than commercial entertainment. Even in the United States, the most capitalistic of nations, Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce in the Republican Coolidge administration, declared at the fourth national Washington Radio Conference in 1925: "Radio is not to be considered as a business. . . . It is to be considered as a public concern, impressed with a public trust, and to be considered primarily from the standpoint of public interest" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1925). Thus began one of the formal enunciations in media policy of a "fiduciary principle" for broadcasting adopted in most Western societies, though, at that point, its contradictions in the United States were not well understood.

A common mantra for broadcasting was the tripartite mission statement "to inform, entertain and educate," articulated as early as 1922 by even such a U.S. broadcast entrepreneur as RCA's David Sarnoff (Archer, 1939, p. 31). But the meanings of those terms were to prove slippery and quite differently interpreted from society to society.

The core definition of "public service" broadcasting emerged most powerfully in the UK during the early and mid-1920s as the result of two major public enquiries into radio, as well of the experiences of founding and transforming the BBC from a commercial company controlled by British and U.S. electronics manufacturers and licensed by the Post Office into to a crown corporation (Briggs, 1961). What became known as the Reithian model evoked a set of commonly applied principles—universality; non-commercialism; independence (from both the market and the state); providing impartial news, public affairs, and quality content; and serving national culture, minority interests, language, and identity (Harrison & Wessels, 2005, p. 835; Reith, 1924).<sup>2</sup> That core set of values came to serve as the ideal for public broadcasting in most Western democracies, and to this day, the charters and mission statements of most public service institutions cite the central themes with only slight variations (with the arguable exception of the non-commercial aspect).

While the fiduciary approach was widely adopted, at least nominally, in most Western European countries, there were a series of adjustments to the model, as reflected in many broadcasting system accommodations to both state and commercial interests. In the United States, "the public interest" tradition turned out to be much more problematic than was initially understood (Rowland, 1997a, 1997b). Broadcasting came to be defined largely as a private commercial enterprise serving primarily as an entertainment vehicle to deliver advertising to consumers. It was to have a "light touch" regulatory regime with a narrow, techno-economic fiduciary definition that, while appearing to support a socially progressive public service remit, turned out to be mostly a cover for avoiding important aspects of it. Many proponents of regulation believed that there would be significant social, public service benefits from the application of the U.S. approach to regulation. They did not understand the pre-existing weaknesses of the public

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beyond the obvious choice in large part because of how the French system more directly represents the general experience among European nations.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. W. Reith was the founding General Manager (later Director General) of the BBC, principally responsible during 1922–1938 for shaping its non-commercial mission, program standards, and the terms of its independence.

interest standard in administrative law, and therefore, they failed to realize that the imperatives of the market basis for the broadcasting enterprise would generally undermine those expectations.

Where the U.S. approach represented a relatively pure expression of the assumption that private, commercially supported broadcasting could adequately serve the public interest, the French approach assumed that the social benefits of a public service orientation could be provided through a more state-dominated system, even with aspects of commercialism that would develop over time. That model of a closer association with government and a system relying on a mix of tax-based and advertising support reflected the dominant model among the majority of other democracies worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Public broadcasting has been at similar crossroads before. Every major change in media technology (television, cable, satellite, and broadband) and political ideology (the social unrest of the 1960s, the rise of marketplace liberalism and the counterpoints of the "third way" in the 1980s and 1990s) has occasioned serious reconsideration of the rationale and prospects for public media. In every such instance, public broadcasting has survived, largely with the understanding that the market cannot fulfill all the public service needs in the media, that overt state control is patently anti-democratic, and that a publicly supported middle-ground alternative remains necessary. However, the current context of evermore sweeping technological and global economic and social change presents as serious a set of challenges to that understanding as ever before. Those conditions have been keenly felt in many nations, and particularly in France and the United States, where, in the 2008–2011 period, there have been vigorous debates about the future of the media and the role of information in local, national, and regional communities, all with direct implications for the public media (Center for Social Media, 2009; Cop  , 2008; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Free Press, 2009; Knight, 2009; Matelepublique.fr, n.d.; Scam.fr, n.d.).

Some of the reports have led to official inquiries and even attempts at practical policy changes in public media mission, structure, and funding, while in other cases, the debates have followed from government initiative. In France and the United States there have been tellingly parallel developments. Within their first two years, the young Sarkozy and Obama administrations each announced and attempted to implement what they styled as "reforms" of the public-service media. The Sarkozy effort was focused through the Cop   "Commission for the New Public Television" (2008) and its aftermath in 2009 and 2010. In the United States, the challenges have been embedded in the "Future of the Media" and "National Broadband Plan" initiatives at the Federal Communications Commission, both supported by Congress and the Obama White House (FCC, 2010a, 2010b).

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<sup>3</sup> The UK system is typically seen as the arch example of the independent, noncommercial approach to public broadcasting and the proper polar opposite of the U.S. system, because the BBC is supported almost entirely by the license fee, and it does not carry advertising in its domestic services. That image, however, belies what is, in fact, also a mixed system in the UK. Channel 4 has a public service remit, yet it is supported by advertising, and, though much less strict now, the origins of the commercially supported independent television companies (ITV) were under a public service charter. As for its independence, the BBC's well-known World Services have heretofore been supported by direct government grants (Foreign Office). The more transparently mixed funding system and closeness to government of the French situation is more typical of most European public broadcasting systems.

In France, and as for several prior decades, these questions continue to be complicated by the development of the European Union. The European Commission has sent conflicting signals over the years about the extent to which it sees its mandate as extending to cultural enterprises of individual nations. That confusion was manifest once again in 2009, in a revised "Communication" on the application of state aid rules to public service broadcasting, "designed to safeguard healthy competition,"<sup>4</sup> where the emphasis seemed to be on the concerns of the private sector about competition from publicly subsidized institutions (Euroactiv, 2009). Meanwhile, the U.S. government and other interests have emphasized further liberalization (privatization) of media services worldwide, and that ethos has, according to some, threatened to overwhelm European approaches to public service media policy (Harcourt, 2005; Humphreys, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

The French role in defining EU communications policy making is particularly notable because, throughout the postwar period, France had been a leader in the overall shaping of the Union, while all along it was vacillating about the proper funding models and degrees of independence of its own domestic public service media institutions (Palmer & Tunstall, 1990).

