

Imagining Exercise for KWSU/KTNW

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The year you picked is one I've assumed might mean retirement for me. So I've already thought a bit about what things might look like then. Some words first about our television operation.

For me, the concept of "station" is increasingly hard to define. I'm going to assume it includes everything our stations do even though my view of a station was shaped by a very traditional, even romantic one not unlike its portrayal in 1973's *American Graffiti* where Wolfman Jack spun records in a radio shack out by the tower.

That concept of "station," however, hasn't been consistent with the reality of our KWSU for 25 years and it will be even less so by 2012. The "station" is now more the core of the apple containing the seeds for continuance of our mission but the flesh is increasingly something else. Our operating revenues this year will be \$7.3 million, out of which \$2.5 million is for radio. Of the \$4.7 million remaining for television, only \$1.8 million is for PBS-related operations. The majority of what we spend on television goes for non-broadcast services. Moreover, the relatively small public television component is itself divided between a full NPS (KTNW) and PDP (KWSU) stations in different markets that themselves have increasingly divergent missions. Since both CPB in its grant policy and PBS in its assessment policy recognize the "larger station," that's what I'll use here.

What follows is a plausible scenario, but only one of many possible scenarios. One big and perhaps fatally flawed assumption is that my stations, like many others, somehow make it through the possible perfect storm of 2009 – loss of a third of our audience* after the demise of analog on top of a decade of losing two points per year of cume rating, continued pressure to reduce the federal appropriation, inadequate system response to the program distribution disruption already upon us, financial spiral and system strife caused by and contributing to that audience loss.

Perspective #1: From the Viewer's Living Room.

On-demand was a disruption to linear programming beginning in 2006, and in similar fashion, home storage networks have since about 2010 become the disruption to both linear and non-linear programming. In the middle part of the decade, our collective efforts centered around getting shelf space for our linear channels on cable, DBS and IPTV systems, but beginning around 2010, those efforts shifted to getting public television programs pre-loaded on the monster terabyte hard drives that are now being shipped to consumers (some 60 million in 2012 counting media center PCs). These hard drives are "trickle charged" with recent releases from the on-demand distribution sources, but they come pre-loaded with thousands of video assets that can be either

* The only public television station to go digital-only to date lost approximately twice the audience percentage in comparison to the percentage of over the air households in that market.

viewed for free or unlocked for a fee. MovieBeam started the trend with public television's help, but it's gone way, way beyond that. The hard drives on portable devices ranging in size from iPods to PSP gaming units, to tablet media players are also very large and can be loaded with content from the home media servers.

Among public media choices viewers have audio, HD video, SD video, consumer productions, "cheap-and-cheerful" non-profit organization productions, and more. If you can imagine it, you can get it – if you can find it. Stations which traditionally housed expertise at picking and scheduling programming competitively now have to provide expertise in helping viewers find things from among hundreds of thousands of media assets available to them.

Coupled with the linear channels we still offer, viewers are therefore blessed (or some might say cursed) with enormous choice. A major new function of stations is to help people find things that they want to hear or see. In 2006, viewers had to sort through 8,760 hours of programming per year on a single channel. In 2012, public service programming alone has media assets is approaching a million in number because nothing gets thrown away, many items are "chunked" into just-enough-television, and we've greatly expanded our notion of what's worthy for public service distribution.

Search, tagging, user ratings, social systems, and the like have been adopted from the Internet to serve all forms of media and assist viewers. So, too, do developments in voice and even video recognition technologies. Metadata generated by these automated systems provide viewers with a fighting chance against the avalanche of content. And, of course, there's still a significant role for curation – both the old-fashioned professional kind and the new-fashioned curation that viewers do with these self-organizing systems.

This brings us at last to the livingroom. Sad to say that Linda Stone's 1997 coinage, "continuous partial attention," is even more prevalent among media users in 2012 than it was then. Families are increasingly using media together – and many times using two at once – because the proliferation of portable devices and the wide variety of viewing or listening options mean that, while mom and/or dad is watching the LCD monitor in the livingroom, no one has to go to another room to use the Web or find a more optimal media choice. Viewers can now choose from traditional "big craft" public television productions in HD, lectures at a local university or library, the city council hearing on a zoning change in their neighborhood, hurricane evacuation plans, school sports, student projects, etc. And, by the way, so can the grandparents halfway across the country.

Perspective #2: From the Board Room of a Local Foundation.

Given the paucity of major foundations in my community, it was a little hard to respond to this one without bending the premise somewhat. Let's say instead that in 2012 our university licensee has gone through its worst reduction in its state appropriation in 30 years due to a simultaneous downturn in the fortunes of its two biggest employers, Boeing and Microsoft. Faced with the threat of layoffs for tenured faculty, the Faculty

Senate has recommended that all non-instructional subsidies be ended to campus entities without a specific action from the Board of Regents. So while our station's direct instructional services (by 2012, about ¾ths of our television budget) are spared, the university's president has decided that public broadcasting should be spared as well, a projected expenditure of \$9 million over the ensuing five years[†] (2013-2017).

