

Should The City Sell Its TV And Radio Stations?

by Laura Forlano

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The Department of Education's TV and radio stations known as WNYE are reportedly up for sale. [WNYC-FM](#) is going to buy the radio station (WNYE-FM 91.5) and [WNET-Channel 13](#) may buy the TV station (Channel 25), according to the Times.

The deal has been a "secret" to the people of New York. As Joyce Purnick of the New York Times reported, "There has been no announcement, no competitive bidding, no comment from the agency conducting the negotiations, the Economic Development Corporation." This is troubling because it contradicts Bloomberg's promise of greater transparency.

Before these deals are signed and sealed, some in government are urging the city to conduct an open review of WNYE and its potential buyers. City Councilmember Gale Brewer believes that WNYE could be a valuable asset in the future, if the city keeps it.

WNYC and WNET--both public broadcasters--may seem like the best possible buyers. WNYC features well-known non-commercial radio broadcasts from [National Public Radio](#) such as "Morning Edition" and "Fresh Air" in addition to its own programming. And Brian Lehrer's morning call-in show has always been one of my favorites. Similarly, Channel 13 offers a range of quality shows such as Sesame Street and Charlie Rose.

With these wholesome offerings, one might find it hard to object to the sale, especially in times of deep budget cuts. However, a more extensive public evaluation is still necessary.

SPECTRUM: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

WNYE hold the license to a vital public resource: spectrum. More commonly referred to as "radio waves" or "airwaves," the electromagnetic spectrum is used for a variety of things. These include cell phones, satellite communications, radio, broadcast TV and wireless Internet access to name just a few. According to Times columnist William Safire, "[Spectrum is] the most valuable natural resource of the information age."

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Since spectrum is invisible, it is difficult to grasp its worth. The New America Foundation's "[Citizen's Guide to the Airwaves](#)" (in pdf format) offers a graphical representation. The total value of all US spectrum is estimated to be \$771 billion. But, the [Federal Communications Commission](#) is using what is now widely regarded as an inefficient way to regulate access to the airwaves. "[Spectrum is] being managed wastefully and inequitably, and what's at stake is the future of technologies that can enable the tremendous economic and social potential of anywhere, anytime access to high-speed data networking," writes the New America Foundation's Michael Calabrese in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

This is because spectrum regulations were created as a result of radio interference almost one hundred years ago. In the 1920's, crossed signals often led to crashes on the high seas because ships could not contact one another or call for emergency response. These problems led to the passage of the Communications Act of 1934.

However, new technologies render the current system defunct. Some advocates in Washington are pushing for spectrum privatization while others are arguing that the resource should be treated as a "commons," much like our current highway system.

Adam Theiner of the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) writes, "There exists today overwhelming intellectual support for an alternative system of spectrum governance based upon the free market principles of flexible use, property rights and freedom of contract." In reality, new FCC regulation will most likely be a combination of both.

Groups like [NYCwireless](#), are working to gain access to unused and wasted TV broadcast spectrum. If the FCC allows more spectrum to be used without a license-microwaves, TV remotes and pacemakers all do this-then it could be used to support free Internet access. According to NYCwireless' Dustin Goodwin, "[This] will be critical to changing the way the poor of this city gain access to the communication services."

POSSIBILITIES FOR WNYE

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So, should the city go ahead with its plan to sell WNYE? Experts disagree on the potential value of these stations for future education programming or other projects.

According to Bob Miller, "The sale would be a big mistake." This is because WNYE's TV station could be used to broadcast five to twelve channels digitally. However, in recent years, lack of city funds prevented the station from shining, digitally that is.

Miller's company Viacel uses a technology that can digitally broadcast to small portable devices. Such technology could turn WNYE into a great resource for delivering educational content to all New Yorkers, not only those enrolled in public schools.

Everything from homework assignments to videos could be sent to students on their laptops, personal digital assistants or cell phones. Many of these devices are starting to come with digital receivers which would allow them to get the broadcasts. This could be used along with the Internet to facilitate learning beyond the doors of the classroom.

Viacel's technology, while popular overseas in Europe, Russia, Australia and Hong Kong, is different from the digital broadcasting standard used in the U.S. The company has been granted a waiver to use the technology by the Federal Communications Commission.

But, Goodwin of NYCWireless sees less value in holding onto WNYE for a different reason. He says, "[channel 25] would not be enough to be useful for wide scale wireless community network deployment." This is because channel 25 is only 6 megahertz wide. A wireless network requires a channel that is 22 megahertz wide--the wider the channel the more information can be transmitted.

While current FCC regulations prevent using a broadcast channel as a wireless network, it is possible the city could request a waiver to use WNYE's spectrum for this purpose.

So, maybe we shouldn't be mourning WNYE's loss just yet. Instead, the city might want to take a good hard look at what it owns with an eye towards the technologies that might make it a lot more valuable to the Department of Education in the future.

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