All nations with public service broadcasting systems have adapted their structures and financing in various forms peculiar to their own political and social cultures (Regourd, 1992). Western Europe remains in theory what Raboy (in Atkinson et al., 1997, p. 78) calls "the heartland of traditional public service broadcast." By that, he means that most European countries have strong commitments to publicly supported broadcasting systems rooted in the traditional elements of culture, education, and national identity. That understanding has been more "natural" in the context of European history and political cultures; by contrast, it has been far less comfortable in the United States.

But even in Europe, the situation also has always been complex and in tension with the Reithian ideal. Over time, nearly all the European systems developed mixed funding models—hybrids of public tax and commercial advertising support. Most, too, have had checkered histories relative to independence

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<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the Treaty of Rome (1957), the question of establishing common standards for broadcasting grew in importance. The *Television Without Frontiers Directive* in 1989 became the cornerstone of the EU's (then the European Community) audiovisual policy, replaced by *Audiovisual Media Services Directives* in 2007 and 2010. European Community law does not recognize a difference between public and private broadcasting. A special regime was established for broadcasters with a public-service mandate in the 1997 *Amsterdam Protocol on the System of Public Broadcasting* that set out the competencies of the EU and its member states. The basic principles of the Commission's policy regarding state aid for public-service broadcasting were first stated in its 2001 *Broadcasting Communication*, and a revised *Communication* was adopted in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> As applied in the European context, "liberalization" can be misunderstood in the United States. It generally refers to the classical liberal notion of freedom from state control and is therefore associated with the rise of private marketplace policies. It is not associated with the U.S. political distinction between "liberal" and "conservative" ideologies. In U.S. terms, the European "liberalization" project is best understood as being associated with privatization and conservative agendas.



from their governments. Even after the totalitarian experiences during World War II and the creation or restoration of democratic forms of government by mid-century, most "public" media systems tended to remain close to, and even frequently under the direct control of, the governments of the day.

France is a good example of this contradictory heritage. Chartered and re-chartered over the years under the rhetoric of the public service tradition, its national public broadcasting institutions have been variously commercialized and related to the state. The license fee and the commercial support structure have permitted French public television to remain a large, central institution in French broadcasting and media culture, and the justification for its continuance has rested largely on the traditional grounds that broadcasting services are to be about more than mere merchandising and simple economic definitions of purpose. While the French model can be seen as a quintessential example of a European "culture philosophy" approach (Atkinson et al., 1997, p. 38), it is, however, as with many other systems over the decades, caught between two conflicting mandates—expected to live up to high-minded civic, social, and cultural purposes while also having to be popular, and thereby trying to respond to its commercial competitors by imitating them (Garnham, 1983; Silj, 1992).

By contrast, U.S. broadcasting has been the archetype of the market-driven "economic philosophy" in media. Its public television has been largely an afterthought, thoroughly overshadowed by the prior commercial, private-ownership system. It therefore remains the most marginal and least well-supported of all public service systems among the advanced democracies.<sup>6</sup> Although it has come to provide a much broader general public service than its educational radio and television progenitors in the 1930-50s, it retains much of that pedagogic heritage with a high-culture gloss. As a result, and also due to having started late (in the 1960s and 1970s), it is trapped in a small-niche alternative model that is not expected to be able to compete with the dominant commercial system at home, or to be as popular as its public television counterparts abroad. Ironically, since at least the early 1980s, it also has been under considerable pressure to take commercial corporate support ("underwriting"). As that modified form of advertising has grown, U.S. public television also has, in its own way, become caught between the conflicting "cultural" and "economic" mandates.

The empirical purpose of this two-part article is to examine more thoroughly the different histories of public broadcasting in France and the United States in the context of their different national sociopolitical cultures, to review the contemporary conditions facing public broadcasting in the two countries, and in making those comparisons, to better understand what the common and different elements reveal about the future of public media. Against the backdrop of serious threats to both traditional media and public service systems, we examine the sustainability of the two models. To that end, in Part I, we relate how public broadcasting came into being in each country—with what missions, funding, and structures—and with what built-in contradictions. In Part II, we examine how the current changing context is affecting public broadcasting's mission, as well as how the current challenges and opportunities are being met. We attempt to ascertain whether the present conditions will continue to support public media in the two nations, and if so, under what terms.

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<sup>6</sup> It also is arguably the most structurally complicated, with results that further inhibit its flexibility, sap its strength, and check its development.

## 2. Mandates and Policies

### A. Early Years

French radio broadcasting began in 1921 and remained, until 1939, under the jurisdiction of the *Postes Téléphones et Télégraphes* (PTT), perpetuating a French tradition of the state controlling transmission networks dating back to the rise of a national postal service during the 15th-century reign of Louis XI.

Because of the heavy role of the state during World War II, one might have expected a strong repudiation of government control in the postwar era. But from the outset, there had always been much more comfort in France with state control of, or influence over, systems of transportation and other forms of communications, such as roads, rail, the post and telecommunications—along with a great amount of suspicion about private motives in radio broadcasting. Much of the concern about the private-public balance in France at the time of television's rise in the 1940s and 1950s was driven by the disaffection with the private sector and the compromises it had made with the Vichy regime (Vedel & Bourdon, 1993, p. 31).

In this climate of strong distrust of private interests, the first postwar broadcasting ordinance revoked all private licenses and restored an absolute state monopoly over radio. The *Radiodiffusion Télévision Française* (RTF) was established in November 1945 as an explicit state agency, and until 1958 it remained under the direct authority of each successive government (officially subject to the prime minister, though often delegated to the minister of information).

Between 1959 and 1974, French broadcasting underwent a series of changes that modified its administrative and judicial structure, but it remained under government control. In 1959, it was established as an autonomous public institution with an independent budget, but with no independent board, and still operating under the Information Ministry. A 1964 law abolished the old RTF, replacing it with the *Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française* (ORTF), which was set up with a board of directors controlled by the state, and it generally remained under the stewardship (*tutelle*) of the information minister.

The new law endowed the national organization for the first time with the status of being a "public service" entity, and it also seemed to clarify the purposes of French broadcasting, in typical public service terminology, stating that its mission was: ". . . to meet the needs and aspirations of the population, as regards information, communication, culture, education, entertainment, and all the values of civilization [and] to impose, in this domain, the exclusive concerns of the community's general interest" (Parlement, 1964, Article I).

This articulation reflected the traditional understanding that cultural concerns constituted the bedrock of French broadcasting. First radio, and then television, had been understood to be important components of the best of the society's literature, arts, music, theatre, and language. The phrasing in the

1964 law would be readopted in a series of successive measures (in 1972, 1974, and 1982). The 1974 law added another public service element, namely that the ORTF was to "participate in the dissemination of French culture in the world" (Parlement, 1974, Article I).

