

Remarks for delivery DLF Conference

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When I began to organize this presentation, I had a mental flashback to about 1964, when I was an undergraduate at Northwestern University near Chicago. As a Communications major, I was required to take a course called “History of Broadcasting.” .

The “history” consisted then of only radio and television. The widespread growth of radio stations dated from the early 1920’s. We also studied regulation by the federal government, which began with the allocation of radio frequencies in 1927. Another landmark piece of legislation came along a few years later that specified the rights and responsibilities of a broadcaster.

Among these was the requirement that a broadcaster held a license in the “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” This mandate was actually taken seriously by almost all radio station owners at the time. They were businessmen out to make profits with the rare gift of a slice of radio spectrum belonging to the public.

For years this meant that radio stations made a serious effort to address the needs of their local communities by providing public service programming, news coverage, cultural and religious programs, and critical support in times of natural disaster.

There was really no such animal as “public radio” prior to the 1970’s. A few noncommercial stations came along early on. Almost all of these belonged to large “land grant” universities, mainly in the Midwest and West. They were called “educational radio” and they were supervised by academic administrators who kept budgets small, and the focus on university activities and outreach to rural communities.

When television arrived, a few of these same universities got licenses for stations, and programmed them with mostly instructional offerings.

In my little historical narrative we now find ourselves at roughly the time when I was enrolled in the course on broadcasting’s history. As I was preparing this, the realization dawned on me was **that there has now been MORE history of broadcasting SINCE I took the course than there was before that time.**

And in my post-collegiate period there has been far more technological, informational and cultural change than anyone could possibly have imagined. The intervening years have seen the introduction and growth of cable and satellite distribution for TV and radio, conversion to digital television, personal portable audio playback devices, video recording in the home, DVDs, cellular phones and personal data communications, the development of the internet and the worldwide explosive growth of broadband availability for audio and video streaming (among many other things) and the birth and rapid growth in the United States of what came to be called “public broadcasting.”

But, back when I took that course, it was simply expected that a broadcaster would make handsome profits, and, because American licenses could be bought and sold with rubber stamp government approval, you could sell a successful station and the license and make even more money.

The unhindered pursuit of greater financial returns eventually began to erode the community service model. In particular, this meant that the public service programs (which drew very small audiences) were largely eliminated, programming for children became almost entirely a vehicle for selling them merchandise, and local news evolved into a sort of daily bulletin board for reports of crime, disaster, and local sports. Many radio stations dropped expensive news coverage in favor of more music as the audience for news gravitated to TV. US commercial radio now offers mainly weather and traffic reports interspersed in the music or talk programming.

Through the 1960's, the deteriorating situation in commercial broadcasting coincided with a period of great social progress (as well as the calamity of the Vietnam War). At home the civil rights movement and an increasingly well educated electorate had demanded social and political changes which were reflected in legislation such as medical care for senior citizens, federal aid to education, voting rights for minorities, and even the creation of a true "system" of public broadcasting for the nation to provide what commercial broadcasters couldn't.

Once this system was created, it soon developed into an uneasy alliance between lawmakers and the broadcasters to keep it going. There are of

course positive and negative outcomes from this political fact of life. It is the negative that concerns us most.

Congress in 1967 created and funded the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to essentially receive federal government funds and equitably distribute them to public stations and program producers.

Later, Congress enacted legislation to provide more insulation from political interference in programming. The “insulation” came in two primary forms—first, the establishment of a CPB board of directors composed of nine members, chosen by the President and confirmed by the Senate for six-year terms. No more than five members of the same political party may serve on the board at any given time.

The second political buffer has to do with federal funding. An advance appropriation is one made to become available one fiscal year or more beyond the fiscal year for which the appropriation act is passed. For more than 30 years, decisions on the amount of federal support for public broadcasting have been made two years ahead of the fiscal year in which the funding is allocated. In other words, Congress approves the FY 2012 funding level for CPB during the FY 2010 appropriations process.

What this provides is a protection against immediate threats to program funding. Controversial subject matter is protected because the funding is safe in the short term from rash acts or reactions by politicians.

When ever a political process exists which attempts to guarantee fairness and impartiality, you can be certain politicians and lobbyists of every stripe

can almost always find ways to subvert the process. Federal funding for public broadcasting has been no exception, and some of the examples of tampering have been quite blatant.

After the legislation that largely created the public system went into effect, the number of stations and their cumulative audience steadily multiplied. What had once been a quiet backwater of American broadcasting was within a few years an attractive and sometimes controversial target.

When NPR began broadcasting in 1971 there were about 85 public stations available to broadcast the programs. Most of these had been “educational radio.” The vast majority of these stations were in the FM band, which was not then widely available in automobiles. Forty years later that number has reached 900 and effectively these stations cover the entire nation.

