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WPR and WPT Celebrate 100 Years of Public Broadcasting in Wisconsin Activities Mark State's Innovation and Leadership Nationally

(Madison, Wis.) In 1917, a small group of Wisconsinites gathered at the Madison home of University of Wisconsin - Madison Physics Professor Earle Terry to witness the launch of public broadcasting in the state. There was no fanfare; there were no crowds, just a small group of scientists and students who were committed to using new technologies to enhance life across the state — a commitment that remains at the heart of everything Wisconsin Public Radio (WPR) and Wisconsin Public Television (WPT) do to this day.

“By all accounts, we’re the oldest public radio station in the nation and one of the oldest continuously broadcasting radio stations of any kind in the country — we’re even older than the BBC,” noted Mike Crane, director of WPR. “When Terry demonstrated voice and music broadcasting in 1917, he was really introducing a significant change in how the world would share information and connect, and it continues to be life changing to this day.”

The history of public broadcasting in the state is really two stories: one of technological innovation and one of program innovation. While UW professors and students were developing the transmitters that would make radio possible — crafting fragile vacuum tubes by hand in the lab — educators at the recently established University of Wisconsin - Extension Division were wondering if the new technology could help the state’s mostly rural families improve their lot in life.

“When our founders decided what they should broadcast first with the new wireless technology, what did they choose? The two things that would benefit the most people in Wisconsin — weather forecasts and crop prices,” Crane said. Among many broadcast “firsts”, WPR was the first station in the nation — public or private — to offer regularly scheduled weather forecasts. “Public service was really the foundation of those early innovations and it still drives everything we do on air, online and in communities across the state,” he added.

According to UW-Extension Chancellor Cathy Sandeen, the vision of extension education was instrumental to developing the public media values Wisconsin audiences still experience on WPR and WPT. “The weather might not seem like a big breakthrough, but for farmers at the time, access to scientific forecasting was game-changing, and data on crop prices leveled the economic playing field, putting them in a better position to profit in the open market,” she said.

“Today, WPR, WPT and UW-Extension remain committed to providing free access to information that allows Wisconsinites the opportunity to chart their own course, to make up their own minds, and to shape their communities,” Sandeen said. “We are incredibly proud of WPR and WPT and hope all of Wisconsin will join us in celebrating their service to the state and their leadership in educational broadcasting nationally.”

The collaboration between public broadcasting and public instruction in Wisconsin expanded in the 1930s when WPR launched educational School of the Air programs to serve the more than 4,000 one-room schoolhouses in the state. Programs like “Let’s Sing,” “Let’s Draw,” “Afield with Ranger Mac” and “Rhythm and Games” engaged students and saved schools and the state money by providing urban and rural schools access to free, high-quality instruction that met state standards.

The innovations continued as College of the Air programs were designed for adults unable to afford tuition during the Great Depression, and a host of home economics and farm programs were created to benefit Wisconsin’s mostly rural families. Traditional topics, such as economics, science and literature, were taught on the radio, alongside practical instruction in family health and even typing.

With the arrival of television in 1954, WPT embraced WPR’s educational mission with original and award-winning children’s programs, even before the advent of PBS. “There was a lot of important, early work here that people might not know about,” noted Jon Miskowski, director of WPT. “‘The Friendly Giant,’ which became our first national show in the 1950s, changed many families’ understanding of what television could do,” he added. The program, hosted by WPR’s Bob Homme, became a national model for educational television and was beloved by children across the U.S. and Canada for decades.

In 1967, 50 years after the launch of Wisconsin public broadcasting, the U.S. Congress established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which created PBS and NPR a few years later. Both organizations turned to Wisconsin for direction. NPR hired Bill Siemering, who worked at WPR while in high school and college, as their first program director. Siemering, who went on to win a MacArthur “Genius” Grant for his lifetime of work in educational radio around the world, wrote the NPR charter and helped create the organization’s first national news program, “All Things Considered,” with another WPR alum, Jack Mitchell. And that famous “All Things Considered” theme song? It was written by WPR’s Don Voegeli here in Wisconsin.

In the 1970s, the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board was created to ensure that communities across the state had equal access to the early learning and general educational content on public television. “In addition to maintaining the network of broadcast towers and technology around the state, our focus has been on supporting compelling educational content for public, private and home-schooled children in the state,” Gene Purcell, executive director of the ECB, said. And, like radio and television, some of the ECB’s work has served a national audience of students and teachers.

“For decades, WPT and the ECB have gone beyond broadcast to help teachers teach and students learn with original, Wisconsin-focused, proven educational content,” Miskowski added. “We’re excited about what we’ve been able to do online, and now we’re exploring virtual reality for education.”

Over the years, as WPR and WPT built a statewide network of stations to ensure equal access to information and education, they also connected the state like never before. Those connections and a belief that Wisconsinites should have access not just to listen, but to also talk to each other, led to the creation of the Ideas Network in the 1990s.

Before the web, before social media, the Ideas Network gave Wisconsinites the opportunity to share their own knowledge and to question experts, researchers, government agencies and elected officials about their ideas. The network continues to thrive today because it still provides a civil forum where issues and ideas are analyzed without litmus tests and rancor.

“Wisconsin has an amazing story to share when it comes to leadership and innovation in public broadcasting, but WPR and WPT know that what we do today to serve the state – and how we plan to serve the state in the future – is what matters most,” Miskowski said.

Even as they celebrate their first 100 years, WPR and WPT are working hard for today, tomorrow and the next 100 years. Whether it’s mobile apps and video on demand or podcasting and virtual reality, WPR and WPT continue to embrace new media technologies to ensure that their groundbreaking educational, cultural and news content will serve Wisconsinites for generations to come.

“We’re building on our history of innovation to provide the news and information Wisconsinites need to make their own lives, businesses and communities better,” Crane said, noting recent additions to the news team and the digital-first collaboration WisContext.org.

A lot has changed in the past 100 years, but according to Crane, WPR and WPT’s guiding principles have not. “If there’s anything I would want Wisconsinites to know about us, it’s that we remain committed to always reflecting Wisconsin’s diverse perspectives,

experiences and cultures today and tomorrow. The people of Wisconsin are the thread that runs through everything we do. Their hopes and needs bind our past, present and future together.”

WPR and WPT are celebrating 100 years of public broadcasting in Wisconsin with a series of special events around the state, special broadcast promotions, and a centennial microsite that includes an interactive timeline (with historic photos, audio and video) and a place where anyone can share their stories – visit wpr.org/100 to learn more.

Editor’s Note: Historic photos, audio and video are available to illustrate this story. Find a selection, along with caption recommendations and credits, at: <http://wprcentennial.org/for-the-media/>

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About Wisconsin Public Radio

For 100 years, Wisconsin Public Radio has served the people of Wisconsin with quality news, music, talk and entertainment. On air, online and in the community – we work for Wisconsin. Listen, learn more and donate online at WPR.org.

About Wisconsin Public Television

Wisconsin Public Television is a place to grow through learning on WHA-TV, Madison; WPNE-TV, Green Bay; WHRM-TV, Wausau; WLEF-TV, Park Falls; WHLA-TV, La Crosse; and WHWC-TV, Menomonie-Eau Claire.

WPR and WPT are services of the Educational Communications Board and University of Wisconsin-Extension.