What remained elusive, however, was the notion of, first, political, and then eventually, commercial independence. That core provision of the public service canon was repeatedly compromised by the fact that French broadcasting was never able to extract itself from the old patterns of state control. The literature reports numerous cases of direct censorship by postwar politicians. President Charles De Gaulle, for instance, is alleged to have declared, "My opponents have the press. Why shouldn't I have television?" (Browne, 1989, p. 72). Throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, this tension tended to distance French public television from the main principles at the basis of the public service democratic project. As Regourd notes, "the state monopoly was reduced to a political monopoly" (2008, p. 57).

Following the tumultuous social and political events of 1968, the government attempted further reforms—notably, in the early 1970s. The 1974 law represented a fundamental new step by disbanding the unified ORTF and replacing it with seven independent, state-financed companies: three partially autonomous and competitive television companies (TF 1, Antenne 2, and FR 3), with each having its own president and administrative board; *Soci  t   Fran  aise de Production* (SFP), to produce most of the programming; *T  l  diffusion de France* (TDF), to be in charge of transmission and distribution; *Institut National de l'Audiovisuel* (INA), to maintain the public broadcasters' programming archives; and Radio France. Some criticized the law as representing the beginning of a "commercialized state television"—halfway between what existed previously and a more thoroughly competitive private and public television system (Missika & Wolton, 1983).

During this period, the independence question was manifest in the funding arrangement. Although the system remained officially a public service monopoly, the license fees were insufficient to cover the costs of its growth, and, rather than increase them adequately, the government had permitted advertising to be introduced in 1968. By the end of the 1970s, broadcasting thus was caught in a large contradiction between being a tax-based "public service" entity and behaving increasingly like commercial media, all with overtones of government control. So, throughout the 1945–1982 period, television remained a state monopoly, with no private commercial competition, while yet itself becoming more commercialized. This was a common development among European broadcast systems; though in France, particularly, there was great ambivalence about that change: "In France, the State, the nation, public service, the mistrust of the economy are values so tightly interwoven within a centralized institutional system that any change is invested with a political and emotional load nowhere as strong" (Missika & Wolton, 1983, p. 121).

By contrast, U.S. broadcasting had begun largely as a commercial enterprise (Barnouw, 1966; McChesney, 1993; Rowland, 1993, 1997b, 2002). It was designed almost from the start in the 1920s to serve principally as an advertising medium—to treat audiences as markets, and to deliver them to industrial clients. The measures of success were not associated with issues of quality or resonance with national identity and social exploration; they were defined almost entirely by questions of popularity and ratings (audience size).

In the wake of World War I and the eroding cultural constraints of the Victorian era, U.S. politics and social outlook were nearly a generation beyond the height of agrarian Populism, urban Progressivism and the initial rise of federal administrative (regulatory) agencies. In the business boosterism “ballyhoo” years of the 1920s (Allen, 1931; Schlesinger, 1957, pp. 77–84), American society was rededicating itself to core elements of marketplace capitalism, resistance to further inroads of federal regulatory oversight, and the primacy of private ownership of all means of production, including culture. These policies were fostered by Republican congresses and presidents of the day (Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover), all under the uniquely American and contradictory doctrines of “progressive individualism” and “cultural democracy.”

Therefore, the “natural” American tendency at the time was to place the new radio technology in the private sector, and to fuel it with advertising dollars from the rapidly growing postwar consumer industries. Misgivings, if any, were related mostly to the growing awareness among broadcasters that they could not adequately police themselves relative to frequency controls, thus leading them to call for federal oversight of spectrum allocations and controls. But the implications of that request by the industry itself were unmistakable inside the policy establishment. Albeit couched in turn-of-the-century progressive state and federal regulatory terminology (“the public interest, convenience and necessity”), there had been quite clear, but unacknowledged, experience in other industrial and social sectors suggesting that the new broadcasting law, the Radio Act of 1927, would provide for minimal, largely technical federal intervention and little else (Rowland, 1997a). The Communications Act of 1934, the broadcasting portions of which were essentially a re-enactment of the 1927 law, established the core conditions for U.S. broadcasting and telecommunications—a policy regime that clearly provided for the dominance of private ownership and commercial purposes, and little public, press or even academic awareness of the contradictions in the fiduciary principle.

Unlike parallel developments in other countries, and largely because of misunderstandings about how the public interest standard had actually been working in state and federal regulation, the 1927 and 1934 laws made no provision for public service broadcasting. It was widely assumed, particularly among social critics, that as overseen by the fiduciary licensing system, a wealthy private broadcasting enterprise would provide all the necessary social benefits of radio and television. That helped lead to a conclusion that there was no strong need for an alternative noncommercial broadcast system, particularly one that might be construed as “state” broadcasting. As a result, there would be no major, positive public policy commitment to the concept and institutions of public service media until sufficient doubts had been raised about the social efficacy assumptions of the fiduciary principle and the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 (U.S. Congress, 1967).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The only semiserious prior effort to enact any special public broadcasting measure was the attempt to pass the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment during the debates over the Communications Act in 1934 (Rowland, 1998, p. 18). By comparison with the public service corporation chartering and national funding provisions already in place in Britain and elsewhere, the amendment was a modest proposal, only to set aside some spectrum for educational broadcasters. That even such a relatively light measure failed is a telling insight

The nearly exclusive policy commitment to the private sector began to change substantially only during the ferment of the 1960s. The various protest movements around such issues as the Vietnam War, civil rights, environmentalism, feminism, and consumer issues led to considerable debate about the quality of U.S. television and the inadequacies of the advertising-based system. Among other things, the existing television regime was accused of offering too much violence, inadequate journalism, and too little programming of quality for children and in arts and culture.

In the wake of the Sputnik scare about the quality of U.S. science education, there had been some initial federal funding for the support of instructional programming and the construction of educational television stations (ETV), as provided respectively in the National Defense Education Act (U.S. Congress, 1958) and the Educational Television Facilities Act (U.S. Congress, 1962). But it took several more years and the full-force support of President Lyndon Johnson and several senior congressional figures before the idea of federal support for general audience public broadcasting operations and programming became popular enough to achieve statutory endorsement.

