

The Case for Public Television Today



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The Case for Public Television Today was an address given before the Conference of Southwest Foundations in San Antonio, Texas, May 9, 1968, by Alan Pifer. Mr. Pifer is President of the Carnegie Corporation.

The Hogg Foundation is happy to reprint this speech in order that wider audiences may read his remarks.



The discussion today is appropriately held in Texas because it was in this state, in Houston, in 1953, that the first educational television station in the country went on the air. This move had been made possible a year earlier by the action of the Federal Communications Commission in setting aside 242 television channels for non-commercial use. And this, in turn, had resulted from the heroic efforts of a tiny band of far-sighted educators and their courageous allies within the F.C.C. who succeeded almost miraculously in creating enough pressure to force the Communications Commission to act.

In the 15 years since 1953, a period of aeons in the fast moving communications world, 159 more ETV stations have come into being, about a third licensed to non-profit community groups, about a third to universities, and the other third to state and local boards of education.

The system has been put together in a rather haphazard fashion with little forethought and planning. In spite of the method, however, a rather impressive base for a new kind of television has emerged. As early as 1952 the Ford Foundation had begun its program of matching grants to ETV stations, designed to stimulate community financial participation. A central programming facility called National Educational Television, but known widely today simply as NET, was then established in 1954. The passage of an act by Congress in 1962 provided federal funds for educational television station facilities. And in 1963 the Ford Foundation inaugurated its annual seven million dollar grants to NET. All in all, the Ford Foundation has contributed \$130 million to the development of educational television, a record for which all of us must be grateful.

NEW CONCEPT

Two years ago a new concept of educational television began to unfold. It started with the Ford Foundation's satellite proposal, which suggested that the revenues gained from satellite broadcasting be assigned to ETV. Following that came the report of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television in January, 1967; the creation the following May of the National Citizens Committee for Public Television; the passage by Congress in October of 1967 of the Public Broadcasting Act; and, lastly, the appointment by the President in March, 1968, of the Directors of the Public Broadcasting Corporation.

We have today, as the result of actions taken by federal, state and local government, by groups of private citizens, and by foundations, a burgeoning non-commercial television system of 159 stations with an annual income of about \$75 million and a weekly audience estimated at 12 to 15 million viewers. Fifteen years ago we had nothing.

GREAT ACHIEVEMENT

This is a remarkable achievement for which we are deeply indebted to just a handful of men and women. Notable as the success has been, however, this is no time for complacency. When compared with commercial television, which today has over 600 stations, an income of over \$2.2 billion dollars, and an audience of 70 million viewers on a single evening, non-commercial television is a stunted, poverty stricken weakling. In order to become a better and more powerful system, non-commercial TV must increase the number of stations in order to reach the entire nation; it must improve and expand its programming; and it must secure large sums of money.

Among the important accomplishments of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, under the chairmanship of Dr. James Killian, was its invention of the term "public television." As the result of that clarification, we now have "instructional TV" for formal instructional broadcasting directly to classrooms and "public TV" for cultural and informational broadcasting to the general public. Hopefully, we have abolished the confusing and meaningless term "educational TV." I shall confine my remarks entirely to public television.

To answer the question, "why does the nation need public TV?" one must necessarily look at its dominant partner, commercial TV. Commercial television is a creature of American business, and its major purpose is to sell the goods and services produced by business. Based on that premise, it has been spectacularly successful.

Commercial television has from time to time been attacked by critics, who have accused its of excessive violence, the manipulation of children, poor taste, and just plain mediocrity. To these criticisms it has always replied, "We give the public what it wants."

And yet, among thoughtful people, the nature of television has aroused profound questions. It is not only a box with tubes and wires, but an instrument of major social consequence. It molds us a great deal more than we mold it. It has changed our homes and our politics and our image of ourselves and of others. It has become a vast artery pumping a message about the nature of life into the veins and capillaries of the nation. And what is that message? In the world created by American television, to be successful is to own things. It is important to be happy, pretty and

clean, and popular with the opposite sex. And all of this will occur if you *buy* certain products—if you buy deodorants, shampoos, and toothpaste, even cars, and cigarettes. What a noble vision of life for a great people to set themselves!

There are, it is true, flashes of insight and moments of greatness. There are moments such as the hours devoted by the networks to the funerals of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King when public interest prevails. There are the nightly news shows supported by a world wide organization and some excellent public affairs programs.

But most of the time the demands of advertisers and stockholders determine what goes over the air. They invest the TV executive with immense power; and this concentration of power in a few men, who must relate most of what they do to sales figures, is one of the things that is disturbing about commercial television. In many ways the power is so great that it serves as a prison, prohibiting experimentation and risk-taking, because the penalty of a wrong guess can mean millions of dollars in lost revenue.

