

ideastream: *The New* “Public Media”

by M.J. ZUCKERMAN

In Cleveland, a partnership between a public radio and public television station may be one model for the future of American public media.



Jerry Wareham and Kit Jensen
of ideastream

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A short walk from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and not far from “The Jake,” home of the Cleveland Indians, there’s a curious 95-year-old seven-story building—originally a fashionable furniture showroom—which, recently renovated, is the home of ideastream, a re-invention of public broadcasting that is generating a digital pulse of media excitement in the surrounding communities while, nationally, attracting curiosity and some downright envious stares.

An engagingly open structure, with more than 80 feet of windows on the avenue enticing passersby to peer in on live broadcast operations and dance studio rehearsals, the building is the physi-

cal manifestation of an elegantly simple concept. This is the vision of two media veterans who placed the mission ahead of all other interests to create an organization whose work is rippling outward into the education community, rejuvenating real estate development, bringing at least a thousand jobs to downtown, increasing public access to government and the arts, providing a center for performing artists to train and exchange ideas, giving rise to a hip tech neighborhood and convening public debate about American ideals.

And those are just the bonuses, the add-on benefits. Originally, when this all began about 10 years ago, the goal was

to define a sustaining purpose for public broadcasting in Cleveland. The underlying concept was to merge the resources of public television and public radio. And then things kept percolating. By most accounts, ideastream has not only succeeded in defining a sustaining purpose for public broadcasting in Cleveland, but also demonstrated enduring potential as a hybrid: public media.

Along the way, ideastream's founders struck upon what more than a few leaders in the industry see as one of the most robust models for the future: A multiple media public service organization operating on broadband and built on two critical principles: 1) a commitment to the mission of "strengthening our communities," which is realized by 2) placing the values of partnership ahead of any desire for control.

If this sounds simple, it isn't. Even if you are deeply versed in the pervasive challenges facing public radio and public television, there is likely to be an "Aha!" moment as you come to understand that Jerry Wareham and Kit Jensen—respectively, the CEO and COO of ideastream—have established a *raison d'être* for public television and public radio that transcends traditional notions of broadcast and simultaneously offers a model that could, in time, remedy what some have called "the flawed business model" of public broadcasting.

Wareham, formerly CEO of television station WVIZ, acknowledges that his "midwestern modesty" is an essential asset, keeping ideastream's partnerships free of control issues and, yet, it is also a quality that innately limits his ability to openly tout the accomplishments he has realized in concert with Jensen. He is the genial host and deal maker, she is the firewall and executor of planning.

Jensen, the former CEO at radio station WCPN, is a serious woman who chooses her words carefully and whose frontier, can-do spirit (she spent nearly

20 years in Alaska, building the state's first National Public Radio station, which for years broadcast the only statewide news content) has been instrumental in shaping ideastream. Jensen recalls arriving in Alaska in 1968 as a period ripe with potential, a time when the federal government was anxious to see Alaska's social, cultural and economic infrastructure developed in support of the oil pipeline to Prudhoe Bay. But she says it took "intentionality" to make the government's interests dovetail with the community's need for honest, broadcast information.

"I had this incredible opportunity to be there and be part of it, so my background is predisposed to possibilities and a little broader view of what broadcast could be and mean to a community," she says. "It was an exciting, and heady time."

She speaks similarly of her work with Wareham in creating ideastream and later overseeing the renovations of the building at 1375 Euclid Avenue, now known as the Idea Center. Though Jensen sees the development of ideastream as mostly the product of "really hard work," she also says, "I think a lot of it is making your own luck. Seeing things as they might be and asking: Why not? I think it's a matter of will, willing it to be and using every asset you can find to bring it about."

Initially, what Wareham and Jensen sought to accomplish, the merger of WVIZ and WCPN, was by itself no small management task. While each organization had outgrown its facilities and recognized the benefits of convergence, both in terms of technology and reducing costs through shared infrastructure and operations, they faced an uphill struggle in making their boards and staffs understand the value of surrendering separate, time-tested identities as traditional programmers and broadcasters to become a single, multiple-media

public service organization.

And, as they began to wrap their minds around the challenges inherent in such a merger, the tougher, bedrock issues emerged: lingering 20th century questions facing public broadcasting, made more critical by the digital era's costly rules of engagement:

■ Is public television still relevant in an era when 90 percent of American households are wired to receive 500 television channels, which in many cases deliver the type of content formerly available only from the Public Broadcasting System (PBS)?

■ How are PBS, NPR, their affiliates and sister organizations to produce competitive, quality programming when the business model for financing public broadcasting—dependence upon the whims of federal, corporate and philanthropic sponsors, supplemented by mind-numbing on-air fund drives—is showing signs of new structural defects and losses in audience?

