



**Rebuilding & Rethinking US Information Infrastructure
Interview with Victor Pickard**

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KENNEALLY: The American Society of Civil Engineers handed out its quadrennial report card on the nation's infrastructure last March. Overall, America's roads, bridges, and waterways received a C-, with 11 of 17 categories marked D for failing. As Capitol Hill now considers a multi-trillion-dollar Biden administration proposal to raise those marks, Republicans and Democrats are arguing over more than the bill. What we mean by infrastructure has now become a critical question.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Keneally for Velocity of Content. When it comes to infrastructure, the White House is looking beyond roads and bridges to include internet access, childcare, schools, and even drinking water, while Republicans prefer to limit their sights to traditional projects. Put another way, Americans are asking, what is essential to our quality of life?

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication make a case to include support for NPR and PBS in any infrastructure funding outlays. Victor Pickard is professor of media policy and political economy at the Annenberg School in Philadelphia, where he co-directs the Media, Inequality, & Change Center. He is the author of *Democracy without Journalism*.

In an op-ed this summer for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Pickard and Annenberg colleague Timothy Neff call for creation of a public media safety net that would deliver trustworthy information and access to democracy. Welcome to the program, Professor Pickard.

PICKARD: Thanks for having me on, Chris.

KENNEALLY: I'm looking forward to this discussion. It's a timely one. We're talking about infrastructure here, but of a different kind than most people think. We've heard a lot about crumbling roads and tumbledown bridges, as well as dilapidated schools and poor connectivity in rural areas. So my question to you, Professor Pickard, is is America's national information infrastructure similarly deteriorated, and how did we wind up in such bad shape?



PICKARD: Yes, that's a great question. The first part of the question is very easy to answer, which is yes, it's in very bad shape. However, how we got here is a much longer discussion, and oftentimes it's not even as much about particular policy decisions as it is about policy indecisions or inaction. For example, we have glaring market failure where local journalism is not being supported, and the information and news that we need as a democratic society is not being provided for. Really, that should be seen as a national crisis. Yet there's been very little policy response thus far.

KENNEALLY: And the crisis you're talking about creates what you have called news deserts. What is a news desert, for people listening?

PICKARD: Sure. To be clear, I wouldn't want to take credit for that term. It's been around for a while. But I think it really captures what's happening not just in the US, but around the world, which is you have vast regions where there is no local news media whatsoever, so that entire communities are left out of the information system entirely. That's a major problem. We all learned in school that democracy requires a free – and by implication, a functional – press system. When you have the collapse of local journalism institutions, that really should tell us that democracy is in trouble.

KENNEALLY: That's the result of the market responding to the deterioration in the business model, and what you call for is for nonprofit public media outlets to step into the gap.

PICKARD: That's right. To back up just for a moment, this still is getting at, I guess, your first question, which is how did we get here? I think a big part of the problem, especially here in the US, is that we've been governed by this particular ideology, what might be referred to as market fundamentalism, where there's at least an implicit assumption that our social problems will be taken care of by the market. And because we've relied on this commercially driven news media system for so long, when you start to have what might be referred to as market failure – I like to call it systemic market failure, because I think it's really baked into the DNA of our commercial media system – when you start seeing that the market's no longer supporting the journalism we need – in fact, driving it into the ground – then it really calls into question some of these basic ideological assumptions.

Even for those folks who might be very hesitant to look to government or look to some sort of public support for their news media – even for those folks, where they might be ideologically predisposed against that idea, I think that the evidence is mounting that there simply is no commercial future for many kinds of journalism, especially local journalism. So that's a long-winded way of saying why we need to find public means of support, or at least non-market means of support. That could either be private nonprofit support, which we see coming from philanthropies and foundations, or it could be more of a public option, which comes from – examples of that would be NPR and PBS, as you mentioned earlier,



or the BBC and other countries around the world. I would like to imagine even something different from all that. We can get into that later in the discussion.

KENNEALLY: So to put the American experience in context with the rest of the world, the challenge that the news media industry has in this country is shared around the world, but the experience here is different because of the notable underfunding of public media here. You did some research to give us a sense of where the US fits in globally on that. Tell us about that.

PICKARD: Yeah, so I think there are two pieces to this. One is, again, looking at the system that we actually have in the United States, where it has been inordinately reliant on advertising revenue, much more so than most newspaper – and here, we’re speaking specifically about newspaper, about print news media, which is the type of news media that’s most in crisis, and arguably is really the last bastion of original reporting in the United States or the last major bastion, which is why this discussion often sounds like it’s just about newspapers. But it’s really about the future of journalism.

Here in the US, American journalism has been so overly reliant on advertising revenue, so that once this core business model began to collapse, this crisis was much more profound here in the US compared to other countries around the world – although as you note, they are also suffering their own journalism crises to varying degrees. Basically, wherever you have commercial journalism, you’re seeing this kind of systemic crisis. That’s the context, right? There’s not this commercial support. Advertising itself was a subsidy that worked for about 150 years or so, and now that has disappeared.

So then we have to look at a public alternative. And when we look at how the US compares to other public media systems around the world and how they’re funded, the US is almost literally off the chart for how little we allocate towards our public media system. It comes out to about \$1.40 per person per year. Compare that to folks in the UK or northern European countries. They’re spending over \$100 per person per year. So we keep our public media system, which really should serve as a kind of social safety net for when the market fails to support the journalism we need – ours is pretty impoverished, and I think that’s the core problem that we’re trying to get at.

KENNEALLY: And that impoverishment is a serious matter. As you say, the investment is minuscule. The numbers you reported in *CJR* – \$465 million in 2020 federal funding for US public media, and that amounts to 0.002% of gross domestic product. You wouldn’t notice it, frankly, at that point. So I have to ask what this means to our public media institutions – to NPR and PBS, largely. How do they survive given just the very thin soup that they are given?



