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

Part II

New "Reforms" and the Prospects: Looking Ahead

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This is the second of a two-part article comparing the development of public broadcasting in two nations—France and the United States. In the first part, we provided a close examination of their different media policy histories and how those differences reflected important varying aspects of the underlying constitutional and political cultures of each, while also revealing certain striking similarities in the challenges that their public media had faced throughout the latter half of the 20th century. In this second part, we examine the impact of changing political conditions in the two societies and related global changes in technology, economic conditions, and social uses of the media in the early 21st century. We again observe certain continuing, unique characteristics of the approach to public media in each country, including common responses, important differences and persistent challenges.

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Part II

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1. The "New Public Television" in France

All the issues involved in understanding the history and present condition of French public broadcasting came to the fore early in the administration of President Nicolas Sarkozy. During a press conference on January 8, 2008, the president suddenly announced his intention to eliminate advertising on the French public television channels:

> The policy of civilization is going to find expression in an unprecedented modernization of public service broadcasting . . . I'd like a radical review of the schedule of obligations for the public TV channels and thought given to totally scrapping advertising on the public channels. (Sarkozy, 2008a)

His decision came as a thorough surprise, because the matter had not been an issue during the 2007 presidential campaign. Neither M. Sarkozy nor his opponent, Ségolène Royal, had openly addressed it; there was no public expectation that it would become a key matter in the new administration.

Perhaps due in part to that lack of debate during the campaign, the president's statement touched a sensitive nerve, unleashing a media storm and an avalanche of reactions from public authorities, interest groups, citizens, and viewers in various fora. The commentaries ranged from strong support to profound outrage, including concerns about the impact of such a change in fiscal policy on the performance of French public television, and on the future of French media, generally.

Taking advantage of the surprise of its announcement and its otherwise normal honeymoon period, the government pushed the public television initiative quickly and forcefully. To formalize the funding review process and prepare the necessary legislative initiative, President Sarkozy appointed *La Commission pour la Nouvelle Télévision Publique* (the Commission for the New Public Television) known as the Copé Commission, after Jean François Copé, its chair and then president of the conservative majority UMP party (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire)* in the National Assembly. The president's charter for the commission was that it develop proposals for a "radically revised" public television. It consisted of 33 members, including many media and political figures, among whom were members of *Parlement* from the right and left, and it was put on a fast track.

The commission undertook its deliberations on February 24, 2008, and, working rapidly, it issued its report on June 25. Then, after considerable public debate, legislation formally establishing part of the proposed advertising ban and other changes was passed by the Assembly and the Senate on February 3 and 4, 2009, respectively (Parlement, 2009).

The complexities of the issues involving French television were revealed throughout the period of the commission's review. Opinions about the advertising ban proposal did not fall neatly along partisan lines, confounding any assumption about being able to predict opposing positions concerning the roles of the state and marketplace in television ownership and production along normal ideological grounds. It seemed unlikely that a conservative government, so otherwise dedicated to marketplace policies, would seek to institute a ban on advertising in a public medium. This would have appeared to have been an initiative most associated with parties of the left, and indeed, it had been a position articulated by such leading spokespeople as ex-Prime Minister Michel Rocard and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bacqué & Chemin, 2008). President Sarkozy's boast that "the left dreamt about it, but my government is going to do it" (Sarkozy, 2008b), reflected the apparent confusion.

Part of the contradiction seems to have been rooted in basic industrial politics. At the end of 2007, TF1 had presented the president with a secret "*livre blanc*" asking him to ban advertising on the public channels (Regourd, 2008; Milot, 2008). The press and others noted that the matter was about far more than the character of *France Télévisions*, because TF1 and other interests stood to gain by eliminating advertising on the public channels.[1] Attention also was drawn to the president's privileged relationships with certain powerful media industry figures, and the improvisational nature of his decision led to charges of opportunism.[2]

Meanwhile, the traditional disarray in public sentiment about the commercialism of *France Télévisions* and the extent of advertising in broadcasting generally was reflected in the make-up of the Copé Commission and its eventual actions. For instance, as the Commission was finishing its work, the Socialist and Communist members walked out. Three leading Socialists in the National Assembly declared that "the dice were loaded," as, among other things, President Sarkozy was refusing to increase the license fee to replace the lost revenues. In this decision, they argued, he would be helping the private television channels and weakening public television (Psenny, 2008).

Despite his radical funding recommendations, the president said few things about the mission of the new public television that he was envisioning. He evoked the goal of "quality" in public service broadcasting and accused the public channels of having become too much like their private counterparts. He expressed his wish that the emphasis be refocused on the best cultural value for the money. As such, the president was re-annunciating a series of criticisms that had been recurrently voiced by viewers and groups of all kinds since the liberalization of television in the 1980s, but overall, there was little that was otherwise new.

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[1] The story first appeared in *Les Echos* on March 7, 2008, and was later reported in other periodicals.

[2] The matter was even more contradictory, because on the same day, January 8, the government announced the introduction of advertising on public radio stations.

The commission's key recommendations were for a two-step elimination of advertising on *France Télévisions* (first after 8:00 p.m. on September 1, 2009, and then entirely by December 1, 2011) and a series of replacement funding proposals. The commission estimated that the advertising ban would cost *France Télévisions* €840 million, or about 30% of its budget. It projected that the replacement funds would need to be €450 million annually 2009–2011 (following the ban on advertising after 8:00 p.m.), and then €650 million in 2012. It also estimated that, beginning in 2009, an additional €200 million annually (rising to €300 million in 2012) would be needed to build out the new aspects of *France Télévisions* being proposed in the Report. So, it recommended the imposition of a 0.5% tax on telephone companies and Internet operators, a 3.0% tax on the additional advertising income of private television channels, the index-linking of the license fee to inflation, and the application of the fee to computers and mobile telephones that can also receive television signals.