The answer, in Cleveland, was to create a multiple-media center that is not only about more or better-targeted programming but also about becoming a resource for community interaction, providing a variety of traditional broadcast and extraordinary broadband-related services.

David Giovannoni, whose market analysis of public radio over the past 20 years is widely credited with shaping today's success at NPR, insists that it's a mistake to lump radio and television together. They are separate entities with their own strengths and failures. "There is no such thing as 'public broadcasting,'" he says. "There is public radio and there is public television, and then,

M.J. Zuckerman is a veteran freelance journalist, author and lecturer, currently on the adjunct staff of the George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs

arguably, there is something you could call public media.”

From the consumer’s perspective the merger is seamless. WCPN is still public radio and WVIZ is still public television. *Morning Edition* is there when folks awake and *All Things Considered* brings them home at night; *Sesame Street* inspires children’s learning and *The NewsHour* informs adults’ ideas. But when you talk to those who have worked with ideastream, they will tell you, again and again, that together, the two stations are doing much more than they could ever have done separately to serve their communities.

The media and technology here runs the gamut: obviously there is television and radio and, certainly, Internet, but also broadband delivering on-demand, digitally stored lesson plans, live accounts from the state legislature and the state supreme court, hi-tech classrooms to help educators learn cutting-edge software to engage their students and a truly stunning state-of-the-art theater adaptable for live performance and/or broadcast. They have done away with separate TV and radio staffs; there is no “newsroom.” Instead, they have merged into a single “content staff,” charged with finding new ways to embrace and engage various communities—defined with a broad brush as regions, ethnic groups, political interests, technologies, educators, health matters, families, children, religions, and so on—with a digital presence. That’s how you compete and remain relevant in a 500-channel environment.

Think of ideastream as a digital community center or a virtual YMCA, seeking to draw together the resources of “heritage institutions” (museums, theaters, colleges, libraries, medical centers, government agencies, etc.) and make them digitally available on-demand to patrons, clients and students. For these and other services

they develop, ideastream and its partners receive grants or are paid an operating fee by school districts, government agencies or philanthropies. This is still a not-for-profit organization, but one financed, sometimes directly, by the communities it serves. They call it a “sustainable service model.” Skeptics have called it “pay to play.”

Ideastream is certainly not the only PBS or NPR affiliate attempting these kinds of initiatives. Wareham and Jensen rattle off the call letters of many affiliates in cities large and small that have inspired, influenced and informed ideastream’s efforts. Many of the 355 PBS and 860 NPR stations are examining the benefits of mergers or partnerships, experimenting with new media, working with new ways to produce and distribute content, and becoming more interactive with their communities. Yet ideastream, for now, seems to be ahead of the crowd.

“What Jerry and Kit are doing in Cleveland may well be the model for what other stations should be doing,” says David Liroff, a widely recognized visionary of public media. “And they are not alone in this. They just have focused more clearly as a locus and catalyst and convener of civic discussion. And what is truly radical about them is that they mark such a departure from the traditional expectations of what the traditional public television and public radio model should be.”

Origins of Public Broadcasting

There seems little doubt that the original lofty goals set out for public broadcasting remain deeply woven into the character of the organization and the aspirations of its leaders. “On a sustaining basis no one is in the space that we’re in,” says Paula Kerger, President of the Public Broadcasting System. “At the end of the day, the commercial marketplace simply is not fulfilling what pub-

lic television originally set out to do, which was to use the power of media to entertain, educate and inspire. They [cable] sometimes entertain pretty well but they don’t always hit that educate and inspire part.”

While several of the 500 channels—“the vast wasteland” as former FCC Commissioner Newton Minow famously labeled television in 1961—have sought to produce high-minded programming, it rarely survives Wall Street’s demands for ever-increasing profits, which require large and loyal audiences, typically built on a formulaic “lowest common denominator” of public interests. Thus, A&E has lowered its once PBS-like standards and now provides prime-time staples such as *CSI Miami* while Bravo touts its lineup as: “Fashion, Comedy, Celebrity and Real Estate.”

Although commercial attempts at playing in the PBS marketplace have frequently fallen short, PBS itself, while true to its calling, struggles to maintain its viewership, with the commensurate loss of pledges those viewers provide. Add to that erosion in the financial support it previously enjoyed from business, foundations, governments and universities.

The New York Times wasn’t the first to question PBS’ future this past February, when it wrote a biting analysis beneath the headline “Is PBS Still Necessary?” According to the article, “Lately, the audience for public TV has been shrinking faster than the audience for commercial networks. The average PBS show on prime time now scores about a 1.4 Nielsen rating, or roughly what the wrestling show ‘Friday Night Smackdown’ gets.” Acknowledging the occasional “huge splash” from a Ken Burns special, the *Times* uses the term “mustiness” to describe PBS’s prime-time lineup, noting, “The *NewsHour*, *Nova*, *Nature*, *Masterpiece* [Theatre] are

into their third or fourth decade, and they look it.”

