

**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 Two, Session Two:  
Independent Producers and  
Dissenters  
December 3, 2004**

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**John Callaway** Ladies and gentlemen, we'll begin now. Let me say that over the past several years it's been my privilege to be invited by our journalism program at Columbia University to do panels there. I remember doing one on who owns art and another one on the future of theatre in New York after 9/11. Those were marvelous experiences. I met some wonderful people, including the man that I'm about to introduce you to. I remember coming back several years ago and saying to Carroll Joynes at the Cultural Policy Center, "We really ought to do some business with the folks at Columbia University," and we have been, and we are about to do so at this point.

It's my pleasure to introduce Andras Szanto. He is the director of the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University in New York. He joined NAJP in 1997 as research manager of the media study center, and that's a media research think tank in New York. He was appointed director of the program in 2004.

Andras has co-authored and edited four books as well as numerous critical essays and research reports about culture, media, and arts policy. His reporting and commentary about art, culture, and politics have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *American Prospect*, and many other publications including the *International Herald Tribune*.

So we're very pleased to have Andras with us, and as we welcome him now as the moderator of this next panel. Would you give a warm welcome to Andras Szanto.

**Andras Szanto** Thank you, John. Thank you, John, and thank you, Carroll, and thank you to all of you at the Cultural Policy Center for putting together this astounding conference on this extremely timely issue. I was very glad to see it in the newspaper this morning. We all know how hard it is to get coverage for these sort of things, and you've managed to create a conference that's not only substantive but also newsworthy, and my congratulations go to you for

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that.

I say that even though I'm deeply offended that you didn't organize a session, a special session, on arts and arts journalism on public television. I sort of swallowed my pride and nevertheless accepted this assignment to moderate this panel. I guess they kind of figured we won't do an arts panel. We'll do a panel on independence and the dissenters. We'll let the arts guy handle the independents and the dissenters. So that's what we're going to do today.

Obviously no conference on public broadcasting and especially the future of public broadcasting could be complete without the people joining us here today, the independent producers who have contributed some of the most outstanding moments in public television over the history of the medium and have often done so against great odds.

What we'd like to find out today is partly what their experience has been doing this enormously important work and how can they find a viable future for themselves in this medium. How are they going to make it work? How are they going to put the pieces of the puzzle together at a time when, as we all know, we face profound difficulties both in raising funds and in operating in a social environment that is, shall we say, increasingly less tolerant of dissenting views.

So joining us here today are four esteemed panelists. From Chicago we have Tom Weinberg. He's executive producer and director of the Fund for Innovative TV, and the president of TWTV, Inc. He's on the faculty of the other Columbia University or College here in Chicago, in the school of the media arts, and has done an enormous amount of work over the years, including more than 300 -- is that possible? -- image union programs for WTTW?

From New York we have Al Perlmutter, one of the great lions of the field, president of Alvin H. Perlmutter, Incorporated, a television production company. He's also chair

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and CEO of Sunrise Media, a television and educational news film archive. He's originated more than 100 PBS documentaries, and his various prizes and honors are far too many to list here. He's also the husband of my wonderful colleague Joan Conner at the Columbia Journalism school. I could go on and on, but among the resume items are vice president for NBC News.

From San Francisco we have Lois Vossen, who it turns out she and I were in Amsterdam last week. We didn't know this, that we were there together, but we were. She is a series producer of the critically acclaimed series "*Independent Lens*," which is broadcast on PBS and has been involved in many other adventures, including the Sundance Institute and Film Festival, and she is here today because as living proof that there are very important, emerging and not so emerging, producers out there working on the scene.

Finally, Karen Bond, at the end of the table, also from Chicago, who is not an independent producer, but she's going to keep them straight today. She is one of the most astute critics of public broadcasting, and the conference organizers thought it would be a good idea to include her in this panel. She is a media activist and management consultant based in Evanston and involved in a variety of issues of great importance to the field, including impoverished people, government accountability, institutional racism, etc., etc.

The moderated part of this panel is pretty short. We only have about 45 minutes, so I'm going to ask one question to get things started from each of the panel members that will give them a little bit of an opportunity to speak at more length. One of them, Tom, even has prepared remarks in some study aids that he brought with him today. Then we'll open it up for a bit more dialogue amongst ourselves, and then we'll go to you.

Before I forget, nobody sitting in this room should leave without filling out what, Carroll? An evaluation. So please

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make a note of it. Very important for the conference.

Now, my sense of this conference so far, and this is going to be trivializing and simplifying, is that there are basically two competing visions of PBS that we've heard, by and large. To some extent, I think they mimic some of the commentary we've heard about the Democratic party in recent weeks. One is to move to the center, to move to where the eyeballs are, to where the sponsorship is, where the mainstream is, to Tucker Carlson land, commercial sponsorship, so on and so forth.

