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"The Independents, Media Arts Centers  
and Public Television"

by John Reilly

Introduction

The stage has been set in the past few years for the greater involvement of independent producers in public television. This gradual shift has been a result of a continuing educational and lobbying effort on the part of independents and their organizations. This effort has had many forums: the halls of Congress, the Carnegie Commission, the Museum of Modern Art, hosts of public stations, Arden House seminars, newsletters, and regional and national meetings of all types.

Two significant things have resulted from all of these efforts; the Public Telecommunications Financing Act of 1978 specifying that independent producers and their organizations should receive significant funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Carnegie Commission's succinctly presented case for the need of independents to receive better treatment by the public television system and its suggestions for some solutions.

"We feel the question now is how can the Corporation respond to the Congressional mandate, and to the exhaustive documentation and suggestions of Carnegie II. We k-now, of course, the Corporation has been funding non-station productions with as much as 50 percent of their Production Fund allocations but, clearly, from the enormity of the case presented to both the Congress and the Commission, something is missing from this funding effort. We postulate that the missing elements have to do with long range planning on how to achieve maximum results with limited funds, and a clearly identified means of reaching the smaller producers in the independent community on a national, consistent, and fair basis.

The following statement was made by Robben W. Fleming, President of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, on April 3, 1979, before the Subcommittee on Communications of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce as part of an oversight hearing on the implementation of the 1978 Public Telecommunications Financing Act:

"Apart from the above, the 1978 Act adds three provisions specifically expanding the CPB's program funding activities. It:

- 1) Expands to 'public telecommunications entities' those who may receive assistance for program . . . development and distribution?
- 2) Expands potential recipients of CPB grants and contracts with specific emphasis on production and acquisition of programs from qualified independent producers, and
- 3) Requires that proposals for program production or acquisition, to the extent practical, should be evaluated by panels of outside experts representing diverse interests. At the same time, CPB is expected to use prudent business judgement in all program funding activities."

We offer this paper as a modest proposal to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and to Robben Fleming, to help resolve the question of how "production or acquisition of programs from qualified independent producers" can be accomplished fairly, and with the greatest possible emphasis on involving the independent producers on as many decision-making levels as possible.

It should be remembered how we arrived at a point where independent producers were specifically written into a funding bill for public broadcasting by the Congress. The Carnegie

Commission offers some insight into the necessity of this conclusion;

"We have seen only sporadic efforts to permit artists access to the system; only rarely has the system been in a position to seek out the finest American talents, so that the public might benefit by their endeavor. Instead, we see independent producers required to 'affiliate' with a station in order to gain access to the system."

"Moreover, the stations', own cooperative program development process has too often preferred the safe and has discouraged individual achievement."

The Commission stated repeatedly and forcefully that the present system had not encouraged creative producers to do their best work. From the Commission's report on this point:

"No organization currently exists in public broadcasting with an exclusive, mission of supporting the creative activity 'necessary --for better • programming services \* One producer told the Commission: 'Instead of seeing how one can clean up the top, please figure out what it is that creative individuals need in order to make programs. It is the individuals rather than the institutions that make programs, and it is institutions that must be created that will support those individuals(1)'. " (p.77, A Public Trust; the Landmark Report of the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting; (1) testimony by Michael Ambrosino before the Commission, Nov. 18, 1977.).

"The achievement of excellence in any field is rare. It requires specialized . and rather single-minded effort, a^ broad and constantly renewable pool of talent, and devotion to the process of creation rather than to maintenance of bureaucracies and turf. To institutionalize this vital activity is the' challenge that has eluded public broadcasting over the years." (ibid.)

We feel that, based on the Commission's eighteen exhaustive months of work, and from our own experience of the past three years in conducting seminars and workshops in public television with independents, it is absolutely necessary to help incorporate

a new structure into the system to effectively deal with the independent producers. Once again, Mike Ambrosino on this issue, "It is the individuals rather than the institutions that make programs, and it is institutions that must be created that will help those individuals" (p. 77 Carnegie Commission Report).

