

Faculty Presentations

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## Public Media at 50: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Public Broadcasting Act

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Thank you Al. First, I want to recognize Dean Stavitsky for his leadership in creating this symposium, which arose out of a conversation we had about a year ago at the Radio Preservation Task Force meetings in Washington. I also want to thank Al and everyone at the UNR for their help and support in making this event possible. This is a *beautiful* campus and a *beautiful* city, and it's even been a *beautiful* day, and you've made us all feel very welcome here.

I have to say that it may be some sort of a minor miracle that I'm even *here* tonight on this panel at all. Al knows, and there may be one or two other people in the audience as well who know, that my relationship with public broadcasting might best be described as *complicated* or even quixotic.

Decades ago, I came to public broadcasting as an outsider. In a previous life, I was the manager of a small community radio station in a secondary market outside of Seattle. At the time, that market was served by *three* big NPR stations with three big signals. In contrast, our station was struggling to find a niche, and to capture an audience we could serve best. And we had *no* resources. When I was hired, the station was running a \$10,000 deficit on \$20,000 budget. We had *no* professional staff, *no* modern studios, and *no* support system. And *I could not believe* that these three big NPR stations were *all* receiving these big grants from CPB, while our station wasn't eligible for even *one* CPB program. It simply made no sense to me. So, I and some other people set out to change that.

Over a couple of a decades, we lobbied hard for the creation of new programs at CPB that helped us to reach more diverse audiences with LOCAL programs that

reached the unserved citizens of in our communities. And, through services such as Radio Bilingue and National Native News, we succeeded in creating real change. I'm grateful to CPB for that opportunity, and especially to the late Rick Madden, who some of you may remember. Rick was one of several allies at CPB, and he was always gracious as he worked with those of us in community radio to see those programs established and instituted - even though we may not have been quite so gracious, or appropriately dressed.

I've been fortunate to be part of the arc of our public broadcasting system in one way or another from its inception, right up to this moment, and as a scholar I've *come to understand* that America's commitment to public service media has depended on the capacity to leverage the power of change at key moments. The first of those moments, of course, was the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967. In our symposium in the journal, I observed how, at that moment, CPB chose to limit the scope of the public broadcasting system to the larger, more established licensees and services that provided leadership in the educational broadcasting environment that emerged during the postwar years. Those choices were both reasonable and practical, but even to the present day they circumscribe the nature and habitat of our public media system, particularly in regard to our capacity to serve the interests of *localism and diversity*.

In her editorial in the most recent issue of *Current*, Ellen Goodman at Rutgers observes that there have been other key moments in the history of American public broadcasting when change has occurred. President Nixon's attempt to defund CPB, and the subsequent provisions providing CPB's extraordinary forward

funding, was such a moment. The decision to pursue satellite interconnection and distribution was another. I like to think that our efforts to develop step-up and rural service programs for public radio was another. More recently, Goodman points to efforts since the 2008 recession to position public broadcasting's commitment to quality and integrity, and to CPB's commitment to the "Three Ds" - Dialogue, Digital, and Diversity.

Goodman also observes that when these moments have come, the responses to change have been incremental, but not transformative. And so I think it's appropriate to take *this* moment to assess where we are, and the challenges that face not only CPB and public media, but the American nation and *maybe* even all of human culture going forward.

At *this* moment, faith in institutions of all kinds is flagging, not just in the US, but around the world. We have reached that point in human culture, described decades ago by Michel Foucault, when we understand that *all* communication is to one degree or another *propaganda*. When we communicate, we persuade. We don't even need language to do it. The image,, the gesture,, the tone – every element of media content *is* persuasive. No form of communication can escape this *doom*. No form of communication is *objective*. Unfortunately, for millions of people, the response has been to take *the blue pill* - to *recede* behind the curtain of uncritical and unquestioning belief in simple and strong doctrines and leaders - even when those doctrines and leaders may be misinformed or misguided. It seems that, in the age of social media, this is the *easy* path.

What's needed at this moment are *transformative* initiatives to cultivate awareness of the nature and effects of communication: To help audiences separate fact from opinion,, *truth* from *falsity*,, and *good* from *evil*. And I'm here to advocate that this sort of awareness-building is can *only* be accomplished through public, and I will say specifically, through *noncommercial* media BECAUSE the existential purposes of commercial media are *inherently* propagandistic. Commercial media are intent on selling us commodities – shampoo, automobiles, guns, drugs, health care, funeral plans, enlightenment, vacations to Disney World or outer space - and yes, even *ourselves*, as Facebook and Snapchat and Instagram have demonstrated with their overwhelmingly successful business models. **It doesn't matter.** In the realm of commerce, as Dallas Smythe observed, *all* content is commodity: The existential purpose of commercial media is to build the wealth of its owners, engaging audiences only as consumers, or even commodities themselves. Just yesterday, FCC Chairman Pai announced his intention to strip away the barriers against cross-ownership of newspapers and broadcasts stations in the same market. The rules Pai intends to repeal date back to the founding moments of the FCC, when the fledgling enterprise of commercial radio sought protection from the dominant and even terrifying power of the big city newspapers. Of course, today it's the *newspapers* that are looking to the electronic media companies for new capital and new opportunities. I suppose at this moment, this makes sense. This is just good capitalism.

Now, the tendency of capitalism is *always* to monopoly – that's capitalism at its most efficient and most successful. But monopoly in communication can only lead to propaganda, just as monopoly in ownership can only lead to *monarchy*.

And these tendencies conflict directly with the fundamental principles and values of the democratic republic established by the *founders*. To preserve and promote democracy, there *has* to be some safe space, some *safe haven*, where the interests of private citizens come first. In the realm of communication, those havens are our *noncommercial, public service* media.

Now is the moment for this message. Just a few weeks ago, I met an enterprising young graduate student from the University of Oregon, Matthew Schroder, whose master's thesis analyzed the discourse used over the years to articulate the mission and goals of American public media. What he found is that we really haven't done a very good job. Instead of pointing a laser focus on our core mission and values, we've instead relied too often on appeals that separate our media from our broader culture, and that isolate the members of our audiences from one another. He calls these discourse "otherizing," and his point is that "otherizing" doesn't really get at the singular and transformative purposes of what we do.

So perhaps this is that moment, when we turn to the original language of the Public Broadcasting Act, and return to the themes that gave birth to the system. **We are noncommercial. We are nonprofit. We are educational. We are here, first and always, to provide service to citizens. This is what we do.** Thank you.