

INDEPENDENCE AND INTEGRITY:

A GUIDEBOOK FOR PUBLIC RADIO JOURNALISM



Major funding for the Conference on Public Radio Journalism as well as the writing, publication, and distribution of this guidebook, provided by a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

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National Public Radio

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Foreword by William Siemerling

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Alan G. Stavitsky

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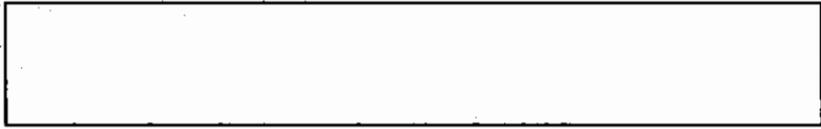
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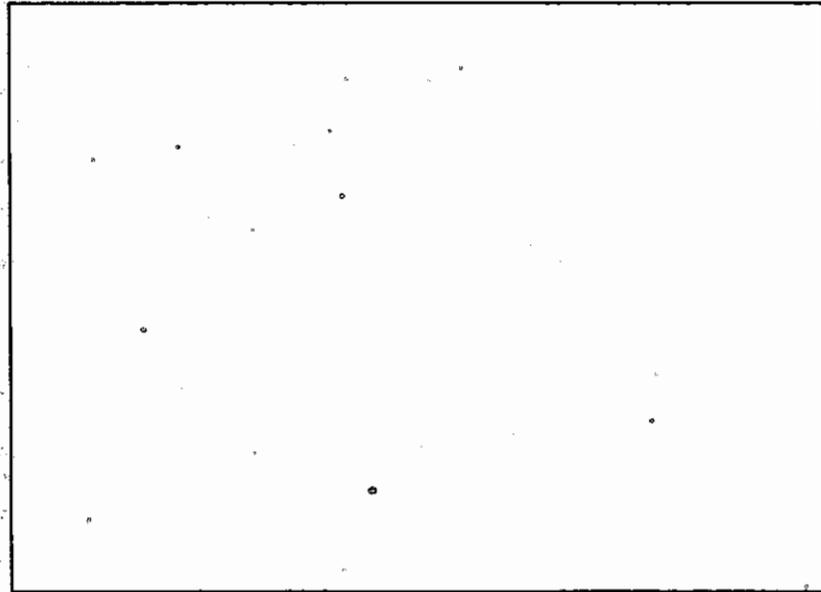
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Foreword

By William Siemering



Independence and integrity are as essential to our work as operating with sterile instruments is for a surgeon. Even though this excellent book is at least twenty-five years overdue, it couldn't come at a more opportune time.

Public radio news and information are needed more now than ever as issues are more complex and the electronic media distort through compression and feed the insatiable appetite for the sensational. Public radio is unequalled in comprehensive, thoughtful coverage of government and is the best example of public journalism at the local station. We have no agenda; we report accurately; we are fair and balanced; we tell the truth.

That's why we need this book. While our task may sound simple enough, we all know how hard it is sometimes. This is not a book of theory; it is drawn from the real experiences of a broad range of journalists/producers at the Conference on Public Radio Journalism at the Poynter Institute.

This book builds upon a long history of journalism. In the first Mission and Goals statement of NPR, written in 1970, you'll find themes which continue to be developed today: "National Public Radio...will regard the individual differences...with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness."

When *All Things Considered* was an idea without a name I said it would reflect "the highest standards of broadcast journalism." It would, among other things: "not substitute superficial blandness for genuine

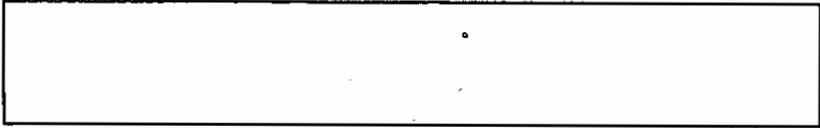
diversity; it would speak with many voices and many dialects. (NPR) will not regard its audience as a 'market'...but as curious complex individuals who are looking for some understanding, meaning and joy in the human experience."

From the beginning, we worked hard to live up to the "highest standards of broadcast journalism." If we hadn't, public radio long ago would have been marginalized as a small alternative operation. Because hundreds of reporters, editors and producers have been dedicated to these principles, public radio is one of the most highly regarded news services in the world.

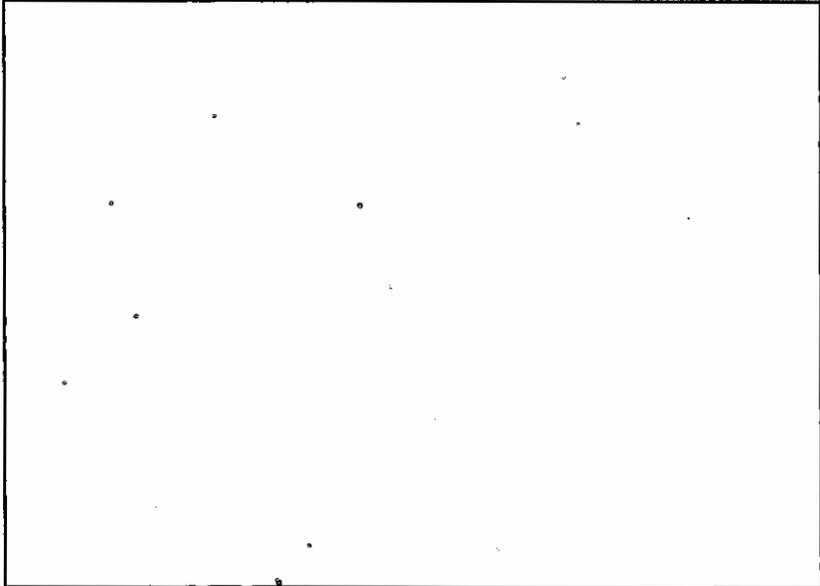
My appreciation of our system has been deepened by my recent work introducing public radio principles to aspiring broadcasters in new democracies. In South Africa, the first institution to be reformed was broadcasting, with the appointment of an autonomous, multi-racial Board of Directors for the South African Broadcasting Corporation. In a country where the dominant medium is radio, the South Africans knew an independent system of broadcasting was essential for a democratic society. For our mature democracy to remain vital we must be committed to journalistic integrity and vigilant of any attempts to compromise our work. This practical guide will be invaluable to keep our trust with our listeners.



William Siemering wrote the original Mission and Goals for NPR and served as its first Director of Programming. Currently a radio consultant to the Soros Foundation, he worked for 22 years in public radio as a reporter/producer and station manager.



Sponsors' Introduction



Building a News Network

For our listeners, public radio is where you hear the news. More and more in recent years, people have come to depend on their public radio station as a primary source of news reports and analysis of the most important issues affecting their communities and their lives. Whether it is National Public Radio news, *Monitor Radio*, *Marketplace*, or a local news segment, top-quality journalism has become the trademark of our growing system.

Each station, each national network, each independent program producer is an autonomous journalistic unit, responsible for the quality and integrity of each broadcast. Yet public radio has developed an identity that goes far beyond the sum of individual stations and producers.

We are not just a haphazard collection of large and small entities who happen to share a common satellite system and similar funding structures: we are increasingly functioning as a unified, coordinated news gathering and broadcasting organization. That is the way our listeners perceive us — as a single network broadcasting high quality national and local programs. With this identity has come the commitment to our listeners that whenever they are tuned to a public radio station they can depend on the quality of our journalism, and that the standards throughout the system will be not only high but consistent.

This book, and the process it represents, is about those journalistic standards: compiling existing standards in our various public radio organizations, making them explicit and clear, collating them with those of our colleagues in other journalistic organizations, pointing out differences and disagreements, and providing a coherent presentation of recommended standards for your consideration and application.

This book is more than an exploration of standards. It grows out of the long-standing effort to protect and defend the independence and integrity of public radio and its unique public service role in the American media. The premise of our endeavor is that achieving high credibility and high quality is our greatest goal and our greatest strength; standards are the guides we use — and our listeners use — to show us when we have achieved our quality goals and when we have fallen short.

In May 1994, 80 public radio professionals representing all aspects of our system met in St. Petersburg, Florida, to deliberate about the wide range of issues affecting the independence and integrity of public radio journalism. The Conference on Public Radio Journalism was a cooperative effort: National Public Radio, Public Radio International and Public Radio News Directors Inc. organized and convened the event. The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, which has acquired an unparalleled reputation for the pursuit of high quality journalism, provided the venue and expert assistance; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provided funding and supported the concept of journalists setting their own standards. The three days of deliberation in St. Petersburg laid the foundation for this book. The authority, credibility and ultimately the usefulness of this guidebook depend on the extent to which we have captured the collective wisdom of that group and kept alive their commitment to high standards, good journalism and a strong news network.

