

Expand OPB's news organization

By Morgan Holm/10.2009

Nationally and locally, public broadcasting (which is increasingly being referred to as “public media”) provides an existing foundation on which to build newsgathering and distribution capabilities. OPB occupies a unique position in the world of public broadcasting thanks to strong journalistic efforts on both radio and television (in many cities, public radio and television stations are licensed to separate entities), large and loyal audiences, and a business model that works remarkably well in providing coverage in both urban and rural areas without the state government funding that is typical for many similar public broadcasting organizations.

National Public Radio's (NPR's) weekly audience for news programming in 2008 was 20.9 million, and more than one in 10 Americans already cite it as a primary source for news (Sources: NPR; *The State of the Media 2009*, Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism) and has developed an extensive network of international and domestic bureaus. Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) is among the strongest local public stations in the country when it comes to audience and newsroom size. KOPB-FM is frequently the top-rated station in the Portland market with a weekly audience of more than 300,000 listeners (Source: Arbitron, Winter 2009, 12+), and it has the highest audience share of all public radio stations in the nation.

In addition to international and nationally based reporters and programs, OPB listeners hear news stories from around Oregon and the Northwest in hourly newscasts and local drive time segments. OPB also produces the only statewide daily current affairs program, *Think Out Loud*, which offers audience members the option of calling into the show or posting comments to the show's online blog.

Over the years, OPB's commitment to original journalism has grown significantly. Currently, OPB employs more than 25 journalists who cover stories for radio, television and the web. The OPB News department currently includes about 20 staff members, based primarily in Portland. Of that number, four are field reporters (including one reporter based in Bend), five are dedicated to *Think Out Loud*, five are on-air hosts in addition to handling newsroom responsibilities, one is a long-form journalist and two are editors. One senior manager oversees the department. In addition, OPB is part of the Northwest News Network, a regional public radio cooperative that shares the work of

five regional reporters, including journalists based at the Oregon and Washington state Capitols. The network editor is based at OPB in Portland.

On television, OPB's original journalism is focused primarily on the environment/outdoors (through the 20-year, award-winning program, *Oregon Field Guide*) and arts/culture (through *Oregon Art Beat*, which has been in production for 10 years). OPB also produces an array of local and national documentaries and was awarded one of broadcast journalism's highest honors, the DuPont-Columbia award, in 2009. Increasingly, these programs are reporting for the web and occasionally for radio as well, providing an opportunity to build on our reputation as a trusted information source.

More than 120,000 individuals already contribute to OPB in support of these efforts. OPB is also frequently cited as a trusted media source among consumers. Against that background, OPB is well-positioned for a strategic expansion that will improve our ability to gather news around the state, expand the distribution of our content across platforms and develop new partnerships that will help us play a central role in providing in-depth, timely news coverage of issues that affect Oregonians and people throughout the Northwest.

Restructuring the OPB Newsroom

Over the past 10 years, OPB has increased its commitment to news and information. Beginning in 1997, OPB Radio became primarily a news and information format and the addition of new stations throughout the region has increased its reach. Newsroom staff has grown, we opened a bureau in Bend, and helped build the regional radio Northwest News Network which supports reporters stationed in Salem, Olympia, Richland and Spokane.

As we have expanded our local coverage, we have experienced audience growth and expanded financial support. Despite the challenging economy, OPB's audiences and individual support have remained remarkably solid. With many observers noting the resilience of public broadcasting's funding model compared to the advertiser-supported model, this may be the time for OPB to expand and enhance its news operation. We've identified three priorities:

1. Expand our network of journalists in communities around Oregon to improve our ability to report on local stories with wide impact and to ensure that our news output represents the variety of communities served by OPB;

2. Improve our ability to perform enterprise and investigative reporting on topics that affect our entire audience; and
3. Expand our ability to produce and distribute local news across existing and new platforms, including radio, television, online and mobile devices.

These objectives are consistent with the recommendations of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, which recently released its report. This commission found a need to maximize the availability of relevant and credible information to communities and to promote individual engagement with information and the public life of the community. One of the commission's conclusions is that public broadcasting can and should provide better local news and information. We agree.

Achieving the Objectives

On a daily basis, OPB already produces journalism that brings to light important events in context and with broad perspective. We also take note of significant developments in ongoing issues of public interest. But we need to add journalistic capacity to build on our strong foundation of in-depth reporting which emphasizes the human element.

One of the most significant contributions OPB can make to improved journalism in this region is to ***expand our network of regional bureaus***. We have identified the following communities as preferred locations for new bureaus: Eugene, Pendleton, Medford, Astoria and Vancouver (WA). OPB has a broadcast presence or potential media partner(s) in each of those locations, and each of those communities is an important center of activity. Each bureau reporter in this expanded network will be expected to generate news across multiple platforms, from daily news website updates to audio or video features that could be broadcast as well as distributed online.

OPB can build its capacity to do ***in-depth enterprise and investigative reporting*** by allowing the current reporting staff to focus their efforts on developing stories within their beat areas and training them to use multiple media tools to enhance the storytelling they already do so well. Adding an experienced investigative reporter to the staff would also improve our ability to do the kind of journalism that helps hold powerful people and institutions accountable for their actions. We also have an opportunity to create showcases for deep, engaging ***niche journalism*** in OPB's media environment. Coverage of the environment and regional arts and culture are two of our strengths and should be enhanced under the guide of an editor/blogger-in-chief for each area. Each editor will

both create and select content from OPB and other sources. The primary output for these niche journalism efforts is online, but the nature of this structure allows content to be developed and deployed across platforms, from smart phones to online video. These niche platforms will give us the opportunity to integrate all of OPB's existing production resources in these two areas, and then to build on those resources to offer a must-see platform for content relevant to both of those subjects.

Finally, we need to develop better capacity to cover *breaking news* in way that allows us to move content quickly to OPBNews.org and OPB Radio, both of which are becoming increasingly important as primary news sources.

As OPB expands its capacity to gather and distribute local news, OPB will continue to produce daily local content that embodies our public service mission and attracts significant audiences. The expansion of newsgathering resources described above will result in a more diverse selection of local stories from around the Northwest available for local segments of drive time news programming on OPB Radio and on OPBNews.org. Eventually, enough additional content could be generated to support new local radio programs and podcasts that would showcase OPB-created content. Shows like *Think Out Loud* would also benefit as it would have a broader base of newsgathering staff around the state to supply firsthand reporting and sources to the daily broadcast. More content would be created for OPB's online platform where we have tremendous potential for audience growth and support.

Next Steps

The scope of these proposed changes is sweeping, and will likely take several years to fully realize. However, the time to act is now. OPB is prepared to launch a major fundraising campaign to enable this expansion. Significant philanthropic funding will allow us to begin implementing these changes and to start laying the foundation for a significantly higher level of audience support to sustain this effort. That ongoing support will be easier to generate with a body of work that demonstrates the value of the investment. As an evolving public media organization with more than 80 years of experience, OPB is in a prime position to strengthen its position as a news organization based on our track record of success and a reputation as a trustworthy source.