

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, Welcome Session:
The Future of Public Television, by
Carroll Joynes
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culture and what, if any, public policy interventions might be indicated.

And as we begin, let me say a word about this man, Irving Harris, for whom the Harris School of Public Policy is named. A remarkably successful businessman, Irving was also a scholar and a truly enlightened philanthropist. His passions were many, but two that were especially important to him were early childhood development and public television. Irving Harris gave his time, his energy, his imagination and his resources to those institutions that researched and advocated on behalf of very young children. Unlike many philanthropists, Irving was also an original thinker, a scholar and writer on the issues that captured his imagination. He devoted many years of his life to public television, serving as a board member and board chair at WTTW here in Chicago. And so, as we convene here this morning, I would like to dedicate this conference to the memory of Irving B. Harris who would have loved to have been with us for this conference and who would have had much to say about the issues that we will address.

And speaking of support, our deepest thanks to the McCormick-Tribune Foundation, without whose generous support this conference would not have taken place, and our deep appreciation, as well, to the Harris School of Public Policy, to the Harris Foundation, and to Jamee Rosa for their contributions. You may know that The University of Chicago is one of the world's premier research universities. You may know that in the past century the University has produced an inordinately large number of Nobel laureates, and you may know that The University of Chicago does not include a school of journalism or a school of communication among its professional schools. What you may not know is that The University of Chicago has been a pioneer in educational broadcasting. With the leadership of Robert Maynard Hutchins and his close colleague, William Benton, in the 1930's the University broadcast its very successful National Radio Network *Chicago Round Table*, said by many

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to be the most successful educational program for broadcast on network radio. And you may not know that from 1983-1994, the University was home of the William Benton Fellowships Program in Broadcast Journalism, the only such program in the United States designed for the best mid-career broadcast journalists from throughout the United States and around the world. The man who will moderate many of your sessions, I will introduce him in a moment, was the founding and longtime director of this program. So, the University is not without its own unique broadcast experience and interests. The motto of the University, **Crescat Scientia Vita Excolitur**, let knowledge increase so that life may be enriched, seems to be in substantial alignment with the mission of public broadcasting. The challenge to a cultural policy study group is to see if and how rational policies can be formulated for the muddy waters of organizational behavior in the cultural arena. What better subject than public television with its less-than-perfectly rational system of finance, its ongoing internal debate over mission, its nagging problem of insufficient local programming and its manifold opportunities and challenges, vis a vis, new media technologies and competition of an entirely different order than we have seen to date.

So, let the conversation begin, and who better to facilitate this conversation than John Callaway, longtime reporter, writer, broadcaster whose years of service in public broadcasting and whose work at The University of Chicago as the founding and longtime director of the William Benton Fellowships in Broadcast Journalism Program provides him with a unique insider's perspective, but whose ability to be fair is fueled by the insatiable curiosity of an outsider blessed with what is described, in journalistic circles, as fresh eyes. It has been a great pleasure to work with John over the past few years. I know that the very least that will happen today is that we will have an extremely lively discussion. Thank you. John Callaway.

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John Callaway Thank you, Carroll, and good morning. Public television is at a crossroads. Public television is at a tipping point. As we prepared for this conference, we heard those and similar remarks over and over again from people that we talked with. We also heard, "Your conference could not be more timely." All of this was most encouraging. It feels good to know that one's conference is on the right set of issues at the right time; but we were also warned, "I hope the people who come to your conference don't say the same old things, the same old bytes, sound bytes." Warning acknowledged. Let me tell you what we asked of the speakers and panelists: Take seriously the claim that public television is at a crossroads. Give us your best thinking about what's required to make good decisions, about what road to take to either redefine the basic mission of public television or to do a better job of fulfilling the original mission of public mission of public television: that is to say to provide programming for underserved audiences, children, and minorities, to provide a good alternative to commercial broadcasting. Give us, we said, give us your best thinking on how the structure and financing mechanisms of public broadcasting can be more rational. Tell us why there is so little local programming on much of public television and what can be done to remedy that old and continuing problem. Look to the future with us and tell us what opportunities and problems you see with the new technologies and new competition. Tell us what we can learn from experiments now being conducted by individual stations. Tell us what we can learn from radio. Tell us what independent producers and critics of the system are saying that we might not be listening to. Help us evaluate how we're doing with one of television's most precious, public television's most precious assets, that is to say, children's programming. Put your cards on the table. Act like you don't have much time, because you don't. The new world of media waits for no one.

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Some have looked at the roster of powerful leaders who have assembled here and exclaimed, "Oh, you're holding a public television summit meeting." Not if you apply the definition of summit meeting as a place where a previously ratified set of agreements is publicly confirmed. No advance agreements have been made to my knowledge, but it is a summit meeting to the extent that the leadership of public broadcasting assembled here has the power to listen to what is said here and to take action on what it hears, and it has the power to offer new ideas, new visions. The conference will feature a number of critics of public television, but it is our hope that we will take constructive notice of the system's deficiencies, in the service of advancing ideas about how to improve or change the system, not just bash it.

For better or worse, we thought of this conference mainly as a kind of workshop for the people who are running or who have run public television institutions and stations. We wanted to provide an environment where they would feel comfortable saying what they really think and listen to people really worth listening to and, of course, it is our fondest hope that following this conference action will be taken to address some, if not all, of the issues to be discussed.

We will be privileged today to hear talks from Pat Mitchell of PBS, Dr. Jerold Starr of Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting, and Kathleen Cox of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and then we will take a break and their speeches will be followed by commentary from Newt Minow, Larry Grossman, and Bill McCarter, followed by some questions from me and the audience. Our lunch break will begin a little after 12:15 and we will return at 1:15 with a talk from John Lawson of the American Association of Public Television Stations, followed by a panel of station executives who will talk about they are doing in their individual stations. And then later on this afternoon we will have a talk by Ken Auletta of

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The New Yorker magazine. So that's our roadmap
for today.