We need to say a word about the way this book may be used, and about its limits. Be assured that this is not a rulebook. Journalism as a profession and a craft lacks the precision of scientific laws. We have tried to make the discussion of standards as specific and relevant as possible to the particular problems of public radio journalists. The checklists and case studies are intended to lead our thinking through ethical dilemmas and guide us so that our decisions and policies are based on the right questions and the right facts. We have indicated where possible the way other news organizations, in public radio and outside our system, have resolved particular issues. And we have provided suggestions for other books and manuals to keep on the shelf in your newsroom.

In the end, as with any journalistic entity, the responsibility and decision rests with you and your news organization, whether it is a station, a network or an independent program. It is our intention and our hope that we have narrowed the parameters of decision-making so that, while individual decisions and policies may differ, standards of quality will be consistent throughout the system. The bottom line is our

listeners: when they turn to us they should be able to trust that they are getting the highest quality journalism. We owe it to our listeners to tell them everything they need to know to judge the quality of what they are hearing, and reach their own conclusions about the information presented. That includes standards, especially when they differ significantly from those generally applied throughout the public radio system.

Remember also, this book isn't only for journalists. It is for managers, programmers, development staff, university officials, student volunteers, advisory committee members — anyone who cares about and has a stake in excellence in public radio.

We also intend the discussion herein to include the complex editorial and ethical decisions that the producers of cultural programming share with news journalists. We create distinctions between program types that our listeners often ignore. After all, news programs can entertain, cultural programs can inform. We construe the parameters of journalism broadly in this volume, to embrace documentary, non-fiction narrative, call-ins, performance programs. We're all in this together.

We are publishing this book at a critical moment in the history of public broadcasting. Money appropriated by Congress and distributed by CPB has been an important, though declining, source of revenue for stations — and indirectly for network organizations. Now, there is open discussion in Congress about greatly reducing the federal contribution or eliminating it altogether.

While the debate is part of a larger movement to downsize government, the specific focus on public broadcasting has included the long-standing criticism that public radio and television are biased in favor of liberal values and causes. That aspect of this debate, by directly questioning the quality of our journalism, is directly relevant to this book, and to our efforts to renew the dialogue about network-wide standards of quality in public radio.

Our journalistic standards, we must assert with conviction, will be the same whatever the outcome of the debate over federal funding for public broadcasting. Our credibility with listeners does not depend on our federal funding, but it does depend on our commitment to fairness, accuracy and balance in all of our coverage. This book intends to provide the tools to evaluate our own editorial decision-making, to judge the validity of criticism directed at us and to respond to that criticism, especially when it comes from listeners, with a confident explanation of our standards and how we apply them.

This book is a work in progress. Work out your own station or program policies and keep them here. Develop reasoned explanations to listener questions about bias and keep a copy here. Scribble in the margins, stick gummed notes on the pages, argue about the content in staff meetings, photocopy it for stringers and volunteers, loan it out (but get it back). Write periodic commentaries to broadcast to your listeners telling them candidly how you see your standards, and asking for their views.

Keep this book on your shelf and use it to raise your sights.

Many people contributed long hours, deep thoughts and good humor to this book because they believe in the special role of public radio journalism.

Bob Steele, Valerie Hyman, Roy Peter Clark and Jeanie Nissenbaum of the Poynter Institute showed us not only how to organize a discussion among journalists but were our guides in making ethics come alive. Bob Coonrod and Rick Madden of CPB cleared the way for this process by providing not only financial support but by supporting our principle that journalists set their own standards. Finally, from the conference through the book, Debbie Elliott, assistant to the sponsors, kept us organized and on task.

John Dinges

National Public Radio

Ken Mills

Public Radio International

Tripp Sommer

Public Radio News Directors Inc.

Author's Acknowledgments

Like public radio itself, this book was a hugely collaborative venture. Your author wishes to acknowledge the support and assistance of the sponsors, whose editing, prodding, and encouraging saw this project through to completion. My University of Oregon colleague, kayaking partner and friend, Bill Ryan, designed this volume and supervised the publishing process with his usual boundless creativity and unflagging energy. Participants in the Conference on Public Radio Journalism provided valuable editorial suggestions. Special thanks, however, are due Don Hein, Sandy Tolan and Michael Marcotte for their insight and clarity in illuminating particular issues. Finally, my wife Terri and daughters Ariel and Zina provided the diversion of love that ultimately kept the words flowing.

Alan G. Stavitsky
Eugene, Oregon



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C H A P T E R

Public Radio's
Legacy
of
Independence

I



A First Amendment Problem

Public broadcasting has a particularly delicate First Amendment problem. We use taxpayers' funds and have a relationship with Congress. Though Congress is not supposed to interfere with public broadcasters' right of free speech under the First Amendment, Congress *is* responsible for overseeing the expenditure of public funds. How can public broadcasters receive the First Amendment protection necessary to serve their journalistic function if Congress is overseeing what is broadcast? Conversely, how can Congress justify the expenditure of public funds to broadcasters over whom the legislators have no oversight?

Is there a contradiction here? Not according to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967: the act set up a system in which public broadcasters could be both *journalistically independent* and *financially accountable*, with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) as intermediary. Let's take a quick look at the history of public radio to understand the evolution of this complex situation.

“Congress shall make no law...
abridging the freedom of speech,
or of the press...”

• • • • •
*from the First Amendment
to the United States Constitution*

Our Roots in Education

Though educational institutions were among the earliest radio broadcasters, the sale of advertising quickly became the economic basis of radio in the United States. Commercial stations, flush with mass-appeal entertainment programs from the powerful new national networks, dominated the airwaves by the end of the 1920s. In the 1930s, however, a group of prominent educators — with a belief in radio’s ability to educate, inform and enrich — was determined to keep noncommercial broadcasting alive. They lobbied Congress to set aside 25 percent of the broadcast spectrum for educational broadcasters as part of the Communications Act of 1934. Though the educators were unsuccessful in 1934, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates broadcasting, in 1938 allocated some AM channels for educational broadcasting. In doing so the FCC created a new classification: *noncommercial educational* stations, which remains the legal description of public radio.

“No public broadcast station may make its facilities available to any person for the broadcasting of any advertisement,” reads the Communications Act, as amended through the years, in defining “non-commercial.”

As public broadcasting scholar Willard Rowland of the University of Colorado has noted, the law tells us what public broadcasting is not (that is, commercial), rather than what it is. In practice, however, broadcasters themselves have defined the core value of public radio: to address listeners as citizens and individuals, not as consumers. We create programming to serve the public.

We aspire to see our audience grow, but we do not view our audience as a marketable commodity. Public radio’s demographics are indeed attractive, but we must guard against making programming choices designed to capture a segment of consumers. From the beginning, however, we have been dependent for financial support on others — institutions, subscribers, underwriters. Inevitably there is tension between our noncommercial mission and our need to seek funding, between commercial-free programming and underwriting “mentions.”

When the FCC was establishing the FM band in the early 1940s, educators again lobbied for reserved frequencies. The commission responded in 1945 by setting aside 20 channels between 88 and 92 megaHertz, where most public radio stations are found today. One significant development during this period was the founding of the Pacifica chain of stations, with the establishment of KPFA-FM in

Berkeley, California, in 1949. Pacifica conceived the notion of listener sponsorship, emphasized the broadcast of minority viewpoints, and relied heavily upon community volunteers. All of these innovations have influenced contemporary public radio programming and operations. Nevertheless, educational radio meandered into the 1960s — underfunded, often uninspired, and lacking regular national programming. FM listenership was slow to catch on, and many educational licensees turned their attention and resources to a new medium: television.

Educational radio was nearly left out of the process that laid the foundation for contemporary public broadcasting. The Carnegie Commission was established in 1965 to recommend ways to upgrade the struggling educational television system. Support for radio was added as an afterthought in the final draft of the resulting legislation, because of the determined efforts of educational radio advocates. The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 represented the first instance of federal funding for public broadcast programming and operations in the United States. Note the name change to *public* broadcasting, which reflected the Carnegie Commission's vision that noncommercial radio and television should have broad appeal beyond traditional educational uses, to encompass human interest and information.

