



Economic Recovery and Public Media

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Overview

Transportation, energy and telecommunications networks are the nervous system of our economy. But American infrastructure is more than bridges, roads and wires. It is also the public institutions and public servants that do the work that democratic society requires -- our schools, libraries, museums and public media outlets. These jobs do not use shovels or require engineering degrees, but they are the glue that quietly and reliably holds our communities together. Not only can we ill afford to lose jobs in this sector, we need to promote expansion. The stimulative effect of public media jobs on the economy is relatively inexpensive, and its reach is expansive.

Public media outlets connect our communities to civil society. They offer education, local and national news, and cultural programming; they partner with local schools, government, public safety, museums, and community groups. We can build the greatest infrastructure and fastest Internet connections in the world. But we must also attend to strengthening the things which make that network worth the connection, starting with our local media.

With commercial television, radio, and especially newspaper journalism in an economic freefall, we are witnessing both a massive loss of jobs and a widening gap in information inequality. That is a systemic problem that deserves first order attention in economic recovery. As these institutions falter, who will produce the news and information our communities need to learn about local issues, hold their leaders accountable, and participate in our democracy? The answer often will lie with public media.

Proposals for Public Media Stimulus Programs

A public media stimulus would address three major areas:

- Creation of a next generation broadband network linking public media outlets, educational, governmental and civic institutions;
- Digitization of public media's vast archival holdings into a universal, searchable database;
- Programming support to expand national capacity and dramatically increase the resources available to community outlets for training, management and local content production.

Public media are not the obvious target of economists looking at a stimulus bill. But investing in public media is critical for the same reason other infrastructure spending is critical – it creates immediate jobs across the country; it is cost-effective; and over time it delivers expansive social and economic benefits.

Stimulus can target funds at the local level in the communities hurt worst by recession, create jobs to produce local media, strengthen our community institutions with new programs in education and public service, and build public communications networks to link outlets, partners, and citizens. And no new administrative body is needed: Public media stimulus programs could be directed through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting via an “innovation fund,” or there are programs at the Department of Commerce and the Department of Education that could manage the distribution of resources to local communities.



Building Public Media Networks

As traditional broadcasting and cable TV blend into the Internet age, next-generation broadband networks will be the distribution system for public media. We need a world-class infrastructure linking public media outlets with local schools, institutions of higher learning, hospitals, government, and centers of content production. This network would facilitate next generation educational resources for schools, enhance e-government programs, and supercharge telemedicine. The stimulus money would be used to build the network to build and guarantee a publicly operated conduit for media distribution.

Cost/ Jobs: We recommend \$200 million per year for two years for the construction of networks. We estimate this could create 3500 jobs with substantial multiplier affects.

Administration: The money could flow through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting directly to local stations to contract with network operators, or it could be directed as a grant program through the Department of Commerce's Public Telecommunications Facilities Program (PTFP). Grant monies would be distributed to local community outlets for the creation of the network based on an RFP that is guided by criteria set by the federal administrator. Priority targeting should be given to areas in highest need of economic recovery and with the strongest showing of local, regional, and national partnerships to leverage the grant. Grants would be contingent on clear commitments to build-out timetables and demonstrable benchmarks overseen by the federal administrator.

Establishing a National Digital Archive

There are currently millions of hours of public media content stored on analog tapes and celluloid in archives and at public media outlets throughout the country. Transferring and cataloging all of this material into digital form will preserve the nation's cultural history and make it available for everyone. The project will also employ hundreds of local technicians as well as a team of national coordinators to create a single, searchable online point of entry to access all current and archived public media content in the nation.

Cost/Jobs: We recommend \$75 million per year for two years to cover the cost of employment and the modernization of production equipment. We estimate this could create more than 1,000 jobs in communities all across the country.

Administration: The money could flow through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting directly to local stations and the national public media network, or it could be directed by the Department of Commerce in conjunction with the broadband network project. Grants could be written immediately to public media outlets nationwide to hire staff to digitize archived materials. Further grants could then flow through an RFP with criteria set by the administrator to manage the creation of the national archive, coordination with local sources, and the creation of a user interface so the public could access the material.

Expanding Public Media Programming

With its libraries of public affairs, educational and cultural fare, public media is poised to extend its reach in ways never before imagined and serve as an educational and civic hub for local communities. Digital technologies offer new opportunities for public media stations to work with local community partners to deliver content and public services in innovative ways. An expansion of content production capabilities, particularly at the local level, will open jobs in the creative community and serve an urgently needed social good – providing news and information in our communities about our communities.



This can be done in a variety of ways. Stimulus funds can be targeted at hiring station-level production employees to jumpstart local programming. Funds could also be allocated on a more temporary basis in the form of a public media production corps – an AmeriCorps type program that employs thousands of young people with technology skills to develop public media production capabilities and an archive of local media content at outlets across the country. Beyond this, specific programs could be created to meet specific needs – such as job training, children’s education, and enhanced public service in partnership with local government.

Cost/Jobs: We recommend \$300 million per year for two years for this program. We estimate this investment could create more than 3,500 jobs in communities around the country.

Administration: The money could flow through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting directly to local stations and the national public media network, or it could be directed through other agencies. For example, the Department of Education’s “Ready to Learn” and “Ready to Teach” grant programs would be a useful administrator of elements of this program. The Commerce Department could also oversee these types of grants – particularly those aimed at addressing the needs of disadvantaged communities. Regardless of the administering entity, grant monies would be targeted at hiring production staff to generate content for the purpose of immediate economic stimulus and long-term community service. Accountability would be ensured through standards, benchmarks and deliverables required as a condition of the grant.

Conclusion: Jobs and Growth in Public Media

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 created today’s public broadcasting system, calling for “a new system that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities...and constitutes valuable local community resources for utilizing electronic media to address national concerns and solve local problems through community programs and outreach programs.”

We believe that a public media stimulus package would both create jobs and achieve these worthy objectives, through a carefully targeted proposal that is tied to public service principles ensuring that American taxpayers get a strong return on their investment. The policy goals of the stimulus package – job creation, infrastructure construction, and consumer spending – strongly reinforce efforts to increase funding to public media locally and nationally. Success would mean a dramatic expansion of public media offerings in education, public affairs, and the arts: from the flagship national networks out to the most innovative new media forms.