EQUIMEDIA ADVISORS / WHITE PAPER

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Reclaiming Local in Public Media

A return to educational roots and community service across generations

EQUIMEDIA ADVISORS

Strategy for consequential moments.

NOVEMBER 7, 2026

59 years after the Public Broadcasting Act

In this white paper

I wrote this paper for newer employees and longtime public media veterans, including leaders and boards deciding what to protect, what to stop, and whom to serve. The 59th anniversary of the Public Broadcasting Act is an opportunity to reclaim the local educational purpose that gave public media its reason to exist.

I follow that purpose from the early stations to choices we can make now about education, national partnerships, and readiness for the next disaster. Public media should be judged by what changes in the communities it serves. That standard should guide our budgets and the case we make for public support.

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On the anniversary a local choice

On November 7, 2026, we mark 59 years since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act. [1] I want us to use that anniversary to answer a question our neighbors have every right to ask: Why does this station matter here?

I am writing for public media's workforce: people just entering the field and colleagues who have spent decades serving it. We should share an understanding of why this work began. This paper offers an introduction for some and a reminder for others. My perspective comes from work at Arizona PBS, Public Radio International, and Local Media Association, and from serving as president of Vermont College of Fine Arts.

The system around us has changed profoundly. In July 2025, lawmakers rescinded approximately $1.1 billion in CPB advance appropriations for fiscal years 2026 and 2027. In January 2026, CPB announced that its board had voted to dissolve. [2][3] Reclaiming local will not replace that money. It can give leaders a clearer basis for deciding what to sustain and why their community should help sustain it.

Meanwhile, national public media organizations are pursuing their own responses. Current reported in October 2026 that PBS News launched Press Pass, an $8 monthly supporter offering with additional benefits while keeping its news free. PBS News is produced at WETA, itself a local station. Its leaders describe a response to growing digital audiences and say some stations welcome the effort to sustain the national program. [4]

Nieman Lab described NPR's partnership with Machine Gods, a video-first technology podcast intended to attract new audiences and sponsorship. A radio version is planned for January 2027, with member stations choosing whether to carry it. NPR did not confirm the financial terms. [5]

Across our workforce, we should ask what these investments make possible locally. Public media should help people learn throughout life, connect with neighbors, and find dependable information when it matters. What changes because our station is here, and how will we show it?

I begin with educational broadcasting before PBS and NPR, then examine what the original 1967 Act established. The historical record is the foundation; the case for reclaiming local is the argument I draw from it. Understanding both can help us choose what to sustain, including dependable service when a wildfire, flood, or hurricane comes.

For colleagues who feel left in the cold by national decisions, I am proposing work we can own together. Reclaim responsibility for our station's purpose and community relationships. Leaders must align resources; everyone doing the work can help shape it. National partners should consult stations, serve them, and give smaller stations an equal voice.

Why educational broadcasting began

American public media has several beginnings. Universities, educators, cultural institutions, and community groups used radio and later television to extend resources beyond the people who could physically enter a classroom, concert hall, or campus. The histories of Wisconsin, Houston, and Boston show different expressions of that ambition. [6–11][12]

What draws me to these beginnings is the practical ambition behind them. A university had knowledge that could help people who could not come to campus. A community had cultural resources worth sharing. Broadcasting gave those institutions a way to reach farther. The reason for doing it began with the people who could benefit.

Public policy helped create room for that work. In 1952, the Federal Communications Commission reserved television channels for noncommercial educational use. Its rationale included both school instruction and adult education, with programming different from what commercial pressures would ordinarily produce. Local initiative developed within a deliberately protected public space. [13]

That educational purpose was broad. It included adult learning, music, children's programs, and public affairs. News was part of some early stations, too. I want us to recover that breadth as we decide what deserves the greatest share of our attention now.

I would start a station's strategy in the same place: with the people we could help. Then choose the broadcast, digital, classroom, or partnership approach that gives them useful access. We have more tools than the founders did. We still need to be clear about what we are using them for.

We should also ask whom those early institutions overlooked. People with disabilities, residents who speak different languages, and neighbors who rarely encounter our work need a say in what comes next. Returning to our roots should widen participation.

The obligation I take from this history is to keep extending opportunity. That requires us to examine familiar activities honestly and change the ones that no longer serve people well. Wisconsin offers an early example of what that ambition looked like in practice.

Wisconsin and the university beyond its walls

Wisconsin Public Radio traces its public information broadcasting to 1917. Its university predecessor used the experimental call sign 9XM; the WHA call letters came in 1922. The station moved to Radio Hall in 1934. [6][7]

The Wisconsin School of the Air began in 1931, bringing educational programs into primary and secondary classrooms. The College of the Air also began that year, extending learning to adults; an early offering taught touch typing. These were concrete attempts to connect university and educational resources with people beyond a conventional campus course. [8]

I find the specificity of that work compelling. A teacher could bring more resources into a classroom. An adult could learn a skill without enrolling in college. The university was extending its usefulness into people's daily lives.

Radio Hall in Madison, circa 1940s. WHA moved here in 1934. UW Archives, S02765, via Alumni Park. [7]

What expertise sits in our communities today that people struggle to reach? A college, library, cultural organization, or public agency may already have something valuable to offer. I see a role for the station in making that knowledge accessible and keeping the connection dependable.

We do not need to recreate a typing course from 1931. We need to recover the habit of asking what people want to learn and how we can help. When television arrived, Houston carried that educational ambition into another medium.

Houston and learning through television

KUHT began broadcasting on May 25, 1953, as the first noncommercial educational television station in the United States. Its original home was the University of Houston's Ezekiel W. Cullen Building. University archives describe a station serving students, faculty, and the wider community. [9][10]

College-credit instruction was an early part of the undertaking. A Texas legislative commemoration describes courses in subjects including psychology, English, science, and the arts. Television offered another route into education through a local university. [11]

Early KUHT station identification, with the Cullen Building behind it. University of Houston Special Collections, via Wikimedia Commons. See visual credits.

