

**The Future of Public Television
The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago**



**The Future of Public
Television**

Presented by:
Cultural Policy Center
The Harris School of Public Policy
The University of Chicago

**Transcript
Day One, Session two:
An Alternate View of the Future of
Public Television, by Dr. Jerold M.
Starr
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December 2, 2004
Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

John Callaway Our next speaker is one of the nation's most thoughtful critics of the current public television system, and no conference on the future of public television would be complete without him. He has written, and I quote, "our democracy requires some space in our vast system of communication that is not controlled by the imperatives of power and profit." Well, how could such a space be found? Well, Dr. Jerold Starr, who is longtime professor at West Virginia University, author, sociologist, media analyst, and founder and executive director of Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting, has been thinking long and hard about what that space would look like and how it could be financed, and he has a real vision of what it could be. Would you please give a warm welcome to Dr. Jerry Starr?

Jerold Starr Thank you, John. And Pat, I'd love to have a copy of that speech for our website. The hard work that Pat Mitchell and her staff are doing, in a very difficult environment, is to be commended. We can learn a lot by looking at the problem in world perspective, and when you do that, it becomes pretty clear that U.S. public broadcasting is not only the new kid on the block, but we are still the small fry in the litter. Public service broadcasting was well established throughout the modern world before it came to America. It was launched in Britain in 1927, Australia in 1932, Canada in 1936. In all of these countries, except the United States, public broadcasting was well developed before commercial broadcasting was even permitted. The universal mission of public broadcasting is to serve viewers and listeners as citizens and voters, rather than consumers. This requires creative freedom, especially from government and commercial controls. In its essence, public broadcasting must be available to everybody, instill democratic values, promote respect for all groups, and strive for fairness and accuracy in the coverage of news and public affairs. Consistent with this tradition, the 1967 Carnegie Commission report recommended that America launch

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 2 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

public television to compensate for the limitations of advertiser-driven media and offer programming that would enhance citizenship and public service. In the language of the report, public broadcasting was to serve as a forum for debate and controversy, providing a voice for groups in the community that may, otherwise, be unheard so that we could see America whole in all its diversity. As he signed the bill into law, President Johnson declared, "Public television will help make our nation a replica of the old Greek marketplace where public affairs took place in the view of all citizens." When PBS was launched in 1967, three commercial networks controlled almost all programming in the United States. The need for an alternative at that time was very clear. The media landscape some 37 years later looks considerably more varied, but the need is just as great. In the U.S. today, there are approximately 1,800 newspapers, 3,000 book publishers, 11,000 magazines, 11,000 radio stations and 1,700 television stations. Behind this illusion of great choice, however, lies a collusion of interests that serves the giant media corporations at the expense of American democracy and cultural diversity.

In 1994, a mere 60 companies owned a controlling interest in all these media. By 2002, this was down to six companies. Comcast and Time-Warner dominate the cable market where the average system makes a 30 percent profit. Only two companies, Direct TV and the DISH, control the direct broadcast satellite market. Between 1975 and 2000, the number of television stations increased by 75 percent. The number of TV station owners actually declined by 33 percent. Time-Warner, General Electric, and News Corporation control all the cable news networks whose news and public affairs programs reflect the interests of their corporate owners.

The authors of the 1999 McKinsey Report, commissioned by the BBC, defined the most effective public broadcasting services as those that provide both distinctiveness and share. That is, not only do they offer

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 3 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

programming that is not available, typically not available on commercial broadcasting, but they also attract a large share of the audience. This creates what the authors call a virtuous circle, whereby commercial broadcasters follow the successful programming examples of public broadcasters. The most successful systems enjoy independent funding in Britain, Denmark, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. Funding comes primarily from TV household license fees. In Germany, commercial broadcasters underwrite public broadcasting with broadcasting and concession fees. Australia and Canada receive generous subsidies from their federal governments. As a matter of fact, a percentage of GNP, Australia and Canada receive three times that of America's PBS, the BBC six times that of America's PBS. According to McKinsey, the most effective public broadcasting services are the ARD and the ZDF in Germany, the SBT in Sweden, and the BBC in the U.K., all supported by license fees. Their more reliable and substantial funding underwrites broader schedules of programs that promote much larger audiences. Public broadcasters in England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Spain attract audience shares of between 33 and 49 percent. In Denmark it is 69 percent. In the U.S. it is only 3 percent.