The president's remarks to the Board of Regents:

I will admit that I've wrestled mightily with recommending to you that we continue funding public media operation, not because it's not important to the university and not because it's not important to the community, but because it wasn't always widely perceived as important within WSU. When I was provost at my previous university, which was much like this one, the stations had drifted away from their student training roots. I didn't really blame them, because we funded them at not even a subsistence level and they were therefore forced to make a living selling memberships through broadcasting doo-wop programs or some such. Not only that, but the communication students themselves didn't perceive that working on public television programming was as career-enhancing as working as an intern in one of the blow-dried local commercial television news operations. In addition, we had a lot of interesting things happening on campus, but with very little air time and all that revenue to raise, the stations never made time for distinguished visitors to the university, much less our own – and might I say equally distinguished (pause for laughter) – faculty.

But it turned out they were drifting in a productive direction, and so, I've found, was the operation here at WSU.

- Students have found that the commercial stations for which they were preparing news careers have themselves faced severe economic pressures and are looking for new business models elsewhere. Our public media operation is one of the country's strongest in the area of new media applications and dozens of students have found that a mentoring relationship there gives them new competitiveness.
- We now have a permanent archive of hundreds of hours of visiting lectures and some of our own star faculty members have also contributed, especially valuable in telling the sometimes hard-to-sell research story. This archive is available and used daily around the globe, helping to put WSU on the map along with other distinguished universities.
- Video produced and curated by the public media group from around the world is made available in the classrooms of all four of our campuses – nearly 10,000 hours worth in the last year. And that's just one of many innovations from which we wouldn't have benefited without the public media group.
- I'm told there isn't a public service entity within a hundred miles that hasn't had some relationship with these stations that's become very

[†] \$6.5 million in 2006 dollars.

important to these agencies, a great many of which have other important relationships with our university.

- Finally, as you know, the legislature in its infinite logic decided to put our great university out here in the wheat and lentil fields next to the Idaho panhandle. Even though audiences for our over-the-air stations aren't quite what they were at their peak in the mid-nineties, in spite of our beautiful rural locale, they still attract way more users more hours every year than anything else we do – and, yes, that includes our beloved Cougar athletic teams.

In major urban areas, universities have de-funded their public media operations. A couple institutions have even given up ownership. Frankly, we can't do that. Our public media operation – the radio and television stations and Internet services used by so many thousands each week across the state – can't survive without funding from this university and the federal matching funds it generates. It's my recommendation that we consider this an essential service and cut them no more than their fair share of the burden.

Perspective #3: From Inside the Station.

In 2012, our stations are providing programming to viewers in a number of ways. Real-time channels are still important, but delivery options have multiplied. In 2012, HD is provided via hard feeds to cable and via on-demand options (including over-the-air on-demand), but like many stations, we no longer use up precious over-the-air bits on HD. We have four SD multicast channels and a surround-sound version of our public radio service going 7x24. On-demand first became a significant factor in 2006 and most families are receiving programs that way, delivered by DTV datacasting, cable or telco IPTV VOD, or over the Internet.

Because there's little incentive for illicit downloads when everything valuable is already there, the digital rights situation has improved and cryptography has become, if you'll excuse the expression, a key technology.

In 2012, bypass both up and down the food chain is a way of life for media companies. We've learned to live with it. Most PBS titles go directly to our viewers' hard drives, but we stations still provide the retail connection through member-based collections accessible at a discount to viewers and through curation, search, and social networks.

As in most communities, our stations have become aggregators for content from community non-profit, education and government partners and for content produced by the public (hey, let's call it *public* television). And like other stations, we aggregate content in a "world is flat" sense in subject areas for which we have expertise. Our station is curating on-demand content for use in higher education classroom situations and we distribute, with only light curation, content from our community.

Likewise, our productions are distributed in a wide variety of collections nationwide by both traditional (APT, NETA) and new aggregators. Our fly tying series from a decade

ago still has an on-demand life as part of a large collection of outdoor public service programming distributed for free by REI through point-of-sale CDs containing the distribution client.. Our various art series are distributed in similar brand hitchhiking fashion as part of a large collection sponsored by the Michaels arts and crafts chain. Sales of techniques videos, online subscription and underwriting shares are a growing, though still modest, source of revenue for our operation though nationally it is now north of \$100 million per year.

As for our future, we feel that the recent positive action by the Regents has solidified our position as a primarily tax-supported operation within the university and new media revenue sources are making up for the inevitable shrinkage that entails over time.