During the early to mid-1960s, a growing number of noncommercial radio and television entities, and their audiences, created a critical mass of awareness, interest, and public support that led to more coordinated and explicit planning for the development of national program production and networking capacities, as well as for larger amounts of federal, state, foundation, and individual membership funding. Those interests began to focus particularly on the question of federal funding, and they culminated in the work of the Carnegie Commission on Public Television (Carnegie-I, 1967) and the passage of the 1967 Act. That law laid out a basic plan for completing the transformation from a relatively narrowly defined, highly localized, and U.S.-unique educational broadcasting model to one that encompassed more of the national, general audience purposes of public service broadcasting reflected in similar institutions abroad.

But even then the new provisions were minimal and inadequate for encouraging the emergence of a substantial noncommercial public broadcasting enterprise. There were no provisions for sufficient, insulated, and long-term federal funding, or for structural innovations appropriate to build a truly major national and local public broadcast system. The only arguably major federal policy support for public broadcasting by the mid-20th century had been the provisions by the FCC to reserve portions of, first, the FM radio spectrum and, then, VHF and UHF television for "noncommercial educational" (NCE) purposes. To this day, those reserved channels have never been re-named "public" or "public service" by the FCC. Their official NCE designation clearly signaled the government's primary interest in protecting spectrum real estate for educational purposes, and not necessarily, at least initially, for the general audience services more commonly associated with the notion of "public service" broadcasting everywhere else.

From the outset, U.S. public broadcasting appears to have been envisioned to be only what Raymond Williams (1974, p. 37) once called a "palliative"—to serve as little more than a band-aid on the ills of the dominant private, commercial system. The continuing history of U.S. communications policy

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into the overarching lack of policy interest in developing anything other than an almost exclusively commercial broadcasting system in the United States.

demonstrates that public television was never intended to be a major pillar of American broadcast and media culture, with the central status accorded it in most other Western and postwar industrialized democracies, including France.

#### B. Late-20th Century: Deregulation and into the Digital Era

French broadcasting underwent its next major set of changes, called “controlled deregulation,” in the early to mid-1980s during the presidency of socialist François Mitterrand. After World War II, a great deal of popular and industrial interest had developed in establishing a more entertainment-based, commercial broadcasting counterpart to the state, as evidenced by the hundreds of pirate radio stations (*radios libres*) springing up across the country and throughout Europe. At the same time, with the advances toward the European Union, in which France was then a leader, the overall European world view was shifting more and more toward “liberalization” of most economic sectors. By the 1980s, that privatization policy shift was increasingly being applied in the cultural sphere. Deregulatory pressures in French media policy also grew throughout the 1980s, yet the situation remained contradictory, as reflected in continuing government support of national corporate champions, irrespective of privatization policies (Palmer & Tunstall, 1990).

Following through on its campaign promise, the new socialist government seemed to be attempting to free broadcasting from the state. The 1982 Law on Audiovisual Communication stipulated that “audiovisual communications are free” (Art. 1), and that “the citizens are entitled to free and independent audiovisual communications” (Art. 2), thereby putting an end to state monopoly (Parlement, 1982). However, the state retained its transmission monopoly. As a result of the new policies, private television channels began to appear in the mid-1980s—Canal Plus in 1984 (subscription) and La 5 and La 6 in 1986 (free-to-air). However, the legal policy for over-the-air television was that of “public service concessions.” So the private television channels found themselves in the position of programming companies acting within the framework of public service missions.<sup>8</sup> Another important development was the creation of the *Haute Autorité*, the first attempt at an “independent” French communications regulatory agency that, among other things, was to have responsibility for appointing the people in charge of the public channels.

In September 1986, under a new conservative coalition (*cohabitation*), yet another broadcasting measure was passed. The so-called Léotard Law extended and clarified the 1982 statute by more explicitly establishing a general framework for a dual, public/private broadcasting system whereby both types of television were to coexist more formally (Parlement, 1986). The term “public service” was replaced by “public sector enterprise” as an indication of the new emphasis on marketplace deregulation.

But the main upheaval rendered by the 1986 law was the privatization of TF1, the oldest public channel. This move radically changed the broadcasting landscape in France, and it represented one of the largest shifts in the history of the struggle over the public-private balance in European media. With the

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<sup>8</sup> In December 1984, Canal Plus was created as a public service concession, by agreement between the state and Havas.

privatization of TF1, the commercial channels became instantaneously dominant, and by the end of the 1980s, TF1 alone commanded 40% of the audience and 50% of the television advertising revenues.

As had been the case with prior measures, the 1986 law seemed to reassert many of the traditional fiduciary tenets of public service media. Public broadcasting's mission was reiterated as "serving the general interest." The public channels were to meet the needs of the public by taking into account "all the constituents" of the population through a vast set of programs and services characterized by diversity and pluralism (heterogeneity of sources, channels, and programs). The new government also replaced the *Haute Autorit  * with the *Commission Nationale de la Communication et des Libert  s* (CNCL), which was said to be modeled on the American FCC (though without much apparent awareness of the contradictions in that agency).

Despite its policy appeals to the public service tradition, the L  otard law was largely responsible for finishing the initial stages of the privatization process and finally toppling French television over into a market system. It also showed the continuing extent of the intermingling of political and economic interests in France. By the early 1990s, it was possible to observe that, "Public broadcasting in France has been suffering from two structural problems: continuous government intervention in its operation, particularly in newscasting, and economic and organizational inefficiency" (Vedel & Bourdon, 1993, p. 29).

Francois Mitterrand was again elected President in 1988, but that development did not lead to any reversal of the trends during the prior *cohabitation* years, or to any serious questioning and unpacking of the 1986 law. The CNCL was itself replaced in January 1989 by a third new regulatory agency, the *Conseil Sup  rieur de l'Audiovisuel* (CSA), which was provided with an extended array of apparently stronger, enforceable powers. The CSA seemingly enjoyed some political legitimacy, and it was not replaced by the next conservative government.

At the beginning of the 1990s, France had become a leader in subscription television with the much-admired Canal Plus. At the same time, "French leadership took a great leap forward" regarding broadcasting and telecommunications policy in Brussels (Palmer & Tunstall, 1990). The interventionist and cultural policies that characterized France were reflected during that period in the appearance in 1993 of the concept of "*l'exception culturelle*." In direct opposition to U.S. policy, cultural exceptionalism rejected the idea that cinematographic and audiovisual works should fall under free trade principles (Regourd, 2002). This lingering concern was expressed strongly in a 1993 report to the minister of communication on the future of public television:

Because it is an instrument of knowledge, of culture in the broadest sense of the word, television is helping to form—for better or for worse—language, thought, reasoning, way of thinking, feeling, imagining, as well as living. It transmits values, it offers everyone a vision of the world and society. And this is a challenging area that France, by tradition, has always been careful to protect, at least in part, from market forces alone. (Campet et al., 1994, p. 10)

That view was consistent with the longstanding French principle about the responsibility of the state in the cultural arena (see the Preamble to the Constitution of 1946).