PICKARD: Right. That's exactly why what you see increasingly – and it's euphemistically referred to as enhanced underwriting, but really it's just a kind of commercial. If you listen to NPR, as I do often when I'm driving my kids to school in the car, I'm just hearing radio ad after radio ad. If I'm watching PBS, I'm seeing basically these television commercials. And it starts really defeating the purpose of maintaining this distinction between public and commercial media.

But basically, they're being forced to do that. We keep them impoverished. This keeps them both politically meek – really, since the beginning of public broadcasting in this country, we've always had this system where they aren't given enough money that they really have full editorial and political independence. They always have to be a little bit concerned about offending policymakers. Otherwise, their funding might be cut.

We've also never given them enough so that they can exist entirely on public support alone. So they're constantly being forced to look for these other, oftentimes commercial, sources of revenue. Of course, they're also doing pledge drives. That's why they're always asking for listener and viewer support, because they're not getting enough money directly from government to support all of their operations. This just isn't an ideal means of supporting a public media system.

KENNEALLY: And in a moment of great emergency in the pandemic, Congress did recognize the need to support public media, at least in addition to existing support. It allocated an emergency infusion of \$175 million for that pandemic-related relief. But what kind of numbers are we talking about here? If we were to approach the UK's level of public support for public media, how much money would the US federal government be spending?

PICKARD: Yeah, that's something that I try to bring out in all of my work. I should mention – I often forget to plug my own book, but a lot of the stuff that we're talking about that's coming out of this recent *Columbia Journalism Review* article, but also I have a recent book that came out a year or two ago, and I really come down on this pretty hard, which is that if we even brought up the US to just global norms – say, looking at the UK, for example – it would really amount to somewhere close to \$35 billion a year that we would be spending on our public media system. It's just amazing if you think about what we could do with that amount of money. I actually think we could probably set up a local public media outlet in every community across the country with that kind of money, which is a kind of more utopian ideal that I try to promote in some of my work.

KENNEALLY: Tell us about the public media that you envision. Where would that money go, and why would it be contributing to public good?



PICKARD: Yeah, so two things I would say in response to that great question. The first one is – and this is what we talked about in the *Columbia Journalism Review* piece – that there is accumulating data – we’re seeing study after study coming out that shows that strong, robust public media systems correlate positively with strong democracies. We’re seeing this again and again. So it really counteracts this kind of knee-jerk response that if you fund a public media system, you’re going to slide into some sort of totalitarian state, that it’s going to become this mouthpiece – a public media system would just become a mouthpiece for whichever party is in power. There’s all kinds of case studies that we can point to. Countries around the world have figured out how to maintain strong firewalls between the public media system and government. That’s something to keep in mind, that this doesn’t necessarily lead to an undemocratic situation.

The second one I try to point out in my work is that ideally, we wouldn’t simply throw a few more dollars to NPR and PBS. As much as I think they do a lot of great work, especially compared to their commercial counterparts, I still don’t think that’s the ideal. I don’t even think that the BBC is the ideal, really. What we should try to do is not just to decommercialize our media, but also democratize it. That’s why I always call for trying to bring control down to the local level, so that this new public media system that I would envision would be federally guaranteed, so that the necessary resources are there permanently, on a permanent basis, but that it’s locally governed. So it really would be democratized. That’s the kind of vision that I’m promoting.

KENNEALLY: So what’s important here, Victor Pickard, isn’t only access to information, but it’s about inclusion in the information ecosystem. That would be important, as you say, at the local level, but particularly for communities that have been excluded or not fully part of that system before.

PICKARD: That’s exactly right, and you’re putting your finger on a key detail that often drops out of the conversation. Sometimes, I’m guilty of also not underscoring this enough, which is when we’re talking about news deserts, we’re talking about market failure, we need to be absolutely clear that for many communities, especially communities of color, they have never been well served by this commercial media system. We’re really talking about historical harms done to many of these communities.

And I think the best way to try to address those harms is to ensure that local communities themselves own and control their own newsrooms, so that local newsrooms look like the communities that they are meant to serve. That means that those communities need to be intimately involved in making the media – to be not just in constant conversation with local journalists, but indeed this whole distinction between journalists and members of local communities should be broken down. They should be one and the same. Again, this is a fairly utopian vision, yet at the same time, we can point to concrete examples – real-



world examples of where this has happened, even how we've done this through policy in the past. So I think it is achievable. We just need to broaden our imagination about what's possible.

KENNEALLY: What it seems to me is the most important piece of this is the issue of trust. The great tragedy of the pandemic, it seems to me, isn't only the deaths and the illnesses, but the deterioration – the corrosion of trust in information. And if people are involved, if they are included, that ought to go far to building trust.

PICKARD: Yes, I couldn't agree more. Again, there's some evidence we can point to where – there's been survey data, for example, when local communities are more involved with their local newsrooms, they tend to have higher levels of trust. So it's not entirely speculative. But some of this would be experimental. Indeed, sometimes I leave out details. Some of the details I don't think we really should figure out entirely beforehand, because I really think it should be up to local communities themselves to decide exactly how these newsrooms would be structured. But I think at the very least, if you had more direct engagement, that those levels of trust would come back.

There's also evidence to show that even among conservatives, for example, who often tend to hate or distrust the media, when it comes to their local media and when it comes to public media, there are relatively higher levels of trust across the ideological spectrum. So I take some of those data points to build up this argument that I think it's definitely an experiment worth trying.

KENNEALLY: Victor Pickard, professor of media policy and political economy at the Annenberg School in Philadelphia and author of *Democracy without Journalism*, thanks so much for joining me on the program.

PICKARD: Thanks so much, Chris. It was great talking to you.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening. Join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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