Independent funding has long been a goal of PBS, as well. Carnegie Commission Chair James R. Killian, Jr., argued that a free, innovative, and creative public television service would not be possible if it were to be ultimately dependant on Congress for its funding. President Johnson proposed a trust fund, but Republican opposition caused this provision to be stripped from the bill. Throughout its history, especially in 1978, 1988, and 1995, similar proposals for a public broadcasting trust have been advanced. Today, PBS is in trouble. Government funding has not kept pace with rising costs, especially those associated with a digital transition. Worse, public support itself is on the wane. Between the fiscal years 1993-2002,

December 2, 2004

Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

public TV memberships declined by 20 percent, from five million to four million. A recent survey indicates that this trend has accelerated to a 55 percent loss in each of the last two years. This loss in memberships reflects a loss in viewers, as traditionally measured. In 1987, PBS had a rating of 2.7. This dropped to 2.2 by 1992, 2.0 by 2000 and 1.7 by 2002, a 37 percent drop over 15 years, and a 15 percent drop in just the last two years.

Now while all broadcasters have lost viewers to cable, the commercial broadcasters own their own competition and they have been able to increase advertising and raise rates to maintain their revenue base. In an attempt to meet their expenses, PBS and its member stations also have followed this path toward greater commercialism. Five second underwriting spots-those of us who started watching it right away remember when they were five seconds-have expanded into 30-second commercials, including pictures on children's programs for junk food and theme parks. There are more co-production deals with commercial partners looking for lucrative back ends. Such programs, typically, are designed for export and, consequently, are less local or even national in character. Also, PBS saw fit and the FTC approved permission to use two of PBS' digital frequencies for revenue generating purposes. And yet, despite these compromises, PBS revenue has been falling almost 3 percent per year since 1993. In the past two years, PBS has downsized its staff three times, cutting its total work force by 25 percent. PBS tried to make up for its short fall recently by increasing member station dues by 7.5 percent. The stations, themselves challenged, balked, and PBS had to settle for a 3 percent raise, which it plans to use for Masterpiece Theater and Antique Road Show.

Clearly, a new approach is required. My organization, Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting, advocates that public broadcasting in the U.S. be restructured

December 2, 2004

Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

as a public trust, along the lines as the U.S. Olympic Committee, Red Cross, or Little League Baseball. In our view, innovative diverse noncommercial programming for both national and local TV and radio audiences would require at least \$1 billion per annum. Most of this would go to TV, far exceeding the \$300 million per year now being spent. This programming fund would be supplemental to current levels of operational support from state governments, individual subscribers, and foundations, and they could still keep the pledge drives. Corporate donations would still be welcomed, but they would be briefly acknowledged and restricted to general system support. There would be no more upscale commercials masquerading as enhanced underwriting spots. We advocate, further, that financing come from the commercial broadcasters, who as Larry Grossman has pointed out many times, pay no use fee for the lucrative monopoly over the public airways.

The following revenue sources, and this is by no means exhaustive, would each provide the \$1 billion per year needed to endow the trust: 5 percent tax on the sale or transfer of commercial broadcast licenses, a 2 percent tax on annual broadcast advertising, a 2 percent annual spectrum fee or a piece of the action on the auction of up to \$100 billion of digital spectrum. Any smaller combination of the above also could produce the \$1 billion required to support the trust. The proposed structure and operation of this public broadcasting trust is spelled out on our website, CIPBOnline.org.

Suffice it to say, that this would replace both the president's patronage appointed Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and it would take over the satellite distribution systems now administered by PBS and NPR. More importantly, it would work with professional associations, labor, and trade organizations to incorporate representatives of those constituencies crucial to its mission: Artists, educators, journalists, and public broadcasters. We suggest, further, that a significant portion

December 2, 2004

Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

of these funds be passed through to local television and radio stations to produce and acquire programs of interest to their communities. At present, less than 5 percent of all public TV program production is local. Only 16 out of some 350-member stations have a daily news program. Perhaps the most overlooked finding of the recent general accounting author's report is that of the 139 licensees that provided narrative comments on program production, 85 stated that they do not have adequate funds for local programming or that they would produce local programming if they could obtain additional sources of funding. We recognize that change at the top, that is, secure funding itself, would not be enough.

