

## **Television in An Era of Fundamental Change**

### **An Assessment Drawn from the Inaugural Peabody/Loyless Seminar University of Georgia, October 2007**

#### **Preface:**

Television is in a state of transition and confusion. Narrowcast niche channels and the World Wide Web fragment once-massive audiences into sharply defined taste publics. Their members define themselves by special interests, leisure preferences, identity orientation, political affiliation, or other specific features. They avoid content, styles, values, or commitments that counter or contradict their own. Even when interests are shared, they may be fragmented temporally by time-shifting technology.

Some publics, especially those outside the most desirable consumer demographics, remain underserved and underrepresented. A paucity of diverse experiences and voices exists both in front of and behind the cameras and consoles, as has been the case throughout the histories of mass media.

The critical point is that television, broadcast, cable, satellite or on-line, rarely provides experiences that create a shared sense of national community.

Broadcasting never overcame the blind spots in its earlier versions of community. In many ways, it fostered them. Yet this imperfect system played crucial roles at many levels in social and cultural life. It will never be restored.

How then must industries, legislatures, policy makers and citizens' groups respond in an era of profound media change? The assessment that follows outlines critical issues in the current media contexts and calls for commitments on the part of industry leaders, citizens' groups and policy makers who will shape new directions.

#### **The Changing Roles of Television News**

Television news no longer commands the cultural and social authority it held in the broadcast era. Many citizens no longer believe the formal institutions of broadcast journalism are capable of fulfilling the role of society's watchdog. Ironically, the culprit may be the explosion of news outlets and digital technologies, another instance of fragmentation.

- Rampant cost-cutting affects every step of the news gathering and distribution process.
- Network as well as local television news operations struggle with reduced staffing.

- News organizations face increased pressure to avoid upsetting valuable sponsors.
- Newscasts air at times when many viewers no longer watch.
- Channels pursue the increasingly elusive audience through an injection of superficial entertainment news.
- Channels stylize their news formats according to audience preferences and opinions.
- Some channels drown in punditry and inconsequential news reports calibrated to attract fickle audiences.
- Some public figures deliberately attempt to intimidate journalists.

At the same time, viralization means we no longer need to wait for the news. It comes to us, often from other viewers.

- Web logs and internet news outlets are available “on demand” in user schedules.
- Viralization means such items may have far greater reach and potentially increased visceral impact.
- Though most of these discussions tend to be as short-lived as they are furious, citizens do broach charged issues openly on Web forums. Powerful examples include footage of incidents involving Michael Richards and Don Imus. When these made the rounds in cyberspace, they sparked debates about racism.
- But these forms documenting every error and controversy also chip away at journalists’ image as objective truth-tellers.

### **The Critical Issue**

One result of the “new” news environment is the creation of a giant media echo chamber. Here, fact-based satire by comics such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert may cut through the noise to unmask propaganda, spin and corporate interests more effectively than work from real-life journalists. But even there viewers increasingly see and hear only those perspectives and points of view that reverberate from their preconceived beliefs and attitudes. Democratic discussion, deliberation, and debate are undercut by a process of self-validation and simplistic dismissal of alternatives.

## **The New Entertainment and Documentary Options**

An encouraging sign in the midst of these seismic shifts is that “quality television” exists. The fragmented post-broadcast system provides opportunities for program developers to offer content that caters to diverse tastes and interests, explores new forms, and addresses problems from a broader range of perspectives.

- Viewers may receive more information and varying perspectives on issues through fiction and documentary than in traditional news presentations.
- Commercial broadcast networks no longer have a monopoly, and the widening array of delivery systems leads to an increase of choice.
- Premium and basic cable networks create signature series – programs distinctive enough to stand out, good enough to reward regular viewing.
- This flourishing of TV entertainment and documentary extends to the internet. Uploaded segments or skits reach more viewers than the originals. Documentaries aired only once on broadcast or cable channels are archived for multiple viewing by expanding audiences.

Consumers now also have the potential to be producers.

- With digital equipment, internet connections, and familiarity with software viewers create TV series and become part of and challenge “the Hollywood system.”
- Similar opportunities exist for viewer generated, in-depth documentation of important topics and problems.
- Viralization enables rich online social exchanges that are occurring today.
- Viralization also contributes to the increasing progression of coverage toward the shallow – celebrity, *TMZ*-style gossip.

## **The Critical Issue**

Access to quality programming and the range of perspectives is increasingly dictated by a financial caste system. Cable access, especially at the premium level, is expensive. Opportunities afforded by the Web are largely restricted to those able to afford computers and broadband access. Conversion to digital signals may mean that even the most worthy programs – such as *Sesame Street* on PBS – will be difficult to access by those who need them most, but can afford them least.

## **Steps Toward a New Public Media Culture**

Those who control the media industries, those who make policies that regulate them, and the exuberant creators of new forms of content and delivery must not repeat or compound the errors of old systems. Neither should they forget or abandon their achievements.

The ideals of public service in the interest of public culture must continue to inspire what we create and what we watch.

The links between communication and community must be remembered, reinvented, and deployed.

The following proposals result from our assessment

- Industry leaders, policy makers, and citizens' groups must work toward the creation of various types of "media commons." These channels, networks or other media spaces **must** be available to provide opportunities for encounters and exchanges among different and differing groups rather than retreat into gated communities for the like-minded.
- Citizens' groups and industry leaders should collaborate with policy makers to define and recognize varying forms and levels of "public good." Terms **must** be defined both more precisely and more broadly to address the larger collective national culture as well as local communities.
- Artists and audiences – of all orientations, colors, and genders – must participate in ways that enrich the new television culture and raise issues of public importance. Groups should devise strategies for presenting their own goals and values to others, who might challenge or be challenged by them. To achieve this aim, industry leaders and practitioners **must** increase and intensify efforts to diversify personnel at all levels and in all roles in the media industries. Reports of these efforts must become part of the public record.
- Across the board, industry leaders and policy makers **must** work to provide access for all communities and to overcome the financial divides that restrict some citizens to a narrow range of content. Strategies to accomplish this goal should be developed by projects comprising citizens' groups, industry, legislative, and policy representatives.

The new media environment requires re-definition of the strategies and actions of industry professionals, policy makers, regulators and citizens' groups. Reliance on old models is no longer an option for those who take seriously the central role of media in public culture.

The Peabody/Loyless Seminar and a resulting “State of Television” report will become an annual project of the Peabody Center for Media and Society housed in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. The seminar is made possible by the Donald Loyless Fund, instituted by Augustus Shaw Loyless, in honor of his father. The Loyless Fund established a permanent relationship with the George Foster Peabody Awards in 2005 through the generosity of Ms. Helen Loyless.

This year’s inaugural seminar was convened in October at the Peabody Center and included a public forum. The panelists were journalistic TV critics Melanie McFarland of the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*; Eric Deggans of the *St. Petersburg Times*; and David Bianculli of the New York *Daily News* and National Public Radio’s cultural series *Fresh Air*; and Noel Holston, a veteran of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* and New York’s *Newsday*.

The scholars taking part were Lynn Spigel, chair of the Radio/Television/Film Department at Northwestern University; Jeffrey Jones, associate professor of TV, Film and Popular Culture at Old Dominion University; and Mary Beltran, assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Horace Newcomb, Director of the Peabody Awards and the Lambdin Kay Chair for the Peabody in the Grady School at UGA, moderated the discussions.