The traditional political unease about the license fee was reflected in the commission's deliberations. Despite the popularity of public television, the license fee remained unpopular, and proponents of maintaining and, particularly, increasing the fee continued to be faced with the need to explain and justify it, which required a certain amount of political courage. So, while the Copé Commission considered recommending that the fee be increased, the longstanding public resistance to doing so and the president's own refusal to endorse it, all in the context of an emerging global recession, meant that the commission did not, in the end, include the proposal in its recommendations.

By way of compensation, the commission considered the other funding measures, but there were difficulties associated with all the options. For instance, some observers estimated that the shortfall replacement would have to be higher. Moreover, the sources chosen to finance the missing funds were considered to be too uncertain, since it seemed risky to make *France Télévisions* depend on the economic performance of the private operators. In the end, the only viable proposals appeared to be the extra taxes on the telecommunications companies and the advertising revenues of the private channels. Indeed, these two recommendations were adopted in the 2009 law.

The report also proposed turning *France Télévisions* (France 2, 3, 4, 5 and France Ộ) into a single enterprise with a simplified structure organized around eight program units (such as fiction, documentary, and sports). The aim was to reinforce the separate identity of the different channels, to reorient the entire institution so as to develop a presence on all new media platforms (the Internet and mobile phones), and to generally improve its capacity to create innovative new content.

The commission asserted that it was placing "content at the center of its strategy," and it advocated more clearly defining the identity of the separate channels to address the differentiated needs or interests of specific audiences. France 2 would have a federative role—to be the general public channel focusing on Europe and broad-ranging global issues; France 3 would concentrate on strengthening regional offerings; France 4 would be the youth channel. *France Télévisions* also would be expected to play a key role in helping maintain the place of French culture and influence in Europe (the quotas for programs of French origin would consequently be increased from 40 % to 50%). Another major emphasis of the report was that *France Télévisions* should increase its investment in production and create more of its own programming. The report also questioned the composition of the *France Télévisions* board and the conflicts of interest inherent in it, and it proposed reducing the board size from 14 to 12 members.

President Sarkozy apparently had stayed in close touch with the commission throughout its work. This was clear when, on June 25, the day the report was released, he immediately announced not only that he was accepting the recommendations, but also that he was going even further (Sarkozy, 2008c).

Among his proposed amendments were the following: moving up the deadline for the elimination of advertising in the evening to January 1, 2009, increasing the telephone and Internet providers' tax to 0.9% (this higher level would generate about €336–378 million). The president also would appoint the president of *France Télévisions* with the agreement of the CSA. President Sarkozy continued to resist seeking an increase in the license fee, and he differed from the report in deciding not to recommend index-linking it.

The first phase of the advertising ban went into effect on January 5, 2009, with the elimination of advertising on the *France Télévisions* channels after 8:00 p.m. However, by mid-2010, there was serious consideration of not implementing the second phase, as terminating all advertising seemed dangerous, given the overall global economic crisis and the deficits *France Télévisions* was incurring.

The post-report policy debates went beyond the financing question. Among other things, the perennial matters of *France Télévisions*' structure and governance resurfaced. While the commission's recommendation to create a single company was a shift in longstanding national policy, it and the expected resulting economies of scale were generally looked upon positively (provided that editorial standardization was avoided). But the traditional questions about the relationship between the government's executive branch and public television were raised once again, particularly by the opposition Socialists and various media sources who re-invoked the specter of the old ORTF. The Socialists declared that the president's decision to retain a political process for the appointment of the president of *France Télévisions* was a "serious blow to the independence of the media," and the media watchdog group, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) [Reporters Without Borders], described it as "unacceptable." Invoking the fundamental principles of the Republic, beginning with pluralism and the independence of the media, some journalists worried that the matter implied a serious regression of democratic and media life: "The state does not belong to a party, even less to one man. 'Public service' means neither the service of the king, nor the organ of the party in power" (*Marianne*, 2008, p. 19).

Meanwhile, there were continuing allegations that the entire "reform" project was being dictated by strong ties between the president and certain media industry owners and managers (ibid.).[3]

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[3] Evidence of those ties seemed to rest in the appointments of Sarkozy friends to key posts in French broadcasting and print media, including that of Jean-Claude Dassier, a fervent Sarkozy supporter during the presidential campaign, as head of news at TF1 and LCI, and that of Christine Ockrent, wife of Foreign Secretary Bernard Kouchner, as head of the large holding company, France 24, which manages external French broadcasting for the government.

The "reform" project also provoked some reflection, albeit much more limited, on the core mission of public service television, its programming, and its adaptation to the new broadband environment. Despite other criticism, the commission's proposals to develop a global medium centered on content, to reposition the channels, and to turn them into more complementary, specialized services were favorably welcomed.

At the end of the 1980s, it had appeared that, with the creation of the CSA, there had been a distinct evolution toward more independence in public television oversight. But in reality the state retained a subtle grasp on the system during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Although the president of *France Télévisions* had, for some time, been appointed by the CSA, and no longer directly by the government, the CSA itself was made up of 14 commissioners nominated by the president of the Republic and the presidents of the Senate and National Assembly. Under the new Sarkozy rules, the CSA role was to become more formally advisory. The president also sought to return to the old pre-CSA model, and to assume responsibility for appointing the president of *France Télévisions* himself, with the nominal check of a retrospective endorsement by a majority in *Parlement*. In defending this step, President Sarkozy argued that he was in favor of a simple and democratic system and underlined the hypocrisy of a long-standing situation in which the CSA had done nothing without a nod from the authorities. He said he wanted to go from a de facto situation to one of law (de jure) (*Marianne*, 2008).