The early station identification makes the educational identity unmistakable. KUHT had a reason to serve Houston before there was a PBS. The medium was new; the relationship between the university and its community gave it purpose.

That sequence matters to me when we talk about the next platform or format. Reach and convenience are useful when they help us fulfill a need we understand. I want the local purpose to drive the technology decision.

Houston also reminds us that a station does not have to supply every kind of expertise itself. It can make another institution's resources more accessible and understandable. That gives us room to be ambitious about service while choosing our partnerships carefully.

Cooperation before PBS and NPR

Local origins did not mean that educational stations worked without national cooperation. The Educational Television and Radio Center, established in 1952 through the Ford Foundation's Fund for Adult Education, helped stations share programs. It developed into National Educational Television, or NET, which also produced programming. The surviving collection includes classroom and adult education alongside arts, science, public affairs, and contested social issues. [14]

I value shared production. No local institution can afford to originate everything its community might use. A program made elsewhere can be enormously valuable at home. The question is what it contributes to the people we serve.

Public support also preceded the 1967 Act

In May 1962, President John F. Kennedy signed the Educational Television Facilities Act, providing federal support for station construction while retaining state and local operation. His statement connected educational television with wider opportunities for learning and cultural growth. The relationship between local responsibility and public investment was already explicit before CPB was authorized. [15]

That history also matters when we discuss money. Local initiative has long worked alongside public investment. Communities have unequal resources, and reclaiming local cannot mean expecting each one to finance every essential capacity alone.

I apply the same judgment to national programming. A shared program may serve our residents exceptionally well. A locally produced program may miss the need entirely. We owe both the same honest assessment.

But when distribution becomes our whole identity, we make ourselves vulnerable. If residents can find the program elsewhere, they can reasonably ask why the local station still needs their support. We need an answer grounded in something they can experience here.

The best national and regional partnerships help us provide that answer. They supply work we could not afford alone, and we bring local knowledge and accountability. That relationship was central to the choices being debated in 1967.

The choice made in 1967

The Carnegie Commission on Educational Television released Public Television: A Program for Action in January 1967. Its proposal included national production and interconnection, but placed independent local stations at the center of a larger and better-supported system. [16]

Its phrase “vigorous and independent local stations” deserves attention from today’s boards. The commission wanted institutions responsive to their communities and capable of contributing to a national audience. It proposed a nongovernmental corporation to serve stations, with each station deciding whether and when to use the programs made available to it. Local production was also to receive support. [16]

Congress did not adopt every Carnegie recommendation. Still, I see a clear ambition in the proposal: shared resources would strengthen local choice, and strong local stations would contribute work worth sharing. Cooperation was supposed to make the local institution more capable.

The word that stays with me is vigorous. A station needs enough people, knowledge, and operating capacity to exercise its independence. Freedom to choose means little if we lack the resources to carry a choice through.

I would ask every national initiative to show how it strengthens that capacity. What can the station use? Who maintains the relationship with residents? What costs stay local? A promise of success across the system needs an explanation of how the benefit reaches our community.

Stations have responsibilities in that relationship, too. We should contribute knowledge and work that other communities can use. Reclaiming local can strengthen the national system by giving it more to draw from. The Act that followed deserves to be read with that local ambition in mind.

What the original Act established

The Public Broadcasting Act became Public Law 90-129 on November 7, 1967. This summary concerns the original law, rather than today's amended code. [17]

Original provision	What it provided
Titles I and III	Expanded broadcast facilities assistance and authorized a study of instructional television and radio.
Title II and section 396(b)	Authorized CPB as a nonprofit corporation outside the federal government.
Section 396(a)	Recognized local and national initiative, diverse programming, and responsiveness to localities and the country.
Section 396(c)(1)	Provided 15 presidentially appointed, Senate-confirmed directors; at most eight could share a party.
Section 396(g)(1)	Addressed objectivity and balance in controversial programming, station scheduling choice, and freedom from control.
Section 396(g)(2)(C)	Authorized assistance for local programming, innovation, and station operating costs.
Section 396(g)(3)	Barred CPB ownership or operation of stations, networks, interconnection, or program-production facilities.

The Act did not establish PBS or NPR by name. [17]

My reading is that local initiative was meant to generate public value. Congress made room for a wider system while preserving space for local decisions. It also confronted a problem we still have to manage: how to support public expression without letting the source of support control it.

I want boards to bring that question into the present. Do our local choices have real weight? Does the support we share leave us better able to serve our neighbors? What benefit can they recognize? The founding design gives us a reason to ask, but we have to make the decisions ourselves.

I am using the original Act to examine that design, not to claim that its historical provisions are today's law or that Congress required the service model I propose. My argument is about what we choose to do with this inheritance.

November seventh and a network for knowledge

On November 7, 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act in the White House East Room. The photograph below records the event. His remarks placed the new institution within a broad educational and cultural ambition. [1][18]

President Johnson signs the Public Broadcasting Act, November 7, 1967. Frank Wolfe, LBJ Presidential Library, C7317-5A. Public domain. [18]

Johnson described “a great network for knowledge.” He imagined broadcasting working with computers and satellites to put resources within reach of people far beyond their immediate surroundings. He also spoke of independence from government and party control. [1] His aspirations at the signing extended beyond the law’s specific provisions.

I hear an ambition we should still be willing to claim. A person can learn something, understand more, or participate more fully because a public institution made a connection possible. That is a meaningful way to judge our work.

Johnson was already looking beyond a single technology. We should be willing to do the same. The enduring question is what knowledge our community can reach through us. The national brands came later, within that larger purpose.

