

Rural Chronicles

Prologue

The following scenarios are a long way from the techno-utopian vision others are predicting. While the scenarios may seem stark at times they are not as far removed from current reality as we might wish.

Interestingly, in concocting these stories I felt a stronger need for public service media than ever before and an affinity for those who could truly benefit from our mission's work. Taking this approach has forced me to think about what really is essential to what we are doing.

I believe that what is somewhat essential today may be more so in the future. Our ability to deliver critical informational and educational services to communities and to facilitate networks of communication, especially among segments of our society who are in danger of being left way behind could define the future great public service media enterprise we would all be proud to have led.

Chapter 1

The Ballad of Lester and Lindy

Rural Pennsylvania - November; it's getting dark earlier. Not that long ago the factory whistle would signal the end of work for many of the town's citizens. Today the factory is closed. Were it not for the schools, a Wal-Mart and a nearby state prison, there would be no jobs at all. The streets of the town are nearly as deserted as are the buildings that line Main Street. The local bar and a thrift store are still open. The town Laundromat doubles as the bus station. The joke is that buses don't arrive, they just leave. Things were bad in 2006, then they got worse: outsourced jobs, undereducated work force, contaminated environment, and fear of terrorism. You know it's bad when your town is competing with nearby municipalities to host a nuclear waste site.

So, settling in as an invisible fly on the wall of a town family of five - plus grandma - you might expect angst and misery, even depression. But, sometimes bottoms have springs, sometimes when you hit them is when you start moving up. This family is not the Leave it to Beaver Cleavers, or Partridge family, but it's also not a model for an MTV bad reality show. The TVs, as always, are on. The bigger one is in the living room, smaller ones in the kitchen and bedrooms. Inexpensive laptops are connected to a few of them. Two of the kids are home. The father is cooking in

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the kitchen. The mother is tending bar downtown. The oldest son is waiting at the bus station. He's just enlisted in the Marines.

Amy is 13 years old. She lies across a body pillow in the living room, her fingers busily tapping on her laptop. She has earbuds plugged into an iPod by her side. On the screen of the big set, a volcano is erupting poetically into a Hawaiian sunset, and a goofy looking guy is madly drawing figures on an electronic board. He is speaking animatedly, his words are scrolling along the screen. Amy is watching, but is also writing. Every now and then she giggles. Amy is watching Science in the Parks as part of her science homework, as well as listening to Beatles Reincarnated and IMing with her pen pal in Kenya. The video chat application provides real time language translation. The two are collaborating on a science project.

Lester, the dad, is 43 years old. He is cooking in the kitchen. He is wearing an old and frayed Che Guevarra t-shirt that barely covers a protruding belly. A half-smoked unlit cigarette hangs out of his mouth. He is watching a small LCD screen in the kitchen. A Julia Child avatar is preparing a bean burrito; Lester looks puzzled. Luckily, Lester can ask questions of the Julia Child avatar and he's answered through a picture-in-picture application as the original program pauses.

Lester is learning how to cook through On Demand, on-line and a CBT version of Video Cooking for the Culinarily Challenged. In the back yard by the kitchen is the vegetable garden Lester started last spring. Since the food contamination scares he and his neighbors have come to rely only on food they grow or hunt. The Master Gardening series has enabled Lester to learn how to be an effective food provider. These programs are supplemented by regular sessions with the area's Cooperative Extension agent and an on-line master gardening course.

Upstairs Grandma is watching a Lawrence Welk rerun. She is getting hungry.

Joey is 17. He is shut in his room. The TV is not on. Joey is staring intently at a video iPod. It shows a close shot of a scalpel gently tearing through the tissue of a human brain. Joey is smiling. He likes knives. He learned precision dexterity using surgery simulation games, and was identified early as a prospective medical student based on his skill and interest. Penn State's College of Medicine has been aware of his potential since the 9th grade. Joey is enrolled in AP pre-med courses offered through the Hershey campus, to which he has already been accepted. He's already observed and participated in simulated surgery through PBS's interactive HD television programs. He wants to be a famous brain surgeon.