As PBS pioneer James Day once observed the greatest force for blandness is not the government, it's the stations. Stations need officers with programming vision and boards of directors from diverse social and professional backgrounds, committed to a clearly defined public mission with relevant expertise, willing to hold management accountable and be responsive to community input. When necessary, such boards also must be willing to defend management and resist pressure from government and corporate officials. Accountability must include both fiscal discipline and program policy. Everybody has to be more involved. New measures are also needed to empower community advisory boards to perform their designated function, to be engaged in active outreach to their communities, to solicit evaluations and assess needs. In short, this would be public broadcasting in the service of the public sphere, supporting and enhancing democracy in mass society.

Is a public broadcasting trust possible in this age of Republican political domination? There it is, the elephant is on the table. This is an empirical question. We do know that all significant legislation has required decades of advocacy before it's time came. This includes Social Security and Medicare. Well, though it some times seemed

December 2, 2004

Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

impossible, their time did come. To abandon this 37-year quest now is to abandon all hope and trust in the political process. In at least one respect, the timing is perfect. The digital transition, as Pat Mitchell has pointed out, like that of color TV, will require millions of consumers to purchase new equipment. In addition to the above use-fee measures, a 5 percent tax on factory sales of digital television sets itself would, for some years, generate the \$1 billion needed for a public broadcasting trust. If this tax were applied to all digital equipment, the tax rate could be lower still.

The fact that the Republican Party is controlled by its conservative wing and that this one party now controls the White House, both houses of Congress, and the higher courts, actually makes it imperative that there be some media, on principle, willing to consider contrary facts, air dissenting views, and hold those in power accountable. Thank you (clapping). This is an important mission. Past public trust proposals were defeated by a combination of forces, and I'm talking about 1979, 1988, and 1995: A powerful National Association of Broadcasters, timid politicians, the narrow base of reform movement, and a divided public broadcasting community. So what's different now? Well, for one thing, the NAB is weaker. For another, politicians are willing to consider the idea, and now we have a powerful public movement ready to support such an initiative. At issue, really, is whether public television still aspires to its founding mission or is willing to settle indefinitely for increasing marginalization.

We must acknowledge that among political officials this trust fund idea has never really gone away. In 1998, House Telecommunications Subcommittee leaders Billy Tauzin and Ed Markey proposed a bill to create a permanent PBS trust fund, abolish the CPB, and phase out commercial underwriting messages. The bill was withdrawn, but the thought was there. The 2000 Gore Commission on the Social

December 2, 2004

Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

Responsibility for Digital Broadcasters strongly recommended, with both private and public support, that congress create a trust fund for public television and eliminate enhanced underwriting by corporations. We would be building on this rich history of efforts to accomplish this very important goal. Public support is crucial and it has, unfortunately, been missing in past efforts. For example, in 1988, the Senate Commerce Committee sought to create a trust fund based on a 2-5 percent tax levied on the transfer of all properties licensed by the FCC. Predictably, commercial broadcasters offered vigorous opposition. The bill's sponsor, Senator Ernest Hollings, challenged public television officials in the senate hearings. He said, "Where was their constituency? Why couldn't they fight a corporate lobby with numbers, viewers who would ring their legislators' bells to preserve and defend noncommercial programming?" Media scholar Pat Aufderheide reports no one answered him and no one on the panel was there, from organized labor, community groups, supporters of children's television issue-oriented groups, or the educational community to say that public television mattered to them one way or the other.

The potential is much greater today. In the past year there has been a tidal wave of public opposition to greater media consolidation. The three million messages to Congress far exceeded any issue, with the exception of the war in Iraq. The courts have ruled against the FCC's ownership cap rollback and Congress, also, has gone on record in opposition. The networks have pulled out of the NAB amidst a growing dispute with the stations. Fed up with sleazy programming and uncritical reporting of government war claims, public criticism of commercial broadcasters is at an all-time high.