Accordingly, with the authority of the new statute, President Sarkozy appointed Rémy Pflimlin as the new president of *France Télévisions* on July 5, 2010. That new process led many critics and journalists to denounce the continuing anomalies of the governance situation and the persistently incestuous relationship between the government and public television (Psenny, 2010). The criticism expressed regret at what it saw as yet another missed opportunity to carry out an in-depth reform of national policies for public television.

Upon his appointment, M. Pflimlin (2010) stated that he wanted to make the transition to digital "the principal axis of his project." By 2009, 78% of all French households had access to at least one means of digital transmission (terrestrial, cable, satellite, or broadband), and the Internet use for television was higher than in other EU countries (CSA, 2010). However, French public broadcasters tended to utilize the Internet more as a public relations vehicle and as a supplemental platform, rather than as a true new content medium.[4] In 2009, French commercial broadcasters attempted to launch a joint video player on the model of Hulu in the United States, but *France Télévisions* seemed to be absent from the

[4] By comparison, the BBC and PBS have increasingly been using the Internet as a content provider, and in the UK, with commercial services. In 2007, the BBC websites reached some 56% of the UK population, while France TV Interactive reached only 12% of its citizens (EBU, 2007). One of the issues is the question of unfair competition between public and private broadcasters on the Internet. To overcome this problem, the BBC must offer complementary programs, and the BBC Trust is authorized to evaluate their interest for the community. In the United States, the public stations and PBS have not yet so commercialized their websites; pressure to do so, however, is mounting.

project. So it remained somewhat unclear how *France Télévisions* was going to take advantage of the DTT conversion and other broadband developments.

The policy debates about public television from 2008 on also rested in a larger context of media policy liberalization. During 2008–2010, the government implemented a series of deregulatory measures regarding private television. For instance, the anti-concentration threshold for the private channels was relaxed, and they were authorized an extra three minutes of advertising per hour starting in January 2009.

Meanwhile, however, President Sarkozy's reforms did not seem to line up with the positions of various important international fora. There were, for instance, continuing uncertainties about how all the changes in French public and private television were intended to relate to EU broadcasting policies. The stand of the EU on the role of public service broadcasting, and even more so in the new media environment, has remained at a broad, general level. The 1997 Protocol regards public service broadcasting as a cornerstone of democracy, and the European Commission has repeatedly made it clear that part of the main terms of reference for public media and online information services is to enrich the public debate by addressing democratic, social, and cultural needs (EC, Green Paper, 2003). But the protocol's policy on funding remained largely hortatory, saying only that determining the means of support for public service broadcasting is an individual member state responsibility.

The situation has been made more complex by the fact that the EC has been under increasing pressure from the commercial broadcasters throughout Europe, who, for some time, have been arguing that tax-based support for public broadcasting represents unfair competition. The private broadcasters have invoked the competition regulation of the protocol and have filed related complaints with the European Commission, all with the effect of resurfacing the persistent questions about the limits and even the need of the public service mandate.[5] Continuing concern about government "cross-subsidization" was again reflected in the 2009 revision of the 2001 Communication, with changes toward stricter rules on state funding and more flexible limits for advertising.[6]

Meanwhile, the European Broadcasting Union has continued to support mixed funding schemes. This stance is taken under the theory that diverse revenue sources help to disperse the influences on the public broadcasters and stand particularly as a bulwark against the power of governments if the funding is entirely from the license fee (EBU, 2000). The position also reflects the fact that many of the EBU's leading members are major national public broadcasters. In any case, although a "purer" statement of the noncommercial ethos of public service, the French government's attempt to eliminate advertising in public television seemed to be at odds with the EBU's position.

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[5] Examples include Ireland, Belgium, and other members.

[6] In recent years, the public service television systems of the 27 Member States have received €22 billion of subsidies or license fees annually. That is the third highest sector benefiting from state aid, right behind agriculture and transport.

France also seemed to be moving away from its traditional support for stricter media regulation measures and key UNESCO anti-privatization positions, including its resistance to pressures to liberalize cultural sectors, as had been exemplified in UNESCO debates over the years, and most recently, in its Convention on Cultural Diversity (CCD), which, having been adopted in 2005, entered into force in March 2007.[7]

So, by late 2010, nearly two years after the passing of the law that banned advertising on public channels, President Sarkozy's "reforms" had been only partially adopted, and that hesitancy reflected a series of enduring domestic policy problems and contradictions, as well as related conflicts with broader European and international policies.

France Télévisions remained as the principal French broadcasting institution. Besides operating the several major and minor broadcast television channels, it had regained control of its production, distribution, and advertising subsidiaries. It also continued to maintain interests in a number of other domestic and international channels such as Arte (45%), Euronews (25%), and Planète Justice (34%). However, despite the attempt to once again restructure public television, as in recreating different content orientations of the several channels, most of the historical contradictions persisted. President Sarkozy's decisions to oppose the increase of the license fee (although it was finally index-linked to inflation), and to nominate the president of *France Télévisions* himself represented to many critics serious setbacks to the broader reform agenda, and even a return to the worst moments of state television.

2. U.S. Public Television in the Broadband Age

By the time of the conversion to the new digital television transmission standards (DTV) in the first decade of the 21st century, U.S. public broadcasting was still playing "catch up" in its own media culture. Meanwhile, many of the fundamental assumptions about conventional radio and television, both commercial and noncommercial, were under heavy assault.

The federal mandate for television's digital conversion had been put into place in the mid-to-late 1990s.[8] Its origins lay, in large part, in international industrial competition, going back to the mid-1980s, when U.S. government and manufacturing interests feared that foreign, and especially Japanese, electronics

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[7] This convention recognized the distinctive nature of cultural goods and services (among them audiovisual) as transmitters of value, identity, and meaning that transcend their commercial dimension (UNESCO, 2005).