While PBS viewership has slipped from 5.1 million members in 1990 to 3.7 million in 2005, public radio scored dramatic gains in weekly audience, up from about 2 million in 1980 to



Paula Kerger, President and CEO of PBS

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nearly 30 million today. But NPR, too, is realizing significant losses, according to Giovannoni, whose market research is the gold standard of public radio.

There was a 6 percent decline in listeners to *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* between 2004 and 2005, Giovannoni's research found. His most recent report, *Audience 2010*, which “set out to identify what is causing public radio's loss of momentum” found that “our listeners are still listening to radio [but] increasingly not listening to us.”

Losses in popularity translate into lost revenues. While listeners and viewers who remain loyal have been willing to pay more in annual subscriptions or membership fees—on the PBS side, an average of \$55.04 per subscriber in 1990 rose to \$99.84 in 2005—the loss in market share has taken its toll as corporate sponsors follow the audi-

ence. And because the federal side of the ledger is light in a good year, the bulk of funding comes from subscribers, corporate sponsors, foundations and state and local government, with the balance coming from colleges, universities, auctions and other activities.

For 2005, the last year for which the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) has reported data, statistics reflect a one-year loss of 6.7 percent in business sponsorships, a 7.1 percent decrease in foundation support, a 3.9 percent cut by states, a 3.7 percent loss in federal grants and contracts, and a meager 0.3 percent rise in subscriber support.

Adding to the difficulty, each year since taking office, the Bush administration has sought to slash spending for public broadcasting operations, most recently seeking

a \$200 million slice of the \$400 million Congress approved for the FY2009 budget. Each year the faithful have rallied, successfully preserving the 10-to-20 percent federal share of the PBS and NPR budgets.

This financial dilemma is as old as public radio and public broadcasting in the U.S.. In January 1967, the landmark Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, created by Carnegie Corporation of New York, completed a two-year study, providing the blueprint for creating public television—to which Congress added, over some objections, public radio—and enacted the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, creating CPB as the oversight mechanism which, in turn, created PBS in 1969, and NPR in 1970, as the national content producers and parent organizations for stations throughout the nation. Congress rejected the

Carnegie Commission's proposal for a 2-to-5 percent excise tax on the sale of television sets—modeled on the British system for funding the BBC—to guarantee the unfettered, financial health of public broadcasting.

Ten years later, a second Carnegie Commission, often called Carnegie II, issued *A Public Trust: The Report of the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting*, which sought, once again, to secure financial independence for media technology and a more forward looking purpose for public broadcasting.

Carnegie II recognized that new technologies were affecting the media and reinforcing the deeper questions, raised by visionaries such as Marshall McLuhan, regarding media's influence on society, cultural values and democracy. Said the report, “This institution [public broadcasting], singularly positioned within the public debate, the creative and journalistic communities, and a technological horizon of uncertain consequences, is an absolutely indispensable tool for our people and our democracy.” Thus, Carnegie II sought to keep the door propped open to future technologies through a strong, independent financing mechanism, noting, “We conclude that it is unwise for us to attempt to chart the future course of public broadcasting as it continues to interact with new technologies. We are convinced, however, that it is essential for public broadcasting to have both the money and flexibility necessary to enable it to chart its own course as it responds to the future.”

That idea, too, went nowhere. Not surprising, suggest Liroff, a 28-year veteran of WGBH in Boston and currently Senior Vice President, System Development and Media Strategy at CPB. He says, “It was, to paraphrase McLuhan, as though we were speeding into the future at 90 miles per hour

with our eyes firmly fixed on the rear-view mirror. The idea of public broadcasting pre-Internet, pre- any of these technologies, was going to be a manifestation of the broadcasting system they knew at the time, dominated, of course, by commercial broadcast.” He continues, “This question of what is the role of public broadcasting in the media environment is as relevant today as it was back then except that the answers have to be very different. This is hardly the environment in which this system [of media distribution] was first envisioned.”

Increasingly, there is appeal for public broadcasting to expand its traditional role, to grow their portfolios as ideastream has done in order “to provide new

the community,” he says.

Ward and others argue that public broadcasting has followed a flawed trickle-up business model: local public broadcasting stations must raise funds which they pay to NPR or PBS to produce programming. This has created enormous challenges, primarily for television where production costs are huge and viewership is decaying.

“The problem with the PBS stations is that they’ve never been able to contribute enough for PBS to not be almost totally dependent upon sponsorships, which they have been unable to keep up,” says Somerset-Ward. “What you need to do is to increase the amount of funding the stations put in and that means optimizing the health of the stations. That doesn’t mean an entirely new business plan [for the stations], just augmenting the present one. And the way is open to do that because of digital and all that implies. And Cleveland is the best example of how that can be done.”