The act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to be an independent, private organization charged with distributing federal funds to stations, networks and producers; establishing interconnected systems of public radio and television; funding the production of programming; and otherwise fostering the development of a loose confederation of stations into a unified public broadcasting system. Out of concern about creating a government-controlled broadcasting system, CPB was forbidden from owning or operating stations and networks, or from producing programs itself. The intent was to keep the government out of broadcasting so that politicians, especially the party in power, would not be able to use the airwaves for political advantage or to spread propaganda.

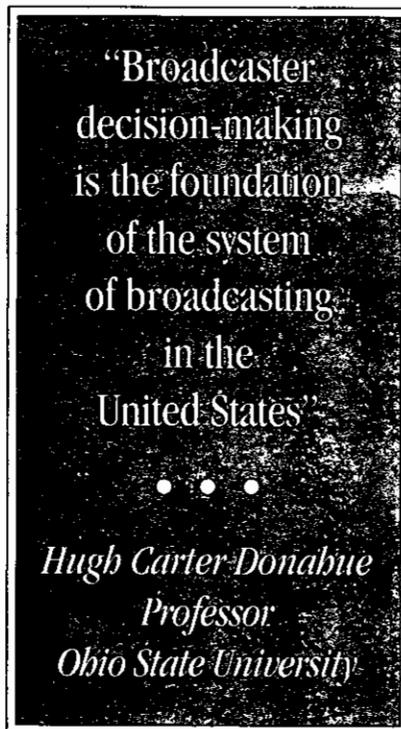
“It’s inconceivable
that we should
allow (radio) to be
drowned in
advertising chatter.”

• • •

Herbert Hoover
Secretary
of Commerce
1924

CPB sponsored a series of meetings of public radio station managers in 1969 and 1970 that culminated in the incorporation of National Public Radio in 1970. NPR was established to produce and distribute journalistic and cultural programs. Its initial news offering, *All Things Considered*, was first broadcast in 1971 by 104 stations; *Morning Edition* was added in 1979.

NPR began distributing programs nationwide by satellite in 1980, which opened the door for public radio's programming marketplace. American Public Radio (APR) emerged in 1983 to distribute Minnesota



Public Radio's *A Prairie Home Companion* with Garrison Keillor, and soon added other programs. APR — which today distributes *Marketplace* and *Monitor Radio*, among others — was recently renamed Public Radio International (PRI), to reflect a new global emphasis. Many individual public radio stations and independent producers have also begun offering their programs to other stations, either directly via the satellite or distributed by one of the networks. Public radio stations today are able to obtain programs from a variety of sources in constructing their broadcast schedules.

In 1984 Public Radio News Directors Inc. (PRNDI) was founded by a group of news directors to serve the needs of station-based journalists and work closely with the networks. PRNDI offers training and professional development programs, holds an awards competition and annual conference, publishes a quarterly newsletter, and provides journalistic support at the local level.

Today both NPR and PRI have about 500 affiliates; many stations pay fees to both networks, meaning they pay dues to the networks based upon the amount of programming they purchase and the support services they seek. While there are nearly 1,700 U.S. radio stations classified as noncommercial educational, about 630 have CPB-qualified status. These stations receive grants of federal funds from CPB because they meet CPB's criteria for minimum levels of staffing, broadcast hours, and budget. Noncommercial educational stations that are not CPB-qualified may be small stations operated primarily by community volunteers, stations

operated by religious institutions, or stations located at educational institutions that operate largely to train students.

Independence

Public broadcasters are protected, as members of the “press,” by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, there are special circumstances applying to broadcasters in general, and still others that apply to public broadcasters. Because we utilize the electromagnetic spectrum, which belongs to the public, all broadcasters are subject to regulations set forth in the Communications Act of 1934 and its subsequent amendments, which include the Public Broadcasting Act. Though section 326 of the Communications Act forbids interference “with the right of free speech by means of radio communication,” broadcasters have long contended that certain federal regulations, most notably the now-repealed Fairness Doctrine and rules that constrained business practices, conferred upon them second-class First-Amendment status.

As we noted earlier, public broadcasters, as recipients of tax-based funds, are in a doubly sensitive situation. Let’s look at the language in the Public Broadcasting Act that addresses the issue of balancing independence and accountability. First, CPB is charged with affording public broadcasting “maximum protection from extraneous interference and control” and assuring “maximum freedom (of public broadcasting) from interference with, or control of, program content or other activities.” This is the corporation’s so-called “heat shield” function, to protect public broadcasting from governmental interference.

At the same time, Congress included a provision in the 1967 act requiring CPB “to facilitate...strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature.” It was unclear where the responsibility for judging “objectivity and balance” fell: to the station, CPB, the FCC, Congress, listeners? Further, the phrase “in all programs or series of programs” was ambiguous. Did this mean each program must be balanced within itself, or that balance may be achieved across a series of programs?

So, on the one hand, the legislation called for public broadcasters to be free from external interference, while on the other hand, “objectivity and balance” were mandated. How does this work in practice?

Consider an onion analogy. Public broadcasting’s founding legislation built in layers of insulation between government and broadcaster. CPB policy is set by a board of directors insulated from Congress be-

cause the directors are appointed by the president of the United States. The president's influence is limited because CPB by-laws require a bipartisan board. The board is responsible for choosing the president of CPB, but directors cannot make programming decisions.

CPB allocates money to stations, in the form of Community Service Grants (CSG), on purely technical grounds, based upon the amount of their non-federal funding sources (NFFS) and not upon their program content. That way, a member of Congress could not punish an individual station, say, by withholding funds to that station because of a program that he or she disliked. Stations spend some of their CSG money for network dues, and some for local programming and operations.

In addition, to insulate public broadcasting further from Congress, a system of "forward funding" was established: Congress "authorized" a funding level for CPB three years in advance, then actually "appropriated" funds for CPB two years in advance. Again, the process aimed to prevent short-term retribution against stations or networks; Congress could reduce public broadcasting's funding levels in general for the future, but it was difficult to exact short-term retribution against stations, networks or producers.

The history of U.S. public broadcasting has taught us that, in practice, it is difficult to insulate broadcasting from politics. For example, the Nixon Administration in the early 1970s launched an assault against public television journalism. Angered by what it perceived as liberal bias on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the Nixon White House attempted to use the allocation of public money to shift public TV programming away from national public affairs to less controversial educational fare at the local level. The administration sought to go around CPB by slashing the corporation's budget and making direct grants to local stations. The campaign eventually proved unsuccessful, but did demonstrate the danger of political interference.

In recent years, increased criticism of alleged bias in public broadcasting has been heard on Capitol Hill. Last year, complaints about Pacifica programming he considered anti-Semitic led a Congressman to seek to withhold \$1 million from CPB's appropriation as punishment. Though that amendment was defeated, Congress did eventually rescind \$7 million that had already been allocated to CPB for fiscal year 1995. The Congressional action breached the principle of "forward funding." "Without forward funding, we're even more vulnerable to political attacks than before," Pacifica Foundation Executive Director Pat Scott told *Current*, a public broadcasting trade publication. Marjon van den Bosch, executive director of Eastern Public Radio, called it "a bad omen." (For the record, Congress stated that the recision was the

result of financial constraints, not an attempt to influence editorial decision-making.)

“Objectivity & Balance” Amendment

The issue of “objectivity and balance” surfaced anew when Congress amended the Public Broadcasting Act in 1992. Provisions of the amendment, entitled the Public Telecommunications Act of 1992, require CPB to:

- Review its existing efforts to ensure adherence to objectivity and balance in public broadcast programming
- Provide an opportunity for citizens to comment on public broadcasting
- Review all of public broadcasting’s national programming on a regular basis
- On the basis of public comments and the corporation’s review, award programming grants as necessary to facilitate objectivity and balance (i.e. to correct perceived imbalance)
- Disseminate information about CPB’s efforts to address objectivity and balance, so that individual stations may apply the corporation’s experience when making local program decisions.

CPB complied with the new law by launching its “Open To The Public” campaign, including public forums in various cities and a toll-free phone number for people to comment about public radio and television.

CPB’s campaign was an attempt to balance its “heat shield” and “steward of balance” responsibilities. The “Open to the Public” campaign encouraged self-enforcement of journalistic standards by public broadcasting entities but avoided — at least initially — any attempt to dictate content or create new programs intended to placate Congressional critics. “Public broadcasting’s standards ought to be explicit, and ought to be developed by the people who produce the programs,” said Robert Coonrod, CPB executive vice president and a participant in the Conference on Public Radio Journalism.