The mission before the national brands

Before PBS and NPR became familiar names, educational stations were already serving communities and sharing programs. I want leaders to keep that sequence in view. The organizations we rely on today grew within a purpose that preceded them.

Milestone	Historical place
1917	Wisconsin's predecessor to WHA broadcasts public information. [6]
1931	Wisconsin's School of the Air and College of the Air begin. [8]
1951	WGBH radio begins, including Boston Symphony Orchestra concerts. [12]
1952	The FCC reserves channels for educational television. [13]
1953	KUHT begins noncommercial educational television in Houston. [9]
1955	WGBH television opens with a children's program followed by news. [12]
1962	Federal legislation supports educational television facilities. [15]
1967	Carnegie recommendations precede the Public Broadcasting Act. [16][17]
1969	PBS is founded. [19]
1970	NPR is incorporated on February 26. [20]
1971	All Things Considered begins on May 3. [20]

The broader ambition belongs to the national organizations' inheritance, too. Bill Siemering's 1970 National Public Radio Purposes emphasized personal growth, cultural experience, and active participation. Its proposals included cooperative development with member stations and educational programs for particular regions or groups, alongside journalism. [21]

I want a partnership that takes those commitments seriously. National organizations can help stations fulfill local purposes while renewing their own. We can value shared programs and still insist on a local identity people recognize.

Calling this history nationalization can obscure what happened. PBS and NPR did not turn stations into a single federally owned network. My concern is how much influence local purpose has over decisions now, and whether we are prepared to exercise the authority we have.

News within a broader public purpose

I am making the case that public media's purpose is broader than news. I am not making the claim that news arrived late or never belonged. Some early stations carried news and public affairs. Producing a local program, carrying a national newscast, and adopting a news-centered format were distinct choices made at different times.

These station and program milestones show how the choices varied.

Milestone	News and public affairs within the service
1932	WHA's political education forum becomes a regular feature. This was candidate access and public affairs, rather than evidence of a daily newsroom. [22]
1955	WGBH-TV's launch-day schedule includes news read by Louis Lyons, following a children's program. News preceded PBS and NPR. [12]
1970	KERA launches Newsroom, a half-hour weeknight local television news program led by Jim Lehrer. [23]
1971	NPR's All Things Considered begins on May 3, establishing its daily national newsmagazine service. [20]
1975	The Robert MacNeil Report, a predecessor of the NewsHour, begins on October 20. [24]
1979	NPR's Morning Edition begins on November 5, adding its morning national news service. [25]
1982	WBUR's history says it has established an identity as a news station, combining NPR programs with local production. [26]
2007	WAMU shifts its main channel to seven-day news, talk, and information, moving Sunday bluegrass to another channel. This was a format change. [27]

NPR's own beginning is clear. Siemering's 1970 purposes made a daily program meeting high broadcast-journalism standards the first development priority, alongside cultural and educational ambitions. [21] We should be accurate about that history as we argue for a broader mission now.

WBUR and WAMU's later changes concerned identity and scheduling, not their first news broadcasts. What I take from their histories is that stations can change the weight they give an activity while retaining a larger obligation to the public.

That is the decision I want local leaders to make deliberately. Assess news by what the community needs, alongside education, culture, and other services. Keep the news people depend on. Be willing to change the balance when a different use of resources would serve them better. Other mission organizations have faced comparable choices.

What other nonprofits can teach us

Public media is hardly the first mission organization to confront a changed world. Some organizations redirect their work after succeeding at the original task. Others expand the ways they serve. Their histories help clarify what kind of change we are asking our stations to make.

March of Dimes redirected its focus

Founded in 1938 to fight polio, March of Dimes supported research that contributed to the development of vaccines. Its work subsequently moved toward preventing birth defects and improving maternal and infant health. A major advance against the original problem created a reason to reassess where its capabilities could serve next. [28]

March of Dimes had to ask where its capabilities could do the most good next. I want us to bring that same honesty to activities we preserve because they are familiar. Continuation needs a reason grounded in present benefit.

The YMCA broadened an enduring commitment

The YMCA began in London in 1844 as a supportive refuge for young men facing the pressures of industrial city life. Its work expanded into a broad community role. The organization describes continuity in its Christian principles alongside evolving programs in youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility. This is an example of growth around a continuing purpose. [29]

The YMCA's history makes a different point. An organization can broaden its work while carrying an enduring purpose forward. When a station adds a new form of service, people should be able to understand its connection to why the station exists.

Oxfam widened its response beyond one emergency

The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief was formed in 1942 and campaigned to bring food to people in occupied Greece. Its relief efforts continued after the war and expanded beyond Europe as needs changed. The organization's geography and scope grew beyond the particular emergency that had prompted its creation. [30]

Oxfam's response grew as its understanding of need widened. The discipline is to explain what changed and why the institution's work should change with it.

For public media, I see a purpose we can reclaim within our own history. Communities still need learning, cultural opportunity, and useful knowledge. Our task is to bring those resources within reach using the means available now.

That is the pivot I am proposing. If we have become more identified with the programs we distribute than with the people we serve, we can change that. The change needs to show up in budgets and service, where residents can see it.

Businesses can return to their core

Businesses have also had to decide what to recover when expansion weakened the relationship that made them useful. I see lessons for station leaders in how they returned to their core while continuing to adapt.

LEGO renewed its focus on the building system

LEGO's 2004 annual report described a fundamental change of direction toward its classic core products, the LEGO brick and the values associated with the brand. Development outside the core, including electronic games, moved to licensed partners. Its 2005 report described the sale of LEGOLAND Parks and a renewed concentration on the building system. [31][32]

The recovery involved cost reductions and asset sales alongside products. The 2005 report also emphasized closer dialogue with retailers and a better ability to meet their needs. Refocusing involved financial choices and relationships as well as a statement of identity. [32]

For a station, that raises a practical question about focus. What do we contribute that our community would otherwise lose? Where could a partner do the work better? We can preserve access to shared resources while putting more of our own effort into the local contribution.