However that requires an attitude adjustment on the part of broadcasters accustomed to an “I-produce, you-view” model, in which content is tightly control by producers and “pushed” to consumers, says Liroff.

Larry Grossman, the former PBS president, highly regarded as a visionary in public broadcasting, began talking in the 1980s about the need to create “a grand alliance” of “heritage institutions,” bringing together public broadcasters, universities, libraries and museums. Today, Grossman remains committed to a top-down approach in which PBS and NPR lead and the

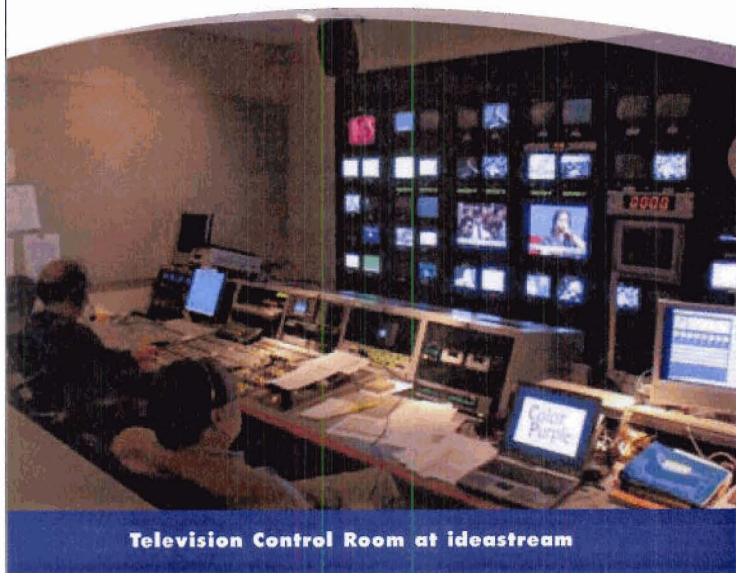
stations follow. What is lacking, he says, “is a blueprint and anybody articulating the dream: what is the role of public broadcasting, what should it be going forward?”

Yet, Grossman’s vision in the 1980s remains vital today. Explains Liroff, “What Grossman saw more clearly than the rest of us is that public broadcasters and universities and libraries and all the rest are all in the same business and the old business model that makes them look so different is being compromised—in the best sense of that word—in terms of their separate identities by digital technologies, which they all share. So it is just as likely...that digital technologies allow these heritage institutions, among others, to begin to extend their services... on the Internet in ways, which at least in form, will be indistinguishable one from the other.”

Or, put another way, Internet consumers tend to be agnostic about the sources of data; they don’t necessarily know or care which museum or library provided the recording of, say, Robert Frost reading “The Road Not Taken”—just that they can access it. Add to that the current steep declines in the cost of digital storage and you have “extraordinary consequences for any individual’s ability to call up what they want when they want it,” says Liroff.

What all this means is that broadcasters and journalists, who have been trained by competition and regulators, most notably the FCC, to fiercely protect and keep tight reign over their turf, to serve as gatekeepers, must learn to loosen the controls, become more interactive and accepting of “pull” technologies.

But that raises an important question: if traditional broadcasters are expanding their roles to serve as content developers and data distributors on platforms other than broadcast, does the mean that five or ten years from



Television Control Room at ideastream

services in new, non-broadcast ways,” explains Richard Somerset-Ward, an expert on public media and senior fellow at the Benton Foundation, which promotes digital media in communications. “This includes distributing other people’s content as well as its own; to open up the possibility of new revenue streams and to become, in general, a community enabler, a go-to organization at the heart of the community, one whose identity is bound up in that of

now their primary function could be something other than delivering programming by radio and television?

That seems a distinct possibility, say many observers, including Liroff, Grossman and Somerset-Ward. Yet industry leaders, including Wareham, Kerger and others, are quick to disagree.

"Everyone is quick to write off traditional broadcasting, but it's been around a long time and survived all sorts of predictions of early demise," says Ken Stern, former CEO of NPR. "So I don't think that's going to change."

Stern resigned his post as CEO this March after only 18 months, reportedly in a dispute with his board over NPR's digital future, which he saw combining a strong video presence on the web with Public Radio's traditional radio journalism. "I absolutely agree that the audience is being fragmented and it's important for public broadcasters to meet the audience where it is, so things like podcasting and moving to multiple platforms is the reality," he says. "But the need is to meet the audience across many platforms and not to give up the broadcast platform."

Creating ideastream

Wareham and Jensen are absolutely sure that they can't recall the first time they discussed merging WCPN and WVIZ. That's probably because they tried dating for a while before contemplating marriage—that is, the broadcast operations, not Wareham and Jensen.