The “objectivity and balance” amendment, and CPB’s efforts to comply, refocused attention on the issue of independence and integrity in public broadcast journalism. This requirement may be seen as an affirmation by Congress that publicly funded broadcasters should adhere

to the values and professional canons of mainstream U.S. journalism.

At the same time, the provisions are troubling because they represent government mandates for professional behavior, contrary to the First Amendment protection from government interference that applies to the rest of the U.S. press. The provisions seemed to create a special status for public broadcast journalists, in which they receive less protection from government interference than their commercial counterparts in the press and broadcasting.

Public broadcast journalists have no problem with upholding the highest standards of American journalism — certainly that's the inspi-

“Independence
is something
that has to be
won
over and over
again.”

• • •

John Dinges
Editorial Director
National Public Radio

ration for the process that led to this book. But we cannot reconcile true journalistic independence with the idea that government officials and the interest groups to which they respond should be entitled to dictate our programming and staffing choices according to nonjournalistic criteria and political quotas.

So far this has not happened. We believe that the framers of the 1967 law were correct in affirming that “maximum freedom” is compatible with public broadcast journalism that is accountable to its own high standards, especially the fairness, accuracy and balance

that are the trademark of American journalism. By exercising our responsibility to set and maintain high standards, we demonstrate to the American people that we are indeed accountable and should be provided the independence we believe was intended by law. Implicit here is the acknowledgment that all of us in public broadcasting — licensees, managers, station staff as well as journalists — must work harder to set high standards, communicate them to the public and to Congress, and implement those standards daily in our broadcasts. The chapters that follow are intended to help public radio professionals with this important task.

C H A P T E R

Fairness,
Accuracy
&
Balance

2



Core Values of Journalists

What we do as journalists is a function of our values, what we believe to be important in our professional lives. These are some of the fundamental values that underlie public radio journalism:

- Journalists seek the truth, both the facts and the “truth behind the facts”
- Journalists serve their communities by connecting people with information they need to participate in civic life, and guarding against abuses of power
- Journalists cover all segments of their communities
- Journalists are independent
- Journalists are fair and ethical
- Journalists seek to minimize the harm that sometimes results from reporting on sensitive issues and personal lives.

“Our microphones I call magic wands that are waved against silence, darkness, incomprehension and misunderstanding.”

• • • • •
Susan Stamberg
National Public Radio

Our challenge is to be true to these values in the daily grind — and not only as newspeople, but as documentarians and cultural programmers, too. These values are reflected in everything that we air.

Cultural programming, too, is a form of information, constituting expression by and for a segment of the community, capable of helping society better understand itself. Under the umbrella of public radio, cultural programmers and journalists share common values and common purpose. Much of the discussion that follows applies to people who cover the news on a daily basis as well as to people who don't. Where standards may diverge for news and cultural producers, we'll try to acknowledge as much.

Objective Talk About Objectivity

The Public Broadcasting Act uses the term “*objectivity*”; we prefer to speak of it in terms of “fairness, accuracy and balance.”

Objectivity, as it has been traditionally defined, refers to the demand that journalists keep their personal biases, emotions, and other “subjective” factors out of their reporting. In a widely used broadcast journalism textbook, Professor Mitchell Stephens of New York University defines objective reporting as “undistorted reporting.” In other words, report the news, don't shape it. This way, according to theories of the role of media in a democracy, journalists will provide citizens with the raw information people need to judge public affairs for themselves, and to make informed decisions about civic matters. Give the public enough news and points of view and they'll find the truth.

Still, many journalists and journalism educators are uncomfortable with the baggage that the term “objectivity” carries. Objectivity as a “just the facts” journalistic style evolved as a reaction to the sensationalism of “yellow journalism” newspapers in the 19th century and as a result of commercial imperatives, such as a desire to attract advertisers across political lines and the need to share wire service reports among newspapers of differing political perspectives.

The tenets of objectivity came under scrutiny, however, in the years after World War II. The Hutchins Commission, which published an extensive critique of the press in 1947, called on journalists to present not only the “objective” facts, but to go beyond: to disclose the *truth* about the facts. Do not accept what your sources tell you as truth, the commission implored journalists; responsible journalists provide a “truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in

a context which gives them meaning.”

The need for more skeptical, explanatory reporting was underscored by often unquestioning news coverage of Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade in the early 1950s. The national media dutifully reported McCarthy's accusations; denials of the accused, generally in later editions or newscasts, never overtook the charges. As scholar J. Herbert Altschull of Johns Hopkins University writes: “The McCarthy experience caused journalists to question their traditional value system for it became clear how easy it was for the code of objectivity to be used by unscrupulous politicians to present utter falsehood to the public.” Journalists were later challenged for becoming too close to powerful figures such as President John F. Kennedy and failing to treat them with critical scrutiny.

As a result, many journalists and scholars rebelled against the conception of journalist as mirror. No longer was it acceptable to many journalists to say “I just reported what I was told.” New movements of journalistic thought and practice emerged in the early 1970s — coincident with the early years of contemporary public radio. This “new journalism” stressed interpretive reporting, providing depth, context and personal perspective to the story; investigative reporting, digging behind the scenes to uncover the hidden story; and narrative approaches, such as the sound-rich, scene-setting techniques that characterize public radio reports.

Some of the strains of the “new journalism” soon faded, such as “advocacy journalism,” in which reporters openly took sides, acting basically as “editorialists operating on the news pages,” as Altschull described them. But other changes did have an influence upon contemporary mainstream journalism.

Let's now consider the principles that guide our day-to-day work. NPR's guide to radio journalism, *Sound Reporting*, uses the term “fact-based reporting”: “Everything that goes on the air, from the most straightforward news voicer to the most elaborate news analysis, is anchored in the pursuit and description of facts — those verifiable bits of infor-

“I simply do not
believe it is
possible
to do a proper,
independent and
worthy journalistic
job, and be loved
by everybody.”

• • •
Dick Salant
CBS News

mation that are the raw material of accurate communication.” Regardless of what you call it, reporting that is fair, accurate and balanced is true to the ideals of journalism. Such reporting filters out bias in the traditional spirit of objectivity, while allowing reporters to apply their personal insights and engagement with the issues they cover. It results in the healthy skepticism, tempered by the positive pursuit of truth, that marks the best journalists. Though fairness, accuracy and balance are inextricably linked, we’ll discuss them individually, then offer a checklist for evaluating how you’re doing in your coverage.

Fairness

The Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics, excerpted in the appendix of this book, defines fairness in terms of fair play: “Journalists at all times will show respect for the dignity, privacy, rights, and well-being of people encountered in the course of gathering and presenting the news.” Often when journalists are criticized by sources for being “unfair,” what the source means is “You didn’t report it the way I wanted you to.” But there are other instances when the criticism is warranted, as when journalists fail to treat people with compassion; the oft-cited example is the reporter who sticks a microphone in the face of someone grieving over the loss of a loved one. Or when the essence of a story was missed by a reporter focusing on a detail. Or when journalists play into stereotypes, such as describing a woman in language about her clothing or hairstyle, when it is not central to the story.

But fairness is a two-headed creature. And in addition to being fair to those we cover, we owe it to our listeners as well. Being fair to the listeners means recognizing their right to information that is as complete as possible, and taking responsibility for presenting information in a way that puts it in perspective.

Consider this example from the print world: In the fall of 1994, angry white residents of South Boston held a raucous meeting to protest the city’s ongoing efforts to integrate local public housing. White leaders claimed that blacks who had moved into the neighborhood were responsible for increased crime and violence. Television cameras rolled and the incendiary meeting received extensive media coverage, but editors at the *Boston Globe* sought to probe deeper.

The *Globe* found that serious crime in South Boston had actually fallen by 18 percent during the period of integration, the arrest rate for whites in the area was actually higher than that for blacks, and whites

in South Boston were far more likely to be victimized by another white than by a minority. Thoughtful, thorough journalism such as this enables people to make informed sense of the day's events.

As noted in *Sound Reporting*, we provide context by providing information about the self-interests of sources, such as possible political or financial motives, and by being honest with listeners about what we don't know or cannot confirm. Stories that merely relay what sources are saying, without weaving the information into a clear and coherent whole, fail to fulfill our compact with listeners.

Some ways in which enterprising journalists help their listeners better understand what's at issue include so-called "truth squad" analyses of political advertisements and claims, in which the veracity of the statements is assessed; "precision journalism," which utilizes government and academic statistical data to present the broad sweep of the story; and even a dose of "unmediated" coverage. In the latter case, a la C-SPAN, public radio sometimes broadcasts entire speeches and events — transcending the soundbite.