The other is to be true to your values, to maintain a commitment to progressive broadcasting, expand the issues, the range of issues that you're dealing with, to speak to audience segments that you haven't spoken to before, and to remain a critical force in society.

I think the question hanging over the conference so far in my mind is whether these two can meet and how and how can they meet sustainably. So that is what I would like to be sort of the guiding premise of our discussion. But in the end, what we're looking for is risk-taking work on the public airwaves.

So to put this in context, Al Perlmutter, would you mind talking to us a little bit about your own experiences which actually begin at a time that predates even PBS and talk about --

**Male Voice** Before television.

**Andras Szanto** Before television, indeed.

And to talk about what kind of possibilities you have had in these different phases of PBS and to put this kind of programming on the air and how you do it today, if you can.

**Al Perlmutter** First let me say that I am very grateful to public television because I have been able to do a lot of things that I really wanted to do through the fact that public television exists. It hasn't been without problems, without difficulty, without disappointments, without rejections, and without

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faults on my side and their side and so on. But given all that, it's been a terrific run. So I'm very grateful for that.

Going back, if I may, as you indicated, when I began, it was back in the days of NET, National Educational Television. For those who are not familiar with NET, briefly, it was a central program production organization that fed both public affairs and cultural affairs programs to stations at the time they were bicycled around by tape to 80 stations; 40 one week, 40 another week. That's how it began.

But more importantly in terms of the questions that you raised, the environment there was really fresh, invigorating, and inspiring. Public television was new. It was designated by the '67 act, as was indicated yesterday, to be alternative television. I was never on staff there, by the way. I was an independent at that time, and there were several other independents and a number of staff people, all terrifically talented and energetic people.

Our mission was to come up with programming that would be interesting, informative, and alternative television. Bill Cobin (phonetic), who was then head of programming, gave us free rein. There was not too much interference. If we succeeded, great, if we failed, well, we failed. As I think Torey said this morning, his likes failure because it delivered, eventually, some of the best programming that he had.

Now, let's fast forward. I'll be brief now because I know you want to discuss this later. My more recent experiences with public television have been filled with some great frustrations. One frustration, of course, is that my file cabinet is filled with programs that I've never been able to produce because I've never got the funding for them or found access to the limited real estate, as PBS likes to say, that it has, that it has in the program time for it.

Another frustration is that the hurdles that an independent producer has to

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jump now to get programming on PBS are very daunting and very difficult to overcome, especially when there may be differing views between those who make the appropriations and the producer of what the program should be. I have very specific feelings about that. I think producers should continue to be given the opportunity to come up with new ideas.

I think one real concern I have had with public television over the last few years is the fact that it is risk-averse, for whatever reasons there may be, fear of funding, government, whatever. But I feel that there is a great need for a mechanism or a mentality that would allow producers and public television to take new risks, to find new ways of being alternative, and to be new again. I think public television by definition has to reinvent itself periodically.

**Andras Szanto** The hurdles that you're speaking about, are these primarily financial hurdles or is it the risk aversion or both, or which do you think are the biggest ones?

**Al Perlmutter** It's both financial and to some extent the executives who make decisions as to whether to fund a program or put it on the air -- especially fund it -- want to know more now about how that program is going to turn out at the end than we've ever been asked to do in the past. Producers are not perfect. Executives who authorize are not perfect, and they may have different ideas as to how a particular idea or concept should be approached.

Those of us who are in the business of producing know that once you have an idea and you start producing it, it may change along the way. I'll give you one very simple example, and then I'll be quiet.

We present -- a group of us got together at NET and presented a proposal in five pages to Bill Cobin which ended up being the Great American Dream Machine. It became sort of a cult and hit show for the couple of years that it was on. The program that resulted was quite different from the five pages that we submitted,

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because as we were in production we saw targets of opportunity. We saw new ideas coming up that we couldn't find out before because we weren't funded to make this exploration.

So you have to have time and the opportunity to change, to make changes, to adapt, and if you succeed, fine. If you fail, all right, then you've learned something from it.

**Andras Szanto** Tom, you've spent almost as many years putting on programming in a large variety of media. A lot of the work Al has done has been on PBS, nationally broadcast, and I think you've been very candid about the difficulties and the frustrations you're seeing at that level. Is there more of an opportunity for this kind of independent work to appear in local media and address local issues? Tell us about your own personal experiences in that work.

**Tom Weinberg** I guess at one point this panel was called "Independent Producers and Dissenters." Before I get into local questions, I plead guilty to both actually.

I think it's as Al said, which is it permeates. It doesn't matter whether it's in Chicago or Buffalo or L.A. or wherever it is. There's lots of problems. One problem is that there is no money. When there is money, then you get into the two questions and piggybacking on you, because I think you're absolutely right about the people who decide and what you need to tell them. And the second one is that it's very difficult.

Now, for me, doing local production in Chicago, we invented a program -- oh, God, 1978 - called "Image Union." We couldn't figure out what the name was even yet. That show is still on the air in Chicago on WTTW, for 26 years now. I only produced it for ten or eleven. But the concept was very simple.