Our polling, and we have done polls on this question, also indicates popular support for the concept of a public broadcasting trust. A December 1998 poll by Lake, Snell,

December 2, 2004

Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

Perry, and Associates, found that only 19 percent of the public knew that broadcasters pay no use fee for the public airways. Once it buys into this fact, almost two-thirds of those with an opinion favored charging broadcasters for any additional air waves, including those for digital TV. An overwhelming 79 percent, four out of five of the American public, favored a proposal to require commercial broadcasters to pay 5 percent of their revenues into a fund to support public broadcast programming. We believe that a bold new proposal for a trust to ensure and enhance public broadcasting's contribution to culture and public affairs and a system dominated by rank commercialism, widespread indecency, and the neglect of public affairs would resonate with the public.

In recent years, several major public interest organizations like Common Cause, People for the American Way, Working Assets, and The Free Press have taken up public broadcast reform as an issue. In the recent past, these organizations have generated hundreds of thousands of letters opposing congressional cutoff of PBS funding or CTB interference with PBS programming. Their capacity to mobilize broad-based support would be invaluable in any public campaign for a public trust. It must be said, however, that none of these organizations has any interest in working to create a trust fund for PBS without substantial assurance that this fiscal independence would, indeed, be used to promote greater journalistic and editorial independence. The truly significant question at this moment is whether PBS is open to change or too trapped by the assumptions of beltway politics to aspire to a new vision. This question is especially salient given the recent PBS choices to host new public affairs shows, Tucker Carlson and Paul Gigot, with Michael Medved still under active consideration. Carlson receives 38 percent of his funding from PBS, Gigot almost all of his funding from CPB. At the same time, Bill Moyers' *Now*, just two years on the air, is being cut back to one-half hour.

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 10 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

Gigot is the chief of the rabidly right wing Wall Street Journal editorial page. That page is notorious. And when he was on Jim Lehrer's *The News Hour*, he was frequently paired with Mark Shields, but this was just his show with his staff. And Carlson, in interviews after he was awarded his show on PBS, proclaimed himself to be, "A conservative ideologue and proud of it." He already hosts his own program on CNN with a dismal 0.7 rating and he professes to have no idea why PBS chose him to host the show.

Defending these new programs at a July news conference, Pat Mitchell denied any pressure from Congress or CPB. Instead, she said, "This was an initiative to have all points of view", adding, "Once PBS was defined by Bill Buckley and *Firing Line*. More recently we have been defined by Bill Moyer." Mitchell states further that PBS also airs what is considered one of the most valid news programs, *The News Hour*. Now, I have shared this with Pat. That is, we feel that this interpretation of balance or diversity misses the mark. PBS' new shows are hosted by conservative white male flacks and hacks whose views on military and economic issues mirror those of government and corporate officials. Worse, they are already available in the commercial media. They do not offer the alternative that the public so desperately needs. They do not provide voices that would, otherwise, be unheard. They do not permit us to see America whole in all its diversity, and I am not just talking about personality, but also format. What every Republican critic may say of Bill Moyers', Now, that show offers investigative reports on subjects ignored by the cable news channels or *The News Hour*. We need to widen the public discourse beyond that of government media releases and celebrity gossip. We need to present research documenting factual claims that lay the basis for reasonable discussion, and while we're on that subject, we need a model of public discussion that is more than just a mere scream fest.

December 2, 2004
Session 2

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

Conservative *National Review* editor John McLaughlin has had one or two shows on 320 PBS stations for at least 20 years, despite a meager 1.2 rating. Former McLaughlin panelist, Jake Germond, has said that a show where "people repeatedly interrupt one another, shout for attention, deliver ad hominem attacks on one another and deride the moderator" should not be taken seriously. Another panelist, Eleanor Clift, laments, "You don't have time to express the ifs, ands, or buts." In the analysis of linguist Deborah Tannen, "Viewers conclude that if the two sides are so far apart, the problem can't be solved, so why try?" I know that PBS does not offer this program as common carriage these days, but the public does not know the difference. Such shows are the face of PBS.