In 1997, the stations joined forces to do a series of stories on "urban sprawl," and despite a rough start it pointed the way towards greater cooperation. "It was a really miserable experience," says Wareham, laughing. "The computer systems didn't talk to one another. The radio people thought the TV people were shallow. The TV people thought the radio people were weird. But a funny thing happened. We started getting these

phone calls from viewers and listeners: 'Didn't I see or hear something about how to get involved in my community?' And, in spite of ourselves, we had made an impact and that got the attention of our boards." They continued to look for joint projects and, with Wareham and Jensen in the lead, by the fall of 1999 the planning committees of the two boards were in meetings discussing merger.

While Cleveland's economy was and continues to be distressed, the financial motivations for merger related to increased efficiencies realized in staffing, marketing, fundraising and grant seeking. Both were also desperate to replace dilapidated facilities.

"But this did not start out with something being broken. Both broadcast stations were in good shape. Except for their physical location," says Susan Eagan, then with the Cleveland Foundation, which served as a neutral moderator to the discussions. "It was mostly Kit and Jerry looking out ahead and seeing a lot of unrealized opportunities...and knowing that if public broadcasting was not repositioned and aligned with what was going on in the larger marketplace, at some point down the road there could be some significant issues."

Wareham and Jensen argued that the emerging reality, the shift in the marketplace, meant, "Access to programming through broadcast distribution is becoming relatively less valuable than content creation, packaging, marketing and control of intellectual property." In other words, having control of the media delivery system is no longer sufficient to remain a player in the community; content development is of greater importance.

While much of this may seem self-evident today, it wasn't all so clear in 1999 to members of the two boards. To make their case, Wareham and Jensen turned first to Chicago and then to Cinderella.

Network Chicago, a multiple media public service organization operated by Chicago's WTTW was a model very similar to what Wareham and Jensen wanted to create in Cleveland. A 1999 promotional video, which they brought to a meeting of the Cleveland boards, explains, "We can create alliances with cultural, educational and business institutions...We can leap beyond the television screen and carry our quality content to radio, print, and the Internet...[create] strategic alliances... driven by our values." (Unfortunately for WTTW, Network Chicago's business model relied heavily on advertising in a print publication, which did not succeed.)

But the "Aha!" moment in the negotiations, the inspiration that enabled people to understand how this worked, they say, came when Jensen posed the question, *What is Cinderella?* To illustrate the point, she passed around several props including a Disney DVD, an illustrated story book, a Cinderella Barbie, and a volume of the original French fairy tale. Which one of these various media forms is Cinderella? "The right answer was really intellectual property," she says. "We needed an object to illustrate that platforms do not define content, content just exists. Cinderella had presented itself in all these different media in all these periods of time. And now we were facing the need to reinvent how we present our stories. This really worked for people."

From that point forward, parties to the talks say, there was only one essential sticking point: who's in charge? And this provided a defining moment in ideastream's reinvention of public broadcasting.

"When it came to the CEO question it all fell apart because people had their loyalties," says Eagan. The WVIZ board pressed for Wareham; the radio side wanted Jensen. But what hap-

The Idea Center

It was here, at 1375 Euclid Avenue, back in the 1950s, in the studios of WJW, that disc jockey Alan Freed coined the phrase “Rock & Roll.” Well, Cleveland still rocks!

All the proof you need is a visit to The Idea Center, home of ideastream, where you will experience a symbiosis of community-based arts and media raised to the highest level of quality. For example: one afternoon last December, Alice Walker and Marsha Norman sat facing each other on the stage of the black box theatre that occupies a three-story space in the center of the building.

This was an event that served multiple purposes. Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, was in Cleveland to promote the Oprah Winfrey musical based on her book, due to open in the spring of 2008. Norman, author of the play *‘night Mother*, wrote the libretto for the Winfrey musical.

Walker made a little news by saying this would be her final appearance on behalf of the book, the movie or the musical. But the real show was listening to these two sophisticated ladies light up a corner of downtown Cleveland.

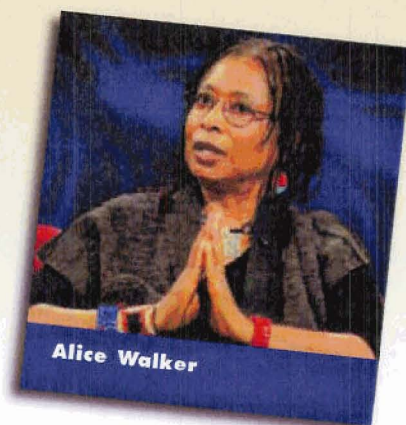
Filling the 300-seat bleachers rising up two stories in front of the floor-level stage were college and high school students as well as several local arts dignitaries, who took turns lining up at the microphones to ask questions. Meanwhile, at a half-dozen schools throughout northeast Ohio, another hundred-plus students watched the event live via broadband and they, too, lined up for a chance to interact with the two Pulitzer Prize-winning writers. Currently, ideastream is linked via broadband to 115 public schools and 190 private schools, reaching a potential audience of 500,000 students.