There's a lot of independent producers out there, but people didn't call them independent producers. We didn't call ourselves that, but there are a lot of people making films and tapes that never see the light of day, and they are good, and they are important, and they

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are coming from some place that is passionate and real for them, and it's not on TV.

So we kind of sandbagged the management of Channel 11. This was a long time ago. They agreed essentially to do it. I remember Dick Bowman said at the time, sure, you can get a few weeks of this stuff, but you can't do it for very long. Of course, we are 26 years in. I like Dick Bowman, but the point is that the people in the stations, locally, nationally, don't really understand who we are and that we're out here not to do it only for ourselves but for a lot of other people who we can help and we can translate to television because we know how to produce television shows. That's really what you do.

So locally, sometimes, but nowhere near as it was years ago. Risk averse? Absolutely. Is that a problem? For sure it's a problem because the survival of PBS, the question you asked originally, the survival of public television at least, I think has to be on the progressive end. I don't see any choice even because even as a marketing premise, I think that's true. Certainly as an ideological premise it's true. I'll talk more about that later. Thank you.

**Andras Szanto** When do you want to show us your clip? You said you wanted to show us a clip.

**Tom Weinberg** Later on.

**Andras Szanto** Later on, okay. Well, you give us the signal.

Now, Lois, we've heard from the two guys before you a lot of expressions of frustration, words that hang in the air -- risk aversion, bureaucracy, corporate types, hurdles, no money. Yet here you are, you're putting on some of this work. You're putting it together through Sundance and other forms. You've worked with a lot of people, many of them younger even than you, who are making it work. Is this really true? Is this whining? Is this sort of a situation where people should just get over it and figure out a new way to do it? How do you do

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you agree to partner with us.

So that initiative which began six years ago was pretty rocky in the beginning, and it's now one of our strongest programs, and it's produced Emmy Award-winning films and Academy Award-nominated films. And again, it's all about independence, really kind of knocking on the doors of local stations trying to get them to pay attention to them. I think that just has to continue.

The funding scene is dismal. There is no reason to deny that. It's worse than ever. One of the things that I thought of as I was listening to my colleagues here talk about those people in the position to make the decision about who gets money is it is true. There is more scrutiny now about what you're going to make, what it's going to look like, and that is a worrisome thing. We were just talking about this at ITVS the day before I left, and what do you do about that, because the competition for such limited dollars is so fierce.

So I'll just sort of throw it back from the perspective of somebody who watches people make those decisions. When we, for years, apply to ITVS, all you had to do was fill in an application and send it off. Funding round after funding round after funding round, we saw you, the panelist, who are literally you, your public television programmers and your independent producers, you would always gravitate toward those projects where there was tape, where you could see what the project was going to look like. Time and time again you discarded ideas on paper for what you could see on tape.

It got to the point that it was so frustrating for independents to just keep getting turned down, that we just initiated a new policy to apply to ITVS you have to have a sample tape of the show you're trying to make. Now, that was directly a response to independents telling us they were so frustrated from getting turned down for funding with the notes "it's because we can't see what it's going to look like."

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So it's kind of this double-edged sword where we're trying to help you be more competitive and at the same time we're doing exactly what my colleagues on my left and right have indicated is a problem for independent producers. How do we get out of that box? I'm not completely sure.

**Andras Szanto** You said you were just back. The reason why we were both in Amsterdam is because you were at a film festival, an independent film festival, that was going on at the time. So you just spent a week talking to colleagues --

**Lois Vossen** Looking at forty documentaries in six days. My eyes are bloodshot.

**Andras Szanto** Maybe it's a good question to ask. Do you feel that they are having, your European Colleagues, are having a more difficult time, an easier time? Why is it easier?

**Lois Vossen** That's actually a great question. I think they are having as difficult a time, but their budgets are dramatically lower. When we would tell them what the average cost is, now we have people asking for \$600,000 to make a one-hour show. I don't know about anybody else in the room, but I find that just outrageous. \$600,000 to make a one-hour documentary. Now, if you're flying around the world going to 26 locations or something, that might make sense.

But the numbers that independent producers are now coming to ITVS for are really high, and we're having to work with producers to actually bring those numbers to something that resembles a real number, like \$200,000. Still, the Europeans are getting half that, and they are making wonderful programming. So there is a huge disparity between what American independents expect to make.

Now, the other flip side of that, and I'll just be candid is, ITVS is very unique among funders in that we give large amounts of money, and you control all the rights. You own the copyright and you cede to us the public television broadcast rights, but otherwise

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the independent producer owns educational, home video, theatrical, foreign, etc. So it is a bit like winning the lottery. I mean, it is winning the lottery for independent producers.