[8] Initially intended to be completed by 2003, the process was extended until 2009 due to a series of difficulties associated with uncertain congressional oversight, inconsistent FCC regulation, and industrial and consumer resistance. Promoted with the consuming public principally for its higher video and audio quality—high definition (HD)—the conversion actually reflected other underlying industrial and political interests, and much of its value for expanding services via multicasting was initially ignored or downplayed.

research and manufacturing capacities were threatening to undermine even further the already declining U.S. share of the domestic and global consumer electronics markets. U.S. trade authorities were concerned that, without concerted national public and private effort, the international movement toward what was then understood as "advanced television" standards (ATV) would be lead by foreign parties. Therefore, at a time of otherwise intense ideological commitment to the so-called "free and open marketplace" and its associated attack on government regulation, the American communications industries and federal government worked together to develop the technical standards for what became DTV.[9]

Additional considerations were the related political determinations to privatize, as much as possible, all natural resources, including the spectrum. By the mid-1990s, it had become axiomatic in U.S. media policy that as much spectrum as possible should be sold to commercial interests, particularly in the wireless telecommunications industries. The principal justification for so doing was to raise money for federal deficit reduction. There was almost no initial thought that proceeds from such privatization should be applied to the enhancement of public broadcasting. Periodic proposals over the years to establish a permanently endowed trust fund for public broadcasting had not been made much of a public issue. It therefore had received little political support (Behrens, 1996) and also, then, was not sufficiently popular to be seen as a worthy vessel for spectrum auction proceeds.

The privatization policy orientation was, of course, in precisely the pattern of U.S. communications industry and government collaboration going back to the dawn of telecommunications in the 19th century. It reflected the widespread, but little acknowledged, compromises in the U.S. form of capitalism as applied to media generally, and to broadcasting particularly. It is a telling normalcy that stands in direct contradiction to that aspect of marketplace philosophy that historically has always otherwise resisted commitment to a strong public service broadcasting enterprise on the grounds that, in media, there needs to be a firm separation of state and private interests.

So, not only was public broadcasting continuing to be marginalized in federal policy at the end of the analog era, it was faced with the daunting task of raising the resources necessary for the DTV conversion. The total cost of the U.S. transition ended up being about $15 billion (Smith, 2010).[10] But, as it was spread out over a decade, the commercial television industry, with annual revenues of $65–$70 billion, found that it was able to distribute and absorb its costs in its normal operating budgets.

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[9] As yet, there appears to be no comprehensive, critical history of the DTV conversion in the United States since its completion. Several accounts of its origins and midstream issues, and some hints at what a complete overview might encompass, can be found in various interim and international accounts, such as Duke (2001), Cinema Source (2002), Papathanassopoulos (2002), Hart (2004), Galperin (2004), Brown and Picard (2005), Perry (2007), Van den Broeck and Pierson (2008), and periodic publications by the Benton Foundation (http://benton.org).

[10] The source of this estimate is the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). It should be considered preliminary, however, and subject to further verification.

For public television, it was a much different story. The public television portion of the total DTV cost was about $1.5 billion, but that amount was roughly the equivalent of the total annual budget for all of public radio and television at the time the conversion had been instituted. So, proportionately, it was a much larger financial burden for the public stations than for the commercial industry.

It had been anticipated that the federal government would assist the public system with perhaps half or more of the full cost—in keeping with the policy of special federal support for prior major technological innovations, such as the initial conversion from terrestrial to satellite interconnection in the 1970s and later upgrades. But the federal DTV support amounted only to $30–$50 million a year, which, by 2010, had accounted for only about a third of what was necessary.[11] That unfunded mandate forced the individual public stations across the country to raise all the rest, and to do so, they each had to mount special local capital campaigns and seek extraordinary support from their state governments. While some of those digital equipment monies helped to accelerate infrastructure replacement that would have been needed anyway, it became a major fundraising distraction. The unrecognized consequence was that, for many years, the federal digital mandate forced the licensees to delay working on their more serious long-term fundraising needs, for such purposes as substantially increasing annual major giving and building badly needed endowments. The stations were, in effect, held back from developing the fiscal capacity for precisely the new public service programming and content services that the DTV conversion would make possible, including both the wholly new forms of HD programming and more streams of content through the multicast capacity of the digital channels.

Meanwhile, just as it was attempting to recover from the costs of the digital conversion, public broadcasting was faced with three other, even more daunting challenges: 1) the rise of Internet and Web-based, interactive, on-demand, and social media; 2) the great global economic recession beginning in 2007–2008; and 3) new federal policy initiatives reflected in the FCC's "Future of the Media" and "National Broadband Plan" inquiries (FCC, 2010a, 2010b).

The on-line media have presented challenges to all legacy forms of mass communication. Although not as dependent on large audience shares and the advertising model as the commercial broadcasting industry, public television, nonetheless, was facing the general syndrome of changing audience behavior with regard to broadcast, cable, and satellite television.

With the increasing penetration of the Internet into homes and businesses, and with the rise within it of wholly new forms of content creation (e.g., You Tube, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter) and marketing, sales, and advertising (e.g., Craigslist, Amazon, AdClick, and Epsilon), most traditional media (broadcasting, cable, newspapers, and magazines) were experiencing losses of audience and severe declines in advertising revenues.[12]

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[11] The federal DTV contribution figures also are preliminary and require further clarification by CPB, APTS, and the Department of Commerce (PTFP).

[12] In a little-noted irony, the heavy focus on the federally mandated digital conversion in transmission systems may have delayed, and in some ways perhaps even confused, the PTV system's response to the nonlinear aspects of the new media changes that were beginning to emerge during the same period.

This condition was exacerbated in the 2007–2010 period by the economic crisis in the U.S. and abroad, deriving from the home mortgage and finance industry failures that, in turn, led to high rates of housing foreclosures, business retrenchment, unemployment, and declining state and local tax revenues. The resulting recession interacted with the changing forms of media production, distribution, and use to put severe pressure on most traditional media institutions, including public broadcasting.