It is hard to believe that Bill Moyers' *Now* has come to "define" PBS in just two years on the air. We do know that this one program provoked a firestorm of Republican criticism from members of Congress and the CPB. William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* was on PBS for at least two decades. While Tavis Smiley's new program is now carried by some 80 PBS stations, for many years the one national program for the African-American community carried by most stations has been hosted by Republican Tony Brown.

Other conservative pundits PBS has featured over the years include Fred Barnes, Larry Elder, Laura Ingraham, Morton Kondracke, Peggy Noonan, and Tony Snow. The only Democrat has been Ben Wattenberg, a conservative affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute, home of the Project for a New American Century.

With the exception of Bill Moyers, no progressive has ever regularly guested on, let alone hosted, a PBS public affairs program. I include in this pantheon of outsiders, such journalists, broadcasters, and intellectuals as Barbara Ehrenreich, Amy Goodman, Ellen Goodman, Molly Ivins, Katarina vanden Heuvel,

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 12 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

Phil Donohue, Jim Hightower, Paul Krugman, Michael Moore, Cornell West, and Howard Zinn.

As for *The NewsHour*, Pat Mitchell neglects to add that this praise for its balance comes largely from Republicans who would shriek in terror at a truly independent news service, like the BBC. In the early 1990s, MacNeil-Lehrer Productions sold two-thirds of *The NewsHour* to Liberty Media, a subsidiary of TCI cable systems, owned by arch conservative John Malone, and later acquired by AT&T.

In 1998, sociologists David Croteau and William Hoynes analyzed several weeks of *NewsHour* shows. Depending on the topic, from 75-90 percent of the sources that appeared on camera were "elite voices," that is, corporate representatives, government officials, professional journalists, and academics. The segments on economic issues featured three times as many corporate representatives as labor representatives. Public interest advocates accounted for only five percent of all guests. Men outnumbered women by four to one. The differences with guests and topics featured on ABC's *Nightline* were negligible.

This discrepancy is built into the very concept of the program. In 1991, Robert MacNeil admitted that "the policy critics are not visible in our program." He explained, it was "because most of the time in our studio discussion, we are coming at the point when the debate has reached the question of policy and how that policy will be turned into action."

After he left the show in 1995, MacNeil acknowledged the timidity of most PBS programs: "We [PBS] are not as provocative, innovative, creative, or original as we should be trying to ingratiate ourselves with the public by diluting what we do plays into the hands of the people who say we're either not good enough or not necessary."

In his 1999 review, *Current* contributing editor David Stewart acknowledged *The NewsHour* to be "intelligent, fair, and determined to consider significant Issues and

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 13 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

news stories." However, in his view, it was not "brisk." He explains: "The debates sometimes seem endless, the discussions feature predictable views, held by an equally predictable set of lawmakers, military leaders, and professional pundits."

PBS deserves praise for presenting many fine documentaries over the years under the auspices of *Frontline*, *POV*, and *Independent Lens*. The recent *Frontline* on the credit card industry was first rate journalism. Unfortunately, too many award-winning productions have been blocked by PBS underwriting guidelines, which permit funding from corporations and conservative foundations, but ban support from organized labor and public interest groups.

For more than 30 years now, corporations have been actively promoting their interests through the Business Roundtable, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, Hoover Institute, and numerous other foundations, think tanks, publishers, web sites, TV, and radio programs. In this last election, top-giving corporate political action committees favored Republican candidates by a margin of 10-1. It is an obsolete bias to pretend that unions and public interest groups are political actors while corporations are not.

This ban effectively handicaps the development of programs with alternative perspectives while doing nothing to ensure fairness and accuracy in content. The latter is a desirable, even essential, goal but could be achieved more effectively by following any of the many peer review models currently practiced in academia, publishing, and the arts.

Reflecting this PBS reliance on corporate support, there are nightly and weekly programs featuring Wall Street and business news, but no regularly scheduled programs that examine the economy from the perspective of workers, consumers, or environmentalists.