So what we're finding is a lot of producers are really basically piling on every deferral they've ever had in their life. So again, on behalf of independents -- which I always feel like I'm wearing two hats at one time. I feel like Dr. Seuss, the big hat and the short hat -- for independents, that makes sense.

They have been working in poverty for five years to make a film, it's a great film, and they are bringing it to a broadcaster. It could be a public television broadcaster and it could be a cable, and they are getting offered \$30,000 maybe, and it's cost them \$150,000 to \$300,000 to make the film. So for them, yeah, they are going to ask for their deferrals. They are going to try to get as much money back as they can.

It's a very complex issue. At ITVS we feel like we're literally in the fire line between one field and the other field with the job of trying to bring them together. So the Europeans are in the same situation. They are just not expecting as much, I think.

**Male Voice** So the grass isn't necessarily greener over there.

**Lois Vossen** No, I don't think it's any greener. Certainly in other countries, ITVS is trying to bring in more work either through Independent Lens and other venues, from Africa, from Latin America, South America. The situation there is absolutely dire. Forget about it. They would be thrilled to get \$5,000. A drop of money to them is the lottery. Talk about essential voices. I mean, never has this country, no matter what side of the political spectrum you're on, never has this country needed to hear from people outside this country more urgently, yet they are not being able to make documentaries and to make those projects, which is really disheartening.

**Andras Szanto** Karen, never has the country

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needed to hear from voices outside this country urgently. You probably feel never has the country needed to hear from voices that are right here within the country more urgently but who don't get heard from.

I thought a moment ago I saw a little ripple of frustration cross your face when you were listening to the idea that now, in order to get funding for these documentaries, filmmakers have to already come out with a reel. I'm not a mind reader, but I thought I saw you thinking that well, that's going to be a high barrier of entry.

So give us some of your own thoughts about (a) what you're missing, what you would like to see more of, and (b) under these circumstances that we've been hearing about, how are we going to get there?

**Karen Bond** Okay, first of all, you're extremely perceptive and observant. So that, I guess, you'll know that we dissenters, all of us in some way, shape or form consider us to be dissenters, we're not always the skunk at the party. I wanted to say that we do love public broadcasting. We would not do this if we did not love public broadcasting, and I think that's it's very easy to start to get into comfortable positions where it's adversarial and it's us against them. If we all want to have public broadcasting that serves all communities, then we just have to start working towards those objectives.

I think that there are a lot of questions about public broadcasting that need to be resolved, but I think the most important question is what is the difference between commercial broadcasting and public broadcasting. I'm not sure that we have adequately defined that. I think that's where some of the frustration comes from.

For example, when I watch the NewsHour now, I would think, gosh, I left public broadcasting, and there is a huge scandal about ADM, and I really want to hear a 20-minute segment on that issue, but then my excitement

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about public broadcasting is tempered by the fact that I know that ADM is a sponsor. Even though they may do a segment on ADM, I am not totally confident that it's going to be totally independent and tell me everything I need to know. What gives me that total confidence is when public broadcasting is truly public and independent of commercial pressures.

Right now is a great time to have this conference and to engage these discussions because we're on the verge of making the digital transition which is going to be a major change for everybody, and also, the commercial pressures have never been more, have never been more extreme than what they are now. I think that there is definitely a risk that the public airwaves are going to be lost to the public. We're at a crossroads right now. I hate to use that term again, but that's kind of where we are.

**Andras Szanto** Before you go on, did I hear you say that in your opinion if there is a commercial sponsor, the work can't be independent?

**Karen Bond** What I'm saying is that if I'm watching a program and they have a commercial sponsor and they are doing a news story about that sponsor's company, it is very difficult to have confidence that everything that I need to know about that story is going to be revealed, and I think that you and I had talked earlier about a few things that dissenters would like to see happening in a perfect world, so to speak. I guess first on that list would be that public broadcasting would be commercial-free.

The first priority in that category would be that children's programming would be commercial-free, absolutely commercial-free. I don't think that children should be targeted as consumers, even on our commercial broadcast stations, but most especially not on our public broadcast stations. I say priorities because it would be nice to think that this could happen immediately. We could have a wonderful source of finance, and we could not have to

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depend on various sources of money.

But in the real world, as many have heard me say, I believe in the value of incremental change, and I think that incrementally we can move toward commercial-free public broadcasting, and the way that we can do that is we can prioritize. We can look at the children's programming first. Get rid of the advertisements to children, and next we would look at the public affairs programming.

The reason we would do that is because one of the hallmarks of public broadcasting is, in fact, its public affairs programming. What makes it different from public affairs programming on any of the other commercial stations is that we want to know that the news information that we're being exposed to is in fact independently determined, and we have more confidence in that when there is no commercial sponsor for the various news shows on public broadcasting.