In this context, following the failure of the commercial channel La Cinq, the Franco-German cultural channel Arte was launched in 1992 as an attempt to create a pan-European cultural network, and La Cinquième was created in 1994 as a more explicitly educational channel.

Under the third coalition government of socialist Lionel Jospin, the 2000 law established *France Télévisions* as a public sector television holding company, grouping together the two remaining national public channels and La Cinquième (Parlement, 2000). It was intended to help PTV face the new competitive audiovisual environment. It also redefined and reorganized the missions of the public channels and reaffirmed the public service role "in the democratic life of the cultures of every state" as emphasized by Brussels. Nonetheless, the audiences of the educational and cultural channels remained small.<sup>9</sup>

The government laid out the national plan for the French conversion to digital television (DTT) in the 2000 law. After a series of hearings in 2002, the CSA selected eight operators that were granted DTT licenses in June 2003. At the same time, it allocated six digital channels to public television following the request of the minister of communication (Vedel, 2005). The French digital terrestrial platform came on line in March 2005, and by October 2006, 65% of the population was able to receive digital signals (Kuhn, 2006). A 2007 measure mandated that analog transmission would cease on November 30, 2011. *France Télévisions* took advantage of the launch of DTT to expand its services, first, when France 5 (La Cinquième until 2004) and Arte were given separate DTT networks, and second, with the creation in 2005 of France 4, aimed at the 25–49 demographic (Kuhn, 2006). It was assumed that the *France Télévisions* budget was sufficient to bear the cost of the DTT conversion (Malverde, 2007).

So, by the early part of the 21st century, and despite the major upheavals during the 1980s that had created a much stronger private, commercial system and seemed to be undermining French public television, *France Télévisions* also seemed to be thriving. In the run-up to the digital conversion, it was expanding its services. Further, as stated in its charter, it was authorized to be a "point of reference" for the country's entire broadcasting system; its values of pluralism, ethics, proximity, and quality were expected to be reflected throughout the nation's broadcasting media (see <http://charte.Francetv.fr>).

In the United States, public broadcasting had grown considerably during the three decades after the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, and it had earned strong public endorsement (APTS, 1999). But that public affection had not translated into the hard political and funding support necessary to make public broadcasting the more central institution in the nation's media culture that it was in nearly every other society, including France. As a result, its programming remit remained narrow, and its audiences small.

An additional set of federal policy problems for public broadcasting rested in the pattern of deregulation that had begun in the mid-to-late 1970s, and that stretched through a series of major

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<sup>9</sup> In 2006, the monthly audience share of Arte was 4.1% in France and 0.4% in Germany, and that of France 5 was 7.2%.



statutory changes and regulatory agency initiatives during the 1980s and 1990s, all culminating in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (U.S. Congress, 1996). The major developments in the deregulation movement included the break-up of the AT&T (Bell System) telephone monopoly, the elimination of community ascertainment and fairness doctrine requirements in broadcasting, and the loosening of media cross-ownership and concentration restrictions.

When examined closely, none of these laws or regulatory changes seems to have anything to do with public broadcasting. There are no provisions in them bearing on public radio and television. So the question arises, why should they be of note here? And that, of course, is precisely the point—public service broadcasting was largely ignored, and by implication, was not expected by leading political forces, Democrat or Republican, to play a major role in the late 20th-century new media environment. Therefore, in the major pieces of federal legislation defining the digital policy environment for the early 21st century, public broadcasting remained, at best, an afterthought.

By the late 1990s, all U.S. television, including the public system, was under the federal digital conversion mandate. But for public television, it would prove to be an unfunded mandate, placing a large capital fundraising burden on the stations by forcing them to raise considerable state and local monies to acquire all the equipment necessary for the new production, distribution, and transmission systems (see Part II).

### **3. Structure, Support, and Content**

#### **A. Organization**

All national systems of communication, including public broadcasting, reflect the constitutional patterns and tensions between the central (national) and the regional or local (state, provincial, or municipal) that define the political and governing structures of their particular societies. Thus, in keeping with their otherwise strong national political structures, most European and other advanced democratic societies, including France, have tended to develop relatively centralized and nationally dominated broadcast media systems.

Reflecting the longstanding French struggles over the relative powers of the national center and the regional periphery (Rosanvallon, 2004), there were repeated efforts to break down the national, Paris-centric television system. Those initiatives were never particularly successful.

Following the 1974 law, there appeared to be some initial success in breaking up the ORTF's unified control. The *Soci     Fran     de Production* (SFP) was given the status of a separate semi-public company,<sup>10</sup> and the new transmission and programming companies remained as state monopolies, although now separated. The new structure required the three separate programming companies to place 90% of their orders with the SFP. While remaining in the state monopoly logic of the ORTF, the SFP was put in the difficult position of having to carry heavier expenses than the much more flexible independent

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<sup>10</sup> Maintained as a public service, but partially managed by a private organization.

private production competitors that it began to face in the early 1980s.<sup>11</sup> From the outset, there also were allegations of gross SFP inefficiency (Browne, 1989). The French production situation also would be characterized as having too low a volume of fiction programs, with resources that were largely inferior to comparable European nations (Schwarz, 2003). The SFP was restructured several times, but it was finally sold to a private group in 2001.

During the 1981 presidential campaign, the Socialists pledged to introduce decentralization, but the goal again proved elusive (Albert & Tudesq, 1981). There was an increase in regional programs from 1983 onward, and the 1985 *Rapport Bredin* envisioned the creation of 80 local TV stations (Bredin, 1985). But in the end, only a small handful came into being, and regional programming remained underdeveloped.

Partial reunification was conceded with the establishment, in the 2000 law, of *France Télévisions* as a public service holding company under the management of a single president, but with the grouping of the different broadcasting components as semi-independent subsidiaries, each under the supervision of a CEO. This arrangement remained until 2008 and the developments initiated by President Sarkozy's announcement of his intention to ban advertising on the public television channels and his appointment of the Copé Commission.