BETTER PROGRAMMING

Under the competition of a vigorous system of public television, the commercial system just might find in *new* public tastes a commercial incentive to devote more time to better programming. Thus commercial television seems to need public television to help free itself from the deadening hand of sales pressure.

Many people do not realize that the airwaves are a basic national resource that belongs absolutely to the people.

Furthermore, the airwaves are a limited resource, especially for television. One TV channel takes as much spectrum space as *all* of commercial radio. The awarding of a television broadcasting license, therefore, is in effect the grant of a public trust, and it carries with it an obligation to serve the public interest. A question can be raised as to whether the bulk of the fare offered today by commercial television represents an adequate discharge of the broadcaster's responsibility to the public. That what is offered is allegedly free is no answer because the viewer pays for it through the cost of TV advertising being passed on to the consumer.

So conditioned have we become by what we get on commercial TV that it is difficult at first to conceive of what public TV could be like. A look at the best of what is already being produced by NET, The Eastern Educational Television Network, and the major ETV stations is a good start. It includes a wide assortment of public affairs programs—from town meetings to nation-wide debates on public issues. It includes a variety of special cultural events—I think here of a recent PBL interview with Ingmar Bergman and a truly remarkable production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Then there are programs for people with special interests, such as French cooking with Julia Child, in-depth analyses of the news, and special sports features.

Unlike commercial TV, to which mass audiences are fundamental, public TV is based on the concept of many audiences with a wide variety of tastes, interests, and intellectual abilities. It is *not*, as has been said of it, just for the long hairs with way out interests. Its appeal is to all types of people—but not all at once. Thus, its audiences will be

measured in figures of a few tens of thousands to occasionally a few million. These may seem piddling figures compared with the 30 million who watch "The Flying Nun" at one time, but they are enormous when compared with the numbers of people who are able to get to a live production of top-flight drama or a concert by a famed artist. Indeed, it has been said that more people saw "Hamlet" the single evening it appeared on television than had seen it on the stage in all the centuries since it was written.

Public TV will, therefore, never have the mass audiences *at a given hour* which the mass appeal entertainment fare of commercial TV can draw. But *over a period of time*, huge audiences will watch it and will enjoy it and profit from it. After all, commercial television has had 20 years and billions of dollars with which to build an audience. With a fair chance, public television can build a large audience which appreciates its quality and variety, its absence of irritating commercial intrusions, and its flexible time schedules. Nevertheless, the same people who make up these audiences will also on other occasions watch commercial TV. The two media are not mutually exclusive and should not be.

A FORCE FOR DEMOCRACY

What else can public television do that commercial television cannot? It can, by addressing itself to the major problems of the day, be a real force for the maintenance of a democratic society in this nation.

The United States is plunging into a racial crisis of ever more severe dimensions. It has become increasingly obvious

that black and white do not know or understand each other. Hatred is growing on both sides. The Republic is in its most serious danger since the Civil War, and the situation can only get worse unless a mighty effort is made. Television can be central to this effort, because it can reach into every home and every heart.

Most obviously, public television can devote as many hours as necessary to help the white man learn about the Negro's history, his heritage, and about what Harry Belafonte terms "the soul and integrity of the black community." Commercial television will be hard pressed to do this because the time and resources required will not reap sales rewards.

Secondly, public television can adopt a deliberate policy of including the Negro in its regular programming. This move will accomplish two purposes. It will show the black man as a whole human being in normal, everyday situations—not just as a comic character, a rioter, or a social problem. Furthermore, in the course of such coverage, some of the frustrations and indignities of his everyday life will inevitably be exposed, so that any subsequent eruptions can be better understood against this background. In addition to providing the white community with a basis for a deeper understanding, the mere inclusion of the Negro on what has been heretofore an almost exclusively white medium will reduce his sense of isolation and enhance his own sense of dignity in ways I think would be hard to overestimate.

In similar fashion, public television can examine other trouble spots—for example, the crisis on our college and university campuses, the struggle for control of our big city schools, the deep division of opinion about Vietnam, to

name just a few topics which need the sustained in-depth treatment public TV can provide.

Another important role for public television in the safeguarding of democracy is, of course, to serve as a forum for dissent and the expression of a wide range of opinion which is seldom if ever aired on commercial television. PTV can actively seek out the views of labor, ethnic minorities, farmers, minority political groups, artists, students—and other groups not being heard. Collectively these groups probably make up a majority of the American people, and yet in commercial TV they get on the air only to the extent of what someone else chooses to say *about* them.