A third priority would be expanding the definition of how public broadcasting deals with race and class diversity, and that is for me, personally, and many of the people that I advocate for, an extremely important priority for public broadcasting because I think I heard probably about a thousand times yesterday that the mandate for public broadcasting is to serve the underserved, particularly children and minorities, and if we're talking about moving incrementally toward commercial-free public broadcasting, we have to take into account the fact that commercial pressures require commercial stations to deal with the needs and the interests of the majority population. There is a lot of financial sense in that. The alternative, or what should be the alternative, which is public broadcasting should not have those pressures.

So that would be a third priority, to make sure that we take care of the children, we take care of the public affairs independence, we look at race and class diversity and the importance of having commercial-free

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shows that deal directly with the issues of race and class. It would be very difficult for the various communities, various target communities, for those programs to believe in the independence of the content, unless it is commercial-free.

**Andras Szanto** Thanks. Tom, I saw you furiously scribbling while she was talking. Did you have a comment to make based on that? No?

In that case, I'll just throw it open to all of you. It seems to me there is a bit of an issue here, and I actually wouldn't mind getting your definitions of these terms of what you mean by independent versus what you mean by innovative. Because if, in fact, independent is not taking money from anybody, therefore doing it on a shoestring, and if innovation -- well, I don't know. Maybe innovation doesn't take money. I thought it does. How do you do innovative work in an independent fashion?

**Lois Vossen** I would never define independents as they don't take money from anybody. They have to have money to do their work. For us, independents are those individuals who are out there not aligned with a station, not aligned with any ongoing funding entity. For example, there are some well-known producers who have large corporate sponsors who sponsor a series of shows, and that's wonderful, but we don't really deem that independence. It's those men and women who literally are citizen storytellers. They spend their life devoted to earthing out these stories, and usually with no money, until they find money, to bring the documentaries or the dramas to life.

Innovation is a really interesting question for me. I was talking to one of our board members a couple of years ago, and she was chastising ITVS, that we hadn't been funding enough innovative things lately. I said what do you define as innovation? Her definition of innovation was so completely different than my definition that of course we weren't even on the same page. A few days later I was talking to another board member who felt that our show that had just won a Peabody was the most innovative

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show ever, and I thought, well, see, innovation is such a catchall phrase.

To me it's about new people, partly, new voices who have not -- and that does mean minorities. It does mean people of color. It means immigrants. It means all kinds of different things, but it's also new ways of telling stories.

**Andras Szanto** Exactly. Is there a kind of sacred cow aspect to this sort of 30-minute documentary? Do you all need to move away from that format and innovate other types of formats?

**Lois Vossen** We have moved away from it in some sense, as we fund interstitials. We fund seven-hour dramas. We fund 44-minute dramas when we have to. I think that yes, innovation is partly that. We just funded a very interesting half-hour animated series, animation show, which is very innovative in terms of what it's looking at and using animation to tell that story. So it's a lot of different things.

**Al Perlmutter** I would add to the definition of independence. To me independence also means diversity and the opportunity to get diverse views of diverse subjects. Anybody who has been in an administrative position in broadcasting is so beset with other problems and pressures, and necessary ones and real ones, that they are not in a position to really seek out or to determine, except in their own personal interests perhaps, the variety of ideas that can come from independent or individuals who are very much like artists in a way; painters, sculptors, book writers and so on.

**Lois Vossen** Very much. They are artists. The other thing I was going to say, it has to do with something you said earlier. It's about the people who are making the film, that they don't know the ending to yet. They don't know the answer. They are looking at an issue. They are looking at an area, a community, whatever, to find out what the story is. As the difference between when you go out and you say we're going to make this film because these are the bad guys, these are the good guys,

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that's how we want you to tell the story. Independents go and they are looking for the story. They make the story. They find the story, I guess is a better way of putting it.

**Andras Szanto** Obviously we know that there are people coming up that are going to do interesting and innovative work. Are they fooling themselves if they are hoping to get it on the PBS style national channels or are they barking up the wrong tree? Should they be trying to put it through some other methods of distribution?

**Tom Weinberg** Clearly most of the time they are barking up the wrong tree because there isn't any room for it. It isn't very available. Certainly a few of the ITVS-funded series, a few local things in various places.

But basically I spend about two or three days a week with college students talking about television, Columbia College here. It's amazing to me that most of them, not just a few, but most of them never watch public television, haven't watched it since they were a kid. So you're talking about young people, it's like somehow it's off the radar of so many people, particularly young people, that the future of public television, which is what we're here to talk about, is difficult. If you don't have young people coming who are part of the deal, what's the deal going to be?

**Andras Szanto** But young people tend to find that stuff in other ways. Are they going to do to independent TV what young journalists have done to blogs? Are they going to reshape it in some completely novel form?

**Lois Vossen** I'll jump in really quickly with just one thing. We designed a special initiative called Electric Shadows, which was to make programming that would never be broadcast. It's programming, independently produced programming, that lives strictly on the Internet. Obviously, the people bringing those proposals to us are predominantly much younger than the average independent producer who comes to us for funding.