By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the local revenue picture for the public stations seemed bleak. Funding by state governments, individual membership contributions (pledge) and corporate and foundation sponsorship (underwriting) all fell off significantly in 2007–2009.[13]

In the face of the periodic difficulties with local and national tax-based funding over the years, and particularly with the chronically inadequate federal funding, public broadcasting had been urged by some forces to turn more to commercial sponsorship. While such messaging on public channels is less intrusive and lower cost than conventional commercial media advertising, it is nonetheless a soft form of advertising that is dependent in large part on marketing considerations of audience size and reach. Earlier efforts to change the policies to permit more explicit forms of advertising (FCC, 1983) had been rebuffed, and no new such sweeping measures had been seriously proposed since. But over time, and against the misgivings of many, the federal rules governing public broadcasting underwriting messages had loosened considerably, and by the early 2000s, many in public broadcasting and among the public were concerned about the extent to which the line between commercial and noncommercial had been crossed without much open debate (Rowland, 2003).

Even then, though, the commercial underwriting support that existed was proving problematic on practical grounds. Given the restrictions on it, and the massive competition with the large private, commercial broadcasting colossus, sponsorship never became as large an element of the local stations' revenues as many had hoped, and it also began to decline noticeably at the national level. The falloff of underwriting support for national production began to have serious consequences for the ability of the major producing stations and PBS to maintain the volume and quality of national public television programming, even at the modest levels of prior decades.

The underwriting decline had other consequences. Throughout its history, and continuing during the 2000–2005 years, PBS had been turning more and more to its member stations to help meet its costs of operation and programming acquisition. But by the end of that period the stations were finding that their own local circumstances, and their only lightly increasing federal grants from CPB, were insufficient to sustain ever-increasing PBS dues. By 2005–2007, and well before the recession that was about to

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[13] Even before the recession, public broadcasting had begun to experience softening revenues. By the late-1990s, all of the traditional forms of local funding had stopped growing or were showing signs of weakening. That pattern continued in the wake of the "Dot-Com" bubble burst in 1999–2001, and, while there was some recovery in the 2003–2007 period, the new recession undermined much of it.

break across the country, the stations were making it clear to PBS that they could not tolerate further increases. The severe economic downturn and the continuing shrinkage of station budgets in 2008–2010 firmly underscored the message to PBS.

Meanwhile, whereas there had been at least some degree of federal and state tax-based support for the DTV conversion, as well as something of a technical and programming roadmap, there was no policy guidance or tax-based support in response to the new media challenges. While some internal public broadcasting budget adjustments were being made to ensure more HD production of national programming and the provision of some additional national and local streams of additional programming in public television (e.g., V-Me, Create, World, and MHz Worldview), these were relatively modest responses not linked to any PTV system-based roadmap to dramatically expanded services. The national multicast efforts were driven by loosely defined interests for more digital content, but not by any broad-ranging vision articulated by the national public broadcasting agencies and the entire system of stations. There was no integrated master policy, content, or funding planned for these efforts, nor for how to respond to the evermore complex new media challenges and opportunities. For its part, and likely in response to the missing vision within public broadcasting itself, the federal government had no new-media appropriations plan for public broadcasting, such as the special funding that it had made available for the earlier satellite interconnection projects and digital conversion.

The general appropriations for CPB had increased somewhat throughout the initial decade of the 2000s, and as late as the Democratically-controlled 111th Congress (2008–2010), there had been promises of somewhat more notable increases for 2010 and beyond. However, after the November 2010 elections, the situation changed dramatically. The rise of the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party, as well as the general public anxiety about the federal deficit in the wake of the Great Recession and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the ARRA, U.S Congress, 2009), the immense federal stimulus funding measure passed in response to the recession, led to a major battle over the FY 2011 budget. In the end, Congress could pass only a continuing resolution (Steinhauer, 2011; U.S. Congress, 2011), the bitter negotiations over which led, among other things, to reductions in, and even the elimination of, many discretionary programs, including in public broadcasting.[14]

Even with the previously projected increases, it had been unclear if such support would have been sufficient to maintain, let alone build, the levels of support necessary for national and local programming and the health of all local stations in the post-digital, new media world. In the wake of the 2011, budget compromises and the forecasts of the larger battles yet to occur for FY 2012, the prospects for maintenance, let alone building, were considerably worse.

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[14] Although the core, two-year advanced funding for CPB was maintained, its FY 2011 amount was made subject to an across-the-board rescission in nondefense discretionary program spending (Behrens, 2011). DDF funding was slashed by 83%, and Ready to Teach and the venerable PTFP program were eliminated entirely. During these debates, the public media cause had been weakened by a pair of highly publicized late-2010 and early-2011 personnel issues at NPR that fed the flames of partisan opposition to all federal funding for NPR and the entire public system (Everhart, 2011; Janssen & Everhart, 2010; Sefton, 2010).

That uncertainty was colliding with and exacerbating the difficulty PBS was having just in sustaining itself as a light network for a single HD service. Neither it nor its members had the resources to experiment heavily in wider ranging, more popular content, such as that typical of public broadcasting abroad; and it certainly was without the resources to aggressively address the interactive programming environment. Further, it was finding its member stations continuing to resist increasing dues at a time when most of their own revenues were declining. In 2008–2009, in the wake of its members' calls for lower costs, PBS began to undertake a series of membership policy and dues reviews. But, far from demonstrating confidence and vision for a robust future, and despite grand pronouncements of being engaged in progressive "strategic planning," its efforts were in effect only a limited, one-to-two year business planning process for PBS as a corporate entity—not for the entire system of public television. Despite PBS claims to the contrary, individual stations were largely on their own in trying to adjust to the new environment, and to influence the national services that depended so heavily on station dues.