The story probably hasn't been written that answers all the questions. Still, as the BBC's Bob Jobbins notes, "The reality we present has to match what people who live there recognize."

Accuracy

It wasn't a huge mistake; a county commissioner had been referred to in a brief story as a city council member. But I knew it was time to leave the television station where I was reporting when the anchor refused to correct the story on air, telling me, "Not many people will know we made a mistake, and it will hurt our *perception of accuracy*." To that journalist, the appearance of accuracy was more important than accuracy itself.

But getting it right is the heart of journalism, having our information correct and in context. Credibility is the currency of our business. Accuracy is how we earn it. It seems so obvious, yet unfortunately there are enough sloppy reporters out there that it bears repeating. Consider the television sportscaster who referred to the possibility of Major League Baseball, then strike bound, becoming "like the albatross — non-existent." As any ornithologist will tell you, it's inaccuracy that's around the sportscaster's neck.

Accuracy is a corollary of fairness, because providing accurate information keeps faith with our sources and our listeners. When we get it wrong,

we undermine not only the credibility of own news organization but also the credibility of other journalists. Recent polls that show trust in the media eroding are distressing testimony to the importance of fairness, accuracy and balance.

Sure, many public radio journalists work in small newsrooms, without the luxury of computerized databases, or fact-checkers, or maybe even without an editor to look over copy before it airs. Deadline pressure can be intense, but we're obligated to get it right.

Our listeners deserve our best efforts to confirm and double-check, and, when necessary, to triple-check. Tracking down a reference book or making a quick phone call to a local professor may make all the difference. And be sure to read your copy aloud as you write; you're more likely to catch errors if you hear them as well as see them.

To err is human, and our listeners, being divine, will forgive our honest mistakes. However, it's our responsibility to correct our errors on the air, and at a time when you're likely to reach many of the same people who heard the original mistake. Don't correct an error made during a morning drive

newscast, for example, at one in the afternoon. Despite what my former colleague said, your perception of accuracy is dependent upon being accurate, and that requires setting the record straight when necessary.

When discussing accuracy, it's important to note *the truth about truth*. Some facts are verifiably true: Columbus is the capital of Ohio; the New York Mets won the World Series in 1969. You could look it up, as Casey Stengel used to say. That's sometimes called *provable* truth. It's something that can be confirmed, witnessed, described by multiple, independent sources.

But consider the case of the politician who brandishes the latest data on declining SAT scores and proclaims the schools are lousy. Is that true? Or an elephant trainer, charged with animal abuse during a circus, who claims he had to hurt the elephant to keep the recalcitrant animal from storming into the audience? Those are conclusions supposedly based on facts. But how reliable are they?

"The First Amendment does not require fairness, but the American public is beginning to."

• • •

Robert MacNeil
Public Broadcasting
Service

Verifiable “facts” are different from allegations, hypotheses, hunches offered up by sources. Information that you cannot confirm — from personal observation or “provable” data — should be subject to a higher standard of scrutiny.

Tell your listeners what you cannot confirm and why, explore alternative explanations, bring in “neutral” sources. The public radio journalist’s role is not simply to gather information, but also to assess the quality of that information for our listeners.

One of the reporter’s most important obligations is to evaluate the sources we put in our stories. What of the source who gives you inside information but insists on remaining anonymous? How can your listeners assess the quality of the information if the source is not accountable? In these cases, the lines are blurred and there are no easy answers. Our finely honed skepticism and common sense come into play:

- Does the source know enough about the issue to give you credible information?
- Does the source have a vested interest in getting the story out?
- Is there an independent source to call, someone without an interest in the story?
- Do a variety of sources say the same thing?

How many sources are enough? Journalists often struggle with this question, and policies, where they exist, vary among news organizations. PRNDI President Tripp Sommer, news director of KLCC, says the type of story makes a difference. For example, you may depend upon a reliable police spokesperson as the sole source for an accident, fire or crime story. But for a more complex, sensitive story, Sommer calls for more sources.

When the Associated Press and Portland TV stations reported, based on anonymous sources, that Senator Bob Packwood would resign, Oregon Public Broadcasting’s Morgan Holm got a phone call at home from his newsroom: Should OPB broadcast the story?

Holm insisted his staff get independent confirmation. When that couldn’t be obtained, OPB passed on the story. Packwood, of course, remained in office.

Sometimes your nose is the final arbiter:

Does it smell fishy?

If your instincts tell you there’s something wrong, there likely is. Hold the story.

Better yet, dig deeper.

Tape Editing

The process of editing audio tape raises accuracy questions — which are becoming even more sensitive with the advent of digital editing. As NPR's veteran tape editor Jonathan "Smokey" Baer puts it, "The power to change someone's comments and leave listeners with the impression that what they heard is what the speaker said is awesome and easily abused."

Participants at the Conference on Public Radio Journalism debated aspects of this issue. Some said they will not edit tape within soundbites, even leaving in "ums" and "ahs." KBIA's Cecil Hickman noted, "The way a person presents himself is part of the story." Other editors consider internal editing an appropriate editorial decision: required to keep actualities to a reasonable length, and to eliminate references to irrelevant or confusing information.

Choosing which part of an interview to include, and which to leave out, is fundamental to a reporter's job. The cut, whether inside an actuality or among several possible actualities, should be guided by considerations of accuracy: if the piece of tape on the floor would change the listener's perception in a substantial way, leave it in and cut elsewhere.

One recent network case underscored the need for careful attention to tape editing. In a story about a business whose environmental responsibility was being challenged, a critic noted in an interview that the firm's products contained lots of petrochemicals and relatively few natural ingredients. However, in editing *within* the actuality, the reporter and editor removed the mention of the natural ingredients, leaving the impression that the products consisted totally of petrochemicals. The network later ran a correction.

Another tape-editing question involved the ethics of laying ambient sound that was recorded at a different time or place beneath a voiceover or actuality, creating a sense of mood and place using elements that in reality did not coincide. Some producers are troubled by any manipulation of time and place; others see it as central to taking the listener "inside the experience." Our obligation to accuracy dictates that we put nothing in a piece that misleads a listener, making her think something happened that actually did not. The guideline is straightforward: if it didn't happen that way, don't create the illusion it happened that way.

While journalists differ on the extent to which they'll clean up conversational speech or manipulate audio elements, they agree on the need to remain true to the essence of the event. The needs of the lis-

tener should come first; the editing process must preserve the fidelity of the experience while advancing understanding.

Balance

Reporters have a tendency to think in terms of two sides to every story: liberals and conservatives, labor and management, young and old. But our world is more complex than that, and the roots of complex stories run in many directions. Too often, we tend to stereotype and to create “artificially polarized points of view,” in the words of Jay Black, Bob Steele and Ralph Barney, authors of *Doing Ethics in Journalism*. Looking for *both* sides skews the balance from the start.

There has yet to be a controversial issue that has only two sides. Nor is it realistic to expect journalists to cover *all* conceivable points of view. Yet it is incumbent upon us to seek out as many significant points of view as we can find, and present them fairly.

It isn't always easy under the crush of deadline to seek out hard-to-reach points of view. In a world of faxes from public relations firms and canned actualities from government or business just a toll-free phone call away, it's easier to choose which sides to represent based on what is available and quick. But consider the possible biases and interests of the source that is promoting the story. Ask yourself who else is affected and bring them into the story. And don't just return to the same folks for comment time and again; seek out fresh voices with fresh perspectives. That means going beyond the usual list of interest groups and activist organizations, whose claims to represent the interests of ordinary people cannot always be taken at face value.

Once you've talked to many sides, your commitment to balance dictates that you apportion air time in a fair and common-sense manner. That doesn't mean, of course, that you make sure everybody's soundbite runs the same length. Instead, edit the report so that all voices are heard roughly in proportion to their importance to the story. Consider who is given a chance to speak on air and whose views are paraphrased in your copy.

Give the criticized a fair shot at responding to the critic. Give the weak a reasonable chance to respond to the strong. Making these judgments isn't easy, but it is crucial.

Another important component of balance in our multicultural society involves diversity. As independent producer Sandy Tolan noted at the Conference on Public Radio Journalism, “A central ethic in the history

of public broadcasting has been creating truly democratic media that provide access to a diverse range of voices and perspectives." Because diversity is multi-faceted, here are some questions to consider:

- Are we broadcasting the voices of all the groups in our community, including racial, ethnic, religious and sexual groups both large and small, social and economic classes both weak and strong, the young and the old?
- Are we reporting their news, their culture, their points of view?
- And does our own staff reflect the diversity of our community?