On any given day, the black box theater does double duty, serving primarily as a theater for the performing arts sponsored by the Playhouse Square Foundation and also as a live TV studio for WVIZ and PBS. So, on this occasion, the two-hour event was also taped for local broadcast in the spring, when *The Color Purple* is presented at one of the major theatrical stages at Playhouse Square and is being offered to PBS affiliates as one in a series of artist appearances at the Idea Center.

These presentations, and the resulting TV productions, are called “Master Moments,” where famous performers speak candidly about their work. Some other recent visitors to the “Master Moments” stage include composer Marvin Hamlisch, actress Chita Rivera and composer/lyricist Adam Guettel.

Many of the student-questions Walker fielded related to fame—How has it changed her life? Does it make writing easier or more difficult?—and with each answer she seemed to become more succinct and focused until, towards the end of the two-hour session, she offered in reply a poem she said she wrote some time ago:

*Expect nothing,
Live frugally
On surprise.*



pened next was iconic in terms of the ideastream partnership model: Wareham and Jensen wrote a memo saying, if the boards agreed, they would resolve the leadership issue on their own. But until the discussions moved off this point neither of them would have anything further to do with the proposed merger. They took their egos off the table.

“That was a very, very critical moment,” says Eagan. “And it set a standard that said, this is not about us, this is what the community is entrusting to us.”

The boards bought it. Weeks later, on a Sunday, Wareham and Jensen met over coffee. Each made a long list of what they liked most and least about their jobs. They exchanged documents. They agreed he would be CEO and she COO. The same procedure was followed with other managers at the two stations.

Somerset-Ward and others credit this enduring, almost stubborn, spirit of cooperation as the primary reason for ideastream’s success, stemming from the Wareham-Jensen leadership model. “They don’t take credit for anything and that, of course, is one of the main reasons why it works,” he says. “Everywhere else, public broadcasting stations that I know of, would leap at the opportunity to grab credit. Jerry and Kit understood from the beginning that you couldn’t do that, not if you want to be a partner. That is why they have been successful.”

On July 1, 2001 ideastream became a reality.

The Listening Project

Wareham is fond of noting how clearly the current mission and approach of ideastream mirrors a key statement of the 1967 Carnegie Commission report, which contends that the underlying purpose of public media is not about technology or distribution: “It is not the location of the studio or transmit-

ter that is most relevant. Rather, what is critical is the degree to which those operating the facilities relate to those they seek to serve.”

Toward that goal, Jensen created The Listening Project, which has informed ideastream’s programming, content and partnerships since its inception. Every year since 2001, ideastream goes out into the communities it serves, drawing leaders and citizens into a discussion of what matters most to them, how they see their lives, what assets they see in their communities and what public services they see a need for. Ideastream was overwhelmed when nearly 10,000 people took part in 2001. Since then, the number has been held to a more manageable level—1,410 in 2007—who respond to on-air, in-print and online solicitations to fill out a questionnaire. There are also live town meeting discussions open to the public.

This is not the usual market research approach: what do you think of our product and how can we make you use it more? Instead, the key proposition is how to connect to communities in ways that are deemed useful by those in the communities.

Four standard questions are asked each year are: 1) What are the most important assets of the community? 2) What are the most important challenges? 3) Who strengthens those assets and challenges? 4) What could multi-media do to strengthen those assets and [address those] challenges?

What they have heard clearly is that citizens want public media to look into problems and then stay on the topic long enough to lead the way towards some resolution. That means, unlike the normal modus operandi of media, not merely shining a bright light on an issue. Such an approach, The Listening Project finds, only serves to increase public anxiety.

“What the community was really

asking us to do was to do the partnership, but then hang in there and be consistent about addressing these challenges and assets,” says Wareham. “They wanted us to create community connection and participation. They wanted us to facilitate the process of community members talking with one another.” That has given rise to a community advisory board and two new programs, *Sound of Ideas* a daily radio show and *Ideas* a weekly television program, which extend the community dialogue.

In 2001, Doug Clifton, the editor of *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, asked ideastream to join the newspaper in a project ideal for the new organization. Clifton wanted to do a series of stories, editorials, town meetings and panel discussions examining the departure from Cleveland and the surrounding area of Fortune 500 companies. Wareham and Jensen jumped at the opportunity.

During the next few years, the organizations shared resources and promoted one another’s efforts in what was called “the Quiet Crisis,” which rapidly became the shorthand by which everyone in the region referred to the economic downturn affecting northeastern Ohio. “It was an effort to document the depth of the decline, assess what the future might hold and look at some solutions,” says Clifton. “Although the *Plain Dealer* penetrated the home market very deeply some people would turn to public radio and public TV and that was the audience we were looking for.”

