

**Running Head: Formative Foundational Support**  
**Research Note on Formative Foundational Support for**  
**Minority-Language Broadcasting**

By A. Joseph Borrell, Ph.D.

Department of Communication and Journalism  
Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania  
Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

[ajborr@ship.edu](mailto:ajborr@ship.edu)

© 2012 by A. Joseph Borrell

I would like to honor the memory of Dr. Kenneth Rose. His help to me was beyond the call of duty and his untimely death is a loss to scholars of philanthropy.

*Abstract*

An overlooked part of the development of public broadcasting in America is the key role that Rockefeller philanthropy played in studying and funding educational radio before World War II. This paper recounts one little-known example of funding, started in 1938, directed to underserved minority audiences. It is the first example of a foundation underwriting the creation of American public media designed for non-English speakers.

Some radio historians claim that the campus of Iowa State College (now University) is the birthplace of the nation's first broadcast station. Managers of KDKA in Pittsburgh, today a CBS station, dispute this claim, but the record shows that an enterprising physics professor, just before the First World War, started an experimental broadcast station, which later grew to become WOI Radio.

Tracing ancestry from pioneers like WOI and KDKA, American broadcast communications grew into two differing philosophical approaches to its social purpose. The first

view argued for putting the power over the creation of media content into the hands of those who saw their work as primarily an educational one. Naturally, this model required public subsidy for the creation of media, but followers conceptualized electronic media as an effective mode for educating the masses. The second model privileged a more popular approach for broadcast content. This model, since it valued reaching the largest possible number of audience members with entertainment, proved readily amendable to advertising sponsorship. The trade-off was having the costs of media production subsidized by commercial enterprises and this compromise was achieved by a transaction where mass audiences were informed by commercial messages embedded into popular shows.

The latter model was widely successful, but the social effects over a generation from a media diet dominated by commercial messages caused a group of American leaders to come together to re-examine the possibilities for expanding the broadcast of educational programming. By the late 1960s, the federal government, through the at-arm's-length Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), began to play a more active role in non-commercial educational (NCE) broadcasting. This secure and more permanent funding enabled the development of such broadcast staples as the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio. In fact, WOI Radio became one of the charter members of NPR in 1970.

The work of the Carnegie Commission on Education Television in the late 1960s in spurring the development of the CPB is well known, but research, drawn from the records at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) and other sources, shows that an underappreciated legacy in these histories of public broadcasting is the contribution of the Rockefeller family and its philanthropies, starting some three decades before the Carnegie Commission.

The point man for Rockefeller Foundation (RF) involvement in educational broadcasting was John Marshall. He came to work for the RF in 1933, after teaching English at Harvard, and quickly became fascinated with the potential of mass communications. Marshall is acknowledged as an influential arts and humanities grant maker at the RF, though his title through the 1930s was just assistant director. He was promoted to associate director of his division in 1940.

Everett Rogers credits “John Marshall and the Rockefeller Foundation [as playing] a crucial role in launching the field of communications.”<sup>1</sup> The RF was conveniently located in the RCA building, then at the center of the broadcast world, and so Marshall was at the crossroads of where American broadcasters and educators met and exchanged ideas. Rogers’ work traces the development of the Radio Research Project and how this RF-sponsored project led to the creation of the academic field of communication study.

Marshall’s RF division was relatively small, with its humanities work valued at over three million a year in grants, but Marshall’s networking skills and enthusiasm for education gave him influence as a program officer beyond his title or his grant making budget.

In 1936, he and several RF employees attended, as observers, a conference on Educational Broadcasting, at Washington’s Mayflower Hotel. This meeting seems to have shaped his thinking about broadcasting’s potential and later grant making recommendations. Marshall’s notes indicate he attended a session chaired by Edward R. Murrow and in a general session, the French Ambassador gave a keynote speech.

Within two years, the RF and its General Education Board (GEB)<sup>2</sup> were active funders of educational broadcasting in the United States, giving money to what is now WCPN in Cleveland and funding the founders of modern communications-journalism colleges and programs. The

RF also paid for research trips for consultants to visit various college-owned radio stations. Documents show that Charles Siepmann, then with the British Broadcasting Corporation and later a professor at New York University, traveled on RF funds to visit the University of Florida's WRUF, the University of Iowa's WSUI and Iowa State's WOI, and Oregon State's KOAC in Corvallis.<sup>3</sup>

The Rockefeller grant making portfolio on nascent educational broadcasting was varied, but one overlooked contribution is the first philanthropic funding of a minority broadcasting network in America. In 1938, P.H. Griffin of Louisiana State University proposed a French language service to the RF.<sup>4</sup> The service began in September with the primary objectives of “reach[ing] the country people in the French speaking areas and to help them with their agricultural, home, community and personal problems and to instill a respect for and love of the heritage of the French people of Louisiana.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, the plan called for the use of French “spoken by the country people of Louisiana,” to be used in dramatic skits. Other pieces would be done in “[S]tandard French.” Shows were broadcast weekly by powerful stations, including one located in New Orleans, but the broadcasts were not targeted at residents of that city.