A final way in which public TV could help us in our search for an ever-more-meaningful society is to speak out forthrightly in questioning our national values and our standards of aesthetic taste. Some people say values cannot be dealt with on television because they are difficult to define. To shun debate on the question of who we are and what we should be is simply to abdicate in TV programming a responsibility which has always been accepted by other art forms.

Much of the potential of public television was already there in its predecessor, educational television. But with far more generous funding, a new clan, and the new talent which these can attract, non-commercial television in the second fifteen years of its life can and must make what it has achieved to date seem only a primitive prototype model. At the end of the second decade and a half we should have such a powerful system of public television that, as in many other countries, we have a genuinely dual system of broadcasting, half commercial and half public.

SUPPORT REQUIRED

If we are agreed, then, that the nation needs a strong system of public television, how should this be organized and supported? These were the questions the Carnegie Commission studied thoroughly and diligently during the year of its work. What Dr. Killian and his colleagues proposed was the establishment of a mixed public/private, non-commercial system composed by 1980 of 380 stations and having annual revenues then of \$270 million.

In addition, they envisaged the creation of a new federally-chartered, nonprofit, nongovernmental agency known as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting which would be empowered to receive and disburse public and private funds in order to improve and extend public television programming and carry out other functions.

According to Carnegie Commission estimates, of the \$270 million required by 1980 for annual support of this system, \$104 million would be for the Corporation to spend on programming and would come from federal sources, \$91 million would be for station facilities and be in the form of Health, Education, and Welfare grants, and \$75 million would be from state and local governments and private sources for support of local stations and state networks. Among the 380 stations there would be varying levels of size and importance and of types of function.

There have been a number of proposals for financing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The Carnegie Commission suggested an excise tax on the sale of television sets. The Ford Foundation proposed that the income generated by commercial use of broadcast satellites be earmarked for public television. Other responsible alternatives that have been put forward are a tax on the gross revenues of com-

mercial broadcasters and Congressional appropriations provided in such a way as to insulate the Corporation from executive or legislative branch interference.

There are pros and cons to each of these methods, and they will have to be carefully studied. What everyone seems agreed on, however, is that there should be a mixed system of federal, state, and private funding; that the money for facilities can safely continue to come via the normal appropriations process through Health, Education, and Welfare; and that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting with its sensitive task of making grants for program production should get its federal funds with maximum insulation from possible interference. This final point was one that was stressed heavily by the Carnegie Commission.

DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM

Essential to the Carnegie Commission plan was the principle of a decentralized system built on local station autonomy. The Commission was clearly opposed to the development of a strongly centralized system, simply a kind of non-commercial fourth network. It believed that the choice of what goes on the air must *always* be a local decision and furthermore that there must be multiple program production centers, including the local stations themselves. The heart of the system therefore would not be the Corporation for Public Broadcasting but the local stations.

While not favoring the network concept, the Commission members did, nonetheless, believe that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting should have interconnection facilities for the distribution of programs and for those spe-

cial occasions when live simultaneous transmission would be appropriate.

A giant step was taken toward realization of this extensive proposal in the passage by Congress of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 and subsequent establishment early this year of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In all essential ways the legislation proved to be what Dr. Killian and his colleagues had proposed in their report. There are some deficiencies in the Act, but also one signal improvement in that Congress had the wisdom to include educational radio in the plan.

CARNEGIE SUPPORT

We at Carnegie Corporation have pledged a million dollars of our limited funds to the support of the new Corporation for Public Broadcasting as evidence of our faith in the new venture. An equal sum has been pledged by CBS and lesser amounts by two unions. All of these gifts symbolize the fact that despite the heavy preponderance of public funds it must necessarily have, the Public Broadcasting Corporation is a private institution and its creation the fruit of a unique public/private partnership.

As we look into the future, wondering whether public television—this new undertaking in American life—will prosper, we are faced not with pros and cons but with known and unknown quantities. We know that, because of the severe shortcomings of the commercial system of television, the nation needs the alternative of a vigorous non-commercial system, and we know that quite a few Americans now understand this. We know too that, considering

the small resources that have been available for it, a good start has been made in our present system of public TV. There is much to build on. We are not starting from scratch.

We know also that a sound framework for the future has been laid down in the Educational Television Facilities and Public Broadcasting Acts. Finally, we know there are able citizens all over the country who are prepared to work for their local stations and to work for the national system of public TV.

But there are some things we do not know about the future, and they are important unknowns.

IMPORTANT UNKNOWNNS

First, we do not know whether adequate public funding can be found for public TV on the scale envisaged by the Carnegie Commission—and necessarily, in time, on an even larger scale. The government's failure to provide promised funds in the current fiscal year, as authorized in the basic legislation, has slowed progress.