Meanwhile, at the bar, Lindy is closing up early. It is her bar. She bought it after the former owner was caught watering the draft beer during happy hour. She learned about restaurant management from a community video course offered through Penn State On Demand. She then went on to get her iMBA.

She's leaving early for the town meeting. Almost everyone in town will be there. Discussions have been brewing for weeks: on-line chats, community forums, and WPSU PIO have all been reinforcing the community dialog. Lester will be joining her. Last month Lester and the produce station manager for Wal-Mart almost

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came to blows. Lester is representing the cooperative growers of Central PA. They are trying to get Wal-Mart to carry local produce. This has become a bigger issue since the food incidents around the country have eroded public trust in all food supplies. Local co-ops are becoming increasingly popular. They have created an on-line network with regular reports on WPSU. Tonight the hearing will be televised live.

At the bus station, Billy, the future Marine, waits patiently. In truth, he hates to leave. He loves the town, he loves his family, but his choices are limited. He really wants to be a philosopher and teach college, but is not clear on how to realize that dream. He took the Wal-Mart Blue Light College program: Ten Great Philosophical Discourses in Human History co-taught by former senators Senator Rick Santorum and Hillary Clinton, but Penn State wouldn't accept the credit. He is now taking courses from Penn State's College of Liberal Arts in Philosophy through VOD and online streaming. The courses are challenging and have made him ponder much about his life, including where this next bus may be taking him.

As Lester enters the living room with a fly swatter, the last thought that occurs is that life is happening in this house and in this town. It may not be the utopian dream we all wished for, but even in the darkest night of the smallest Pennsylvania town hope finds a way. Our mission is to help, to be there, a streetlamp on a sometimes-deserted street.

Chapter 2

Studio World

It's 2 AM; blue lights illuminate the satellite saucers guarding the studio facilities. Inside appears dark, but lights flicker in distant corridors. A huddled shape appears, disembarking from a battered Toyota Prius. He is an academic, an intellectual, and an endangered species in 2012. He shuffles silently toward the studio entrance and flicks an electronic key at the red light, which switches to a welcoming green. The doors open. He enters, as he has done many times before.

Once in the dome-like lobby he turns instinctively left, and lets himself through another secure door. He moves quietly down the hallway toward an unlit "on-air" sign, and enters a small dark room. On the wall to his left are several switches. He pushes one up and lights glare around him, revealing a news desk near the far wall. He pushes a second switch and a virtual, book-filled library appears behind him. He will replace that with an exploding atom later in the program. He pushes a final switch and three cameras rotate into a single host configuration; he will not need the virtual host feature for this presentation.

The professor takes a seat. He has just returned from a South American expedition, a trip that began with a sense of exhilaration but ended with one of deep foreboding. Over the next 53 minutes the professor will share his discoveries with whoever wants to take the journey. The footage he shot on location is cataloged and available for cut-ins at his command via his laptop control center.

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His findings will be sent out automatically to a satellite delivered channel, streamed on University Live, and archived for VOD distribution throughout the state. His discoveries will be attacked, he will be vilified. His comments will not be edited. He has entered an institutionally protected, free media, academic speech zone.

07:00 – A bus arrives. 60 slightly dazed and confused “children from the wilderness” timidly step into the parking lot. They’ve have talked of nothing else for weeks: what they will do, say, show, once they get into the “nuts and kids” studio. It shouldn’t be a big deal. They’ve been creating short programs for the series all year. But this is different. They are in Mecca, and the Big Varmint is here, smiling, enticing, almost daring, not quite the goober Barney, something a little tougher. But, they’re from the country; they know tough. These kids are eight years old, and they’ve been on deer hunts. They’ve trolled empty streets looking for runaway family members. The towns aren’t what they used to be. The mines are gone, the schools aren’t safe, parents are driven to distraction with loss of jobs, loss of pride. But, this morning is OK. The sun is shining. Adults are smiling, waving. They have come to play in the big sand box.

