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A New Generation of Public Broadcasting

Model: User-supported C SPANs for different nonprofit institutions and professions. Institutions pay an annual fee and provide programming in standard format at their own expense. PBS provides a range of broadcast services, from low bandwidth Internet and video-on-demand archiving to 4 (digital) broadcasts of each program over a national satellite net. Participating institutions receive prestige and wider visibility for the quality of their work. And access (for their students, faculty, members, researchers, supporters and/or alumni) to an extraordinary range of high-quality program material from all other participants. And the programming will be in the public domain, so the public benefits as well.¹

For example:

highereducation.tv

An invitation to each four-year college and university, and to the Presidents of their alumni associations, to contribute 6 hours/year of programming of national interest that represents their campus. (For example, distinguished lectures, research conferences, concerts, audio/slide tours of special exhibits at the college museum.)^{2 3} The institutions receive wider publicity for the vitality and intellectual excitement of their campus programs, and their faculty, students, alumni (and the general public) receive the benefits of programs from all institutions, many times the investment of each institution's own contribution to the national startup.

internationalstudies.tv

An invitation to each of the 100+ federally-funded National Resource Centers for international studies at US universities to contribute 6 hours/year of programming that represents their current work and research that would be of wider national interest.⁴ Their submissions also could draw from their federally-funded outreach programs (to help teachers and students in local elementary and secondary schools to learn about the world). And from their foreign language training programs, esp. colloquia to improve the teaching of foreign languages with new technology.

The federal grants for National Resource Centers are competitive and renewable (and include funds for speakers and the outreach programs): it is likely that there will be high participation.

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[This initiative is under discussion with the International Studies Association. I believe it is likely that, if PBS helps to begin internationalstudies.tv, it would grow quickly to include participation by counterpart Centers in other countries and global audiences.]

culturalaffairs.tv

An invitation to US cultural institution (e.g., museums, art galleries, professional theatres, symphonies, and dance companies) to contribute a selection of their material for a wider national audience.⁵ (Initial invitations also might go to the State Councils supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, inviting 20 hours/year from each state. And to grantees of the National Endowment for the Arts.) Many of these institutions already have public outreach programs, which could become more effective by this PBS initiative. A national channel would benefit all Americans and their contributions would be an appropriate recognition of taxpayer support for the arts. Their participation also would help many institutions and lesser-known artists to become better-known and, as technologies evolve, they could operate Web sites and subscriptions series to their full season.

Both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have been passionate in seeking to build wider public benefits, and support, for their programs. It seems likely that their grants might, in the long-run, expand to support costs of preparing material for a PBS culturalaffairs.tv initiative. Once a core group of leading institutions gets the project underway, it is likely that many others, with equivalent pride in their own work, also will want to take advantage of the opportunity and be represented (and their presentation to national audiences also would be a source of pride to their current donors and supporters.)

Other experiments: energyresearch.tv; educationresearch.tv, mathematicsresearch.tv, genomeresearch.tv, appliedethics.tv, etc.

A wide range of additional initiatives could help specialized audiences to linkup: the initiatives could range from several hours/month per channel, to several hours/week. Leadership from PBS can be a catalyst to get these cooperatives underway: many academic disciplines, scientific and professional societies, and foundations would find them attractive vehicles to accelerate progress. Wholesale purchases of satellite capacity (and a common public domain neighborhood on direct-broadcast satellites) would reduce costs and remove planning uncertainties that currently face individual institutions.

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Dr. Lloyd S. Etheredge, Director
International Scientific Networks Project
lloyd.etheredge@yale.edu (Email), www.policyscience.net
(301)-365-5241 (voice)

Notes

1. This design is similar to the nonprofit prototype, researchchannel.com, from the U. of Washington.
2. There are about 2,260 4-year college and universities in the US.
3. Alumni of each participating university could receive, via email from their alumni associations, weekly program schedules and alerts in their areas of interest. Similar value-added services might be provided to constituents for each of the startups.
4. There are federal grants to leading universities for Africa (12), Canada (2), Caribbean (1), Central/Inner Asia (1), East Asia (15), Latin America (14), Middle East (11), Pacific Islands (2), Russia/Eastern Europe (15), South Asia (9), Southeast Asia (7), and Western Europe (7). In addition, 12 Centers receive broader federal grants for Centers for International Studies.
5. E.g., The World Almanac (1998) lists 42 (Some Notable NonProfit) Professional Theater Companies in the U.S., 102 (Some Notable) U.S. Symphony Orchestras, 101 (Some Notable) U.S. Dance Companies, and 99 U.S. Opera Companies with Budgets > \$500,000, pp. 252-254.