In the United States, due to the size of the nation and its own deep-rooted federalist debates over the relative powers of the national and state governments, there were relatively stronger elements of local control of such public functions as education, arts, and culture than in other democracies. The pattern was more mixed in telecommunications and broadcasting. From almost the outset, the distribution technologies and commercial logics of the telegraph and telephone industries helped drive them toward networking infrastructures, national consolidation, and mega-corporate ownership.<sup>12</sup> Despite vestiges of local ownership in aspects of radio, particularly in small towns, the notion that broadcasting is a largely local, community-based enterprise remains a powerful public policy myth.

The one exception to that pattern and the singular aspect of U.S. broadcasting that has tended to remain more thoroughly close to the model of local control has been public broadcasting. Going back to the pre-1967 days of educational radio and television (ETV), all public broadcasting station licenses have been held by local- or state-level organizations (community nonprofit corporations, universities, school districts, or state education or telecommunications agencies). Prior to the 1967 law, and with the arguable

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<sup>11</sup> In the early 1980s, there were four major production houses: Telfrance, Hamster, Technisonor, and Telecip. After 1984, several more were created with the aid of the Ministry of Communication.

<sup>12</sup> That reality masks a continuing contradiction in U.S. media regulatory policy. Although the federal government pre-empted communications oversight from the states, to this day, the FCC does not directly license or regulate the national broadcasting networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC), despite the fact that, since the beginning of broadcasting, such organizations have owned stations, have controlled the major share of national program production, and have steadily migrated toward concentrated ownership—often with strong elements of cross-media consolidation.

exception of National Educational Television (NET) in the 1950s and 1960s, the noncommercial stations were not centralized in a way that resembled anything like the strong network organizations of the U.S. commercial system or the public and private systems abroad (Rowland, 2002).

The new public broadcasting legislation provided for the creation of a national funding organization, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and for federal funding for the development via CPB of "systems of interconnection" and national programming—what became the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR), and other associated entities. But that law and its later amendments also provided strong support for individual station operating autonomy within those structures, and it severely restricted the powers of CPB. The law explicitly prevented CPB from producing programming and owning or operating stations or networks, and in turn, CPB and the stations established similar restrictions on PBS, creating a singular anomaly among national broadcasting systems worldwide.<sup>13</sup> By contrast with the centralized, "top-down" public and private networks nearly elsewhere else, PBS and NPR were fashioned as "bottom-up" membership organizations, governed by boards of directors elected by the public television and radio stations and funded largely by dues paid by those stations. U.S. public broadcasting began and remained shaped in a hyper-Jeffersonian model that deliberately restricts the power and reach of its national organizations (Rowland, 1998).

#### B. Funding

While not always unanimous, there has been a general European consensus that public service broadcasting "needs an appropriate, secure funding frame" (EBU, 2000). In France, prior to the early 1950s, support for the fledgling television system had been entirely by the government. A television license fee was established in 1952 (the radio fee remained until 1980), and it was the only financing means until 1968, when advertising was introduced. Among the major democracies, only Canada and the United States had not adopted the license fee system. The twin desires to continue building up the public system (e.g., France adding a second television service in 1968) and to avoid raising the license fee led most governments to introduce mixes between tax-based and commercial systems.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> CPB established NPR at the same time, but in so doing, permitted it to produce its own programming. This was largely because, during the educational radio days, few stations had developed the capacity or ambition to produce for national distribution. In educational television, there had been the long, sometimes contentious NET experience, and several large city stations had emerged that were capable of producing for the new "network." That group was keenly interested in having the new federal dollars that CPB would be putting into national production directed to them, rather than PBS. That competition with PBS was satisfactory to many stations across the country that were otherwise suspicious of the alleged ideological tendencies of media organizations seen as part of the so-called "Eastern liberal establishment." The long-term structural consequences and production inefficiencies associated with that accommodation were little understood, and to this day, they remain largely unacknowledged and analyzed.

<sup>14</sup> In France, this step was encouraged by the pre-existence of what were known as "collective commercials" on French radio and television—since 1951, the government had been paying the broadcast institutions to carry messages promoting French agricultural products.

Initially, advertising rates in France were kept well below the market levels, and they were limited to twenty minutes a day per channel. Such restrictions were, in part, out of concern about over-commercializing the public service media. But they also reflected a wider French "schizophrenia" toward the commercial financing of the media in general. The ambivalence about advertising on French public television was "in line with the tepid confidence showed by the French people towards the market economy, the advertising-phobic feeling is fairly widespread which is translated in the regulations" (Dagnaud, 2008a).<sup>15</sup>

But over time, and especially by the 1980s, with the stagnation of revenue from the license fees and the competition from private channels, advertising resources were permitted to occupy an increasingly important place in French public television. To be sure, certain strong restrictions remained, but advertising and its logic were now firmly in place.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the French license fee remained low compared to that of its European neighbors, which partially explained the recourse to advertising revenues.<sup>17</sup> Proposals to increase the fee have always been controversial in every country having them, and the political resistance was particularly strong in France. Successive governments, on both the right and left, all shied away from increasing the fee, and its yield has also suffered from a poor collection system (Sergeant, 1999; Regourd, 2008).<sup>18</sup> As a result, the *France Télévisions* budget (€2.9 billion in 2008) has been considerably less than that of the major public television organizations in other large European countries.

Public broadcasting funding in the United States has always been a mixture of tax-based and private sources. Because the majority of early educational radio and television stations were departments or divisions of universities and school boards, they were the beneficiaries of the state and local tax revenues that supported their host institutions. In time, by the 1950s, local and national foundations began to offer support for programming and facilities, and eventually, private individual contributions began to be solicited. But throughout those initial decades, there was no federal funding.

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<sup>15</sup> That attitude may, in part, explain why, as compared to overall GDPs, proportional advertising expenditures in France were among the lowest in Europe in the early 2000s.

<sup>16</sup> Advertising on public channels remained strongly regulated. For instance, the 2000 law limited advertising to 8 minutes per hour of prime time (down from the 12 minutes allowed previously), and advertising revenues, which represented 39% of the global revenues in 1998, fell to 29% in 2004. Further, as with most national public systems, commercials on the French public channels could not interrupt programs.

<sup>17</sup> In 2006, the fee was €116 in France, €204.36 in Germany, and the equivalent of €195.60 in Britain, while the European average was €161 (Copé, 2008). These relative differences had persisted for some time; for instance, in 1970, the fee was F950 in France, and the equivalent of F1,320 in Britain and F1,438 in Germany.

