

THE GIST OF IT

'The consumer has left the couch'

A panel of public broadcasting CEOs asks: Is this the death of television, or the birth of its next golden age?

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The Riley Institute at Furman University, with former Secretary of Education and South Carolina Governor Dick Riley in attendance, put together an impressive panel of some of the top (female) names in public broadcasting in order to discuss the changing nature of Public Media's role in society. Speakers included Linda O'Bryon, CEO of South Carolina's own SCETV, Paula Kerger, CEO of PBS, and Pat Harrison, CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

Introduced by Furman University political science professor Dr. Brent



From left: Linda O'Bryon, Patricia Harrison, Jennifer Lawson and Paula Kerger.

Nelsen (who also serves on the board for the CPB, in addition to playing other various roles in the public media world), these three outstanding women went on to address the pressing question of how the growing digital age is affecting the role of public television in our world today.

Nelsen put it best, saying we are living in the "Age of Digital Disruption," where media is playing an incredibly large role in society, but the plethora of ways that we access this media (cellphones, computers, tablets, etc.) has disrupted the channels by which that media is delivered to the consumer.

So you know

The Riley Institute broadens student and community perspectives on critical issues and leverages its well-developed work in education policy and diversity to drive collaborative, creative and pragmatic initiatives that help break down barriers to economic and social well-being for all South Carolinians. For information, visit riley.furman.edu.

All three women on the panel challenged that, despite the title of the discussion. They contested that we are not living in a "post-television" era, only that we are no longer accessing that content through a traditional television set in our living room.

To all three of the panelists, the most important facet of public media in this age was giving quality content and storytelling to viewers, with the manner of access to this content being only a secondary concern. Below are a few highlights from the discussion. >>>



» PUBLIC MEDIA AS CIVIL SERVICE

"We are in the business of strengthening our civil society."

— PATRICIA HARRISON

Harrison reminded us that public television plays a major role in educating our youth (remember "Barney" and "Sesame Street"?) and is increasingly used as an educational tool in the classroom with such quality documentaries as Ken Burns' "Civil War" series. Taxpayer dollars are what make stations like PBS and SCETV run, and they are an investment in "evenly distributed lifelong learning and knowledge." Educational television provides enriching programming evenly across a community that is chosen by the community, and not by a marketing team looking to deliver the most profitable programming.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF PUBLIC TELEVISION (NO ALARM HERE)

"The consumer has left the couch, and the audience is in the driver's seat."

— PATRICIA HARRISON

Despite claims that television is "on its way out," the panel of public television CEOs didn't even break a sweat when trying to explain how nothing has really changed in the industry. The only difference nowadays, they said, is that content can be delivered to an even larger audience who access shows through phones, tablets, and the computer as opposed to the traditional television set. O'Bryon even went as far as to say that this may be the "golden age" of television, because content can reach more viewers than ever.

QUALITY CONTENT COMES FIRST

All the panelists agreed that the first

Details

WHO: Linda O'Bryon, President and CEO of South Carolina Educational Television (SCETV); Paula Kerger, President and CEO of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS); Patricia S. Harrison, President and CEO of Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)

WHAT: "Public Media in a Post-Television Era," an event held by the Riley Institute at Furman University

WHERE: The Watkins-Room, Trone Student Center, Furman University

and foremost objective of all public media is creating quality content that viewers can connect with on a level beyond the consumer culture that dominates most contemporary television content. Harrison described this as "providing content beyond a sensational sound byte or an exaggeration."

This echoed the idea that public media, because of the removal of the need to "sell" their shows, has the freedom to provide more authentic content than some of the "reality" shows that dominate most airwaves today.

Kerger drove home the idea of how local ownership of public media leads to more quality content. She said the goal of providing "authentic, engaging stories that are well told" can be accomplished because "PBS stations are run by people in the communities, and they make the decision of what ends up on the air based on their understanding of what is important to the community." The sum of this local grounding is the ability to treat PBS customers like "citizens, and not consumers" as Kerger reiterated

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