We feel that these institutions exist.

There is now, and has been for some time, an infra-structure within the independent video and film community that effectively accomplishes many of the goals that the Commission correctly feels have not been achieved in the broadcast system. Broadly speaking, these artist-run organizations are the Media Centers which serve the independents on a regional basis. Fortunately, therefore, it is not necessary to create new institutions to serve the artist; in this case they already exist.

Most of these organizations have been funded by the Media Arts program of the National Endowment for the Arts under its Media Arts Center and other related categories. A partial list follows: Bay Area Video Coalition, Boston Film/Video Foundation, Carnegie Film Section, Film Center of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Film-in-the-Cities, Global Village Video Resource Center, the Kitchen Center for Video And Music, Media Study/Buffalo, Museum of Modern Art Department of Film/Video, Northwest Film Study Center, Pacific Film Archive, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Rocky Mountain Film Study Center, South Carolina Arts Commission, Southwest Alternate Media Center, University

Film Study Center, and the Walker Art Center.

There are also centers not funded under the Media Arts Center category. Among them are; Alabama Filmmakers Co-op, ^ and/or. Anthology Film Archives, Appalshop, Association of .Independent Film and Videomakers, Chicago Editing Center, Community Film Workshop of Chicago, Double Helix, Downtown Community T.V., Foundation for Art in Cinema, Grassroots TV Network, IMAGE, Institute for New Cinema Artists, Inter-Media Arts Center, Long Beach Museum of Art, Maine Film Alliance, Martha Stewart Communications, Millenium Film Workshop, Neighborhood Film Project, New Orleans Video Access Center, Northwest Media Project, Oblate Communications, Ohio State University Department of Photography and Cinema, Sheldon Film Theater, Sun Ship Communications, Synapse Video Center, Utah-US Film, Whitney Museum of American Art/Film and Video Department, Young Filmmakers/Video Arts. This list suggests the range of the field; it is not to suggest that all of these Centers could or would indeed desire to produce programs or series for public television.

Why are these organizations important in effectively supporting the work of independent producers both in the area of new productions and acquisitions?

Because throughout their existence they have gone through a rigorous process of peer group review procedures, they have enviable track records of fiscal accountability and fund raising skills and, most importantly, because they know the independent

film and videomakers best and have served them in their production, exhibition and distribution needs.

The field of Media Centers is organic and responds to changing needs and emerging talent. This structure is not the creation of a single bureaucracy in Washington, New York, or wherever. It is diverse and evolves as needs and talents emerge.

To mention a few examples, there is the recently formed Bay Area Video Coalition and the Boston Film/Video Foundation, both exciting and dynamic groups fulfilling real production and broadcast exhibition needs of film and videomakers, and there is the very recently formed "Public Interest Video Network," a coalition of ten or more media organizations that made history by broadcasting the recent anti-nuclear demonstration in Washington, D.C. These organizations have grown out of the field and are responsive to the needs of the makers, needs that must be reached if support of projects is to be effective.

What specific role can these organizations play in the identification and support of the independent producers?

John J. O'Connor, in a May 20, 1979 New York Times piece, addressed himself to the definition of the "independent", and his broadcast involvement:

"Obviously the role of the independent producer on television - public or commercial - will not be determined easily or very amicably. Merely defining 'independent' is a problem. Technically, Norman Lear,

the Children's Television Workshop and Dick Cavett/Daphne Productions are independent. But they are not included in most debates on the subject. Generally, the independents in question are small producing organizations or individual producers who operate outside television stations and distribution organizations. The content of their work ranges from video art to documentaries."