Starbucks recommitted to the customer experience

When Howard Schultz returned as chief executive in January 2008, Starbucks announced a renewed focus on coffee, the store experience, and its relationship with customers. The plan included training and tools for employees, slower U.S. store growth, and changes in resource allocation. It combined a return to core strengths with continued innovation. [33]

The lesson I draw is to recover the relationship that gives the institution value. The return has to be something people experience today. Recreating an old schedule will accomplish little if the community has moved on.

Our responsibility is public benefit. We can renew access to knowledge, learning, and culture without waiting to see what the national brands launch next. But we also have to understand how people's use of our work is changing. That is where audience data belongs in this argument.

What audience data tells station leaders

A national program can reach millions without telling us whether people recognize their local station or believe it understands their needs. I want boards to examine national reach and local relevance separately, then ask how the two connect. We should know what relationship our spending is building.

Broadcast listening has contracted

Pew's published NPR series shows average weekly terrestrial audiences falling from 30.1 million in 2017 to 23.5 million in 2022, about 22%. These are listeners to NPR programming across carrying stations, not the entire audience for every program on NPR member stations. [34]

National Public Media reports 21.9 million weekly NPR radio listeners, citing Spring 2026 Nielsen data for people ages 12 and older. [35] That is still a substantial audience. It is a seasonal estimate, distinct from the historical annual series above, and neither series explains why particular listeners changed their habits.

Digital scale does not establish local connection

Published measure	Scope and interpretation
NPR 41 million weekly audience	Spring 2026 internal estimate across platforms. Broader than radio listening; not a count of people connected to a particular station. [36]
PBS over 36 million adults monthly	Linear primetime reach reported in PBS's 2025 fact sheet. A reach measure, not average audience per program or proof of a decline. [37]
Podcasts 58% monthly and 45% weekly	Americans ages 12 and older who listened to or watched podcasts in Edison's 2026 survey. All podcasts, not public media alone. [38]

Read these measures on their own terms. Their populations, time windows, and methods differ, so they cannot be added or ranked as comparable totals. NPR's radio trend also tells us nothing by itself about a decline in PBS viewing.

Edison's January 2026 survey included 2,050 people ages 12 and older. [38] It gives us reason to adapt distribution to changing habits. Choosing the right investment for a station still requires local judgment.

I see a warning in the combination of declining broadcast use and more ways to reach content directly. National programming retains a large audience. The local question is whether access to it is building a relationship that gives people a reason to use and support our station.

When national reach can widen the local distance

I worry that national growth could create more distance between stations and their communities. That could happen if the audience relationship moves elsewhere while local money and staff time remain committed to supporting it. We need to test that risk in our own markets.

A person may discover a national program without discovering the station. Meanwhile, we may be paying to carry and promote that program while leaving a local need unmet. National political controversies may also shape how neighbors see us when they know little about our other work. I want boards to ask where these pressures are present and what they can change.

Residents are changing how they connect locally

Pew's April 2026 fact sheet reports that 21% of U.S. adults followed local news very closely in December 2025, compared with 37% in 2016. Local content alone does not guarantee attention. Among people using local TV news, the share primarily accessing it online rose from 22% in 2018 to 43% in 2025. In 2025, 52% of adults got local information at least sometimes from online forums or discussion groups, and 40% from local organizations. These are not public media audience measures. They show that a community relationship can develop beyond a broadcast schedule. [39]

Different residents also seek different kinds of information. Pew found in 2024 that 30% of parents with children under 18 often followed local school news, compared with 14% of other adults. [40] That is evidence of varied use, not a ready-made service plan. We still have to ask our neighbors what is hard to find and where we could help.

Ask what national reach returns to the community

I would ask management to connect program-level reach and time spent with local participation, use of services, and financial support. Where can we trace a referral or conversion? Where is the evidence incomplete? Compare the full cost of carrying and promoting programs with other uses of that money, including what audience and revenue we could lose by changing course.

Then listen beyond the donor list. Ask nonusers what needs are difficult to meet, whom they trust, and how they want to connect. Judge a service by whether it reaches the intended residents and helps them. Essential work may deserve support even with a small audience.

PBS's 2024 announcement of CPB-funded Nielsen Local Dashboards shows a precedent for investing jointly in station-level audience knowledge. [41] We should ask what data stations can access now and what else they need. National organizations seeking our investment should help us understand its local return. We cannot assume national scale will supply local relevance.

Reclaiming local

When I say reclaim local, I mean taking responsibility for our purpose, priorities, revenue, and relationship with the people around us. National programming earns its place by contributing to that work. We can make those choices ourselves, within the commitments we have made to our partners.

We also need to reclaim the right to define success. Ten years from now, I want us to show measurable improvement in the health and wellbeing of the communities we serve, with evidence of public media's contribution. Audience size alone cannot tell us that. We should be able to explain whom our work helped, what changed, and why the next dollar belongs there.

Is the juice still worth the squeeze

In a digital world, national programming may no longer deliver enough distinctive local value to justify what a station pays to carry and promote it. For some stations, the juice may no longer be worth the squeeze, especially when we are footing the bill while the audience relationship develops elsewhere. We should be prepared to say so when the evidence supports it.

If we are cutting local staff or postponing essential service, national spending belongs under the same scrutiny as everything else. A large national audience does not settle the local budget question. Show what our community receives and what the same resources could sustain nearby.

That review has to include people who rely on broadcast access because broadband is unreliable or unaffordable. It must also account for national programs that attract support for local work. I am asking for an honest comparison of benefits and losses before we decide.