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So I think the idea is to find innovative ways, again to use that word "innovative," for those young storytellers to come back into the fold. I'm going to disagree with my esteemed colleague and tell independents they shouldn't give up on public television.

**Andras Szanto** I didn't say that. I just said it's difficult.

**Lois Vossen** Barking up the wrong tree. I'm going to tell them to bark up the tree because we're, I think that we're looking -- ITVS and my colleagues that I work with at PBS, we are looking to make the tree more friendly.

**Andras Szanto** Let's run with that metaphor as far as we can.

**Lois Vossen** It was very ugly. As soon as it came out of my mouth, I realized I wish I hadn't said that.

**Tom Weinberg** Our PBS is terrific. It's wonderful that it exists because if it didn't exist, it would be a shutout.

**Andras Szanto** Karen, you had a thought.

**Tom Weinberg** ITVS is not the system.

**Lois Vossen** I agree with you on that.

**Andras Szanto** Karen, you had a thought.

**Tom Weinberg** We need more than that, and the public needs more than that.

**Karen Bond** I agree. I think that as we look at this situation, we keep hearing "it takes money, it takes money, it takes money." I think that one of the really big -- I guess you could call it secrets, but it's not a secret to a lot of us - is exactly what you were referring to. There are young people who never watch public television. There are a lot of people who never watch public television.

Take, for example, the situation in Chicago. We have a situation where people in the African American community, to take just one underserved community as an example, feel that there's not a lot of content in public television and public radio that is speaking directly to them and speaking about their issues and speaking with authority. By authority, I mean the community has buy-in and does give

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credence to what the person who's been chosen to talk about those issues is saying.

I think that there needs to be a great deal of outreach with the youth community, with the African American community, the Latino community. Yesterday WYBE was talking about the Heritage Circles. Interesting concept. I think that concept has been repeated more than just about any concept we've talked about today, a way of bringing communities into the process.

Speaking of hackneyed phrases, if you build it they will come. If there is something that is useful and interesting and meets the needs and the interests of these communities, they will come, and they will not only come with their viewership, they'll come with their dollars. I think that it is very easy to assume that only the affluent class is going to write those checks, but that is not true, and I think that there is a lot of room to prove that that's not true.

**Lois Vossen** I just have to add that that is actually what I was going to say next. ITVS shows are oftentimes used as pledge shows, and to great effect. The shows I'm talking about are shows about gay/lesbian issues, shows that are about Arab American issues, shows that are about Native American issues, and they bring in huge pledge dollars. So the stations that have been smart enough to realize that they can actually target new viewers both as viewers and as potential donors and have really used that to great effect. We're always shocked at how few do it.

**Al Perlmutter** Let me offer another possible take here and weigh the suggestion. Independent producers could have more access to the system. When I was involved in doing a magazine program, I consciously had about half of the producers were old-timers and the other half were people fresh out of college and brand-new people, and some of the most terrific material came from there. So there are ways of dealing with it, but you've got to find time on the air

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for it.

Another thought that should be addressed is that public television through PBS and through the local stations, especially now, have a number of repeat broadcasts on, a number of feature films, and if some of that time could be taken to devote to public affairs and issues, I think it would strengthen the public television schedules around the country tremendously.

**Andras Szanto** I think it's a great idea, and I think it actually leads me into the question that I wanted to ask before we open it up to the audience, which is we could all sit here analyzing the situation, and I think the audience pretty much already has guessed that it's tough to be an independent producer and it's hard to do this kind of work.

I want each of you to put one bright idea on the table, one concrete suggestion that would significantly enhance your ability and your peer's ability to produce and get the work on the air that you would like to see on air. One idea, concrete idea.

Who goes first? Other than more money, please.

**Lois Vossen** This is a minor one, and it's certainly personal to me. I would love to see the two independent film series on PBS become common carriage, POV and Independent Lens. I think they are the only two series on POV that are not common carriage.

**Andras Szanto** On PBS.

**Lois Vossen** I'm sorry, on PBS. So stations would be required to show them at the same time so that our publicity efforts could all be more effective and our outreach, which we do extensive amounts of outreach.

**Al Perlmutter** I think we've heard in the last couple of days that more and more talk shows are coming on public television, issue-oriented, and the justification was that issues can be discussed. The problem I have with that is that there is plenty of talk on the air, and the NewsHour does it in its own way. There are other

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ways to do it certainly. However, that assumes that the viewer and listener to those talk programs has a basic information about what the discussion taking place.

It seems to me that what we need are more documentaries, or the equivalent of documentaries, which would give background on an issue before those talk shows take place. I feel that public television is the place to do it. Certainly networks are not doing it. CNN does not do it as a regular feature on their programs. You have to provide what public television has provided in the past and continue to provide very well, is information and insight and backgrounds that come from good, strong journalistic reporting. I think that should be a prerequisite for any of these talk shows that then take up these subjects.