<sup>18</sup> 20% of the French TV owners have been exempted from the license fee, and the missing resources have been replaced by *Parlement* through allocations from the state budget which, although small, represented a continuing direct involvement of the government in French public television.

The federal government began to provide some modest capital facilities funding in 1958, but it provided no general programming or operating support until 1969, following the 1967 Act, and even then those amounts were initially tiny. To this day, they remain comparatively miniscule. While they increased from an initial \$5 million in 1969 to over \$250 million by the late 1980s, and then to nearly \$500 million by 2010, that is an exceedingly small amount by comparison with most other federal social programs, or with the national government tax support of public broadcasting in all other countries.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, public broadcasting funding continued to grow and diversify. The role of individual private membership (subscription) support for local stations became increasingly important, as did commercial corporate support in the form of underwriting grants, akin to those of philanthropic foundations. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the proportions of major funding for all of public broadcasting were roughly the following: federal government, 15–21%; state and local governments, 25–30%; and all private, non-tax sources (individual memberships, foundations, private universities and corporations), 51%–59% (CPB, 2009).

Prior to the recession of 2008–2010, the total revenues of U.S. public broadcasting had peaked at about \$2.9 billion in 2007, \$2.0 billion of which was for public television (CPB, 2009). While the grand total was roughly double what it had been in the late 1980s, it still amounted to less than 2% of the overall revenues of U.S. commercial broadcasting and cable (\$150–160 billion).

Despite being small and only about one-fifth or less of the overall funding base of U.S. public broadcasting, the federal support has been an important underpinning of the stations and the national services they provide. But the fact that, since the early 1990s, such funding has been appropriated only on an annual basis, unlike the longer-term guarantees of the license fee systems abroad, means that the U.S. system is actually more sensitive to the federal government than its relatively small amounts of support would suggest.<sup>19</sup>

Over the years, those small federal appropriations also have been heavily politicized. There have been several major episodes of cuts—in the early 1970s, the early 1980s, and the mid-1990s, during the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton administrations—and again, more minor rescissions in the early 2000s during George W. Bush’s presidency. Each of those cuts had to be overcome, and in each instance, over a number of years, public broadcasting was successful in lobbying to have the funding levels grow back above the pre-reduction amounts. But those restorations came at considerable political cost, and they have proven misleading about the extent of federal support for public broadcasting, meaning that, over

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<sup>19</sup> One might argue that a strength of the U.S. funding pattern is its diversity. No single funder, including the federal government, controls the hundreds of stations across the country, and thus there has been less capacity for any government—local, state or federal—to interfere and influence programming. However, the relatively small level of overall support is, in itself, a censoring factor. Without higher funding, public television cannot expand its services and behave more like the large national public service broadcasting institutions abroad.

time, the amount of federal funding and its growth rate remained much smaller than the increasing demands and possibilities for public broadcasting services warranted (Rowland, 2007).

As a consequence of the hostile climate in the early 1980s, CPB, PBS, and most of the stations had begun to think in terms of constriction and limited service options. That attitude persisted over the years and remained so strong by the end of the 1990s that, instead of planning for the long-overdue expansion of U.S. public television services, particularly in the new environment of digital conversion and newer online media opportunities, the system continued to look inward. That restricted policy thinking persisted well into the early 2000s.

Meanwhile, due also to the stagnation of other funding sources, the stations were beginning to find themselves unable to continue supporting increases in their PBS dues, with the result that PBS's budget was remaining flat.<sup>20</sup> The PBS and CPB national program funding budgets had always been too small to support much program experimentation and service expansion; by the early 2000s, any hope of that situation changing was rapidly evaporating.

### C. Programming

One of the most important consequences of the organization and funding struggles for French public broadcasting has been in its programming services. During its early years, French television offered an elaborate schedule of entertainment, cultural programs, documentaries, TV drama, news, and sports (Albert & Tudesq, 1982). As early as the 1960s, the public was increasingly thirsty for entertainment and turned more and more to popular dramas, sports, games, and soap operas.

From the mid-1970s, French public television wrestled with the programming implications of the new financing schemes, and, while it stuck to its cultural mission, pressure mounted for more entertaining fare. Meanwhile, there were growing tensions over independence, especially as it turned out that the new structural arrangements did not give the public television channels as much autonomy as most global discussions of journalistic standards suggested was necessary (Missika & Wolton, 1983, p. 77).

The 1982 law introduced market-based management and programming values for the public channels that increased the emphasis on popularity, audience size, and share, and that, in turn, led to a radical transformation of the meaning of "public service" in French television. *Telenovelas*, game shows, and American series flooded the public channels, and the line between the public and private channels began seriously to blur. A "competitive" model of television programming that could be traced back to the

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<sup>20</sup> From a high of nearly \$2.0 billion in 2007, the total PTV system revenues declined by roughly \$80 million in 2008, and by more than \$200 million in 2009, and estimates were that further declines would continue for several more years (CPB, 2009, 2010). This possibility was exacerbated after the November 2010 elections and the federal funding cuts included in the FY 2011 budget resolution in April 2011 (Behrens, 2011; see also Part II).

1974 reform was emerging, as opposed to a "fair play" model, in which the relation between the private and public sectors would be based on complementarity (INA, 1989).

During the following two decades, there also was a proliferation of private television channels, aided in part by the spread of cable and satellite distribution infrastructures. French public television responded by further accentuating its entertainment and commercial-like content on its major channels, such that, by the beginning of the 21st century, public service programming had come to share strong similarities with that of the private channels (Vedel, 2005). That situation helped resurface the perennial question about whether *France T  l  visions* could hew strongly enough to the traditional noncommercial public-service aspect of its mission.

While this drift was clear, the analysis also must be nuanced. The official obligations of public television in France had not changed much, remaining focused on the broad social, cultural, language, diversity, and national service elements that had been invoked from the beginning (Parlement, 1986). Those responsibilities suggested that there would be real differences in public and private content, but the extent of commercialism in the public system implied otherwise. Yet a 2008 side-by-side comparison of the programs of the two private channels (TF1/M6) and the two major public services (F2 and F3) suggests that there is, in fact, more real difference between the public and private channels than a surface-level review might reveal. For instance, it appeared that the public channels broadcast more documentaries, news magazines, and French fiction and cultural programming than the private channels. It seemed too that the public channels' entertainment programs were at a higher level of quality and diversity. Put simply, "the spirit of public service relates to a certain 'cultural model' itself based on two mainstays that are quality and pluralism" (Regourd, 2008, p.163). By the end of the 1990s, with the proliferation of television channels of all kinds, the public service profile also was broadening beyond what *France T  l  visions* provided in its generalist channels (France 2 and 3). France 4 and 5 offered a high percentage of documentaries and magazines, and *Parlement* itself was providing its own public channels—*Public S  nat* and *La Cha  ne Parlementaire* (LCP).