Connect educate and empower

Connect people with neighbors, local expertise, and opportunities to participate. Educate through useful learning across generations, with schools, libraries, colleges, and community organizations. Empower people to use that knowledge: complete a course, navigate a service, contribute to a local effort, or prepare for an emergency. These verbs should describe results we can show. Agree with partners on a starting point, useful measures, and a time to review progress.

That standard should have consequences for our budgets. Count national programming fees, dues, distribution, promotion, and staff time without double counting. Identify actual savings and possible revenue losses, then compare them with a specific local use. National organizations should explain how their investments strengthen local access and participation. We should fund the capacity to produce and assess community benefit, including work whose value will never appear in a streaming activation or donation total.

Some of our most important work will never pay for itself. Education, culture, and emergency information can merit support because people need them. Reclaiming local means choosing those priorities deliberately. For me, education across generations belongs at the center.

Education across generations

As a former president of Vermont College of Fine Arts, I believe education should be central to public media's local thesis. People should be able to keep learning throughout life, including when college is unaffordable, impractical, or more than they need for the knowledge they seek. I see a distinctive role for a station that helps bring quality learning within reach.

That role is there in our beginnings. WHA's School of the Air and College of the Air extended educational resources, and KUHT brought instruction beyond the campus classroom. [6–11] I want us to recover that ambition with today's educators and tools, shaped by the needs of people living here now.

Price and value make access urgent

Higher education's price should sharpen this purpose without dismissing its value. College Board reports average published in-state public four-year tuition and fees of $11,950 in 2025–26. Estimated net tuition and fees for first-time full-time in-state students are $2,300 after grant aid, excluding living and other expenses. Inflation-adjusted net tuition has declined from its earlier peak. [42]

The affordability concern is real in public perception. In a June 2026 Lumina Foundation–Gallup survey, only 12% of U.S. adults rated four-year institutions excellent or good at providing an affordable education. [43] I value what colleges make possible. I also believe our communities need more ways to learn alongside them.

Serve the whole learning life

I want a station's educational commitment to include children, parents, caregivers, working adults, and older residents. Career exploration and creative study in retirement belong in the same account of whom we serve. There is also value in bringing generations together to learn from one another.

Colleges, schools, libraries, and local practitioners could help us offer adult literacy, preparation for further study, digital skills, and local arts or history. KET's FastForward high school equivalency preparation shows that public media already has capabilities beyond children's programming. [44] We have something to build on.

Make educational quality part of the promise

We can connect educational expertise with broad distribution and a continuing local relationship. Offer a free foundation of learning, be clear about additional fees, and combine broadcasts or on-demand lessons with partner-led practice and help. Captions, appropriate languages, and access for people with limited connectivity belong in the design.

I would hold that work to clear standards: qualified educators, accurate materials, understandable goals, and evidence of what learners can do afterward. Show people where they can go next, and offer college credit only through explicit agreements.

Put this commitment in the budget and report what it achieves. Participation is a beginning; show what people learned and could do afterward. With educational partners, a station can become an essential local institution people turn to throughout their lives. Here is what that could look like in practice.

A modern station as a community classroom

Imagine using a broadcast to invite people into a subject, digital lessons to help them prepare, and a local class to put the learning to work. We bring production, outreach, accessible materials, and a place to gather. Qualified partners teach and verify completion. These are partnerships I would explore locally.

Learn to observe local weather

Start with weather. A station could invite its local NOAA National Weather Service forecast office to host a free SKYWARN spotter class, then recruit learners through broadcasts and community partners. NWS describes training that typically takes about two hours and covers storm features, safety, and how to submit useful reports. [45] Residents would have a way to contribute observations as well as receive forecasts.

We could provide the venue, an introductory video, and reminders using NWS-approved material. The forecast office would set instruction, eligibility, and reporting requirements. Here in Phoenix, NWS describes free two-hour in-person or virtual classes, generally for adults, with refresher training every two years. [46]

Recognition would follow the local office's practice. NWS Corpus Christi, for example, provides training certificates but no spotter IDs. [47] With partner agreement, a station could add a learning badge recording the class, date, issuer, and completion criteria. It would recognize the learning completed.

Prepare with local emergency professionals

I would bring the same approach to county emergency managers, fire departments, and local Community Emergency Response Team programs. They could lead preparedness classes and practical training. We could recruit residents, help them register, and provide learning segments or a venue that makes participation easier.

FEMA's IS-317.A course is an online introduction to CERT; it does not replace the local CERT Basic classroom training. [48] A station could organize a study group around that introduction and help learners continue into the local program's practical work.

FEMA issues its Independent Study completion certificates after successful exams. [49] The local CERT sponsor sets its own completion and volunteer requirements. Our role would be clear: connect people with the training, support their learning, and label any station participation badge accurately.

Demonstrate the educational return

I would judge these offerings by completed training and demonstrated learning, confirmed by partners with learners' consent. Who participated? Who could not get access? Did people continue into volunteer or educational opportunities? NWS would assess weather reports, and the CERT sponsor would manage its participants. We should report the contribution we can verify.

When the next disaster comes

The public will need public media when the next wildfire threatens homes, the next flood isolates a neighborhood, or the next hurricane disrupts communications. I do not want us to wait for that day to prove our value. SKYWARN and preparedness classes give residents a way to learn with the experts now, while giving the station relationships it can draw on when local information becomes urgent.

That is how education and emergency service connect in this proposal. People learn useful things, and the station stays close to its community and expert partners. We also have to maintain the staff, information practices, and distribution that make service possible under pressure. The experiences of these stations show why.