For its part, CPB, too, was floundering. It seemed to have a limited capacity to respond to the new environment. During its 2009–2010 review of its major statutory station funding obligation, the Community Service Grant (CSG) program, CPB articulated only a vision of decline and retrenchment and, again, as had been its wont in prior moments of crisis, it was questioning the long-term sustainability of the existing cadre of public television stations. Rather than celebrating the existing diversity of public stations and local voices, and far from expressing a vision of growth, expansion, and dramatically increased services in the new media age, it was using the recession and the CSG review to try to force consolidations and mergers among local public television stations (CPB, 2010).

For the first time in many years, public broadcasting had appeared to be on the verge of receiving marked increases in federal appropriations for the 2010–2013 period. But rather than planning to use those increases for significantly enhancing station support and strongly investing in plans for expanding the nation's public media platforms and capacity, CPB seemed fixed upon diverting over half of them to "social engineering" goals having to do with unverified models of efficiency and archaic models of diversity in station governance and management.[15] In such policies, CPB arguably was violating congressional intent for the appropriations and exceeding its authority relative to management of the licensees, but regardless of the legalities, the primary concern was that it was exuding a climate of fear

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[15] CPB had been focusing on the consolidation and merger agenda since at least the mid-1990s; playing to unsubstantiated claims that it was necessary to appease Congress in the wake of the funding cut threats at that time, and seemingly accepting a view in some political circles and even, surprisingly, in public broadcasting itself that public television was "over-built." CPB, and many PTV station leaders too, seemed unable or unwilling to push back against such narrow views of the prospects for public television to note how under-built U.S. public television is by comparison with its counterparts abroad, and CPB never could explain why it did not have comparable consolidation policies for public radio. Additionally, in explaining its posture on the grounds of political pressure, CPB was undermining precisely the statutory requirement and best-practices policy expectation that it serve as a heat shield for public broadcasting generally, to protect the programming and operating independence of the stations and national producers and distributors.

and little plan-based confidence.

On the whole, then, the public television system remained in its perpetual quandary about its future. Throughout the decade-long digital conversion process, public broadcasting had failed to develop a coherent, comprehensive plan for itself in the new DTV world. There had been no systematic, coordinated planning among the major national agencies (the so-called G-4: CPB, PBS, APTS, and NPR), various other public broadcasting entities, and the hundreds of public television and radio stations around the country. There had been isolated public radio and television planning initiatives through such organizations as the Station Resource Group and the Affinity Group Coalition, some of which had been supported by CPB (e.g., Public Radio Audience Growth Task Force, 2010; Pagliarini et al., 2006). But those efforts were never connected to anything larger, nor were they aimed at an overall case statement on behalf of the public service media that could be convincingly put before Congress, the White House, the FCC, and other policy makers.

That lacuna proved to be a serious detriment in the face of the new media and economic challenges of the 2007–2010 period. The problem was nowhere so well reflected as in public broadcasting's relatively lightweight responses to the "Future of the Media" and "National Broadband Plan" initiatives at the FCC. Those inquiries had been authorized by the ARRA (Stolberg, 2009; U.S. Congress, 2009), the FCC provisions of which reflected the major communications policy interests of the Obama Administration and the 111th Congress that had been elected along with the president in 2008.

The lack of planning also partially explained why continued efforts to try to develop a special public broadcasting trust fund never went anywhere. Dating back to its first major articulation in the late 1970s (Carnegie-II, 1979), the concept had been periodically reintroduced, but with variations that reflected a range of serious disagreements and doubts about the sources of funding for it, its size and adequacy, its governance, and its recipients. During the DTV conversion period, there were further proposals to create the fund out of proceeds from the analog spectrum auctions (Grossman & Minow, 2001). But there was little consensus even among the fund's proponents about how well that version would work, and there was significant, if quiet, opposition among diverse political and public broadcasting leaders.[16] As a result, the trust fund concept seemed yet again to be going nowhere, and public broadcasting's federal funding remained on the annual appropriations treadmill.

Having failed to develop anything like a system-wide plan and an associated major policy and funding vision for itself and the broader concept of public media, the public broadcasting community was

[16] What came to be known as the Digital Opportunity Investment Trust (DOIT) proposal actually began as a way of funding universities and cultural institutions. It initially was not intended for public broadcasting. In response to objections, public broadcasting was added. But the proceeds still would be split among a large number of institutions, and there was considerable doubt about the amount of the auction proceeds and the eventual size of the fund. Many critics noted, too, that there was continuing strong congressional resistance to letting go of the annual appropriations process, precisely lest public broadcasting became too independent.

caught relatively flatfooted by the FCC inquiries. The prior 2009 series of important national foundation, think tank, university, and media reform group studies had focused on the challenges by the new media to conventional media, community engagement, and adequately funding national and local journalism (Center for Social Media, 2009; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Free Press, 2009; Knight Commission, 2009). All of those studies had direct implications for public broadcasting. Yet public broadcasting did not systematically engage or formally respond to any of them. Doing so would have permitted it to rehearse a set of positions that it might have brought forward when, as was certain to happen, Congress and the White House finally began to articulate new media policies via the FCC initiatives.

CPB sponsored two Aspen Institute meetings in 2009, and the leaders of the national agencies and representatives of other interests in public broadcasting eventually provided written and oral testimony to the FCC inquiries. Those representations included reminders to the government of public broadcasting's great potential in such areas as education, journalism, and local service. They also noted the need for more federal support for those potentials to be realized. But, when boiled down, those statements reflected no overarching, long-term, break-out vision for public broadcasting's programming, service, and structural change, nor any empirically grounded, explicitly plan-based expanded funding request. Nor did they state the associated set of changes in federal communications policy and regulation necessary to support such a vision.