Diversity *within* our news organizations is important so that we can help each other recognize the range of issues and concerns across our communities. In addition to racial, ethnic and sexual diversity, think of diversity also in terms of age, religion and yes, political orientation. We rightly resist the notion that journalists should be hired based on their political leanings. But if we look around and find that nearly everyone in the newsroom shares a narrow political perspective, that's a deficiency. We're a richer newsroom if we reflect the people we serve.

Various courts, in upholding FCC policies promoting racial diversity in broadcast ownership, have held that it's important to broadcast the perspectives and culture of minority communities not only for the benefit of that minority group, but also for the good of the majority, which is exposed to the issues and concerns of all citizens.

Balance and Independents

Independent producers have contributed greatly to the diversity of public radio by providing access, in independent Jay Allison's words, to the "citizen story-teller." For his "Life Stories" series, Allison provided tape recorders and basic recording training to people, then sent them out to chronicle their lives. In "Ghetto Life 101," broadcast on WBEZ and NPR, producer David Isay went a step further. He gave recorders to two inner-city teens, and worked with them daily to see themselves not only as chroniclers but as reporters in their community. Now that's *public* radio in the truest sense!

Such experiments expand the definitions of journalism. To what extent are they balanced?

Sandy Tolan argues for an inclusive definition of journalism as "non-fiction narrative," whether traditional hard news coverage or docu-

mentaries and features. Ginger Miles, another independent, notes that documentaries and features deal with “the human experience, which by nature often concerns a point of view.”

KQED’s programming policy, reprinted in the appendix, addresses this dilemma squarely: “Programs containing analysis, opinion, and points of view also play an important role in KQED’s broadcasting mix. While these programs do not always necessarily embrace the objective and dispassionate presentation of facts, KQED recognizes that the airing of such programs is consistent with the ethical discharge of its responsibilities....KQED recognizes that diversity can be accomplished not only within the confines of a particular program but also may be accomplished by airing, over time, a rich mix of programs.”

Our commitment to our listeners, however, dictates that we’re up front with them when a program has a singular point of view. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), in its statement of editorial principles, holds that “the audience must be made aware of the personal character of the program.” Just as we clearly label commentary, when we depart from traditional notions of balance within individual reports or programs, our listeners ought to know.

When we choose to broadcast programs or pieces with a point of view, we incur the journalistic obligation of giving similar treatment to differing points of view. We have failed our listeners if, looking back over our broadcasts, we find that most of our point-of-view pieces point the same way.

Without a Net: Broadcasting Live

“Live broadcasting is a double-edged sword,” says NPR’s Ray Suarez, host of *Talk of the Nation*, “giving you the edginess and unpredictability of live, and exposing you to the desires of those who want to produce their own program instead of helping you produce yours.” Like all talk-program hosts, Suarez finds that guests or callers sometimes ramble on too long, others are rude, and some programs on hot topics drift toward anarchy.

What’s the host to do?

Hosts have split responsibilities — toward the listeners, the guests, the callers, maybe even a studio audience. But the ultimate goal is to produce good radio, and that requires that the host maintain control of the broadcast. “The best control of the program will appear transparent,” Suarez says. He recommends intervening gently when cutting some-

one off or steering them in a different direction. And explain to your listeners why you are intervening, so you don't leave the impression that you simply didn't like what they had to say.

Special problems sometimes arise in live broadcasts when a guest or caller says something inaccurate, offensive or racist. In those cases, the host must be careful to signal, directly but skillfully, that such comments are out of line on the program, and to indicate where the facts are in dispute.

Says Suarez: "The impression of openness to all points of view must be maintained at the same time as your control of the program." It's that openness, along with the quality of the discussion, that distinguishes public radio talk from the often-strident commercial variety.

Standards for Cultural Programming

The journalist asks, "Have I given my listeners a fair, accurate and balanced account?" The cultural programmer asks, "Have I given my listeners a high-quality, meaningful cultural expression?" Journalists cover events, cultural programmers create events, says Murray Horwitz, NPR's director of jazz, classical music and entertainment programming. Different questions, different approaches, the same goal — excellent public radio.

But sometimes cultural programming involves issues that are among the most controversial in our society, which raises the question of editorial standards. Some examples: KPFK's *Afrikan Mental Liberation Weekend*, a celebration of African-American culture and thought, drew charges of anti-Semitism against some of the speakers. Broadcasts of the opera *Death of Klinghoffer* dealt with Palestinian terrorism against Jews. Minstrelsy, part of our artistic heritage, had racist overtones.

When they deal with topics such as these, cultural programmers must grapple with editorial standards just as newspeople do. Their obligation to create a bond of trust with their listeners parallels that of journalists. However, cultural programmers differ on the extent to which standards should be explicit.

"There is such a broad range of programming included under the banner of cultural programming that it is impossible and undesirable to establish anything more than a general set of criteria for evaluating programming," says Melinda Ward, PRI's senior VP of programming. "PRI seeks programming that reflects the highest achievement in the arts and the richness of the world's diverse cultural expressions." Ward

says she evaluates programming on the basis of creativity, production quality, innovation, timeliness, and the degree to which it meets the needs of stations.

NPR cultural programming is guided by criteria set forth in a policy statement, which includes the following: "We seek to maintain consistently high standards in both the artistic content of our offerings and their radio production sound. Further, we examine the character of potential programs for their informational as well as entertainment content; we are after programs that not only present cultural expressions, but also help listeners understand them and the people who produce those expressions more fully."

PRI, NPR and many station-based cultural programmers point to performance and production quality as the definitive standard, and justifiably so. Nonetheless, there are questions of fairness and balance to be considered. Does your choice of subjects and artists reasonably reflect the cultural expression of your community? If you broadcast artistic expression that makes a political statement, are differing points of view represented in other programs? Just as we seek to present a broad spectrum of political and social expression in our news, shouldn't our cultural programs reflect the diversity of artistic expression in our communities?

Dealing with Charges of Liberal Bias

A frequently voiced public complaint is that journalists are biased. Though the charge of bias is often invoked in response to unfavorable coverage, bias commonly refers to the idea that journalists allow their personal beliefs and values to color their reporting. Reporting on social and political change, which we often do, is sometimes perceived by listeners as looking favorably upon those who advocate change, such as activists.

Public radio has come under criticism from both liberal and conservative quarters through the years for alleged bias. For example, conservative critic David Horowitz, speaking at the Conference on Public Radio Journalism, contended that public broadcasting often acts as "a subsidiary of the Democratic party" and claimed that public radio "has no conservative executives or gatekeepers." At the same time, some liberal listeners and critics argue that public radio has joined the ranks of mainstream media and no longer represents "an alternative" to commercial broadcasting. An analysis of NPR news programming — published in *EXTRA!*,

the journal of the watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) — concluded that “NPR’s routine coverage is hard to distinguish from commercial broadcast journalism” and that NPR has “taken on some of the weaknesses” of mainstream journalism, such as “equating the workings of public officials with news (and) equating balance with interviews with the top-ranking member of each major party.”

The loudest and most frequent criticism, however, involves charges that public radio journalism is biased in favor of liberal causes and viewpoints.

“We will not
lower our standards
to beat other
organizations
with lower
standards.”

• • •
Peter Iglinski
News Director
WSKG

How then should we respond to claims of liberal bias? First, we should deal openly with listeners who complain about our coverage. Our listeners include people of all political perspectives.

According to the independent Simmons market research firm, more NPR listeners identify themselves as conservative than identify themselves as liberal. We should satisfy their expectations of fairness and nonpartisanship, as well as our own. Answer their letters and calls with candid, courteous and substantive replies. Ask them to be specific, however, about their complaints.

We should be judged on the basis of our broadcasts, not on someone’s sense of what our politics might be.

Let complainants know that we’re involved in a system-wide process to develop and implement the highest editorial and ethical standards for public radio journalism. Tell them about your station’s strict guidelines about conflicts of interest and how your editorial process examines every story for fairness, accuracy and balance. By the way, if you don’t have standards and processes like these, why not? How can we respond to our critics without them? More on such standards in pages to come.

A final note: some of our critics will demand that particular political views should be a litmus test for hiring public radio professionals. We base our hiring on journalistic, not ideological, criteria. We would consider it a conflict of interest to hire people because they espouse a particular point of view and would be expected to reflect that in their reporting. We should recognize, however, that a politically homoge-

neous newsroom, of whatever stripe, is a problem.

