

Public Broadcasting's Future Is PBCore's Future

The following is excerpted from CPB's internal description of the project:

“As public broadcasting endeavors to maintain our value and values, we know we must do three things: develop and deliver content across multiple platforms, heighten our content and service partnerships, and develop more efficient methods to conduct our work. Our ability to exchange our highly valued content within and across our institutions and those of our educational and community partners has never been greater. We have been afforded a tremendous opportunity for service and for efficiency.

Metadata are fundamental to the exchange of this content. The Public Broadcasting Metadata Dictionary (AKA “PBCore”) creates a single protocol for describing all public broadcasting content, both radio and television. The PBCore will be a “touchstone”, a single, streamlined standard to which other database structures and other asset/content management systems will be “mapped”. It can also be used as a guide for the onset of an archival or asset management process at an individual station or institution.”

Those of us who have been seduced by the clear audio of compact discs (and, more recently, surround sound) and by the sparkling video of HDTV – and haven't we all – tend to think of enhanced quality when we think of the primary attribute of digital technology. For those of us who grew up professionally in analog radio and television, it is the realization of what we have always strived to achieve.

Yet, digital technology will arguably prove just as valuable when it reduces content quality (Web) as when it enhances it. The most important benefit of digital technology is simultaneously more prosaic and more profound than the one which seems most obvious to us. The real power of digital technology – of “being digital,” to use Nicholas Negroponte's 1995 book title – is control and flexibility.

We can now control every aspect of production and distribution to a degree never possible with analog technology. Need to produce a spectacular over-flight series in high definition video? No problem; watch the PBS HD loop. Need to give listeners or viewers a second chance to benefit from content you've produced on their own schedule? No problem; check out most station web sites. Need to reach programmers with your radio feature? No problem; PRX.org does it every day. Need to develop new business models for public broadcasting? No problem; datacast programming on demand over your own digital transmitter.

PBCore will prove valuable for each of them. But let's say you want to design a new interconnection system that will “pre-ingest” everything from multiple producers and distribute programs to stations just once instead of seven times on the average. Or that you want to collaborate on a production with two other stations across the country, enabling them to perform edits from a distance. Or that you want to break up that traditional program into short segments for Web distribution as niche content for specific community, service and institutional needs. For these

applications where granular manipulation and interoperability are required, PBCore will not just be valuable, it will be essential.

Drilling down, the attribute of digital technology that gives it this asset management power is its ability to carry with each piece of content some data describing that content in a useful way. These descriptive data are called metadata. PBCore is designed to provide – for television, radio and Web activities within public broadcasting’s diverse community – a standard way of describing and using those data. Without such a standard, the real power of digital technology will not be available to our mission. The creative/operational problem that the PBCore will solve is “You can’t use it if you can’t find it”. If we can’t sensibly organize, re-use and re-purpose our assets, we will find ourselves delivering less and less product, and having less and less relevance to our audiences.

We joke that, when you’ve seen one station, you’ve seen one station. Our diversity and distributed governance make it impossible for one station or even one national organization to drive a metadata standard. Yet all stations will have in common continued financial pressures to increase efficiency and lower costs. The PBCore effort was designed to provide us these benefits that we could not otherwise achieve. A common metadata protocol will make it easier to locate and retrieve content, so that it is used in new ways, on new platforms, by new constituents. But a metadata dictionary is not a static thing. The technology we use and the content relationships we develop are dynamic and will of necessity drive revisions and additions to the dictionary. And our inherent structure means that we have hundreds of production shops and thousands of vendor relationships. To be successful, this effort needs a permanent focus for maintenance, communication and coordination of mapping and interface efforts.

In the March 2004 Request for Comments, 47 participants were drawn from public radio and television stations, PBS, NPR, national distributors, educational institutions and private-sector organizations that either partner with public broadcasting or supply metadata-related services to it. As an indicator of acceptance of the PBCore, *96 percent of the respondents “strongly” or “very strongly” agreed that “public broadcasting needs a core metadata dictionary”*. After completing the RFC process, *the same percentage “strongly” or “very strongly” agreed that the proposed PBCore met this need*.

PBCore is, within our industry, an unprecedented collaboration that has resulted in a document that is critical to our future. External to our industry, PBCore has generated interest from organizations world-wide, further extending the global brand and reach of American public broadcasting. Standards increase in value as they become ubiquitous.

It requires a modest investment of system resources to launch and gain momentum. Without this investment, public broadcasting will continue to operate as a fundamentally analog business with prettier pictures and clearer sound, and “being digital” will happen for our competitors, not for us, and not for the people we serve.