Since 1967, no Aspen meetings, national commission reports (e.g., Carnegie-II, 1979; Twentieth Century Fund, 1993), or other high-level forum had ever led to any substantive legislative or regulatory policy change for public broadcasting's funding, structure, or prospects. The lack of concerted planning by, and on behalf of, public broadcasting by its own agencies reflected no understanding of that history, and therefore it seemed to predict continuance of that pattern, even in the face of the new government initiatives.[17]

Further, it was unclear to what extent the Obama administration and Congress really intended to

[17] As just one telling sign of the lack of coherence within public broadcasting, it seemed to have no consensus vision on what to call itself in the new age and how to relate that term to its own history. The name "public media" had come into vogue in the early 2000s, and yet the way it was being used inside and out of the established public broadcasting community suggested considerable tension and uncertainty. Some critics and media reform interests were advancing the notion of "public media" to suggest a need to incorporate, and support with federal dollars, other institutions than the existing licensed NCE "public" radio and television stations and their national agencies. The legacy public broadcasting entities were alarmed at the funding implications of that rhetorical shift, and apparently to head it off, began to talk about how they needed to embrace or become "public media" themselves—as if in all the years of being educational (and then public) radio and television, they had in fact never been "public media." Some argued for defining the prior period as "Public Media 1.0," and that the existing system should be understood as being engaged in a transformation into "Public Media 2.0." Regardless of the most accurate way of characterizing their own history, the lack of clarity on the matter spoke volumes about public broadcasting's uncertainty about its own identity and vision.

advance the cause of public broadcasting (Palmeri, 2010). A close reading of the two FCC initiatives revealed no clarion call for building and adequately funding a much stronger, more pervasive media system, and the renewed heavy assaults on federal funding in 2010–2011 muddled the picture even more.[18]

3. Conclusion

Tocqueville's suggestion two centuries ago about the utility of comparing the French and U.S. political systems remains pertinent in a contemporary analysis of the public television experiences in the two nations. At the outset of the 21st century, public broadcasting continued to face significant challenges worldwide. This two-part comparative study of the public television experiences in France and the United States—the story of two quite different media traditions—offers useful insights into those challenges and the prospects for public service media worldwide at a time of significant technological and sociocultural change. Both systems reflect much of the differences in their respective political structures, and their histories provide remarkably similar, and yet strikingly different, understandings of how the two nations, and others, have defined their media systems and public culture policies.

Public television in France has a mission and set of service, organization, and funding conditions that are typical of most advanced industrial democracies. French public broadcasting began as a largely noncommercial enterprise, and it has long been expected to serve as a central institution in national media and culture. Accordingly, it is chartered with a strong universal "public service" mandate, and with core funding via a national tax (license fee) system. Yet, as in most other cases, because the fee support has been insufficient to permit *France Télévisions* to meet all aspects of its mandate, its funding has been supplemented with advertising. That mixture has long fostered a strong contradiction in its programming services, driving its major channels (France 2 and 3) toward considerations of popularity that confuse the extent of its distinctions from its private, commercial broadcasting competitors.

Some of the research and popular commentary on French and European media differ on that question of similarity between the French public and commercial channels. Close studies of the main public channels and the array of additional national and international services under the *France Télévisions* umbrella (France 4 and 5, Arte) suggest that the range and quality of French public television content are greater than surface-level analyses may demonstrate. But the other policy and institutional contradictions persist.

In keeping with the French Constitution and a long history of power concentration in Paris, *France Télévisions* and its predecessor organizations have tended to be highly centralized systems that have had difficulty developing an effective pattern of regional and local service. In line, too, with the history of

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[18] By mid-2011, it appeared that the best public broadcasting could count on was modest resistence to wholesale further cuts in federal funding. Indeed, in that light and with the local and state fiscal difficulties facing the PTV system, the prospect of some return from the sale of NCE bandwidth was highly tempting to many stations, and it was unclear to what extent the system was or would remain united on the principle of preserving all its television bandwidth.

French politics and the longstanding role of the state in so many institutions and aspects of public life, French public television has tended to have close associations with the government and therefore has struggled to establish programming autonomy. Seemingly major episodes of "reform" every decade or so—most recently reflected in the Sarkozy and Copé Commission proposals—have attempted to provide for more journalistic independence and decentralization, and yet such measures have typically fallen short of their goals.

Therefore, while significant changes have taken place in the structure of French public television over the past half century, and while some forecasts about public broadcasting have been "less bleak than a few years ago" (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008; Kuhn, 2006), it is unclear how fundamental the transformations have been. For instance, the public system's relationship with the government has remained problematic and continues to exacerbate the matter of public distrust—"state monopoly ownership has given way to a framework of regulated competition in which the French state is still a key actor" (Kuhn, 2006). French public television has also tended to be under-financed by comparison with most other European public service media institutions, and it has not had the resources necessary to meet the increased costs associated with new digital services, including more domestic production (Malverde, 2007). Those longstanding contradictions could prevent it from rising fully to the challenges of the postdigital, broadband era.

Whatever the status of French public television relative to the public media in other democracies, U.S. public television, by contrast, has been much more marginal in the American media system. U.S. broadcasting was seen from the beginning largely as an instrument of commerce, rather than as one of culture. From the outset, the private commercial sector was given the responsibility for, and significant profitability of, leading the development of broadcasting, cable, and satellite television. The U.S. policy assumption was that the "fiduciary" theory—the combination of a marketplace approach and a light-touch regulatory system—would guarantee all the programming aspects associated with public service broadcasting elsewhere.

As a result, public television developed much later in the United States than in any other advanced democracy, including France. It had begun with a strong, but narrowly circumscribed educational remit that was closely associated with the system's origins in and long-time close associations with such formal instructional institutions as universities, school boards, and state educational agencies. It took considerable time, well into the 1960s and 1970s, before there was any wide understanding that public television needed to be more of a general audience service in keeping with all other public service systems around the globe.