Listening to Ourselves

One of the goals of the Conference on Public Radio Journalism is development of clear and explicit guidelines for assessing what we're doing and how well we're doing it. What follows are a retrospective exercise and a checklist of questions — self-exams, so to speak. Regularly analyze your stories, listen closely to listener feedback and ask yourself these questions when a sticky situation arises. In addition, take the test on a regular basis, to measure improvement, highlight problems and build fairness into your daily decision-making process. Talk about the questions with colleagues throughout the station, with your counterparts in the media community. Discuss these questions on the air from time to time, in commentaries and call-ins.

Finally, add your own questions to the list. Devoting time and effort to evaluating the quality of our programming is an important step toward achieving and maintaining the excellence for which public radio is noted.

Retrospective Exercise

Listen systematically to all the stories your station or production company produced in a given period — say, a week or a month. For each story, note:

- Whose interest is served by paying attention to the story
- Who, if anyone, emerges as the good guys and the bad guys
- Any flip or sardonic turns of phrase — both in tape and copy — and who is the target of the remark.

Finally, and this is the tough part, classify all the beneficiaries and targets by some common framework: such as people who share the same political party, ideology, occupation, economic status.

Be brutally honest!

Checklist

In Pursuit of Fairness, Accuracy and Balance

- 1. Have the people affected or harmed by the story been given ample opportunity to reply?** If harm is inevitable, have I sought to minimize it where possible?
- 2. Have I provided listeners sufficient background and context to understand the story fully?** Are there major questions left unanswered? Is there anything I know that I am not telling my listeners, which — if they knew it — would change their view of the story?
- 3. Might my personal feelings have affected my handling of this story in any way?** Do I have relationships with sources or subjects that would compromise my ability to cover the story fairly, or allow someone to claim my ability was compromised?
- 4. How confident am I about the credibility of this information?** Do my sources have vested interests in getting this information out? Is there a disinterested, independent source of this information with whom I could check?
- 5. If I am using anonymous sources, is there another possible source of the information?** Can I make a compelling case to my listeners for using the anonymous source?
- 6. Have I attributed, documented and double-checked all the basic facts of the story?** Did my tape editing distort the essence of the actuality or of the event?
- 7. Have I sought out all the relevant points of view of the story, and avoided creating “artificially polarized” sides?** Have I edited the story so that all sides are heard, and in proportion to their importance to the story?
- 8. Am I presenting the news and views of all segments of the community I serve?** Do I continue to “round up the usual suspects” in choosing sources, or have I brought in new sources with new perspectives?
- 9. Does the diversity of our staff match the diversity of our community?**
- 10. If I’m broadcasting a “subjective” program with a point of view, have I let my listeners know?**

C H A P T E R

Ethical
Decision-
Making

3

Ethics Codes

The broad freedoms afforded journalists under the First Amendment give us license to do more legally than we might choose to do morally in our reporting and our programming. Law and ethics are quite different. Journalism ethics refers to the moral standards of conduct that govern our professional practice, a set of guidelines — formal or informal, organizational or personal — for what we ought to do.

Though the study of ethics dates back to Socrates, attention was first paid to ethics in journalism in a thoughtful way during the 1920s. Through the years journalists have become keenly aware of ethical problems and have drafted numerous codes of ethics. One of the most widely cited, from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), is excerpted at the end of this book. PRNDI's code of ethics is specific to public radio; it's also included in the appendix, along with the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) code.

“Freedom from legal constraints
is a special privilege that demands
increased awareness of moral
obligation.”

• • • • •

Stephen Klaidman & Tom Beauchamp
The Virtuous Journalist

While ethics codes underscore the core values of journalism, they cannot by nature anticipate the idiosyncrasies of day-to-day reporting nor warn us about all the potential ethical dilemmas we may encounter. Nor can this book.

Too often we dwell in the negative when talking about ethics, stressing what journalists must *not* do. Of course, red flags are important, but our focus here will be to accentuate the positive: to develop ethical decision-making skills so that public radio journalists are well equipped to handle thorny ethical issues. As noted in SPJ's ethics handbook, *Doing Ethics in Journalism*, ethical decision-making is a craft and a skill, which must be learned and honed, not unlike good reporting and editing. This chapter draws upon that valuable handbook; its contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

Ethical Decision-Making Process

Think of ethical decision-making as a three-step process: *consult yourself; consult your colleagues; consult your profession.*

It starts with your own take on the problem, based on individual training, experience and morality. But journalism ethics is not a matter simply between your conscience and you. Raise the question to the level of the station or organization that shares responsibility for the decision. First, talk the situation over with peers, then with your editor, and if necessary, with other supervisors. Are there guidelines to consult? Does your station have a policy about covering suicides, naming juvenile offenders, discussing the sexuality of public officials? Finally, our decision should take into account the core values and highest standards of journalism as a profession. Remember that the actions of each journalist reflect in some way on journalism as a whole. Is your decision one that you could justify and defend to journalists in other news organizations you respect?

Ethical decision-making involves reconciling our journalistic obligation to provide fair, accurate and balanced reporting with the need to act morally and responsibly, and to minimize harm to people affected by what we broadcast. Jay Black, Bob Steele and Ralph Barney, the authors of *Doing Ethics in Journalism*, offer a list of questions to help journalists make reasoned ethical decisions. Our exploration builds on that list. It's intended to stimulate critical thinking, to help build ethics into your newsroom culture and to help journalists make good ethical decisions. On deadline.

1. What is the ethical problem?

Ask yourself what's going on here. Again, the law is usually not at issue here; it's your sense of what's journalistically appropriate and responsible. Is a source offering you something of value to influence the way you cover a story? Has a judge asked you not to broadcast an interview that he believed would damage a defendant's right to a fair trial (as happened to journalists reporting the O.J. Simpson trial)? Is someone at your station trying to get you to cover a story involving an underwriter or big contributor? Has a source asked to review a script or approve quotations before a story airs?

Consider this problem: A population control organization gives you an award for your excellent reporting on that issue. The prize: an all-expenses paid trip to Rio de Janeiro. You're invited to tour the organization's project sites and listen to a few lectures on their work, otherwise you're free to enjoy the beach.

Define the problem: Someone is offering you something for free. Then ask yourself, are they seeking to cultivate you so that you may provide them favorable coverage in the future? Press on.

2. What are the professional standards and organizational policies that apply?

Is there precedent for the decision you have to make? Does your news organization have a set of guidelines or code of ethics that sheds light on this problem? Ask colleagues about similar situations, at yours or other stations. How do the standards of fair, accurate and balanced reporting (discussed in chapter two) apply to this case?

Let's return to the example of the Rio trip. Both organizational policies and professional standards offer guidance here. Many news organizations have guidelines forbidding reporters from accepting anything of value from people they cover. In addition, the core value of journalistic independence tells us that, like Caesar's wife, we must not only be independent from sources, but must appear to be so. A journalist, regardless of motive, who accepts what appears to be a junket from a group may reasonably be perceived by listeners, if they know about it, as biased in favor of that group.

3. What is the journalistic purpose?

Can you justify your action on journalistic grounds? Is the story important enough that it's worth pursuing or broadcasting even if people

or organizations are harmed? For instance, when reporters determined that a high-ranking officer in a major local charitable organization had been misappropriating donated goods for his own use, officials of the charity admitted it was true but pleaded with journalists not to run the story, saying it would damage the institution. The story ran. In that case, the journalistic purpose of uncovering wrongdoing overrode the possible “harm” of reducing charitable giving. What about naming names — of rape victims, of suicides? Is the harmful information (that is, using the name) so essential to telling the story that it overrides the value of avoiding embarrassment to victims and their families? Most news organizations say no in the case of rape victims but yes in the case of suicides.

What about making exceptions to written ethical guidelines? Say your news organization forbids accepting anything of value from people you cover. Suppose emergency management authorities offer you a helicopter ride into an area devastated by a natural disaster. The officials are in a privileged position to present their perspective on the story. But if the free transportation is the only way to get there and gather information, most journalists would go, making sure they disclose the ride to their listeners as well as any limitations imposed upon their news gathering.

Or imagine a situation in which you’re investigating an animal rights group’s allegation that laboratory animals are being mistreated. You know lab officials won’t let you in to check out the protester’s charges. Your ethics guidelines ban use of deception. But what if you claimed to be doing a “feature” about their research? Misleading, but not an outright lie: Is it justified to get a potentially important story?

In all of these cases, the journalistic purpose must be weighed against the ethical implications.