09:50 – A pickup truck, hauling three pigs and a sheep, pulls up behind the main studio. Behind the truck is a mini van with five worried middle-aged passengers. They unload the animals and lead them toward the second studio entrance. A small crew waits, wearing plastic gloves and masks along with observation cameras attached to their wrists – the footage goes into a diagnostic archive. It’s only 10 minutes to Extension Hour. Infectious diseases are ravaging the countryside. Food terrorism is rampant. Something has gotten into the animal feed. Veterinarian and nutrition experts are already in place in the studio. This will be an extended examination. Nobody yet has the answers. Throughout the Commonwealth, Extension Agents and farmers are gathering around media pods. They all have experiences, questions and hopefully, working together answers will be found. The lights go on. They are live.

11:00 – Perky doesn’t begin to describe her. She is a force of nature. They call her Dr. Health. Her eyes swallow those around her. She wants to know. Alice in Potville has a boil on her big toe. Her local doctor left last week on a cruise. Some say he bought a one-way ticket. The boil looks infected. Dr. Health is deeply concerned. She connects Alice to a variety of biosensors that can be observed through a secure web-browser. She IMs one of her many friends, mostly University experts, through the real-time two-way high definition video conferencing. This time it’s Professor Lance. He asks a few reassuring questions, suggests as always that she consult a local physician, but knowing they are increasingly rare to find in rural Pennsylvania, Dr. Lance suggests a course of action.

The show goes on. Albert in Wereville can’t sleep. Jody has a pinched nerve. Emily feels something suspicious on her neck. Dr. Health stays with them all. The phones and laptops continue humming long after the show wraps. Medical students and nurses field questions as best they can. 1,000 health segments have been created, from asthma to arthritis. They are available on line, and VOD.

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But, there is nothing like the live, understanding voice of Dr. Health when you're feeling down in Neverbeenthere, PA.

12:00 – The lobby is filling up. The main studio doors open to connect the two spaces. A school board meeting is about to occur. Many are recorded for streaming and VOD. This one has divided the community. Hundreds have signed up to speak. University security has been alerted, as it often is, but is rarely needed. Controversy happens. Crew, hosts, and participants all are trained in practices of civil and constructive discourse. It doesn't always happen but no events are hosted without the clear intent of finding truth and resolving differences. The only exceptions are sports and deer hunting.

14:00 – The live feed of women's rugby is just beginning. The sports team is out with its full field crew. This game will be uplinked to ESPN 29 across the country, South America and parts of Eastern Europe, where the sport is attracting record crowds.

18:00 –The National News hour begins. WPSU is going with the international version tonight. This version, anchored by Bono, is captioned in 12 different languages.

19:00 – WPSU's nightly magazine, including weather, news, current events, and audience-produced segments, airs. The Ag on-line network is reporting demonstrations at local Wal-Marts. Che's Weeders, the emerging agricultural activist organization, is claiming responsibility. Citizens' reports will go out immediately via the station's real-time datacast set-top boxes and be added to the 5 pm radio newscast. A VOD pod is being prepared with expert commentary and analysis. It will be available to schools.

20:00 – A Conversation with Salman Rushdie, produced live, with an audience, from the WPSU lobby, begins.

Since the slow demise of PBS beginning in 2004, and waning viewership for broadcast programs, common carriage has disappeared. Stations that relied on those programs were forced to change or more likely went dark, usually selling out to the religious broadcasters who now dominate the public airwaves. Instead of destroying public television, however, this has led to a resurgence of creativity and energy. New ways have emerged of connecting to audiences locally and globally, and affinity networks have emerged.

A small core of university channels banded together early on to redefine a new public service media mission, and for the first time a genuine alliance between higher education and public broadcasting was forged. The stations created a new public Internet to replace the open access that was eliminated with the "Net Neutrality" legislation of 2006.

We are at the intersection of a major land grant university and the world. Most important in that world are the communities of Pennsylvania. Our base is the editorial integrity that informs what we do. We have arrived in a new, challenging and sometimes confounding space in which ideas and people meet, clash,

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discuss, find resolution, and have lunch. We are pleased to be participants in the university of the mind and of the community.