The funding bill that President Fleming was reporting on to Congress, the Public Telecommunications Financing Act, specifically called for the support of "small independent producers and their organizations." The groups that are most directly in touch with the small independent producers are the Media Centers which exhibit their works, provide a center or place for independents to relate to, and, increasingly, produce series for local or regional broadcast of works. Further along in the same May 20th Times article, John J. O'Connor speaks of these efforts on the part of independents to change the present situation:

"In-attempting to change this pattern and, at the same time, establish some sort of foothold within the broadcasting establishment, independents have been organizing festivals, museum seminars and assorted lobbying efforts across the country. One thing is clear at this point; They can no longer be ignored." (p. 38)

Again, all of these efforts have been carried out by Media Centers organized and run by independent producers. We feel these same organizations can serve an important function in the dissemination of funds to independents, in aiding the production of finished works, in providing post-production facilities, and in packaging series for local and national broadcast.



What specific strengths do Media Centers possess that would make the tasks of fund dissemination, production and post-production, and producing of series possible?

1. First, and foremost, they are the organizations that have chosen to affiliate with, and in most cases have been started and are run by, independent producers.
2. As a group, the Media Arts Centers, as identified by the National Endowment for the Arts, possess considerable skills in fund raising and are fiscally responsible. The combined budgets of the Media Arts Centers supported in that category run into the millions of dollars, with a total average annual budget of each Center in excess of \$200i000. Three Centers have recently been awarded National Endowment for the Arts Challenge Grants (Media Center/Buffalo, Global Village, and the Pittsburgh Filmmakers), passing the rigorous and demanding review procedures with high evaluation scores. They are, as a group, very accountable and fiscally responsible, showing a considerable capacity to raise funds from diverse sources of funders and the general public; in this regard they resemble the public stations, but on a smaller scale.
3. Dr. Fleming spoke of the need of the Corporation to have "proposals for program production or acquisition ... evaluated by panels of outside experts representing diverse interests." With the panel system presently functioning at the National Endowment for the Arts Media-Arts Program, over 50 panel members each year evaluate

proposals from the field, both on an organizational and an individual basis. These panels are composed of experts from public broadcasting, the arts, commercial television, and writers, critics, independent producers, curators and others. Therefore, the professional references called for by Congress for the Corporation are built naturally into the Media Centers' organizations. In addition, most Centers use peer group review to run festivals, exhibition programs and allocations for production facilities.

4. These organizations represent a national trend in the film and video areas. They are the media "alternate spaces" of a few years ago. They have existed as organizations for an average of seven years, with a few existing considerably longer. They are the new and "emerging" institutions of the video and film community.

In order to take the steps necessary to alter the present public broadcasting system which has not functioned as well as most independents and others would like, it is necessary to turn to new elements in the community. And from Carnegie II the message is clear. They called for the "creation of a format balanced between the differing needs of producers and stations." Carnegie II has also postulated the creation of an Endowment that would not be part of any one station or PBS but would have a degree of autonomy in the Trust concept.

We feel that these statements are significant, for they recognize the need to have structures functioning outside of the present station/network system to solve the creative needs

of both independent producers and producers within the stations. Carnegie II made it clear that it is not sufficient simply to turn to an existing station or group of stations to solve the problems of creative producers but to create new structures.

Media Centers have had successful experience in productions and series for independents as well as extensive experience in choosing and, exhibiting the best of the independent-works; and they have worked closely with public television stations.

The Bay Area Video Coalition is an outstanding example. BAVC has put together a major series of independents' works for which this Media Center has raised full funding (approximately \$130,000 with \$50,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting). The series will be post-produced at KCET in Los Angeles and aired on six California stations and later on the Public Broadcasting System.

Another example is Media Study/Buffalo, which is completing the programming of a series of independents' works which will be aired over WNED in Buffalo. James Blue is the executive producer of the series for Media Study.

One of the longest-running independent series comes from the South West Alternate Media Project, formerly known as the Rice Media Center. They have produced a 13-week series of independent works broadcast on KUHT in Houston, and have done so for the past four years. The program, called "The Territory," has been a great success.

Finally, University Community Video in Minneapolis-St. Paul is a group that has consistently produced powerful works that have been broadcast locally, and some nationally.