By the early 2000s, considerable time on France 2 and France 3 still was devoted to historical dramas, literary magazines, French-produced films and the display of French culture. However, as compared to the BBC, for instance, the two channels did not broadcast as many news programs, and certain traditional program forms, such as debates in the style of the *caf   du commerce* tended to disappear.

In the United States, it was widely assumed from the onset that, by virtue of the market-based system and the light touch "public interest" regulatory standard, whatever was meant by "public service" in other societies would automatically emerge in the American broadcasting industry, thereby providing all of the "social goods" in broadcasting that most of the society would need and desire. To the extent that there was concern about the need for educational fare, the few noncommercial stations licensed to universities or local school boards provided instructional programs (ITV) for classroom use. That much narrower, more stiffly pedagogical notion of instructional broadcasting was to dominate the small noncommercial radio enterprise of the 1930s and 1940s, and likewise, it was the primary orientation of the initial experiments in noncommercial television (ETV) in the 1950s and early 1960s (Blakely, 1979;

Frost, 1937; Leach, 1983).

By the mid-to-late 1960s, many educational television stations were pushing beyond the ITV mode to develop high-culture performance programming, more entertaining forms of science and arts, and some public affairs efforts that did not get developed, or were being abandoned, by the commercial stations and networks. It was this movement toward a general audience model of noncommercial programming that energized much of the more ambitious national policy planning within educational broadcasting. With the support of various major national and local foundations and government leaders, those efforts led to a call for federal funding for what was now to be called “public broadcasting.”

But throughout the remainder of the 20th century, and despite the increased newer federal resources, U.S. public television programming was marked by the restrictions in its authority to serve general audiences in anything like the breadth and depth of public broadcasting abroad. It still was not expected to be widely popular or entertaining. Lacking sufficient national production dollars, public television made few efforts to produce serial entertainment or drama. Public radio had sufficient resources to develop round-the-clock news (and thereby, to fill a gap left in the wake of commercial radio deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s) and a limited amount of what one might term “erudite” entertainment and humor. By contrast, due to much higher costs, public television was considerably more restricted, and at the national level, it could offer just a few hours a day of largely highbrow culture, arts, science, and public affairs programming. Further, for all their roots in local ownership, most PTV stations provided only a few hours a week of truly locally generated and oriented programming.

Beginning in the 1980s, and well before the emergence of the Internet, the mission of U.S. public television had been threatened by the rise of the broadband cable and direct broadcast satellite (DBS) industries, which developed national niche programming channels in content areas previously seen as the exclusive province of public broadcasting. Congress and the FCC steadily deregulated the broadband carriers—in large part, by refraining from any content or advertising oversight, and by undermining the authority of local franchise authorities (typically city and county governments) to set service terms and subscription rates. As a result, the carriers increasingly developed explicitly entertainment-purposed channels for cartoons, science fiction, film, sports, and even culture and news that soon became profit centers. Despite clear warning about these threats to its core mission and proposals for how to work with and against them, and due largely to its chronic underfunding, public television had great difficulty responding.

The commercial cable and DBS content, in fact, seldom rose to the level of public television standards. Their models of history, science, arts, news, and even children’s programming were highly commercialized, and they were rarely as educational and in-depth as the comparable public television content. They were, instead, “PBS-lite,” reflecting the imperatives of a ratings-based commercial marketplace.

The early broadband carriers had promised to develop such channels as noncommercial services by cross-subsidizing them from the revenues of the millions of their subscription customers, the advertising from their other channels, and retransmission fees from the commercial broadcasters. But



over time, the commercial logic was so strong that nearly all the cable channels, including those with the purportedly public television content, came to be supported by advertising. The result was that conventional commercial media business models began to dominate that content, with an emphasis on larger audiences in particularly attractive demographic groups, all leading to a notably popularized, "down market" tendency among the carriers' more "educational," PTV-like channels. Meanwhile, under its severe funding limitations, public television had no singularly notable genres all to itself, and without the resources to expand and improve what it already had, it continued to be able to provide only relatively small amounts of its mission-based content. Much of that would periodically be copied, but then downgraded, by the increasingly vertically integrated cable industry.

While the public reported great trust in and affection for PBS (APTS, 1999; Roper, 2010), the underlying impression of the differences between public television and the comparable broadband channels was, in fact, not always that clear in the public mind. That confusion extended into the political world, where, in an era of continuing deregulation and growing confidence in "marketplace solutions," as well as of the implications of election campaign funding by the carriers, there was considerable bipartisan resistance to challenging the claims of the broadband industries about the quality of their services, and to providing significantly more tax-based support for public television.

#### 4. Summary

As late as the turn into the 21st century, it therefore remained unclear whether either French or U.S. public television could break out of the restrictive patterns of organization and funding that had persisted throughout the history of each institution. In France, the core issues continued to be the adequacy and implications of the mixed funding system, the relative independence of *France T  l  visions* from the government and commercialism, and the extent to which its programming lived up to the traditional public service mandate. If there were to be changes in these factors, the further question was, who would be responsible for leading and implementing them, and how successful could they be?

In the United States, the struggles continued over the breadth of the system's programming mission, its lack of anything close to adequate public and private funding, questions about the extent of its independence from both corporate and government authority, its highly complex organizational structure, and the associated tensions over relative local and national powers. There also remained within public television the problem of its decades-long patterns of constrained thinking about its prospects, as well as the lack of broader public policy support for encouraging "outside the box" planning for the public media. It was unclear to what extent public broadcasting, itself, could develop a solid, expansive vision for its digital and new media services, and it also was uncertain whether federal communications policy would change sufficiently to help public television come to that higher level of ambition and service.

Part II of this paper will closely examine public television's more recent history in France and the United States, particularly as those institutions encountered the challenges of a major shift in broadband technology and economic models, and as changing governments sought to adopt new perspectives and possible reforms of both the private and public media systems.

(References. See Part II)