Both organizations saw the effort as a success. “The sum of it was greater than its individual parts because it brought together three of the serious institutions in the region who were speaking with one voice,” Clifton says.

In addition to anecdotal evidence of success, ideastream can point to:

■ Combined 2007 radio and television fund raising campaigns that brought in \$1,999,653, up from

\$1,419,530 in FY 2006, \$1,425,575 in FY 2005, \$1,632,609 in FY 2004 and \$1,490,434 in FY 2003.

■ Weekly cumulative audience for the spring Arbitron ratings found WCPN audience increased 32 percent between 2001 and 2005. During the same period, the national audience increased 11.5 percent.

■ Weekly cumulative audience for the February Nielsen ratings period found the WVIZ audience declined 6.25 percent between 2001 and 2005 compared with a 13.5 percent downturn regionally.

■ In the past five years, public radio and public television stations throughout the U.S. have sought guidance from ideastream; they have taken their story on the road to public broadcast operations in at least nine states.

Partnerships: Inside ideastream

Playhouse Square Foundation

Provides a Home

Among the partnerships fostered by ideastream, the most evident is The Idea Center, at 1375 Euclid Avenue, from which all else emanates.

One of Wareham’s and Jensen’s earliest ambitions for the WVIZ-WCPN merger was to combine their infrastructure operations and develop a new headquarters. After contemplating a number of locations and partnerships, they became enamored with a proposal from Art Falco, Executive Director of Cleveland’s Playhouse Square Foundation, which, with 10,000 seats, is the second largest center for the performing arts in the U.S., after New York’s Lincoln Center.

Over the past 20 years, Playhouse Square has invested \$55 million to obtain and renovate almost one million square feet of commercial real estate in downtown Cleveland in an effort to restore the once-thriving theater district, says Falco. According to one economic

impact study, the commercial and theatrical programs enabled by Playhouse Square generate \$43 million a year for the local economy.

The building on Euclid Avenue was seedy, run down, and only about 10 percent occupied when the mortgage holder agreed to donate it to the foundation, which hoped to turn it into auxiliary work space for its performing arts operations. "We needed to create an arts education space," says Falco. "We had these wonderful theaters but we didn't have classrooms and we didn't have a dance studio, we didn't have a...theater, we didn't have gallery space."

Knowing that ideastream was in the market, he approached Wareham and Jensen and after some design work the two organizations realized they could realize some big savings by sharing their most costly facility needs: Falco wanted a "black box theater" (unadorned performance space) and ideastream needed a second television studio, but neither needed to have access to it on a daily basis. "We knew that we could build a great education and arts center and they could build a great tech and broadcast facility, but we knew it wouldn't be as good as it would be if we did it together," says Falco.

By sharing their space needs, the two groups reduced their total footprint from 120,000 square feet down to 90,000, and saved \$7 million. It also meant that a greater portion of the four upper floors would be available to rent, creating revenue flow to defray their annual operating costs. "It has turned out to be a building that not only served our purposes, but has been characterized as a 'cool' building, where other commercial tenants who have connections with technology and architecture and design want to be located," says Falco. "It's surpassed my expectations."

As has proven true with many of its

partnerships, the ideastream-Playhouse Square partnership is a wondrous symbiosis. Their combined capital campaign exceeded its goal, bringing in \$30 million. They began moving into the facility in fall of 2005 with the last wave in February 2006. The upper floors are 90 percent occupied, well ahead of schedule.

OneCommunity Provides Reach

The grand symbiotic relationship ideastream has embarked upon, which has drawn national attention—including a Harvard Business School study—and opened vast opportunities for Cleveland, is with OneCommunity.

OneCommunity—formerly OneCleveland—was the vision of Lev Gonick, who became CIO and Vice President, Information Services at Case Western Reserve University in 2001, just as ideastream came into being and the Cleveland community was coming to know about the Quiet Crisis. Essentially, what Gonick sought was to build a regional broadband network at relatively little cost to serve the educational, health and nonprofit communities of northeast Ohio. What he didn't have in mind, until he was approached by Wareham, was someone to provide content to that network and, perhaps more importantly, someone with the community connections to bring together the nonprofit community in Cleveland in support of Gonick's vision.

Toward the end of the 20th century, an estimated \$3 trillion-plus was sunk into the streets of the U.S. in the form of fiber optic cable in anticipation of the explosion in broadband digital service, which halted abruptly when the e-commerce bubble burst. Gonick understood that this fortune in so-called "dark fiber" (unused cable), was everywhere in the country. In 2003, Gonick convinced City Signal Corp. to donate several strands of dark fiber to his nonprofit organization,

for which the corporation got a substantial tax write-off. In September of that year, OneCleveland was incorporated and Scot Rourke, a former venture capitalist and Cleveland native, became its first executive.