**Karen Bond** Well, I mentioned one idea, which was the step-by-step decommercialization of public broadcasting.

So I would say second to that would be strengthening the voices of the disenfranchised.

**Andras Szanto** But how?

**Karen Bond** How? I think that a really important thing would be not to try and reinvent the wheel. Understand that there are organizations, groups, citizen activists, etc., who have very, very good suggestions, ideas, concrete proposals. I think that the experience, or at least my experience of many of my fellow activists, have been to feel somewhat rebuffed when you're making those suggestions and to -- in this city, you don't necessarily feel like you're part of the process.

**Andras Szanto** So you're suggesting some sort of established system of panels or feedback loops that would --

**Karen Bond** More than that, more than that, because when we talk about station governance and we talk about having an elected board so that the community feels that the decisions that are made by that governing board are representing them, they have to buy-in to

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all those decisions. When we talk about having the Heritage Councils that were talked about yesterday, those kinds of things are very good, but there has to be that additional step where the community feels like they actually have a vote as opposed to just giving suggestions.

**Andras Szanto** Tom, what is your suggestion?

**Tom Weinberg** Not quite a simple thing. I think the political climate in 2005 in this country and the next four years to follow that really doesn't figure to be one that embraces what we're talking about. It does not embrace the kind of television and journalism that I've been doing for a while, or the ideas really that I care about or put out there when I'm producing programs.

What does that mean? I mean, things like producing TV that seeks out a genuine diversity of voices and provides an ongoing opportunity for people to be on TV and not be mediated and not have any fear of reprisal of any sort. That's one. Is that specific? That's a formula.

Also, producing TV which seeks out, respects the views from people all over the world and presents them. We don't live in some place where the rest of the world doesn't exist. You wouldn't get that from watching most TV. You get very little of it relatively watching public television.

So the rest of the world has to have a place. People who we have to learn from and understand and not get nuts about when something happens. Also, it might not be what the President thinks or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company thinks or anybody else, the Congress or anybody else. It needs to be separated in some way. This pie in the sky talk yesterday about building a fund, that's not new. That's exactly what the Carnegie Commission said when?

**Female Voice** 1967.

**Tom Weinberg** 1967.

Let me get one more.

**Andras Szanto** That's the last one.

**Tom Weinberg** One last one.

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**Andras Szanto** In the spirit of independents, we need to open it up to our audience as well. So one last idea.

**Tom Weinberg** Sixty-one words. Or like providing a consistent daily presence in primetime and at other times for TV that is unpredictable and intellectually provocative and definitely responsible. And doesn't need to be a huge expensive documentary. I completely agree with that. The world is changing. If you have a two-minute or a ten-minute or a twenty-four-minute piece that works, public television ought to be smart enough to know that the world has changed since 1949.

**Andras Szanto** Okay, I'm very gratified, because I actually feel like we've extracted some actual proposals or almost proposals for things that could be done, but now we need to leave some time so that members of the audience can ask their own questions. There are microphones, and if you would, before asking your question, do identify yourself for the record.

**Jerold Starr** Jerry Starr, Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting.

Encouraged by the fact that PBS member stations are only required about ten hours a week of common carriage of the national program service and that the average station has about 30 percent of its schedule comprised of acquisitions or productions that are its own choice, about four years ago we decided to test the boundaries by having a national film competition. We did this in collaboration with the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers with prize monies and juries and came up with four winners of the documentaries and then tried to see how many of these PBS member stations would, in fact, preview them and perhaps put them on the air. It was, despite our best efforts, a dismal failure. There was not the receptivity we thought there might be.

Lois, I'd be very interested in knowing, because ITVS was established by Congress for the purpose of getting more independent productions on TV at a time in which

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public stations were actually doing reruns of old commercial programs, like *Leave it to Beaver*. What share of your programs that are produced by ITVS money actually make it to the national program service. And then secondly, when you're not successful in getting on a national program service, what kind of organization do you have to try to distribute these very good shows to the independent PBS member stations.

**Lois Vossen** That's a great question. We're very pleased that currently, right now, about 70 to 72 percent of our programs get on the national schedule, and that's either on *Independent Lens*, *POV*, which is about 80 percent of the *POV* schedule is ITVS programming. One of my old jobs was to get those shows on places like *Frontline* and *American Experience*, which, as we know, are wonderful series, but they don't really work with independents. They have sort of in-house producers. So to get them once a year to take a real independent production was, we felt, a huge coup. So as I said, about 70 percent.

The second question, I think, is even more important because it speaks to the programming that, again, my colleagues are talking about, which is a program that tends to be a little edgier. It may not look as sharp. Maybe the cinematographer wasn't first-rate cinematographer. ITVS has always filled a huge responsibility to get those shows out as well, and so we have a very aggressive communications department that does stations relations to all stations.

