



**benton at 25:  
marking a transition**

# 25

**“If these new communications technologies are so powerful and so innovative... then why cannot they be harnessed to our local and communal needs?”**

*Connecting Communities,*  
Benton Foundation, 2000





# embarking on a new chapter

At 25 years old, the Benton Foundation, like media and communications, is at a crossroads.

With the advent of digital broadcasting and the proliferation of media driven by the Internet, the Benton Foundation is working to ensure that the values of access, diversity, and equity prevail. After many years of steady, strong leadership under Karen Menichelli, we welcome now our new President, Gloria Tristani. Together, we are resolved to journey toward the future asserting the foundation's values, preserving its assets, and taking risks with its projects.

We are embarking on a new path propelled by the interest, enthusiasm, and energy of a new generation of people concerned about our media future. To continue to meet the challenges of translating "in the public interest" from an analog to a digital world, the foundation is recommitting itself to advocating for public benefits in communications with new leadership and vigor.

Here at Benton, we have a 25-year-old tradition of educating the media reform community—policymakers, funders, and activists—about the crucial debates that help shape our media future. We are also advocating—inside the Federal Communications Commission—for traditional public interest benefits in the digital world. Our participation on the FCC's Consumer Advisory Committee have given us the platform for advancing our historical priorities—the public interest obligations of broadcasters, media ownership, and universal service, while helping make the FCC's processes more open and transparent.

But what is the use of good policies and innovative technologies unless they are harnessed to our local, community needs? We will continue to promote the untapped potential for community alliances between local media and local nonprofit organizations. Such alliances embody the realization of our policy goals for a stronger public media—with new media voices and choices, new technologies that put citizens more in control, and policies that more effectively balance public and private interests.

We are at a crossroads. While the Internet has become part and parcel of American life—as a vital tool for economic empowerment, education, and socialization, access to high quality Internet connections is not a given for most Americans. Without the light of public scrutiny, policymakers may allow for greater consolidation of media ownership—with an Internet that is controlled by fewer hands and with the Internet's open and democratic flow greatly imperiled. Without public participation, traditional public interest obligations may also be further weakened. Without public pressure, newer public interest imperatives, such as assuring that high speed broadband is affordable, accessible, and available to all Americans, may be nothing but a pipe dream.

We, as Americans, could have a media environment that is accessible to all and that delivers a vigorous, uninhibited marketplace of ideas. We could have a media environment that reflects, responds, and is accessible to local communities. We could have a media environment that truly embraces and enhances the public interest.

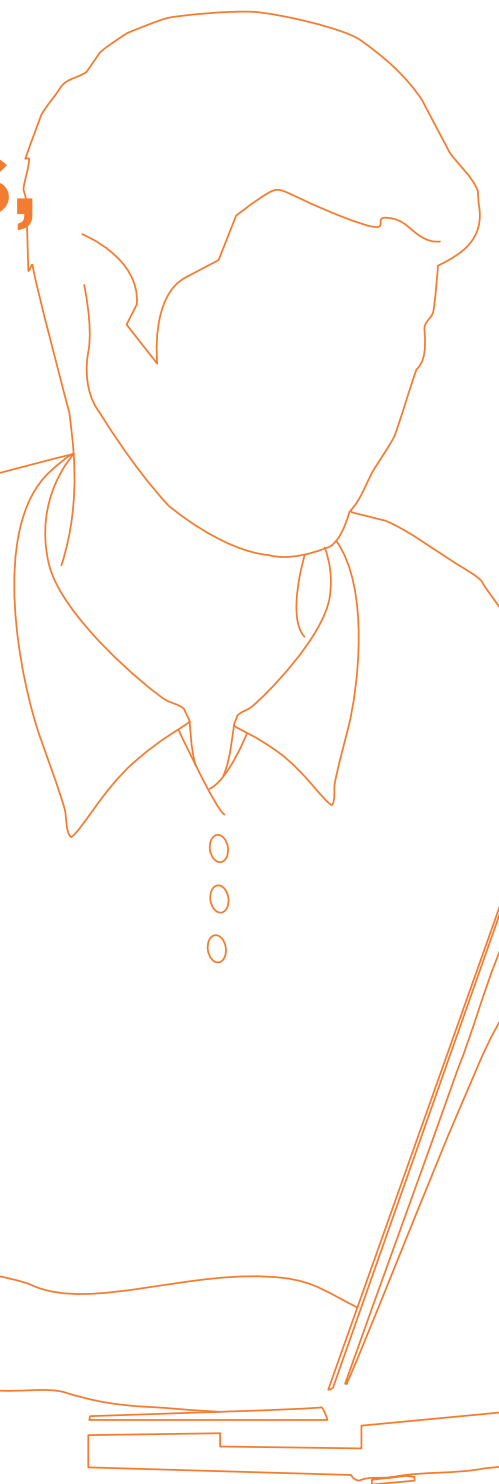
A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Charles Benton". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Charles Benton  
Chairman and CEO