Wildfire in Mendocino County

KZYX's account of the October 2017 fires describes a late-night volunteer interrupting regular programming as reports arrived from listeners. The station sought information from CAL FIRE and the sheriff's office while continuing to inform its community. The on-air invitation reached beyond ordinary divisions: "Call your neighbors, call your friends, call your enemies." [50]

KZYX knew whom to contact and had a relationship with people who needed to hear from it. Training partnerships would give a station another reason to build those connections before a fire, when there is time to learn together.

Flooding in western North Carolina

After Hurricane Helene struck in September 2024, Blue Ridge Public Radio describes an around-the-clock coverage effort and a text-only website developed with partners for people with limited connectivity. Residents used its information to locate water, shelters, health care, and connectivity sites. BPR also documented its own power-related broadcast interruptions; sustained service was a challenge, rather than a certainty. [51][52]

I would carry that lesson into every local learning offer. Make participation accessible in ordinary times, and retain ways to reach residents when normal connectivity fails. A service people cannot reach will not help them.

Hurricane Ian in southwest Florida

During Hurricane Ian in 2022, WGCU-FM used an auxiliary transmitter to serve the immediate Fort Myers area for about 36 hours when its main transmission site failed. WGCU-TV was off the air during that period. Current's account describes local coverage supported by statewide meteorologists and assistance from other Florida stations. A backup built after an earlier hurricane helped preserve radio service. [53]

These responses show what emergency service demands. The training I propose would sit alongside that capacity, strengthening relationships while the station sustains skilled staff and dependable distribution. Both need attention before the warning arrives.

Readiness begins before the warning

Readiness begins in the work we do every week. Local learning can connect residents with experts and help them know where to turn. Our staff need to practice checking and distributing information, and our facilities need to work when conditions deteriorate. I want those responsibilities planned and funded together.

Service between emergencies

KET reports that its educational resources are used in every Kentucky school district and offers adult learning through FastForward. [44] That continuing relationship with learners is what interests me. A station can have a place in people's lives long before an emergency brings them to us.

Smaller stations can pursue that relationship, too. Bring people to qualified providers, keep the invitation open, and help learners return for refreshers or further study. The partner leads instruction and verifies completion. We keep the local connection active.

Shared capacity can serve a local identity

The Florida Public Radio Emergency Network operates from the University of Florida's WUFT facilities, supplying partner broadcasters with weather and public-safety material across platforms. Its work includes preparation and recovery, with information distributed through local station channels. It is an example of cooperation that strengthens a local service instead of requiring each station to reproduce the same specialist expertise. [54]

I would ask a board to decide what it must maintain locally and what a partner can provide more dependably. Then practice that arrangement. Residents need it to work when the pressure comes.

Readiness has a real cost

KZYX's later experience makes that cost tangible. After the 2024 Grange Fire, the Community Foundation of Mendocino County reported damage from a power surge and awarded $15,800 to restore and upgrade the station's equipment. An organization that had served during earlier fires needed help protecting its own ability to serve again. [55]

Boards need an honest account of facilities, backup arrangements, and staffing. Our employees also have families who may be affected. A continuity plan must account for them. Readiness is part of the service we ask people to support, and it needs resources between emergencies.

More ways to make local learning useful

Preparedness is one expression of a broader educational purpose. The same approach could support a seasonal calendar of learning across generations. I would choose subjects with residents and local educators, starting where there is a clear need and a capable partner. These examples show some of the possibilities.

Learning opportunity	A possible station and partner offering
Digital skills for daily life	With a library or adult education provider, pair short lessons with practice in email, online forms, and basic computer use. An authorized Northstar location can arrange proctored assessments leading to Northstar certificates; badge records distinguish proctored from unproctored assessments. [56]
Adult learning and career exploration	With a community college or adult education provider, offer guided study and introductions to local training pathways. KET's FastForward preparation is one existing resource. The education partner handles equivalency testing, admissions, and any credit or credentials. [44]
Financial skills across generations	With qualified educators, adapt FDIC Money Smart for Adults into workshops supported by short broadcasts. Using the curriculum does not establish an FDIC partnership or credential. [57]
First aid and CPR	Recruit learners and host an authorized Red Cross provider's course. The provider handles skills assessment and certification. Red Cross distinguishes online-only study from courses with the in-person skills session needed for workplace-eligible certification. [58]
Learning from local university research	With Cooperative Extension educators, develop locally relevant workshops on gardening, water use, or other subjects within their expertise. Extension already connects university knowledge with community learning. Any course recognition follows the provider's requirements. [59]
Family learning and local culture	With teachers, libraries, colleges, and museums, combine caregiver learning, family reading, and intergenerational arts or local-history workshops. A shared project can demonstrate participation; a station badge should describe the activity rather than imply a professional qualification.

Give each offering a clear promise

Tell people what they will learn, who will teach, what it costs, and what recognition they can earn. Make joining straightforward. Agree on branding with partners, and identify each badge's issuer, criteria, verification, and any renewal date.

Keep the core invitation open to the community. Funders could help pay for instruction, interpretation, supplies, or scholarships. We still need to cover the full cost and protect educational judgment. As with weather and disaster training, we would be building useful knowledge and lasting relationships through service people can use throughout the year.

Community service and broader public trust

I believe useful community service gives people with different politics a reason to support the same station. A parent looking for learning resources or a neighbor preparing for a storm should be able to recognize our value without agreeing with every national news judgment. That is why I want the local benefit to lead our identity.