Chapter 3

The Clementine Foundation

The curtains that cover the large plate glass window between Charlotte's office and the boardroom are half closed. She can just see the outlines of the board members as they begin taking their seats. The Clementine Building, which houses the Clementine Foundation, was built in the 1800s. The money came from coal. In his later years Andrew Clementine began to see visions. He gave up his job as company president and journeyed throughout the world in old robes with a begging bowl. The Company continued to prosper. When Andrew died, alone in a cabbage patch in north central Pennsylvania, his children mourned; then they fought. The fight continues to this day. The one thing they all agreed on was that all monies should rightfully go to them and their heirs. Andrew, however, had different ideas. He donated half of his estate to charitable projects to be determined by a board consisting of his heirs and a representative selection of community leaders chosen to meet a variety of representational needs: ethnic, geographical, political, gender. It was a melting pot with no flame, and nothing melted. The best lawyers in town could not change that will.

For many years the board met haphazardly. Its chair rotated from bank president to local politician and back. That cycle changed in the 1990s when Andrew's great grandson also saw visions and sued the foundation for violating non-profit laws and the trust of his great grandfather. Out of that mess Charlotte was hired. She had been raised a tiny town in western Pennsylvania, but was educated in the City of Brotherly Love. Her eyes had been opened but her heart never left the small, now depressed, towns of her youth.

Today was her first board presentation. She gathered the 11 copies of the grant proposal that was being considered and an outline of the comments she had prepared and entered the boardroom.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I am glad to see such a strong turnout, especially given the two weeks of rain that have pelted central Pennsylvania. Fortunately the Altoona bus station has stayed open, and I understand some planes are landing in Williamsport." Charlotte looked around at the 11 impassive faces seated at the large, heavy mahogany table. "Who are these people?" she thought. "Are they alive?"

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She continued: “I am bringing you a proposal today that is large in scope and lofty in ambition. Before I discuss its specifics I’d like to spend a few minutes discussing the larger vision.

“You all know we live in difficult times. Our rural areas have been decimated by factory closings, ensuing unemployment, school funding crises and rising crime rates especially among the young, those who have not left. Our students, as you know, are not getting good education in our schools and have little hope for the future.”(Some of the board members squirmed in their seats. This was not the chamber of commerce presentation they expected).

“Declining population in our rural areas has eroded our political leverage. We are becoming the forgotten ghost towns of American life. Our media comes to us from far off places produced by companies who neither understand nor care about our problems. Outsourcing of jobs and lack of education has created communities of unemployables, not so different from the outcasts of India.” (At this reference Gladys Clementine snorted uncontrollably and reached for her water).

“I did not come to this job with illusions. Norman Rockwell never painted our towns. While I was initially shocked by how much worse life had gotten since 2006 I still saw and continue to see hope. But the hope I see is not easy. It’s not about giving another grant to the Up with Animals Foundation, or putting up neo-colonial signage along our deserted main streets. The hope I see is genuine community life starting to take stock of itself. I see virtual networks linking towns throughout our counties, but also throughout the world. I see communities looking at what values they really cherish. I see people fighting back, not blaming, and not giving up.

“The question I ask myself again and again is how can we help? How can we find and support what is good? What is the essence of a healthy community life? In some ways it seems simple. We need ways to support each other, networks that help us learn, help us live healthy lives, networks that we trust. We need to help communities take responsibility for their future. We’ve learned the hard way what happens when communities give up that responsibility. It’s not just the coal mine shutting down or supermarkets leaving town, it’s allowing our schools to deteriorate, it’s poor planning seeking quick profits at long term expense, creating environmental eyesores that drive visitors away; it’s water contamination; the list goes on. You all know them. You may not acknowledge them, but it’s why many of you have also left town.”

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Charlotte paused, letting that uncomfortable reality sink in. This representative board now represented Arizona and Florida as much as it did central Pennsylvania.