The consequence is the continuing erosion of core supporters for whom

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 14 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

this is supposed to be the alternative to the corporate-owned, establishment-oriented, cable news channels. In fact, when compared to broadcast only viewers, some 35 percent fewer PBS members with cable now look to PBS first for "in-depth analysis of major news and issues," and 43 percent fewer for programs that help you "understand the issues that matter to you."

Viewers now have new choices on public access channels like *Democracy Now*, satellite channels like Link TV and Free Speech TV, cable's *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, and subscription channels, like Showtime and HBO, willing to feature shows like *Real Time with Bill Maher*, documentaries like *The Panama Deception* and series like the sequel to *Tales of the City*, judged to be too controversial by PBS gatekeepers. These do not begin to approximate the reach of the Christian Broadcasting Network, Fox News or MSNBC, but they do offer progressive alternatives not available on broadcast media, including PBS.

Defending the Public Interest

Beyond any semblance of real balance in our media system, we all suffer from the lack of vigorous investigative reporting to inform the public about social problems confronting our nation and our communities and what can be done about them. The FCC requires that all frequencies be dedicated to the public interest, convenience, and necessity. This should be truer still of those frequencies specifically reserved for public education.

In the tradition of the Enlightenment, the public interest refers to all those things that are essential to community and nation. There is a public interest in accountable government, an impartial judicial system, tax fairness, secure borders, crime-free streets, effective schools, safe roads, reliable public transportation, economic growth, good jobs, clean air and water, affordable health care, a social safety net for the disadvantaged, and all that makes for a good society.

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 15 -

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

These goods are of a different order than home shopping or celebrity gossip, no matter how many individuals might be interested in such things. The same can be said for typical PBS fare, like how to cook, garden, paint, sew, decorate your house, lose weight, manage your emotions, or make money in the stock market. Such subjects do not address the public interest.

We may differ on how to obtain these collective goods. But that is precisely why we must thoroughly investigate, discuss, and debate these questions. And we cannot do that without the active cooperation of those who control the media of mass communications, especially those dedicated to public education.

According to the distinguished educator John Dewey, it is the media's job "to interest the public in the public interest." If we desire a democratic society, if we desire transparency and accountability in our political and economic affairs, then we must dedicate a sufficient portion of our communications capacity to consideration of the public interest.

News and public affairs on PBS must transcend the artificial criteria of objectivity and balance which are used selectively to censor program content critical of established interests. No one requires business programs to invite socialists or labor leaders to balance the views of capitalists, religious programs to invite atheists to balance the views of believers, programs on national security to invite pacifists to challenge the assumptions of militarists, or cooking shows to give equal time to vegetarians. Similarly, charges that one has failed to adequately balance the views of public interest advocates or policy critics with the views of government or corporate officials are most often red herrings to distract attention from the media's ongoing censorship of those who challenge the system.

The Future of Public Television

The Cultural Policy Center at The University of Chicago

PBS spokespersons are fond of defending their service by pointing to criticism from both the left and the right as evidence that they must be doing something OK. A more efficient conclusion is that all alternative points of view have typically been excluded in favor of programming dominated by establishment perspectives and sensibilities. Public broadcasting's unique mission requires that it include alternative voices rather than justify their exclusion; that it reflect on power, not simply reflect power.

In our view, this is not an issue that can be neatly reduced to political labels—liberal vs. conservative, right vs. left, Democrat vs. Republican, or whatever. It comes down to a question of what stories get told and who gets to participate in the telling. If politics, economics and other public affairs are covered only from the top down, interest groups and potential publics representing millions of citizens will continue to be excluded from the national debate, further impoverishing our democracy.

When those who control the dominant institutions also dictate the subjects and terms of public discourse, democracy and truth are the silenced victims. Surely, the perspectives of government and corporate leaders are important. However, they must be balanced, if you will, by coverage from the bottom up—with an understanding of what is happening to our workers, consumers, citizens, and environment.

This could be the beginning of a bigger and better public television in the United States; a public television truly equal to its important mission at a time when such contribution is needed more than ever. Or it could be the beginning of the end. The choice ultimately rests with the leaders of public television. We eagerly await their decision. Thank you.

John Callaway Jerry Starr, thank you, very, very much for that.

December 2, 2004

Session 2

- 17 -