Community benefit can cross political lines

Pew Research Center's March 2025 survey found substantial differences in trust in NPR and PBS as news sources. For NPR, the figures were 47% of Democrats and Democratic leaners and 12% of Republicans and Republican leaners; for PBS, 59% and 23%. These are perceptions, rather than findings about bias in particular content. [60]

A July 2025 Harris Poll commissioned by NPR asked about public radio more broadly. Among respondents, 64% of Republicans and 81% of Democrats regarded it as valuable to their community; 77% and 78%, respectively, agreed that they relied on public radio emergency alerts and news for public safety. The online survey included 2,089 adults. [61]

The surveys ask different questions, so I would not treat them as proof that changing our news mix will change trust. They do give us a reason to examine the community benefit people recognize across political lines. Make that work more visible, invite broader participation, and see whether support follows.

Let news serve the local purpose

I would let local needs determine the role of news. Some communities depend on their station for essential coverage. Others may need a different balance of education, culture, and practical learning. We can collaborate, narrow production, or move resources, but we have to account for what residents would lose and who could meet that need.

We will still need to check facts and provide accurate information, especially during emergencies. Those skills serve the larger mission. We can lead our invitation with learning, preparedness, and community service, but changing our vocabulary will accomplish little unless the work changes with it.

Make nonpartisanship visible

Make nonpartisanship visible in how we operate. Apply access rules fairly. Invite people who have never been members. Keep parties and sponsors from controlling decisions. Explain what people can use and give it a dependable place in the budget.

I am not promising an end to accusations of liberal bias. Nor would I let political discomfort decide which facts we provide. I am arguing that more residents should have a direct stake in what we do. The strongest case for support is a station that serves people fairly and is useful when they need it.

Paying for the public purpose

Paying for this work should open a conversation about the future of local institutions like public media. Involve major donors, foundations, other funders, and underwriters while choices can still change. What does the community need its station to become, and what would sustain that role?

Bring supporters into the institutional discussion

Ask supporters what the community would lose without a strong local station. Which needs are going unmet? Where could education, preparedness, culture, or local information improve community health and wellbeing? Compare their answers with what residents and nonusers tell us. Then discuss the people, partnerships, and continuing resources needed to produce that benefit. An ambition to change community outcomes should change what we are willing to fund.

This is about strengthening public media's value chain. Educators, local partners, and national organizations contribute expertise and resources. The station makes that knowledge accessible through trusted local relationships and dependable distribution. Residents gain something useful, which can build participation and support. Where is that chain weak, and what investment would strengthen the benefit?

Fund the capacity behind the service

Show the full cost of delivering that benefit: skilled people, accessibility, technology, partner coordination, and facilities that work between and during emergencies. Review what the budget can contribute, what should become smaller, and what can be shared. Explore multiyear commitments, flexible operating support, and shared investment that can sustain the capacity.

A major donor might help sustain educators or technical capacity; a foundation might support access and evaluation; an underwriter might help keep useful learning free to the community. Develop the conversation around local needs and each supporter's interests. Keep residents involved, protect educational and editorial judgment, and report what the investment makes possible.

WGCU offers one example of a funded capability. Its emergency backup arrangement with a commercial television station included an annual retainer and technical investment before Ian. [53] What capabilities do we have that partners value, and who has a reason to help sustain them? The answer can reveal relationships worth developing well before a crisis.

Keep the case for public investment

Philanthropic and underwriting conversations should also strengthen the case for public investment. Our history combines local initiative with public support, and communities with smaller fundraising bases still deserve essential service. Reclaiming local means examining how those sources can work together to sustain the institution people need.

I want these discussions to clarify local purpose, its cost, and each partner's role. Tell residents what we can sustain, what more investment would enable, and what remains at risk. National organizations belong in that conversation, too.

What do PBS and NPR owe local stations

Before prescribing another governance structure, I want us to examine the responsibility PBS and NPR have to their member stations. What exactly have they committed to provide? Which responsibilities arise from membership and program agreements, which from their stated missions, and which are expectations we have never clearly defined?

The public remains the ultimate beneficiary. But stations supply money, local access, and relationships that help the national system serve that public. How should PBS and NPR account for what they return to those institutions? Where should national growth strengthen local capacity, and how would we know that it does?

Passport makes the question concrete for public television. PBS describes it as a member benefit that participating stations offer eligible donors, with each station setting its qualifications. [62] It can help bring someone into membership. What responsibility do PBS and stations share for turning that first encounter into an understanding of the station's local purpose?

What have the organizations committed to

I would put the current agreements, dues and fee schedules, product terms, and published mission statements in front of the board. What services and rights do stations receive? What discretion do they retain? Which commitments are enforceable, and which depend on cooperation? The answer may differ between PBS and NPR and among particular services.

Then examine the practical return. Do national investments help stations develop local audiences and support, or primarily expand the national organization's direct relationships? Who has access to audience information? How are local programs discovered? What happens when a national revenue opportunity competes with a station's fundraising or obscures its identity?

I want the organizations and their members to answer those questions together. Ask what station consultation should occur before a material decision, what information members need to assess its effects, and how concerns can change the outcome. The announcements cited at the opening are reasons to examine that process, not proof that no consultation occurred.

How do stations influence the decisions

Which decisions properly belong to management, which to the national board, and which should require member approval? Dues, affiliation terms, local brand use, and donor relationships deserve close examination. Editorial choices should remain independent. The franchisor comparison expresses a concern about power; these are membership organizations, and their actual agreements and governing rules should guide the review.

Stations already hold board seats: PBS describes 14 station-manager directors on a 27-member board, while NPR identifies 12 Member Directors on a 23-member board. [63–65] Does that representation give smaller stations a meaningful voice? Should member votes have equal weight or certain decisions require smaller-station concurrence? I want us to examine those options against the responsibility to serve communities of every size.

Membership should build a local relationship

PBS describes Passport as a member benefit. [62] I increasingly see it as a feature: access to a library of programs. The deeper benefit is what belonging to a local public media institution makes possible for a person, a family, and a community. Our invitation should make that value clear.