We buy satellite time for every ITVS show that's ever been made. We feed it directly to stations. We work with programmers to help them find ways to tie it into their program. We do publicity. We do outreach occasionally if it warrants it. So I'm happy to say 100 percent of ITVS-funded shows are seen on public television, with about 70 percent.

Now, that number did take a nice jump up once we got *Independent Lens*, because it allowed us -- and I thought it was really smart thinking on behalf of PBS. They

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realized, Pat Mitchell, that having these independent programs all over the schedule was in some way nice, but it made it really hard for viewers to find them, and so the idea was to create this permanent footprint on Tuesday nights at ten. And along with that came ITVS has a voice in what goes on this series.

I co-curate it with colleagues at PBS, and so we get some shows on that they might not have put on otherwise. That's really, I think, really exciting for the field. Frankly, some of those shows are shows that did really well at Sundance, and we think that they are great, or they didn't do really well at Sundance, but we really feel the message is important and that story has to get out there.

I wanted to just briefly say you bring up a really important issue. PBS and public television are two very different things. I do think a lot of scapegoating happens with PBS, and that's a whole nother conference probably. Television, the stations have so much clout, that we need to take control of our public television stations to do what Karen's talking about. I mean, in a grassroots level in our community, we have to be engaged in our station.

**Andras Szanto** Do we have any other questions?

**Cesar Sanchez** Hello, my name is Cesar Sanchez. I'm from Video Machete, a media arts organization here in Chicago. My question goes to the fact that I think as an active participant in this society, we have been dehumanized through commercial aspects. We've been turned into product to some degree, and especially young people have been targeted in that sense. They themselves are dehumanized. I haven't heard that being spoken about here at all. The fact that we as an organization, we're small, but we try to involve people from the very beginning, even in the process of what it means to make media.

So my question is how can you, either as ITVS or independent producers and even public television, engage communities to be active participants in media, and not just be

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active participants, but in the education and the formation of these people to understand what it means to be part of media. I mean, what are some of your -- in order to have vision, in order to be innovative, you have to have a vision, and a lot of these people don't necessarily have that.

**Karen Bond** I think part of that puzzle goes back to the funding issue. I think that when you link yourself too closely to your sponsors, you end up in a situation where you're hamstrung, and you can't afford to have these disparate voices coming at you from various positions and ideologies because you have the sponsor and you know that you have to balance those pressures.

So actually your question goes back to the issue of funding and independence, and that would, of course, lead us into the discussion which we won't get into in great detail at this panel, but it would be the independent funding issue and are we going to take the frequency sale money and put it in a fund for public broadcasting or are we going to have the ABC, NBC, CBS, etc., all the core commercial stations pay into a fund, because we own the public airwaves, as the people of this country, and the commercial broadcasters have never had to pay for using them.

So if they were paying into a fund and that fund were untouchable by the Newt Gingriches of the world, then the fear of the unknown, which is your voice and my voice, etc., wouldn't be so great. In terms of a mechanism, there are various proposals that have been explored, but there would have to be a situation where not just the members of the station but the public that's supposed to be served by this station can voice their opinion, and that that opinion is binding and not just a suggestion.

**Andras Szanto** Well, we are almost out of time. I'll allow one more question, okay, over there?

**Renee Summers** I'm Renee Summers from a WTTW citizens advisory board here in Chicago. My question to you all is what do you feel that we,

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the citizens advisory board, could do in our role to be most effective. You have talked about grassroots efforts. Any ideas?

**Karen Bond** I have ideas, but I just spoke.

**Andras Szanto** Tom?

**Tom Weinberg** I say blast them when they are doing the wrong thing and really praise them when they are doing the right thing. It's hard.

**Karen Bond** But that is an example of what I'm talking about in that the citizens advisory board does not have any member that sits on the governing board, the board of trustees. If, for example, going back to your question, if for example the public voted, let's say, as an incremental step, let's start voting in the community advisory board. There are representatives, but X percentage of the community advisory board have permanent seats on the governing board of the station.

Those kinds of changes would create buy-in in the community, and creating buy-in creates financial resources. It creates good will. It creates involvement that doesn't have to be forced. It comes naturally when people feel they have that buy-in.

**Andras Szanto** Well, I hope that this conversation gave us a sense that the puzzle that I posed at the beginning of the conversation, whether two aspects of public broadcasting, the sort of mainstream and the spirit of independents and progressivism, can meet. I hope that this panel leaves us somewhat optimistic that they can.

One thing that may leave us optimistic is, of course, what Katrina vanden Heuvel of *The Nation* recently said about her magazine, in which she said that George Bush may be a disaster for the nation, but he's wonderful for *The Nation*, in that major issues are again at the forefront of the public agenda, and perhaps we will be less interested in being entertained than also to explore the big issues of the day, and I do believe that it is this group who are going to continue challenging the rest of us to

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continue thinking critically.

So thank you very much, and thank you to the organizers for hosting the panel. Thank you. (Applause.)