But beyond this first hurdle, there will always be the longer range question of whether enough of the American people will believe strongly enough in public TV to give it the substantial financial support it will require, eventually perhaps as much as \$300 million to \$400 million a year. The greater share of this sum must inevitably come from federal government sources, but there must also be private money in the enterprise to help insure its independence. The funds that will be required are less than one percent of what the nation is currently spending in Vietnam, about 6 per cent of what it is spending in the space race, and less

than one fifth of what business spends annually on television advertising. There is no doubt that this rich nation can afford it. But will we give it the necessary priority?

Secondly, we do not know whether we are mature enough as a people to allow a largely government-financed public television system the independence and freedom from both executive and legislative branch interference it must have if it is to thrive. Can we really put dissent on the air with Uncle Sam's dollars? The issue will come into focus most clearly in regard to the financing of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Feeling strongly that the Corporation's independence was fundamental to its entire plan, the Carnegie Commission recommended that it be freed from the annual appropriations process and receive its funds through a dedicated tax paid into a special treasury trust fund. In view of the considerable controversy which would surround any decision as to the source of such a tax, whether commercial TV profits, or other, the Administration decided to postpone that issue to a future date and meanwhile go the appropriations route. Thus, the issue remains unsolved and will be a rough one when it is faced.

The third unknown is whether the men and women who man the public television system, if given the sort of financial support discussed (both as to amount and insulation from political interference), will then show that they really can put something new and different on our TV sets—something entertaining, informative, stirring, and ennobling. Will they be able to free themselves of the trite conventions of so much of TV as we have known it, and let emerge the truly wonderful potential of this telecommunications medium?

The fourth unknown is whether the decentralized, local-autonomy system of public TV which the Carnegie Commission envisaged and which has now been enshrined in the Public Broadcasting Act will in fact work. Or will the trend inescapably be toward the development of a centralized network—like the present three networks, only non-commercial? Instinctively, because of their history and the myths that accompany it, Americans warm to the idea of local choice and local initiative. This is the way we want things to be. But in fact we have become a society characterized by a high degree of centralization in almost every aspect of our national life. In communications, the arts, and entertainment especially, there is a heavy concentration of talent in a few centers.

The final unknown is perhaps the greatest question mark of all and affects commercial as well as non-commercial TV. This is the impact of present and future technological innovations on the American family's information/entertainment needs. As FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson has pointed out, how these needs are met, provided they are met economically and efficiently, is quite immaterial to the recipient. A picture doesn't have to be broadcast over the airways. It can come onto the screen by cable or in a disc which the viewer inserts in his TV set.

Thus, we are not dealing with a static situation. Technological innovations already with us in various stages of development could change the system greatly. There is *UHF*, which is rapidly coming into its own and is providing many more choices to the viewer. There is *cable television*, or *CATV*, which will soon increase the viewer's options by bringing a total of 20 channels into the home.

There is the *synchronous communications satellite* which from its "stationary" position 22,000 miles over the equator can overlook a third of the globe and which, in combination with cable systems, adds enormous flexibility to broadcasting. There are the recent developments in *home video tape recording and playing equipment* through which a TV set becomes a kind of visual phonograph. Finally, there is the technologically possible, though not yet developed, combination of *cable-video tape library-computer retrieval technologies* through which at the pressing of a button the viewer will be able to select from a depository hundreds of miles away *what* he wants to see on his screen *when* he wants to see it.

PUBLIC TELEVISION NEEDED

Let us, however, not be bemused by these technologies and have their imminence be used as an excuse for inaction now. We need public television today to develop resources of creative talent for tomorrow. Technology, great as its impact will be, will not in itself determine the calibre of what comes into the home for TV screening. At some point program material will still have to be created and prepared by men and women trained for the job. And this material can be either meritorious or meretricious, intellectually vigorous or intellectually vacuous, morally constructive or morally destructive, according to what the people of this nation want it to be. What comes into the living room is of vital consequence to you and to me, to your children and to mine, and to the future of this society. In public television we have a chance to reassume a measure of control over a

powerful instrument. Let us not miss that chance.

In closing I would like to quote the final paragraph of the Carnegie Commission Report. It said:

"... what we recommend is freedom. We seek freedom from the constraints, however necessary in their context, of commercial television. We seek for educational television freedom from the pressures of inadequate funds. We seek for the artist, the technician, the journalist, the scholar, and the public servant freedom to create, freedom to innovate, freedom to be heard in this most far-reaching medium. We seek for the citizen freedom to view, to see programs, that the present system, by its incompleteness, denies him.

Because this freedom is its principal burden, we submit our report with confidence: to rally the American people in the name of freedom is to ask no more of them than they have always been willing to provide."

