

PBS in the Digital Era

Serving the Public, Innovating on Their Behalf

*Remarks by PBS President and CEO Paula A. Kerger
to the Federal Communications Commission Workshop
on Public and Other Noncommercial Media in the Digital Era
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On behalf of PBS and its member stations, I want to thank the Federal Communications Commission for organizing today's workshop. My colleagues and I applaud the Commission for recognizing the essential role that public providers play in shaping the future of America media.

PBS was created to do what commercial providers cannot, which is to use media as an instrument for teaching and learning. They create content to make money; we raise money to create content – all in the name of public service.

To put it another way: PBS exists to serve the people – not sell to them.

Because our focus isn't on boosting shareholder value, we've been able to take risks and experiment for the public's benefit. PBS single-handedly invented educational children's television. For more than a quarter century, we've also broadcast an hour-long nightly newscast – an invaluable resource for citizens seeking substance over sound bites. Thanks to "Frontline," PBS has also kept alive the prime-time news documentary, taking on tough issues without regard to commercial ramifications.

PBS alone has also preserved the arts on television, providing enriching experiences for Americans who might not otherwise have them. On April 28, PBS aired a new interpretation of "Hamlet" starring Sir Patrick Stewart. As USA Today's Robert Bianco wrote, "[I]t has become abundantly clear that if PBS doesn't [air the arts], no one will."

We've also pioneered genres and concepts that now serve as the basis for entire channels, including science and nature programming, how-to and cooking shows, and even reality television. Of course, today's reality TV bears little resemblance to our groundbreaking "American Family" series.

These twin principles – public service and innovation – continue propelling PBS forward.

Consider the crisis in American journalism. The latest Pew Research Center data show the newspaper industry has lost 30 percent of its reporting and editing capacity in the past decade. By another estimate, 800,000 stories have gone unpublished because of the industry's job losses in the past two years.

The decline in commercial journalism holds serious consequences for American democracy, but PBS recognizes that journalism doesn't just need a rescue – it needs a re-invention. We are working with our member stations and partners like National Public

Radio and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to not only fill gaps in the marketplace, but also to create journalism for the times in which we live. For example, public media's new Local Journalism Centers represent a significant attempt to strengthen regional reporting in communities across America. We also remain committed to national productions like "PBS NewsHour," and the kind of "accountability journalism" that "Frontline" practices so well.

PBS is also experimenting with projects like "Need to Know," a new multimedia series that launches May 7, 2010. On this program, the reporting will begin online and continue throughout the week before culminating in a one-hour "Need to Know" broadcast each Friday night. Along the way, citizens will be able to weigh in and help shape the stories – offering PBS a novel way to engage today's participatory news consumer.

Public media is uniquely positioned to help re-invent American media. PBS reaches more than 120 million TV viewers and almost 20 million Internet users each month. Our prime-time audience is more than twice as large as CNN's. Americans continue to turn to us because they trust PBS to help them make sense of the world around them. For example, the latest Roper opinion poll found the American people consider PBS the nation's most trusted and unbiased institution.

Roper's research also shows the public considers PBS the most educational media brand for children. This is another area where PBS is meeting a critical public need while also innovating. According to Pew, children now spend more time with media than they do in school, with their family, or sleeping. This includes watching 4.5 hours of TV a day – a new record. Of course, much of what children see on television is more entertaining than educational. In fact, just 13 percent of children's television is "highly educational," according to the latest research from Children Now, an advocacy organization.

PBS's lineup includes series like "Sesame Street" and "Super Why," which help at-risk children, providing them with opportunities to succeed in school. We're also enthusiastic about digital media's potential to help us close the achievement gap. Last month, PBS streamed 79 million children's videos online, putting us on the path to becoming the most popular online destination for children.

We also offer a range of iPhone applications, including a "Martha Speaks" app that is proven to help children strengthen their vocabularies. In addition, we are creating content for "smart boards" and "smart tables," making PBS a valuable partner in the effort to create 21st century classrooms. We're even using online advertising technology to create educational games that help preschoolers learn to count.

Digital media also plays a role in our efforts to strengthen the arts. Our forthcoming PBS Arts Showcase will include a broadband video channel devoted to the performing arts, allowing users to watch ballet, opera, or even experimental theater, anytime they choose. The Showcase will also offer several interactive features, including one that will allow budding artists interact with master artisans, creating new educational experiences. This

project is the first step in a long-range plan that also calls on us to bring more arts content to more Americans on every platform – whether it’s TV, the Web, or mobile devices.

PBS is committed to meeting the public’s needs and innovating on their behalf, but we cannot do this alone. We strongly support the National Broadband Plan’s call for reforming the nation’s copyright laws, which will make it much easier for public media to use copyrighted material for educational purposes. We also need help with the demands of digital media, including the significant costs that come with streaming 79 million children’s videos each month.

The bottom line: PBS and its member stations have an important role to play in shaping the future of American media – and we’re eager to do our part.