However, even then, when it finally was authorized by official federal policy to begin to offer a broader alternative to the commercial system, public television, in fact, found itself with two major constraints. One, its organizational structure was highly localized and rooted in the individual states and communities, heavily reflecting the Jeffersonian side of the federalist debates about the U.S. constitutional and social structure. As a result, it had none of the centralized production and programming efficiencies typical of all other national broadcasting systems, either commercial or public. Two, its national (federal) funding was tiny by comparison with the support provided by taxes in France and all other democracies. It depended heavily on state tax and educational institution support, and then, more and more, on local individual subscriptions (membership) and foundation and corporate sponsorship for the vast majority of its funding. Altogether, those sources—national and local, public and private—amounted to only about 5% or less of the per capita fiscal resources available to French public broadcasting and other European public service systems.

During the four decades after the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, public broadcasting remained as absent from the major national communications policy debates (telephone restructuring; cable, satellite, and broadcasting deregulation; and general media reform) as it had during the prior 40 years. Shortly after the 1967 Act, it had initially seemed destined to step out on a much larger public policy stage, but it soon found itself having to focus more narrowly and almost exclusively on its ever-present annual federal funding challenges and just a few regulatory measures. However much due to resource constraints, that limited-vision posture caused public broadcasting to fail to engage many of its opportunities in the first wave of broadband development (cable and satellite) in the 1980s and 1990s. There were, for instance, two major planning proposals in 1979 and 1980 that anticipated the initial broadband opportunities (Carnegie-II, 1979; Gunn et al., 1980). They were ignored by both the public policy establishment and public broadcasting itself. That oversight meant that public broadcasting failed to exploit its growing distribution platform potential and expand its services throughout the remainder of the analog period. That failure, in turn, left public broadcasting ill-prepared for the second, much larger wave of broadband development associated with the rise of Internet technologies; digital telecasting; and new interactive, wireless, and mobile media services in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The public media likewise were unfocused around the changing political circumstances reflected in the Obama Administration and associated Congresses.

Over the years, the persistent funding restrictions and lack of clear leadership responsibilities among the diverse entities had fostered a “trained incapacity” in public broadcasting’s own policy assumptions and plans. Therefore, by the 2008–2011 period, at perhaps the most seminal moment of potential change and opportunity for itself since the rise of radio and television in the 1920s and 1940s, and despite decades of laudable service, public broadcasting seemed to have little clarity within itself, let alone for the American people and political leadership, about its precise promise and expanded funding and policy support needs in the new media era of the early 21st century.

In the U.S., the key questions about public broadcasting over the decades had turned around the extent to which it was seen, and it understood itself, as a core national need. If it were as well-regarded as the research suggested, then why would the American people and their government not do what it would take to build and support public broadcasting as a major cultural and social entity on a par with its sister institutions abroad? By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, two versions of those questions remained. One: Would public broadcasting, itself, be able to articulate a vision for itself and make a sufficiently convincing public and political case for its service role in the digital and online society to improve the prospects that its support could be sustained and even enhanced? Two: Would U.S. communications and cultural policy makers hear that case sufficiently well and invest the requisite political capital to preserve and expand the modest expectations of, and support for, the public media that had defined their place throughout the late 20th century?

Despite their differences, the French and U.S. public television systems have recently experienced quite similar political, technological, and economic challenges. In response to the rapidly changing broadband and related communications and market conditions, new political leaderships in both countries have raised fundamental questions about the viability of the public service media in both countries, dredging up longstanding questions about their missions, structures, and financing. At the same time, those policy scans have been deeply influenced by longstanding patterns of governmental accommodations with the large private, commercial media institutions and related general political and ideological tendencies particular to each country.

Those experiences provide some insight into possible lessons for one another between the two countries. For instance, the United States would benefit from a greater understanding of the value of the French and European "cultural" approach to broadcasting and media policy, plus adequate funding. As a result of those conditions, public broadcasting in almost all other countries is in a much stronger position than in the United States, with an unapologetic mandate for diverse and popular services. The more centralized, less bottom-up structure in France also suggests ways of achieving greater production and service development efficiencies in the United States. At the same time, there is in France and other countries a cautionary tale for the United States about the threat to the public service and educational mandate of too much dependence on advertising support.

The French, in turn, might learn something from the U.S. experience with local control and the possibilities for independence associated with more diversity of funding, but also the dangers of far too few resources. Despite its inefficiencies, the U.S. structure suggests for public media elsewhere ways of better serving the needs of local communities, including minorities and diverse voices. Such decentralization carries with it implications of more independence from the national government, which, in turn, can result in generating more public trust and sustaining the institution's legitimacy.

Meanwhile, of course, both systems face similar challenges. They each have relatively weak national and local production capacities, and they are struggling over their respective roles in journalism. Moreover, whether public television is a relatively large enterprise (France) or much smaller (United States), and regardless of how popular and admired by the public, it often continues to find the legislative and regulatory environment in which it exists dominated by the macro-level commercial industries and their power in national, regional, and global politics. Those influences are based on large-scale, profit-oriented commercial purposes, and therefore dictate media policies that historically have never aligned well with public service media goals.

While the many sweeping technological and related sociocultural changes in the postdigital, broadband world constitute substantial challenges to the prospects for legacy public service media, those factors are merely the latest iterations of contradictions that have always constrained the public media in every nation. The question now is whether the combined forces of the newer and traditional conditions will finally undermine the capacity of the public service institutions to sustain whatever places they have in their respective media environments, or whether, as so often before, they will find ways of rising to the new challenges and restaking the ground for public culture purposes. Close consideration of the developments in France and the United States outlined here should help to inform the answer.

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