In 2001, our annual report celebrated the foundation's twenty-year history of expansive operating projects that challenged the field's notions of what new technologies can deliver in the public interest. Then we adjusted to changing economic and political times in the last five years with mission focus and staff restructuring.

**over those five years,  
the foundation has  
examined its path to  
effectiveness and  
reaffirmed its core  
values—access,  
diversity, and equity.**

What stands out in this transition is not a new direction, but the anchoring of our current activities in the goals and accomplishments of the past. This continuity brings standing, deep knowledge, and credibility to our current endeavors. We retain a strong belief in the power of communications technology and media policy to strengthen our democracy—to deliver new opportunities, strengthen communities, and enliven public debate.



# our programs

## media policy

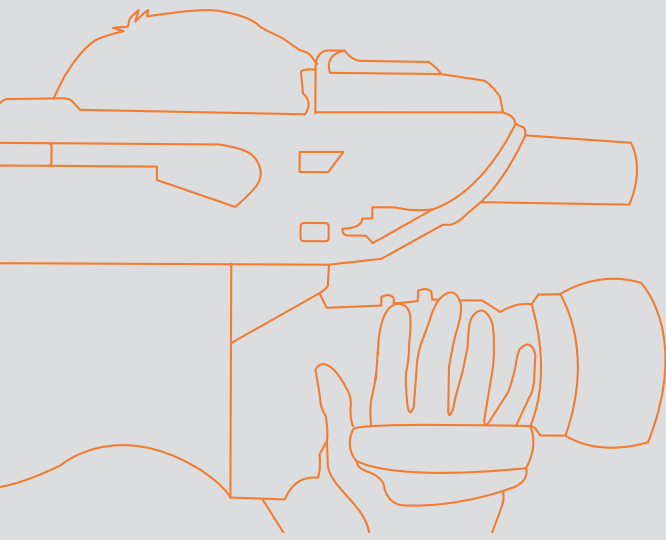
The foundation has remained committed to both education and advocacy on a range of communications policy issues. Our efforts have focused on policymakers, funders, and nonprofits, urging them to protect and strengthen access, diversity, and equity in our media system and helping them appreciate the value of communications to nonprofit expression and efficacy.

Publishing has been our trademark: [policy option papers](#) framing the critical communications and information issues federal policymakers faced in the 90s; trigger videos that galvanized a nonprofit voice to shape communications policy; a [What's Going On series](#) in the mid-90s mapping communications practices and policies in education, low-income communities, Indian Country, health care, and libraries. And we launched a free daily news service, [Communications-related Headlines](#), in late 1996 to keep advocates up-to-date on communications developments.

In 2005, the foundation released the [Citizen's Guide to the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters](#), a hands-on guide for citizens who care about television's role in their lives and want to maximize the public benefits that come from the public's airwaves. The foundation was appointed to the [FCC's Consumer Advisory Committee](#) and has worked collaboratively with its other members to make FCC proceedings responsive to citizen interests and easier to understand and participate in. On the tenth anniversary of our Headlines service, we are developing new resources, like the [Telecommunications Legislation Tracker](#), so that policy advocates around the country have access to affordable intelligence about telecommunications policy debates.

Another Benton tradition is [convening](#) in order to elevate awareness and mobilize action. In 1993, the foundation organized the first national debate on the definition of Universal Service with papers on telephone access and affordability. In 1994, prior to the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, we convened hundreds of nonprofit leaders in a [public interest summit](#) to claim a stake in shaping the new media environment. And in 1996, we convened frontline Internet innovators to share best practices and lessons learned with policymakers as they prepared to implement the historic '96 Act.

Continuing the tradition, in November 2005, the foundation convened a meeting of media reform activists on the research needs for a [media ownership](#) proceeding likely coming in 2006. Benton and Social Science Research Council teamed to provide the resources for some initial research on such topics as the effect of newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership on public affairs programming and the impact of media consolidation on minorities. The foundation also convened a meeting on research topics to inform the debate over modernizing [Universal Service](#) and committed its entire discretionary grants budget to seed a proposal from Penn State University to advance a vision for making broadband as universal as telephone service is today.