By the mid- 1970’s, the early years for public broadcasting journalism, the Nixon White House believed it sensed a growing liberal influence in public broadcasting, and feared yet another network “biting at the troubled Nixon’s ankles.” The fact that it existed largely on federal funds made it an easier target than the powerful commercial networks. They tried to “sequester” funds from public broadcasting. This is a means for the executive branch to hold back the actual spending of money already appropriated.

Their efforts failed, but there were similar attempts to come from future administrations and from Congress itself. Generally, Democratic administrations, like Jimmy Carter’s and Bill Clinton’s were more sympathetic to public broadcasting. The money flowed from the treasury

and public broadcasters gratefully soaked up increasing amounts of it. In the past 20 years, federal funds for all of public broadcasting have grown by almost 100 million dollars to \$445 million. But in the current political climate, this number is certain to drop significantly. But, note that today in the budget for the average NPR station, federal funds makes up on average only 10 to 15% of all revenue.

In the mid-90's, with Republicans, back in power in the Congress, conservative Republicans launched an out-in-the open effort to drastically cut federal money for public broadcasters. They viewed it as federal underwriting of liberal social and political ideals that were anathema to their views. Public broadcasting was a tempting target offering a chance to kill off offending liberal viewpoints in the name of cutting federal spending.

But the broadcasters, with the help of friendly Democratic lawmakers, rallied public support, and as the actual vote drew near, many thousands of furious public broadcast listeners and viewers flooded Congress with so many protests that the telephone system in the Capitol was overwhelmed and crashed. This served as testimony to the political power that public broadcasters could wield in their own defense. The effort was successful and the threat to funding receded, for a while.

But all threats do not come via funding.

A decade ago, the administration of George W. Bush launched a widespread campaign to insert stalwart Republican conservatives into as many administrative posts as possible throughout the government. Among the

many targets, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was quite attractive and while more high-profile issues distracted the media, they managed to gain effective control of the board and installed an aggressive political operative as Chairman. Using his powers over CPB funding, he went after programming he deemed “liberal and biased,” and manipulated private funders to create conservative-oriented public TV programs. None of the shows he created found an appreciable audience.

The Chairman’s efforts began to attract Congressional and public scrutiny and finally an investigation by CPB’s inspector general in 2005. The report found a multitude of abuses and illegalities, and he was forced to resign under threat of legal prosecution.

When Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives two years ago, the urge to punish public broadcasting, especially the dominant news source--NPR, emerged again with a vengeance.

The NPR audience had grown significantly in a decade since the last attack, and it did not matter to conservatives that it was frequently rated as one of the most reliable news sources in the country. The public radio audience of almost 30 million listeners was and is far above average in education, income and civic involvement. They are far more likely to vote, and they are often influential in civic affairs.

They are the news audience you might expect after a decade of declining newspaper reporting, fragmentation of the television news audience, and an almost total absence of commercial radio journalism.

Two quick examples: the nightly half hour television newscasts on the three major networks were for decades the standard bearers of American broadcast journalism. Their audiences from the 1960's onward dwarfed other news media, and a broad cross section of the nation tuned in every weeknight. For decades, the nightly news was an important part of the informed citizen's daily news diet. As you can see, in spite of all efforts, the audience has shrunk from over 50 million in 1980 to just over 20 million today. It is still shrinking, as is the readership of newspapers.

The newspaper business in the US is in very serious trouble. We actually can hand the internet a nice share of the blame here. For more than a century, classified advertising was a solid business for newspapers and it helped provide the expenses of newsgathering as well as decent profits. In the past several years internet sites, such as Craigslist, with free illustrated listings, have effectively stolen this business, and the decline of department store advertising, as that segment of retailing diminishes, have meant devastating losses of ad revenue. And in difficult economic times, many readers cancel subscriptions.

The loss of readers seems to have stabilized recently at about 4 or 5% per year.

Many large city daily papers have folded, and reporters and editors have felt a disproportionate share of the pain. While newspaper employment in general has fallen by 11% since 2007, newsroom staffs have been cut by 22%-- that is more than 11 thousand journalists.

I cite these grim figures to illustrate the setting where public radio journalism finds itself today. With growing audiences and fairly diverse, reasonably stable sources of income, and a strong move into digital media output, NPR and public radio stations are in relatively good shape. The quality news and information programs are capturing and holding audiences, which in turn financially support the member stations. And as these audiences (and their prime demographics) grow, it becomes easier for stations and NPR to recruit advertisers for funding credit “sponsorship.” These are rigidly-controlled announcements of minimal length (usually 15 to 20 seconds) with very brief messages from station underwriters. I can tell you more about these later if you are curious.

But that growth is also part of the problem when it comes to politics. If NPR and public radio were in declines like the ones I just mentioned, there would be little need for conservative Republicans to continue efforts to cut off the federal funding that now provides about 10 to 15% of the money for public radio stations and almost nothing directly for NPR.