A host of other groups have strong production capability; the Chicago Editing Center, Downtown Community Television, Synapse, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, and others. On a national level, Global Village is currently preparing a national series for independents, working in cooperation with six public stations, and a regional series for New York State.

The Media Centers can provide diversity and a wide range of viewpoints greatly needed on American television.

As the American broadcasting industry now stands, it is as though there were only the New York Times, the Washington Post. The Los Angeles Times, and, let us say, National Geographic Magazine. This is not to malign these publications; they are necessary and often brilliant publications. But they cannot possibly duplicate the service of providing the opposite, eclectic, hard-hitting or unusual viewpoint to the American public that smaller publications often do. The New York Times could not publish a magazine like The Nation, for clearly. The Nation requires for its very existence the freedom to be small, independent and eclectic. We feel that the Media Centers can provide the diversity of viewpoints that have proven so difficult to broadcast.

Why Should Media Centers, and not the public stations, be responsible for working closely with independents and for producing material for broadcast ?

One could certainly make a good case that the success of the Television Laboratory at WNET proves that stations can function effectively in working with artists. The Lab has indeed had a degree of success, but that has required a considerable

investment on the part of the station as well as on the part of a number of funding agencies,.- and- has required the skills and talent of someone of the caliber of David Loxton. And it is the only example; no other station has attempted anything on the scale of the TV Lab, with the exception of WGBH, and in that case they are working closely with an independent media center, the Boston Film/Video Foundation.

After three years and 18 programs of our series of seminar/workshops called "The Independent Producer, Public Television, and the New Video Technologies", a national series of seminar/workshops held in conjunction with public television stations, we have concluded that it is simply unfair to ask a station to set up what amounts to a media center at the station to work with artists. The commitment in time, energy and space is simply beyond the capacity of most - not to mention the extreme pressure that most stations are under to raise funds and operate a broadcast facility.

What would be necessary \_in order for the media center to succeed in producing \_for \_public television?

1. It would be necessary to enlist the services of the National Endowment for the Arts Media Arts Panel in the initial selections of centers that meet the requirements.
2. It would be necessary, as a first step, to select those organizations that make a strong commitment to broadcasting independent works. There are a few with current series in the works, and others that have demonstrated strong production capacity.

3. Any center that would be considered for funding should have a strong working relationship with at least one public television station. It should be a cooperative relationship, stressing the strength of each partner.
4. The center should be funded to produce a certain number of programs in a given year, with maximum freedom given to each to select the independents and prepare the programs. We would suggest cooperation with public stations, in all phases of the process.

#### IN SUMMARY

The Media Arts Centers provide an opportunity for the ; Corporation for Public Broadcasting to bring the most talented video and filmmakers in the country into public television. By giving a series of block grants to key centers that work closely with public stations, the Corporation could accomplish one of its main objectives, that of bringing into the system the smaller, talented independent producers.

One alternative is for CPB to take upon itself the task of viewing hundreds of thousands of applications from all parts of the country and of making fair judgements. Even if the Corporation took this approach, it still would not solve the problem of follow-through and other assistance to makers which is necessary to achieve success.

Another alternative would be to set. up a new central agency that would attempt to carry out CPB's task of awarding grants. This would be overly centralized, and therefore not regionally responsive. It would not take advantage of existing artists' structures, and it would force the independent to go to one place when it might be possible to provide many opportunities. One of the major strengths of public television is the diversity of the system. Independents have often found one station that would acquire a work where another would not. This pattern is healthy and should be emulated in the funding and support of independent producers.

Another possibility is to ask the stations themselves to take on the task of screening the hundreds of applications that would be made and to administer production grants to independents. We feel that most stations would be unable to maintain a TV Lab-type of operation, and it would be unfair both to the stations and independent producers to ask them to do so.

We feel that it is the Media Centers that can accomplish the goal set by Robben Fleming to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. And we feel that they can do it in a manner that would benefit all concerned, including the viewing public.