## public service media

The foundation's history in this arena has been twofold: educating funders and nonprofits about the potential of new technologies and media to address and influence the issues that motivate those groups, and stimulating innovative uses of the technologies by example. Again publishing—both print and electronic—and convening have been our trademark strategies.

In the early 80s, we produced a [primer in print and video on new technologies helping nonprofits](#) effectively embrace the “information revolution.” Ten years later, the information revolution morphed into a strategic communications imperative for nonprofits, and we commissioned a series of [media guides for nonprofit leaders](#); funders helped us distribute the guides to their grantees and cosponsored workshops around the country to make the lessons of the guides real and local.

In the mid-90s, we incubated several web portals—[Connect for Kids](#), [Debate America](#), [Destination Democracy](#), [Digital Divide Network](#), [Open Studio: the Arts Online](#), and [OneWorld US](#)—as demonstration projects to deliver content more effectively to new audiences and engage them in solutions. In the last five years, some have succeeded beyond our expectations as more than demonstrations and now operate independently, most notably [Connect for Kids](#), [Digital Divide Network](#), and [OneWorldUS](#).

In 2000, we had a vision of “connecting communities” through local communications alliances. Now a community media project we launched in 1996 with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is drawing to a close, after providing the field with profound lessons in local alliances between community groups and media. Over the last ten years, [Sound Partners for Community Health](#) has amplified local discussion and decision-making around health care issues, enabled individuals to access health care services, and helped shape the outcome of health policy debates. But perhaps its greatest impact has been in shaping a new relationship between community and media, a relationship built on trust, respect, and risk-taking.

Recently the foundation has undertaken a [scan of community media practices](#) across media platforms to see what is emerging in the new digital environment. We are researching practices that increase citizen participation in media production, governance, and policy. We are convening innovative practitioners in communities around the country to capture their experiences and lessons. Seeing the role of community media in community development, we are considering a second generation of Sound Partners that will look beyond public broadcasting and beyond health care issues. In these activities, we want to strengthen, sustain, and expand community media and will be alert to the policy implications of the practices and lessons that we uncover.

## testament to partnerships

**Through partnerships between public broadcasters and nonprofit health care organizations, Sound Partners grantees have leveraged local resources to increase their own organizational capacity, reach new audiences, and create new civic networks. Smaller community stations, like WMPG in Portland, ME, have especially benefited from this model, fully integrating the community into the creation of the programming, gathering input from community members about message and scripts, and training them as hosts, engineers, interviewers, and producers. “Sound Partners gave us the capability to go directly to the community for information and gave them the reassurance that they can come to us if there is something they want to share with our community,” wrote one grantee.**

## STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

As of December 31, 2005 (unaudited)

ASSETS	
Cash and investments	\$10,919,237
Grants receivable	778,885
Other receivables and prepaids	337,708

TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS	\$12,035,830
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Furniture, equipment, and leasehold improvements	429,143
Noncurrent assets	146,832

TOTAL ASSETS	\$12,611,805
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TOTAL LIABILITIES	\$307,722
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NET ASSETS	
Board designated (endowment)	11,107,327
Temporarily restricted (program grants)	1,196,756

TOTAL NET ASSETS	12,304,083
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TOTAL LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS	\$12,611,805
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## STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

For the year ending December 31, 2005 (unaudited)

REVENUE	
New grants	\$1,027,830
Other income	20,603
Investment income	827,698

TOTAL REVENUE	\$1,876,131
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EXPENSES	
Program expenses	\$1,378,560
Foundation charitable expenses	190,963
Supporting services	452,861

TOTAL EXPENSES	2,022,384
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CHANGE IN NET ASSETS	\$ (146,253)
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NET ASSETS	
Beginning of year	\$12,450,336
End of year	\$12,304,083



# introducing our new president

Former FCC Commissioner Gloria Tristani will assume the role of president of the Benton Foundation in April 2006. "I look forward to directing the foundation's efforts both to educate people about their stake in communications policy debates—and to advocate for a media environment that ensures communities can produce and have access to diverse and locally responsive media content."

Most recently, Gloria served as the managing director of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ (OC, Inc.), where she advocated for the public interest in the media, including a diversity of ownership and viewpoints, meaningful public interest obligations, and enhanced children's educational television programming. Gloria was the first woman elected to the New Mexico State Corporation Commission (SCC), and is a graduate of Barnard College and the University of New Mexico School of Law. She was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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