“My first challenge then was to find out what was left. I’ve attended more church services than any agnostic in history. I’ve been to the bowling alley, the bingo parlors, the school board and town hall meetings and local bars. I’ve sought out on-line chat groups, blogs and community bulletin boards, and I’ve read, watched and listened to every form of local media around. Initially, I despaired. I heard tired sermons, barstool laments, and tinhorn politicians. I saw car sale ads and weather reports. I couldn’t find life. I wondered what I was doing; what kind of crazy, quixotic venture I had embarked on.

“However, one day as I sat in my office musing on the bus schedule something happened. I was listening to my radio, soothing classical music. I was waiting for NPR from Washington. The music stopped. A voice I recognized came on. It was Lester Lohan, a local activist promoting food cooperatives that more people have gravitated to since the food scares began. I don’t remember exactly what was being discussed. It had to do with food, obviously; a debate in a way, but more interesting. There was a cooperative extension agent on and a university professor of agriculture. There was mention of a video program which I clicked on through university demand and a cooperative network website. I had a meeting and couldn’t listen to the whole program right then, but I went back to it later that night. An on-line discussion was still going on.

“It wasn’t a big deal. There is so much media out there, although since President Tancredo subsidized the Moon Network’s purchase of all commercial media it’s been hard to find reliable commercial news of any kind. And since religious broadcasters have taken over most of the smaller public outlets in Pennsylvania there is not much there either. This, however, was a university station, and something else was going on. I felt like I was, for the first time, listening to a community.

“As I delved into this I found more. There was a growing network of communication and activism. It wasn’t all emanating from the stations. They were more of a conduit or crossroads for the activity. Everything connected through or to them. They weren’t pushing an agenda although as I looked further there were clear values around civil and intelligent discourse. I know Moon News has started to label this type of conversation as un-American but, at least, on the local level, it is resonating in a new way.

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“I wanted to understand this new media for myself and so I traveled to College Central. It’s not so easy to get there anymore. Since the ground contamination made I-99 impassable the only road from here is an old logging route that winds around Tussey Range. The College itself, as you know, has been gated ever since the terrorist attacks of ’09. I was surprised, however, to find the station located just outside the gates. Graduate assistant security guards guarded it, but they were well trained in the welcoming but cautious new school of friendly force.

“When I first entered the building I was surprised to hear giggles followed by a whirring pat as a spitball landed on my cheek. Across the lobby, a gaggle of 6 year olds erupted in laughter, a sound I had not heard in many months. The station isn’t a day care center, but it is open to all comers, especially on ‘little tyke’ mornings when kids are invited to create programs for broadcast. The smallest studio was called the Romper Room.

“The facility was a colorful bazaar of audio and video cables, lights, cameras, computers, and other detritus. If you come into it unprepared as I was, you could become disoriented. It takes some time to understand the rhyme and reason. It all has a purpose. The station is at the intersection of a major land grant university and the world. Most important in that world are the communities of Pennsylvania: rural, urban, rich, poor and all colors and genders. They are sending out and beaming in, they are talking and listening, recording and broadcasting. Their base is the academic integrity that permeates all they do, but it is not the ivory tower integrity where the real world is viewed askance. Rather, they are denizens of an academic utopia where ideas and people meet, clash, discuss, resolve and have lunch. It is the university of the mind and of the community

“To be honest, the technology is so portable that most of the content production functions could take place out of a minivan. There are several such vehicles that travel the state: the town hall van, the wacky gardener van, etc. And, then there are the pocket studios on other campuses, in the dorms, and in the University Libraries. In spite of the geographic ubiquity of the technologies, however, people still like to gather, to peacefully assemble. They like the smell of others, the unpredictability and the warmth of strangers and neighbors; so there I was, in the bazaar.

“And in that crazy chaos, it struck me, I had found life. Even more I had found health and intelligence.

“So the proposal I present to you today is a “pro-life” proposal. It recommends an annual funding endowment of \$50 million. I could recommend specific programs, education, civic discourse, health, but the issues change and evolve. I want you to

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support a new institution that is good, that brings hope and joy and hopefully a little trouble for us all.”

Charlotte stopped. She knew she had said enough. She knew that the next 30 minutes would determine whether the one-way bus ticket she had bought earlier would ease her escape into a safer world or stay in her pocket for another day and another battle.

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