

SELLING OUT PUBLIC RADIO

The following is a letter to Richard W. Carlson, President and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting by Ralph M. Jennings, General Manager of NPR station WFUV-FM in New York City:

I am writing to express my utter dismay over the process that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting has set in motion to handle public radio established under your so-called "Common Sense for the Future." My concern runs beyond the idea that in New York State alone, 5 of 17 stations (29%) are to be eliminated from public funding — WFUV, Fordham University and WNYE, Board of Education (New York City), WAER, Syracuse University, WRVO, State University at Oswego, and WCFE, Plattsburgh. I am truly shocked that the concept of the public interest, convenience and necessity appears to have given way to a Darwinian struggle for individual survival.

All stations in the system have been asked to appeal to their customer base (listeners and underwriters) to fight for continued federal support. Stations have been asked to use their good will with Senators and Representatives to lobby for continued funding. It is more than a little disquieting to discover that a hastily assembled tribunal in Washington is now going to decide which stations and listeners will benefit from the proceeds of this joint effort. The lessons learned and the political messages generated by the stations that are "disseminated" may just hasten the demise of the public broadcasting system.

At the heart of the CPB plan developed by Tom Thomas and Terry Clifford of the Station Resource Group* is the elimination of funding for 80 (about 24%) of the stations now supported by CPB grants, apparently beginning in 1998. These stations are to be dropped, for the most part, on the basis of audience ratings. The artfully drawn demarcation points would appear to protect most, if not all, SRG-represented stations, with additional safe harbors created for the most politically sensitive services, such as stations run by now legally protected minorities, and those serving rural areas. Some multiple station licensees — many SRG participants — would be allowed to aggregate their ratings to maintain their funding status.

This plan, if implemented, would insulate from economic reality the very largest, mainstream public radio stations, by killing support for many stations that still try to serve non-protected ethnic and cultural minorities. The SRG/CPB plan would allow these big stations to feed on the spoils of a grant pool in which fewer stations participate. Even with reduced federal appropriations, they might retain or enhance their funding levels. They might even benefit by taking over abandoned frequencies for translators or from the proceeds from the sale of spectrum left by failed stations.

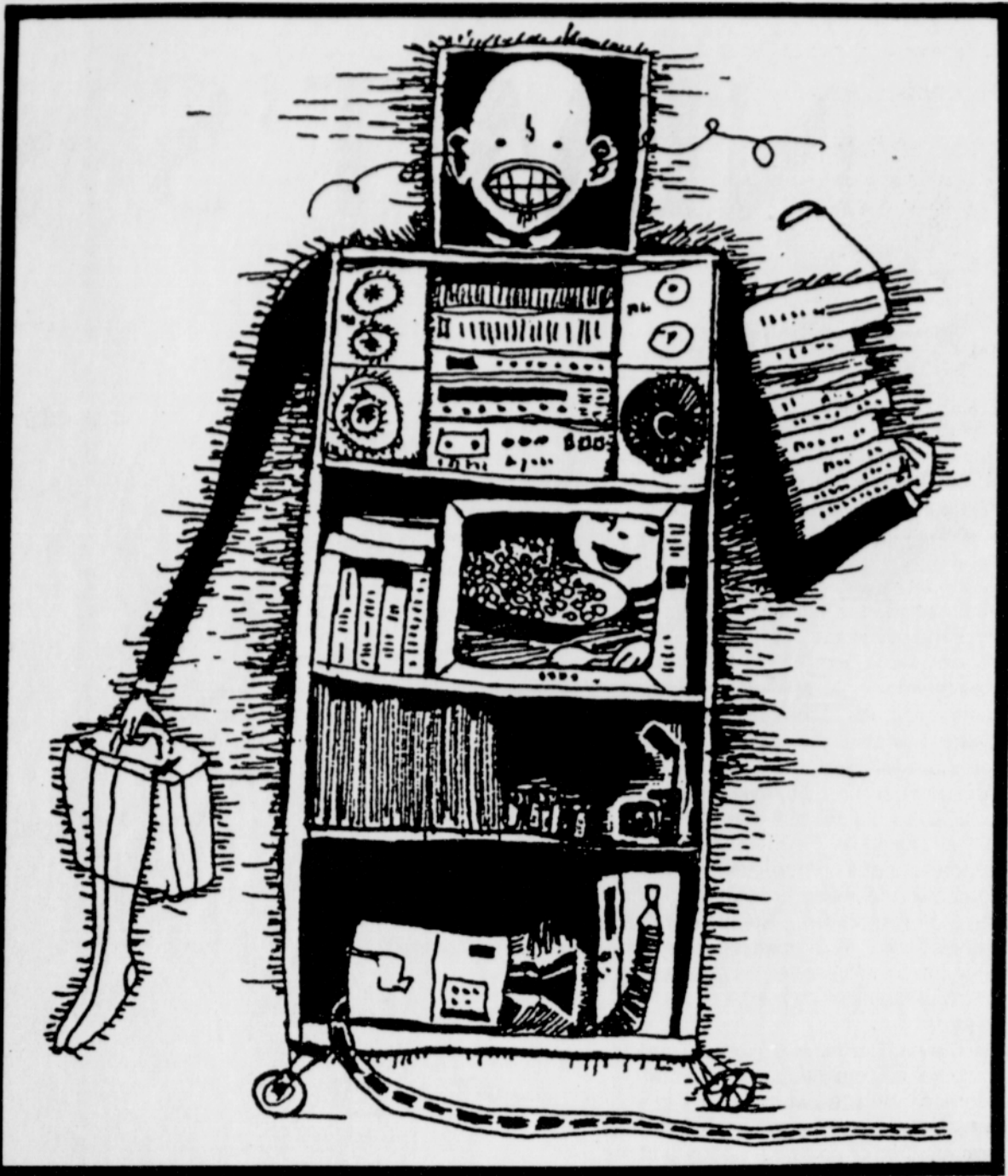
The SRG/CPB plan would encourage surviving stations to reduce diversity in their program schedules and maximize audiences at all times to insure the ratings required for continued federal support. Culturally diverse programming would be made an economic liability. Gone would be encouragement to provide for local self-expression and diversity of viewpoints. If, as Congress appears to intend, government moves back to the states and localities, and greater media concentration is devolved, public broadcasting will have lost its ability to insure a diversity of voices to foster the democratic process.

