THE TELEVISION ESTABLISHMENT,, THE INDEPENDENT PRODUCER, AND THE SEARCH FOR DIVERSITY

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We seek diversity.

That message seems clearly implicit in the title and theme chosen by the sponsors of this conference. The message also seems to suggest that if diversity is our goal, the means to the goal is the medium of public telecommunications -- and the independent producer is the chosen agent.

The prescription strikes me as a dangerous oversimplification, dangerous because it will lead us into believing we have solved the problem of programming diversity once we have reconciled the differences between the independents and the system. Not so.

We are dealing with not one but two problems: the first involves the means to achieve a wide range of program choices; the second is a matter of access and freedom of expression by those outside the public broadcasting establishment. They are different problems and must be dealt with separately.

Let us look first at diversity.

Of course we're all for it. Luckily, the term is sufficiently ambiguous to allow everyone to embrace it with complete safety, loaded as it is with the suggestion of positive values, promising the delights to be found in differences, and offering up a smorgasbord of infinite options from which to make our choices. One can hardly argue with the notion itself. America is a diverse society and proudly so. We don't need scholars to tell us that "the greater differences that abound in a society, the more interesting and attractive that society will be." [1]

Fair enough. But what meaning does diversity hold in the context of public broadcasting -- or public telecommunications, as the conference title has it?

Does it imply that we are obliged to serve the <u>needs</u> of a highly diverse society -- or merely to reflect society's diversity in our programming? There's a world of difference to the program executive. There are those who will read diversity to mean the free expression of the widest range of political and ideological thought. The less politically minded will see it as geographical diversity, casting the program-gathering net broadly enough to capture the flavors and accents of our regional differences -- or, at any rate, those that have survived the relentless forces of homogenization (of which television is the most pervasive). The practical-minded will see diversity as a demand for programming to suit every variety of need and taste, to serve not the one but the many separate and distinct audiences.

The ambiguity of the term is a trap for the public broadcaster, a trap because the pursuit of these alternate meanings can lead in different, and sometimes contrary, directions. To illustrate: plugging into our regional differences through the deliberate decentralization of national production, parcelling program funds out to various local stations, is not necessarily the best, or even an adequate, means of mirroring our cultural diversity, the rich mixture of ethnic, racial, and religious differences that abound in the country. For that matter, spreading production dollars across the American landscape may not even be the best way of plugging into our regional differences. A "Wall Street Week" from the Old Line state, or Washington political satire from upstate New York, are only two examples of opportunism and enterprise wrestling regionalism to the deck.

We need to choose, to set our priorities, to be more precise about what we want to achieve.

In the process, we need to challenge, perhaps to discard, the notion that program diversity imposes on public broadcasting the need to serve all the many discrete publics — providing a little something for everyone. The notion itself rests on the false assumption that the public looks to the mass media to serve its many particular and specific needs. There is no evidence in communications, research to support the contention that the public wants this kind of diversity in its media, or the expectation that if we supply it they will be magically changed and "uplifted" as a consequence. The public looks to

radio and television primarily for entertainment and information. The public's more specific needs are served by other than the mass media.

This position has been persuasively argued by a scholar of the media writing in the Journal of Communication. "There is nothing," he writes, "absolute or sacred about diversity, per se, certainly as it pertains to mass communications." In asserting that no single mass communications medium should attempt to be functionally equivalent to all other institutions serving the artistic, informational, and entertainment needs of all possible publics, he writes:

> "It is difficult to see how forcing one institution into serving all sub-populations simultaneously is ameliorative in any sense of the term. Rather it would appear that if diversity is to be encouraged, it should be supported <u>across</u> institutions to keep them separate, specialized, and serving the diverse needs of our society." [2]

If the meaning of program diversity is not to be found in serving specialized audiences, what does it mean?

It means choices, but choices within a larger concern for the need for excellence, since excellence must be the first and most important consideration in all that public broadcasting does, the foundation on which the programming structure is built, as the recent Carnegie Commission study emphasized. Within the bounds of excellence will be offered.the widest possible range of program matter, choices. The best because it is the best. Not for special audiences but for everyone/those who demand the best and those who will come to know and want the best once given the opportunity to experience it.

Some believe diversity in programming can be achieved by obtaining programs from diverse sources, particularly by opening the system to easier access by the community of independent film and video makers. I mean to speak of those artists who work alone or in small groups, consistently showing more enterprise than overhead, and who work outside the system for whatever reason. There are powerful reasons why the system should be opened wider to independent production, but I do not believe the search for diversity is one of them. There is nothing in our experience to guarantee that programs from diverse sources will be more varied-in form and content that those produced by institutions. And while, as Sir Huw Wheldon pointed out to the Carnegie Commission, programs are made by individuals, there are instances when the support of an institution is essential because of the complexity and scale of the production: a "Great American Dream Machine," an "Upstairs, Downstairs," or the extended coverage of the Watergate hearings. Public broadcasting needs both the institutional production and the independent production, but it must have ultimate control over some part of its own production; it cannot be left to chance and the luck of the draw. Diversity is the product of careful planning. It must be ordered, ordered in the same sense that a concert is ordered. And this cannot be left to committees.