When we lead with streaming access, we invite comparison with commercial platforms on catalog, price, and convenience. That makes membership feel transactional: contribute, receive access. I want a relationship in which residents support a useful local institution, and the institution listens, invites participation, and demonstrates what that support makes possible. Passport can help open the door.

What does our public invitation say

Look at the homepage on a phone, the donation page, the welcome email, and the renewal appeal. What comes first? How easily can a neighbor find local work or a way to learn and participate? Does the appeal explain whom the station serves before asking the visitor to activate a benefit? These are questions each station can examine directly.

I would ask whether our message amounts to paying for something to watch, or helping sustain something the community needs. Local content, education, preparedness, and useful service should be easy to discover. Passport is a feature we can offer; the benefit we must earn is a stronger community and a meaningful place in it.

Does the benefit lead to belonging

A person may arrive for a national program and develop a lasting local connection. We should make that possible. After activation, do we introduce the station's people and local work? Do we invite members to classes, community conversations, and opportunities to shape our priorities? Do we show the benefit their support brings to neighbors, including those who cannot contribute?

Ask members what they believe they are supporting, and why they stay or leave. Examine participation, use of local services, renewal, and the reasons people give, alongside Passport activation. Activation can tell us that someone used a benefit. It cannot tell us, by itself, whether a local relationship took hold.

Who is accountable for that relationship

PBS should be able to explain how Passport's design and promotion support the member station's identity and relationship with donors. NPR should face the equivalent questions about its direct digital offerings and station partnerships. What do the national organizations make possible locally, and what do they expect stations to contribute in return?

Local leaders own the way we present our institutions, too. We cannot ask national partners to respect a purpose we hide in our own appeals. I want a shared examination of responsibilities, with smaller stations able to participate fully. The outcome should be a clearer local relationship that national services help us sustain.

A discussion for the next board meeting

At the first board meeting after this anniversary, I want station leaders to bring forward a decision about local purpose and the next budget. Leave with a commitment the board is prepared to fund and review.

Recover the founding obligation

Read the founding documents and early schedules. Ask what opportunity the station was created to extend and where that obligation points today. Hear from people who rarely use or fund us. Compare their needs and preferred ways to connect with what the audience data tells us.

Choose the local benefit to prioritize

Choose a need where the station can contribute something distinctive, with partners where appropriate. Name who will benefit, what should change, and how we will assess our contribution. Agree on a starting point and a review date. Be explicit about what will receive less attention, and protect essential information residents would otherwise lose.

Connect the choice to the next budget

Show the staff, partners, and continuing costs behind the commitment, including emergency communication. Assess national offerings against the same local purpose. Review current membership and voting rules, identify where member consent is required, and bring forward the changes needed for meaningful consultation and smaller-station influence.

Make the commitment reviewable

I would start a board resolution with language like this, then make it specific to the community:

We affirm that our station exists to extend useful knowledge, learning across generations, and cultural opportunity in this community. We will identify whom we are prioritizing, align resources with that responsibility, and protect essential local information during emergencies. We will seek transparent national partnerships with equitable member influence and report how shared work benefits residents. We will examine audience use and community benefit, including whom we fail to reach, and change course when the evidence requires it.

Before adopting it, name the local priority, assign responsibility, and set a review date. Track learning, useful connections, and what people can do afterward, alongside tested continuity for emergencies. Examine who cannot yet access the service. Account honestly for our contribution and its continuing cost.

Residents should be able to point to a decision that changed because their needs came first. That is how they will know we mean what we say.

Choosing local purpose again

I am asking everyone who works in public media to see a place for themselves in this history and in the choices ahead. Educational broadcasting existed before PBS and NPR. Its local purpose can guide what we build with nearby institutions and what we ask of national partners. Leaders must resource that purpose; colleagues across the station bring it to life through their daily work.

The community we serve is larger than our audience or donor list. Someone who never activates a streaming benefit should still recognize a reason for the station to exist. A family unable to contribute should still benefit from its work. I want lifelong education, opportunities to connect with neighbors, and dependable information to make that public purpose tangible.

And when the next wildfire, flood, or hurricane comes, people will need local knowledge and dependable communication. What we can provide then will depend on the people, relationships, facilities, and skills we choose to sustain now.

Connect, educate, and empower. Let us show what each makes possible locally before a catastrophe forces the question. Give people reasons to learn with us and help shape our work. Judge success by what changes in community life, including health and wellbeing, and give that ambition a budget and an honest account of what we contribute.

Share your station’s educational origin story

What’s your local station’s educational origin story? If you have one to share, would you share it with me? I would welcome stories from newer employees, longtime colleagues, retirees, and community members. Tell me who began the station, whom they hoped to serve, and what those beginnings still mean today. Historical photographs, early schedules, and archival links are welcome, too. Please distinguish documented details from memories or questions that need more research.

Share your story and optional photos at equimediaadvisors.com/reclaiming-local. Submissions come to me for review; nothing is posted automatically.

On this November 7, I want us to do more than honor the beginning. Reclaim the local responsibility that gave public media its purpose, and make it real for the people living around us today.

Sources and visual credits

Historical statements are distinguished from the author's interpretation and recommendations. The Act discussion uses the original 1967 law, not the current amended statute. The 2026 developments are described as reported in the articles cited at the opening; this paper does not establish their eventual effects on local revenue or service. Sources reviewed October 27, 2026. This edition is prepared for release November 7, 2026. Disaster examples draw on station accounts, a funder's grant account, and interviews published by Current. They document contributions and operating limits; this paper does not claim a measured count of lives saved or guaranteed availability. Organizations cited are not endorsers.

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EQUIMEDIA ADVISORS

STRATEGY FOR CONSEQUENTIAL MOMENTS

This paper was developed with AI assistance for research support, drafting, and production. Historical sources are provided so readers can examine the evidence behind the argument.