The experiment was not without controversy. A few months of programming convinced the director that the “French spoken by the Cajuns of Louisiana” would govern the broadcasts, although some wanted the educational service to refine the French spoken by Cajuns, presumably to be more in line with a European standard. In addition, a field worker added the new objective to the service of promoting “bi-lingual education.”<sup>6</sup> The project went on for several years and was reported upon favorably by the *New York Times*. It appears to have ended in 1942.

The GEB grant provided three thousand dollars a year in support, which allowed the hiring of a staff of three professionals. Contributing to the content were eight to ten professors of French or Cajun descent. Broadcasts reached twenty-three parishes<sup>7</sup> of the state, including the most geographically isolated areas. About 450,000 French (Cajun) people could receive the show, although official records showed only 55,000 radios were in homes in these parishes. In some areas, neighbors and extended families gathered to hear the broadcasts and turned the reception of the broadcast into something akin to a social occasion.

Foundation interest in educational radio declined starting in the late 1930s. The gathering storm that would produce World War II was well forecast by the RF staff, not only because of their frequent travels to and exchanges with European colleagues, but also because of their work aiding the relocation of endangered European intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno and Paul Lazarsfeld to America. Notes from the Rockefeller Radio Seminar indicate a growing interest in propaganda research and formal analyses of foreign language broadcasts transmitted to the United States in contrast to aiding or researching domestic foreign-language broadcasts. In fact, in December 1940, Lazarsfeld wrote to Marshall about a sponsored study that would examine the content of German, Japanese, Spanish and Italian broadcasts on American commercial stations.<sup>8</sup>

War was not the only key reason that RF interest in public broadcasting declined. Television came in after the war and reshaped American's leisure pursuits. The RF seemed less willing to study or invest in research related to that medium. Marshall remained an advocate of radio as a medium for the broadcast of innovative content, which he saw as content other than entertainment. He wrote an article in 1950 on the subject, but found it rejected by the *Saturday Review*.<sup>9</sup>

A decade later, Carnegie philanthropy would pick up the mantle and establish the study group that led to the formalization of Public Broadcasting in America through a unique mix of public and private support. Rockefeller philanthropy in public broadcasting continued on an occasional basis, but without the clear focus found in the Marshall-led efforts.

Nevertheless, echoes of early Rockefeller philanthropy in public media can be seen in today's public media. Today's Corporation for Public Broadcasting<sup>10</sup> regularly reaffirms its commitment to minority communities by noting that public broadcasting is especially important to minority communities since the special needs of minority audiences are underserved by larger commercial media operations dependent on securing the mass advertising revenue that come from reaching large segments of the available audience.

WNET, New York's flagship PBS station, and other investors became the first to start a national Spanish-language network with an explicit public service mission. The V-me (Spanish for "see me") network is broadcast across the nation over-the-air and on cable through the facilities of local PBS stations.<sup>11</sup> This public-private partnership serves the underserved needs of a rapidly growing Spanish-speaking audience by presenting over six hours a day of educational programming, but it is not the first time that a network with substantial philanthropic support had been formed to transmit foreign-language broadcasts in the U.S. That honor goes to the Rockefeller Foundation and its "experimental" funding for a little-remembered project in Louisiana.<sup>12</sup>

*Editor's Note:* This research report is presented here with the author's permission but should not be cited or quoted without the author's consent.

Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Erwin Levold, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

## ENDNOTES:

---

<sup>1</sup> Iowa State maintains archives related to its pioneering broadcast operations. See <http://www.lib.iastate.edu/arch/rgrp/05-06-03.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> John Marshall regularly received correspondence on GEB matters. See RAC, GEB, Box 360, Folder 3715 or Box 362, Folder 3732.

<sup>3</sup>RAC, RF, Record Group (RG) 1.1, Series 401, Box 53, Folder 699. Today, the BBC remains focused on the public service model in its domestic operations. This undoubtedly influenced Siepmann's views on broadcasting's social role. It is also interesting to note that many of the stations and universities he visited became charter members of the non-commercial National Public Radio system when it formed.

<sup>4</sup> At that time, Louisiana and the states bordering the Canadian province of Quebec had significant French minority populations. The French speaking people of Louisiana trace their ancestry to exiles from the Canadian Maritime Provinces and are known as Cajuns.

<sup>5</sup> Smith to Griffith, January 14, 1939, RAC, GEB, Series 1, Sub-series 2, Box 360, Folder 3708.

<sup>6</sup> Louise Olivier, French Radio Project, RAC, GEB, Series 1, Sub-series 2, Box 360, Folder 3708.

<sup>7</sup> A parish is a unit of government in Louisiana. It is roughly equivalent to a county in other parts of the U.S.

<sup>8</sup> RF, Record Group 1.1, Series 200, Sub-series 200R – Columbia University Radio Listening Maps, Box 222, Folder 2657.

<sup>9</sup> RAC, John Marshall Papers, Box 3, Folder 34.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://cpb.org/aboutcpb/reports/diversity/08diversity.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Multicast channels crowd bitstream: V-me, in Spanish, joins options for stations' DTV broadcasts. <http://www.current.org/dtv/dtv0702choices.shtml>

<sup>12</sup> WNET is a partner in the V-ME Spanish-language broadcast network. WNET and its affiliate, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, have received support from several Rockefeller philanthropies, including the RF and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, for specific projects, including a 2008 effort on Latino voter education (<http://www.rbf.org/close-up/wnetorg>).