Efforts to denigrate NPR’s objectivity have largely failed as well-educated audiences of every political stripe prefer to judge for themselves rather than be guided by critics. Although the figures vary slightly from year to year, the public radio audience is now over 30 million weekly, roughly 12% of the total average American radio audience in any given time period. A remarkable 68% of the NPR audience has a four year college degree or greater.

And here's the oddest part of all this (in my opinion):

Although it is rarely spoken aloud, there is a belief by some observers that right-wing critics of NPR, largely in the House of Representatives, want to shut off federal money **because NPR is successful**, and that runs completely counter to their most closely-held beliefs. **Because it is successful and nonprofit, non-governmental** it blatantly contradicts the idea that only the private sector—profit-making enterprises—can possibly do anything effectively. In their dogma anything nonprofit with any amount of government money in it must **by its very nature** be wasteful, useless, and ineffective.

If they're successful, shutting off federal money will cause some difficulties, certainly, but it won't silence NPR or any other public radio news and information producer.

Finally, I'd like to offer one more example of the intersection of politics and public radio journalism.

Politics in the US is marked by a large number of interest groups, either business, religious, educational, lifestyle, etc. These organizations use their membership and the money they raise from supporters to influence public opinion and by extension, public officials who make policy and laws.

In the late 1990's a well-funded group of individuals strongly supportive of Israel's Likud Party began to emerge as a focal point for this view of Middle East Politics. It is in their interest to keep the public, especially Jewish

Americans, and friendly lawmakers solidly supportive of Israel's actions and policies.

This Boston-based group is called the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (called CAMERA). It takes it upon itself to monitor hundreds of news sources and object to every single report or article critical of the Israeli government or any reporting it views as positive concerning the Palestinians. In the years since the organization's founding it has added as members many Evangelical Christians, who are deeply concerned with the welfare of the state of Israel for their own religious reasons. The organization claims 65,000 members.

CAMERA believes that any negative media coverage of Israel could undermine support for Israel in the American Jewish community, which provides millions in contributions each year for Israeli organizations, as well as US government military support.

When a CAMERA disagrees with a news report, it issues a denial and/or a rebuttal, publicizes the alleged transgression to its membership and sympathetic media. And then it often looks for ways to discredit or otherwise harm news organizations it feels are consistently not seeing their point of view.

As a global news organization with a bureau in Jerusalem and a sizeable audience of well-educated, high status Americans, NPR merits their close scrutiny. Because American Jews are in the upper tiers of education and earning, above average in their contributions to charities, as well as more

interested in political and international issues, they constitute a disproportionately larger percentage of NPR's audience than the general population. In other words, NPR news programs have their attention and their interest on a daily basis.

In this case, after taking issue with NPR's coverage repeatedly, a few years ago, CAMERA asked its supporters to stop contributing to NPR stations.

NPR and its stations are more vulnerable at the level of individual contributors. NPR gets 34% of its income from member station program fees—most of that to pay for the news programming.

Crucially, NPR member stations get about the same percentage directly from their contributors.

It's unclear how much actual financial damage CAMERA's campaign caused, but the threats alone were unsettling to many station managers.

In response, NPR instituted a number of measures designed to help clarify and enhance Middle East coverage. Most visibly, NPR began to publish transcripts of its Mideast coverage on its website. Previously, all transcripts had to be purchased. In this way listeners could see what actually was said and by whom. Inaccurate word of mouth descriptions or misrepresentations of the reports diminished markedly.

NPR's foreign editors took extra precautions with reports from the region, resulting in generally improved coverage. And in 2003, NPR hired a highly-

regarded independent editor to review all the coverage for fairness, accuracy and breadth of coverage. His reports are issued quarterly and published on NPR's website. His agreement with NPR does not allow NPR to make any changes to his assessments.

The CAMERA campaign put a chill on station managers and it serves as an example to other groups of what can be done to intimidate a news organization that relies so heavily on its listeners for financial support.

But the predominant effect is a positive one: The direct listener contribution component of its funding has by its very nature generated an extra measure of loyalty and a personal connection with listeners that other news organizations lack. When web components were added, they drew a strong response and helped to boost listenership through podcasts, streaming and listening on demand.

Over the years, both objective experience and audience research have demonstrated that NPR's audience is intensely loyal, very satisfied with the quality of the journalism, and although at times critical, still staying tuned day after day. For them, no other news source can replace it, and they feel a unique personal investment in keeping it strong. The audience has discovered true value in what NPR programming and all of public radio offers.

I believe in the end it has most importantly been the audience that has recognized the inherent value of the journalism and understands the need for their support.

Because of that, at this moment, the future in the digital media era looks very promising indeed.

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*The views expressed in this document are my own, and not necessarily those of NPR, CPB or any other organization.*