If Gonick is the visionary, Rourke is the master builder. Rourke's plan for the nonprofit was to expand the broadband connection well beyond the city of Cleveland. What he proposed was

It's a tough challenge for people to cede control in terms of the traditional gatekeeper role played by broadcasters and journalists.

that the corporations donating some portion of their dark fiber would not only get a healthy tax write-off, but also, said Rourke, "We are going to build the market for you. We will expose the community to the value of [broadband], we'll do the missionary work and build a market demand for the rest of your fiber."

"Scot has a wonderful concept," says Wareham. "He refers to 'Liberating content held captive by various community institutions, universities, foundations, and nonprofit organizations.'"

Adds Rourke: "It's not that they are trying to imprison it, it's that they don't know how to let it out."

Some of the programs enabled by the ideastream-OneCommunity partnership:

Distance Learning enables schools, which pay an annual fee, to have interactive access to live shows and instructional classes presented at the Idea Center.

Voices and Choices enables anyone interested in the economic issues of the region to log into a dedicated web site, study the issues, make choices and contribute to an ongoing dialogue, including community town meetings.

One Classroom is the outgrowth of a \$2 million grant from the Cleveland Clinic connecting 1,500 area schools to the OneCommunity network, making rich media content created by ideastream, including lesson plans and other educational content, available on-demand. In time, this is expected to include digitized content from the many museums and cultural institutions in the region.

Wireless Mesh Network is a work in progress, building on ideastream's FCC licenses to develop a citywide wi-fi network with OneCommunity, Case Western Reserve University, the city of Cleveland and area schools.

Rural Health Network, when completed, would create a broadband network for participating medical institutions in Northeastern Ohio to exchange medical data ranging from paper records and MRIs to televised medical exams.

Somerset-Ward says of ideastream and its partnerships: "They are becoming much more than just community broadcasters, they are becoming community enablers. And they are doing that by forming partnerships with community institutions. Jerry and ideastream are in a class of their own...But it's a model of what communities can do when institu-

tions like schools, universities, and health authorities create partnerships."

Harsh Realities

Perhaps the toughest part of using ideastream as a model is broadband access. Rourke, however, insists that should not be a problem. Dark fiber exists throughout the nation and large telecommunication companies are anxious to build a market for broadband by getting the attention of consumers—and one way to do that is to donate a couple of strands of fiber to a local nonprofit, with the added benefit of a tax break. "We know we can repeat this pretty much anywhere in the United States by promising that we are going to create the market and we aren't going to touch the residential customer," says Rourke.

Some observers say that an equally tough challenge is finding people willing to cede control, both in terms of the traditional gatekeeper role played by broadcasters/journalists and a willingness to enter into partnerships in which the traditional objectivity of the broadcaster/journalist might be questioned. Other skeptics have challenged ideastream's partnerships with regional institutions that are sometimes subjects of media scrutiny, such as the Cleveland Clinic, the second-largest employer in the state, which has provided grants to OneCommunity and ideastream.

Unquestionably, partnerships can create the appearance of conflicts of interest for journalists whose stock in trade is perceived objectivity. But the same can be said with respect to advertisers: does *The New York Times*, for example, have a problem covering a scandal at General Motors because it accepts ads from GM?

David Molpus, a veteran reporter with NPR and Executive Editor at ideastream since March 2006, says that there are some legitimate issues to be addressed when working with another

organization on content creation. "What are the rules of the game? We've started to work that out and codify it," he explains. "We obviously see that there is one level of cooperation with another news organization like the *Plain Dealer*. But then there are degrees of variation: What could you do with the university? What could you do with the city library? What could you do with other nonprofits? What could you do with a government agency?"

There was an early dust-up over a perceived conflict of interest, concerning a grant provided to ideastream to do stories about affordable housing by an organization that also provided affordable housing. "There was concern in the newsroom, at that time, that this organization was setting some agenda," says Mark Smukler, ideastream's Senior Director of Content. "But they never did get involved, there was no direct conversation, no proposals, no story ideas. At one point they did place a call to the reporter that was working on it and I told them not do that and they said fine and that was the end of it."

And, as with any merger or change in corporate identity, there were myriad management issues, including heightened staff distress and brain drain. "I have a great deal of admiration for the model and for the people who put it in place," says Mark Fuerst of the Integrated Media Association. "Merging any two organizations is a particularly hard undertaking. There are fears, anxieties and big concessions that have to be made. Kit and Jerry deserve great credit for what they've done."

Neither Wareham nor Jensen is recommending others follow ideastream's lead. "I don't know if our model can be or should be replicated elsewhere," says Jensen. "But the key has to be to work within the resources that the communities provide and with full recognition of the communities' needs." ■