



Recovering a Public Vision for Public Television

[Balas, Glenda R.](#)

[Rowman & Littlefield](#), 2003

168 pages

Hardcover: US \$65.00; Paper: US: \$24.95

Reviewed by: [Siho Nam](#), [The Pennsylvania State University](#)

In *Recovering a Public Vision for Public Television*, Glenda Balas has produced a compelling argument for the reaffirmation of U.S. public broadcasting's institutional mission. She lays out the claim that democracy requires public media institutions that can serve as a Habermasian public sphere. Offering a diverse yet remarkably coherent body of theoretical criticism, case studies and legal analyses, she not only seeks to reconstruct the history of U.S. public broadcasting in its struggle for resources but also strives to find a way in which public broadcasting is reconstituted "as an agent of public talk and social reform" (121).

In so doing, she first develops the notion of "publicness" hinted by some critical theories of public sphere, social change and education, ones articulated by such theorists as Jürgen Habermas, John Dewey, Douglas Kellner and the like. At the heart of the book is the argument that U.S. public broadcasting lacks a clearly articulated and shared vision, failing to offer a public space in which diverse individuals and groups participate to talk about matters of public importance.

After tracing a line that weaves together three important historical moments – the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment of 1934, the FCC allocations of educational frequencies in 1950-51, and the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 – in the development of US public broadcasting, Balas diagnoses public broadcasting as taking the "glide path to extinction." According to her, public TV's lack of "commitments to the theories and practices of publicness" (12), even in its very beginning in the late 1960s, led to the reduction of its roles. Then, the crisis of public broadcasting today is characterized by its increasing affiliation with commercial interests. Unsurprisingly, the main casualties of this are such fundamental goals of public TV as localism, cultural diversity and civic participation.

The reduction of public television's role to a mere instructional medium was another warning. One might be easily persuaded by such an argument that the best way for U.S. public broadcasting to remain afloat in this increasingly privatized media environment is to position itself as educational TV. According to Balas, such rhetoric tends to undermine public

broadcasting's bigger social and political roles in democracy. Seeing education as an essential force for social change, she claims that public broadcasting nowadays has become "a tame and risk-averse institution ... [failing to] apply the lessons of progressives such as John Dewey to solve social problems, develop innovative teaching, and create public spaces for dialogue" (86).

In an effort to retrieve publicness from the neoliberal transformation of the whole media industries in the United States, Balas in her last chapter presents a set of propositions which are aimed at repositioning public broadcasting as a venue for democratic discourses. Among the six, the most inclusive and urgent would be one that calls for public media institutions' initiative in "demanding structural change in U.S. media." Although the book does not discuss some specific policy goals in detail, philosophic, democratic, and other normative analyses of public broadcasting's institutional mission laid out in the book will serve as a springboard for all concerned media scholars, activists and citizens to engage in a meaningful discussion regarding the future of public broadcasting.

After all, Glenda Balas' book is a wake-up call for the sluggish public television. I do not expect Balas' book to be the complete guidebook for reforming U.S. public broadcasting, but subsequent works will have to take up an important question: How to construct a genuine public broadcasting system, which is free from both bureaucratic and commercial forces?" As Todd Gitlin asserts, "neither pro-corporate monomania nor old-school restoration will do the trick."

Works Cited

Bales, Glenda R. Recovering a Public Vision for Public Television. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Gitlin, Todd. "Turn On, Tune In—Pay Up?" openDemocracy. 30 Aug. 2001. 3 Dec. 2003 <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-8-38-55.jsp>>.