In fact, committees are the bane of public broadcasting – a barrier to creativity, and the worst possible way to achieve the diversity we seek. A committee cannot create diversity. It is a contradiction•in terms: a committee is a means of dealing with diversity -- and reducing it to an acceptable consensus through accomodation and compromise. It is appropriate to self-government. It is wholly inappropriate to a journalistic or an artistic enterprise, and public broadcasting is both. It must look to other journalistic and artistic enterprises and not to government for its models. They will discover these organizations to be largely hierarchical, perhaps even autocratic. Some one person is in charge and clearly responsible for the decisions that are made. Carnegie II recognized the cancerous effects of consensus programming and recommended the creation of a Program Services Endowment, headed by an executive with authority to make program funding decisions. It was a bold recommendation in today's climate of consensus

programming democratically arrived at. But even they suffered a failure of nerve when pressed to the wall: the program executive, they hasten to point out, is not to be a "programming czar." [3] Apparently one man's "programming czar" is another man's editor-in-chief. One is to be shunned, the other is absolutely essential. Every journalistic enterprise has one, by whatever title: the Director General of the BBC bears also the title of editor-in-chief. They know where the buck stops.

In this connection, let me refer once again to the Carnegie Commission's recommendations for solving public television's need for more national programming of stature and excellence. The creation of an entity within the system "with the exclusive mission of supporting the creative activity necessary for better programming services" [4] is a proper and needed step. But it falls short of what is needed to achieve and sustain a national program schedule of diversity and excellence. To foster creativity, as the Program Services Endowment is apparently designed to do, is the kind of function that belongs with a foundation, not with the leadership organization of public broadcasting. There is more to broadcasting than creating programs. There is the need to create a broadcast service -- and that implies an organizing principle around which program schedules are built, a matter that cannot be left to chance and the competitive scramble for available production dollars. It also requires a governing intelligence daring to risk, willing to put faith and confidence in the individual artist (whether inside or outside the system), and ready to accept responsibility for the decisions that are made and the occasional mistakes that risk-taking entails.

In short, the need is for an editor-in-chief with responsibility not only for funding programs, but for shaping a program service that draws upon the best our creative community can provide, offering viewers the widest possible range of choices.

It would be nice to be democratic about this. We cannot have it both ways: we must decide which is the more important, the structure or the product. In recent years far too much attention has been lavished upon the structure and too little on what the structure is intended to produce. We need only to agree on what belongs on the face of the tube to decide what kind of structure can most effectively and economically produce the desired result. If program diversity is the objective, it is foolish to build a structure that can only result in consensus programming. We have that now. It's called PBS.

There is another facet to this matter of program diversity, and the problem of access for independent producers -- and they are linked.

One of the barriers the independent producer experiences as he seeks access to the system is inherent in a structure in which each of the PBS stations is a potential, if not actual, producer of national programs. It is a situation that creates inevitable tensions between the independents and the stations. On the one hand, the independents need the station as an entry point into the system. But the station has an earlier claim upon available production funds -- to keep its own producers working, its studios fully utilized,and its overhead amortized out of production grants, particularly where stations have made heavy investments in capital equipment in the expectation of producing national programming.

The rationale for station-based national production was not the exclusion of the independent -- though it has worked in that direction - but rather to produce a diversified national schedule. In this it has largely failed. It has failed because competition for available production funds has resulted in stations racing through the same corporate and endowment doors, chasing after the same dollars. Too often the dollars have chosen the programs. Inevitably, the programs are no more diverse than the sources of funding. The scramble for production dollars is competition gone amuck, resulting in a squandering of time, money and creative energy on staff and services that are duplicated in a dozen places, piling overhead on overhead in a system that needs every dollar it can get for programs.

There are sound reasons for localism and local control of public broadcasting. But localism has little or nothing to do with programming for a national audience. The primary function of a local station is to meet local programming needs. Ironically, since program production has been decentralized the amount of local programming has dropped. If we are determined upon quality and diversity in our national program service, we would be well advised to abandon the present system of station-based production centers, relying instead upon separate production centers -- several in number (the recommendation of the earlier Carnegie Commission, but ignored by Congress), possibly with distinct. specialities and competencies -- whose sole function would be the production of the highest quality programming for the national service. Several models are at hand: the Childrens Television Workshop, the now defunct NPACT, and the newly-created science group in Cambridge. The production centers would own no studios, leasing them as needed from stations or other vendors, thus avoiding the economic pitfalls of the present system. Each center would build up an expertise through repeated experience that now is generally lacking, avoiding the absurdity of three different production entities attempting to match the quality of BBC historical drama, and all falling short for lack of experience: each produced only one and may never have the opportunity of trying another.

The work of the several production centers — as well as the work of independent producers - would be coordinated through a highly experienced and tested program staff under the leadership of an editor-in-chief (by whatever title), with the staff, the editor-in-chief would have the power to fund, commission, coordinate,' acquire, whatever would be required to assemble a national program service that would offer the widest range of choices to public television's audience.

Such a system would not find favor with everyone. The faint-hearted will find it too risky. Stations - or some, at least - will see it as a threat to their autonomy. And those who feel that the only good decisions are those in which they had a hand will find it arbitrary. I believe the independent will benefit - and not only by knowing at last where to go for a decision, and getting one without the constant waffling, infinite delays, and bureaucratic shuttlecocking.

But if anyone stands to benefit from a system capable of delivering programs of sustained quality and diversity, it is the viewer. After all, it's his money we're spending. He deserves the best the system can provide.

NOTES

1. Harold Mendelsohn, "Diversity in Broadcasting: Social Need or Sacred Cow — A Sociological Perspective" in Journal of Communication, Vol 28, No 2 (Spring 1978).
2. ibid
3. Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting, "A Public Trust", Bantam Books, New York, 1979.
4. ibid