It is unlikely that stations contemplating loss of funding will remain quiescent. The day occasioned by the unfortunate split between CPB policymakers and other national organizations is likely to be joined by protests from the threatened stations fighting for their survival. In their wildest dreams, public broadcasting's Congressional detractors could not have set into motion a more divisive scenario.

What began essentially as an ideological dispute over the character of public broadcasting has metamorphosed into a draconian struggle over who will continue to exist. It is reminiscent of the struggle for spectrum with commercial broadcasters which drove most noncommercial broadcasters from the air in the late 1920s. Except here we have an eternal struggle led by well placed self-serving insiders seeking to gain advantage in a time of extreme peril.

What is needed is strong leadership refocusing our debate on the essentials of a diverse and culturally rich public broadcasting system. CPB should cease to condone this unconscionable grab for resources. The alternative is a system dominated by a few ratings driven, mass audience, commercial broadcasting clones and the beginning of the end of public broadcasting as we have known it in our society.

~RALPH M. JENNINGS
GENERAL MANAGER
WFUV-FM, NYC



MICHAEL GREJNIEC

Letter to Ralph Jennings, General Manager of WFUV-FM from Ruth Seymour, General Manager of NPR station KCRW-FM, Santa Monica, California:

Thanks for so eloquently stating the issues involved in the Corporation for Public Broadcasting plan to zero out about 24% of the now qualified stations.

It may surprise you to know that many of us — even those of us who easily qualify — back you all the way.

Some of us remember when we once too were small and struggling and gradually achieved success through the system that is now in place. In fact it's only in the last 10 or so years that I feel comfortable that KCRW would have qualified under these new audience measurement guidelines.

Moreover you were eloquent and precise in suggesting that this "hit list" was constructed in such a way as to be self-serving to all but one of the stations on the CPB Task Force.

What is now disturbing is that following three regional meetings in which similar objections were voiced, we have yet to hear from the Corporation.

The CPB appears determined to chart a new course in local station funding by 1998. We have no idea, at this point, whether the Corporation intends to stick with the now discredited approach or if they have come up with a suitable alternative.

All over the country (NPR) station managers are making appointments to see their Senators and Representatives. The Corporation needs to decide now in what direction it's heading. Their silence, so far, is ominous.

~RUTH SEYMOUR
GENERAL MANAGER
KCRW-FM



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INSIPIDITY

Have you given much thought to the probability that your life is molded and defined by television commercials?

The pervasive influence of TV ads is much greater than the more advertised violence in between commercials. You are prodded several times an hour to purchase and consume a bewildering variety of products that purport to satisfy every craving or longing, every passion or desire. You get used to tuning them out, or you think you do.

Perhaps that is the point of advertising's overall success — it assaults you subliminally while you consciously ignore the sounds and flickering images. Advertising blends into an general perception of life, no longer separate pitches to purchase individual products but instead a cultural warp; an unconscious assumption of life as advertised overtakes the sense of the way life really is.

Commercial radio can be almost as bad. The endless saturation of high-pitched patter sugarcoats the brain. The music squeezed grudgingly in between insipid commercials is even more inane and hardly memorable enough to interfere with the dense airwave of consumer capitalism.

Public radio and television do not intend to remanufacture you. Cradle to grave consumerism is neither the means nor the ends of public broadcasting. Instead its attempts to counter the trend of perpetual adolescence with appeals to thought and intellect are serious and varied and shaped to adult responsibility in an increasingly complex democracy.

Commercial media is allied with the political and religious right in its wish to pamper the American brain as a willful child and desynapse its thoughtweaves while cleansing it of reason and maturity. Public and listener sponsored media such as KMUN-FM in Astoria intend the opposite, devoted to stretching and amplifying the American brain. This is anathema to commercial media whose only purpose is to sell products. Corporate capitalism in league with political and religious ultra-conservatism shuns diversity, though the contradiction between sensual materialism and ecumenical tyranny might be disharmonious to the alliance.

Now some people at PBS, threatened with Congressional defunding, are leaning toward advertising to keep their stations on the air. The reaction is tremendous. Although many of the largest stations think advertising would not be so bad, a majority of public radio and television station managers are very much against it. They say advertising would be the end of public broadcasting.

They are right.

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

*The SRG is the committee CPB formed to deal with the funding crisis. It is the largest coalition of public radio (and TV) stations in the U.S. and includes the biggest affiliates in the PBS network.

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