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**Comments of
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Public and Other Noncommercial Media in the Digital Era**

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The Station Resource Group (SRG) is a coalition of leading public media organizations focused on strategy, policy, and innovation. Our members' roots are as public radio broadcasters. Their current reality is rapid evolution in content, services, and platforms. Their future is as multi-media public service institutions with significant roles in the civic and cultural life of their communities.

One of SRG's top priorities for the past two years has been to map public media content and service goals for the long arc ahead – ten years out and beyond. We have submitted our comprehensive report, *Public Radio in the New Network Age*, in a separate filing in this Inquiry.

When we look ahead we see three fundamental changes that shape the context for public media:

- The decline and reconstruction of American journalism driven by the collapsing business model of newspapers and the shifting priorities of commercial electronic media. There is a clear responsibility and opportunity for public media in this space, but one that

requires far greater capacity locally and nationally than we can now bring to bear. This is a matter of both priority for current resources and an urgent need for more.

- Increasing access – at lower cost and higher quality – to the technologies of content creation. We have the opportunity to put the public in public media like never before. Hand in hand with this opportunity, we must resolve important questions about how to organize, curate, and engage with this content to create meaningful dialogues in our communities, and to preserve the trust and integrity that are some of the most important assets we seek to carry through this evolution to a new era of service.
- Exploding pathways and devices to distribute electronic content. Just as public broadcasters have relentlessly pursued universal access through signal coverage, public service media in a digital era require universal ability to connect to broadband, wireless, and emerging technologies, at a cost for connectivity that is within reach of the least advantaged in our society. Issues of access that focused on the producer side of the equation in a broadcast world now embrace the audience as well.

These factors are creating a public media eco-system that will be dramatically larger and more diverse than today's public broadcasting – more organizations, more content, more users.

Broadcasters will be joined by online-only groups, robust social networks, and communities of users. Public media's future is a portfolio strategy of broadcast and broadband, authoritative productions and authentic popular voices. The organizations we work with welcome this explosion in public service.

A Fundamental Responsibility: The Opportunity for Public Media to Flourish

The FCC's most basic responsibility for the future of public media is to provide the opportunity for public media to flourish. The system of reserving FM and TV spectrum exclusively for noncommercial educational ("NCE") services is one of the great success stories of regulatory history. That system made it possible for more than 3,100 full-service FM stations and nearly 400 full-service public television stations to provide an astonishing variety of noncommercial programming to the vast majority of the American public. That diversity will be further enhanced by the nearly 900 LPFM stations that have been licensed, and by the scores of new full-service NCE applications that continue to be granted. By contrast, services such as AM broadcasting, which developed without a means of reserving channels for noncommercial use, have been impoverished by the absence of NCE services.

Wired and wireless Internet services should, like broadcast services, have their national parks. The great regulatory challenge for the Commission is to preserve space for public media to develop. Although each medium presents different technical challenges, the FCC should seek to provide spectrum for public media to flourish on the Internet, just as it has in FM and television broadcasting, satellite radio and television services, and cable services. Each of those services has been enriched by shielding content from the pressures of commercialization. The full potential of the Internet will not be realized unless the FCC plays a role in conserving spectrum for noncommercial, public use.

If the Commission embraces this responsibility, a cascade of issues will require forward-looking resolution.

Definition of the Field. The FCC has developed definitions and eligibility requirements that define services for noncommercial, public service use of various platforms. These definitions have both assured a protected space and fostered a rich mix of service providers – educational institutions, independent nonprofit community organizations, religious groups, local school boards, Native American tribal associations, and others. The FCC’s definitions have, in turn, given guidance to others inside and outside government, with respect to funding criteria, other aspects of regulation, and other matters. The field of public media should be broadly defined to include an array of noncommercial entities.

Public Service Obligations. A key principle of federal communications law is that free use of public spectrum comes with obligations for public service, including serving local needs and interests, contributing to an informed electorate, providing educational children’s programming, and generally addressing the values of democracy, diversity, localism, and education. The benefits of reserved or protected spectrum for public media should come with a higher standard, but one that is consistent with the level of development and resources of an evolving field.

Noncommercial Character. Many believe noncommercial operation is essential for a protected public media space; others are less certain. The FCC’s framing of the noncommercial character of public radio and public television has evolved over time, incorporating broad principles restricting overt promotion of products and services offered for profit, flexibility that seeks to

accommodate the perennial underfunding of public broadcasting, and substantial reliance on the good faith judgments of public media organizations themselves. This regulatory legacy should carry forward to new platforms.

There are four additional steps the FCC can take to help public media succeed.

1. Pay attention to the infrastructure of public media. In the four decades since passage of the Public Broadcasting Act, we have learned that the disciplines of scale, use, and impact really matter. A robust public media future requires strong foundational institutions to anchor the service. With hard work, we have built a number of such institutions across the country: controlled at the local level, supported with sustainable business models, and creating unique and meaningful content. These institutions and others who will join them – not all of which will have a broadcast license – must not be taken for granted. National policy, not least of all at the FCC, should protect and strengthen them.
2. To develop a robust public media system the FCC must make platform specific policies that are imbued with cross-platform sensibilities and mindful of public media's particular role. This is a challenge, given that the FCC is structured in platform-specific divisions that compete for spectrum and leadership mind-share. A decision to revolutionize capacity in broadband and wireless opens a universe of possibilities, but we are in deep trouble if the current focus on broadband leads to an erosion of our capacity on the broadcast platform. Decisions regarding spectrum allocation,

noncommercial policies, reporting obligations – these are all consistently in motion, regularly analyzed and revised, and always impact our ability to address our mission.

3. The FCC, CPB, NTIA, and Congress need to act in coordinated and reinforcing ways, mindful of the larger purpose and the specific steps that will strengthen and expand public media. Sometimes these entities are in sync, and the results are powerful – other times each marches to its own drum, usually to our detriment.
4. Public media is under-resourced and the FCC can do its part to change that. We urge consideration of proposals by Henry Geller, the Benton Foundation, Media Access Project, Free Press, and many others to assess a spectrum fee or tax to produce revenue that can be committed to a fund for public service media.

SRG is encouraged by the care and attention that has been devoted to public media issues thus far in this proceeding. We urge the Commission to continue to engage in vigorous discussions following the receipt of formal comments, shaping a full backdrop to the Future of Media report that will eventually be issued.