4. Who else should be included in the decision-making process?

Don’t walk alone through the minefield of journalism ethics. This goes beyond seeking advice for your ethical dilemma. It’s not just the individual journalist who is responsible for what goes on the air, but the entire staff of the news organization. Bringing colleagues and supervisors into the loop, consulting those who share responsibility and accountability for what is broadcast not only provides more points of view, but also fosters a collaborative decision-making culture.

Note: even if you’re in a one-person news shop, you’re not alone. Feel free to call an NPR editor or PRNDI board member or PRI producer to

consult on ethical issues. If your newsroom is wired to the information highway, there are several journalism "bulletin boards" and lists available via computer, including the PUBRADIO forum, through which journalists share advice. A list of phone numbers and computer addresses is provided at the back of this book.

5. Who are the stakeholders affected by my decision?

Put yourself in the shoes of the people affected by your reporting. Your journalistic purposes are already on the table. Now think about the impact upon real people. Who are they? Turn the situation around and imagine yourself as source or subject, someone affected by the decision. In one real-life scenario, journalists had prompt confirmation of the shooting death of a prominent public official before the victim's family was notified, and agonized over whether to broadcast the name. (Some stations did, some didn't.)

In such a case, journalists who consider the stakeholders would weigh several factors, first imagining how terrible it would be for the family to learn of the tragedy on the air. Certainly competition, the desire to report the story first, would be a strong motive to go with the name. But they would also ask, "What does the public need to know and when do they need to know it?" Given the victim's position, would the community be harmed if the name was withheld for a few hours? Some journalists concluded the public would not be harmed if the station waited to broadcast the name until the family was notified. (Had the official been, say, the governor, the decision may have been different, because the public's need to know would have been much greater.)

In this case the stakeholders were the family, the community and the station. Stations that withheld the name decided their own interests ranked last. Another station put its competitive interests *first*, making the ethically questionable decision to broadcast the name immediately.

Asking questions about stakeholders in your ethical analysis will prompt you to balance consequences: weighing journalistic value against possible harm. It tempers your reporter's zeal with compassion and a sense of the public good.

6. What alternatives are there?

Journalists should consider ways to handle touchy ethical problems with creativity, candor and sensitivity. How, for instance, might the journalists covering the case, described above, of the thief at the local charity have handled the story in a way that minimized harm?

They could:

- Emphasize that the charity candidly admitted that the scandal occurred
- Report on the charity's efforts to right the wrong
- Invite officials from the local philanthropic community on the air to discuss safeguards to prevent such theft, and to stress the value of charitable giving.

You may well have come up with other alternatives. There are ways to deal with ethical problems that serve journalistic purposes while minimizing harm. Find them.

7. Do I have to decide now?

Another point to consider: do you have to decide now? Concern for deadlines often tempts us to make snap decisions, perhaps without adequate time to consider questions like those on this list. But you may have to delay broadcasting — or decide not to broadcast at all— until you're comfortable that you've made the proper decision.

CBC Radio's chief journalist, Jeffrey Dvorkin, offered a telling anecdote. One CBC station interviewed a woman, in custody at a psychiatric facility, who had escaped from a mental hospital and allegedly attacked a child with a knife. CBC staff weighed the issues:

- The public's right to know about hospital security
- The woman's right to a fair trial
- Whether the woman was capable of granting informed consent to being interviewed.

After consulting widely with his journalistic colleagues, Dvorkin suggested producing a story on hospital security, but *without* the voice of the accused. Then, once the woman was found by the court to be mentally competent, the CBC aired a feature about her, which was nominated for an award.

8. Could I go on the air and justify this decision to my listeners?

The ultimate test of your ethical decision is how you justify it to your listeners. As you are making the decision, consider how you would explain it during a broadcast. Would you be comfortable doing so?

Why not also take calls on the air from listeners periodically to discuss particular situations, and journalism ethics in general? Your spirit of candor and openness will demonstrate that your station aspires to being ethical in its journalistic programming, as well as fair, accurate and balanced.

Justifiable reasons, simply put, are those you can explain with a straight face. This checklist, drawn from *Doing Ethics*, the SPJ ethics handbook, also lists the other kind — reasons you would be embarrassed to share with listeners:

- We did it to beat the competition
- To get the story cheaper or faster
- Other journalists did it
- We might win an award
- The subjects of the story are unethical people themselves.

Libel Issues: Watch Your Language

Sometimes ethical issues do cross the line into the realm of the law where journalists' First Amendment rights are balanced against the fundamental rights of individuals. Many news organizations have spent enormous sums defending themselves against libel suits in which individuals and groups claimed they were harmed by broadcast or publication of false information. Even when journalists prevail in court, the cost in money and time may be astronomical and the effect on future reporting may be chilling. Experience has shown that it's generally routine news stories that attract most libel suits. The hard-hitting investigative reports inspire caution and careful checking. With routine stories, your guard is sometimes down.

What follows is far from an exhaustive discussion of libel; libel law is extremely complex, and varies from state to state. We will recommend some books, listed in the back of this volume, that deal with the subject in depth, and your station's attorney should be able to provide detailed information should a crisis occur. But the point here is to outline the basics of libel law and to raise the red flag, stressing that careful attention to fairness, accuracy and balance is the best way to steer clear of libel. A self-test checklist for avoiding libel is provided at the end of this chapter.

To libel someone is to damage their reputation by broadcasting or publishing false statements about their activities or character. Someone can sue for libel if:

- The false statement was transmitted to a third party (for example, to listeners through a broadcast)
- Broadcast of the statement harmed the person's reputation, subjected them to ridicule, caused them to be shunned, or reduced their source of income
- The person whose reputation was harmed was clearly identified; (You may not, for instance, have used the person's name. But if you referred to, say, a University of Oregon journalism professor who used to work in public radio, and that person's associates could reasonably figure out who you meant, you could be sued.)
- The journalist was "at fault," negligent in broadcasting the false statement.

The "fault standard" is a critical part of libel law. It varies, depending on whether the aggrieved party is a private individual, or a public official or public figure. In the case of public figures — someone who has thrust himself, or been thrust, into public attention — the standard of proof is quite strict. It must be proven that the journalist acted with "actual malice," meaning knowledge that the statement was false or with reckless disregard for the truth. Extra care must be taken when reporting on individuals not in public life. "As a rule of thumb," according to the Associated Press *Libel Manual*, "a careless error on the part of the journalist will often be found to constitute negligence" when reporting on private figures.

The only absolute defense against libel is to demonstrate that the statements in question are *provably* true. Easier said than done. Say a reporter used the term "mobster" in a broadcast when referring to a criminal suspect. Perhaps the individual has long been associated with organized crime figures. What facts could you muster that would support your use of the term?

Avoiding libel is a matter of attention to the facts and to your writing. According to the Associated Press *Libel Manual*, most libel suits result from factual errors or inexact language. For example, in reporting an arrest, be sure to write, "Police charged John Doe with sexual assault," as opposed to "Police arrested Doe after he sexually assaulted a woman." To sum up, don't be sloppy:

- Train yourself to recognize potentially libelous statements. Beware of loaded terms in your copy (e.g. thugs, mobsters, crack houses)
- Remember: expressing libelous material as someone's opinion does not necessarily protect you

- Always check your facts carefully. When a report contains statements that, *if in error*, are libelous, double and triple check
- Attribute information, telling your listeners how you know what you're reporting (especially when reporting on potentially libelous matters)
- Evaluate your sources in all cases. Never — repeat, *never* — put potentially defamatory information in a story based on anonymous sources, unless you're prepared to prove the information yourself
- Don't run a story with potentially libelous material without making extraordinary efforts to include the detailed reply of the accused parties.

Regarding libel, as your mother used to say, "Watch your language!"

Exercise Your Ethics

Consider these hypothetical cases. Discuss them in various scenarios. Adjust the circumstances and see how your ethical decision might change accordingly.

1. You've been trying for months to secure an interview with a reclusive business tycoon who wields great influence in your community. She finally consents to speaking with you, but with two conditions: that she gets to approve the list of questions you may ask, and she gets to approve your edited story before it airs.
2. An independent auditor finds the university spends too much money on administration. The vice president to whom your station reports calls to tell you the audit is misleading and its release would damage the university. He asks you to hold the story and he'll give you an exclusive next week.
3. A local business leader who's been arrested for beating his wife pleads with you not to broadcast the story. If you do, he says, he would be ruined financially and would kill himself.

Checklist

Ethical Decision-Making

1. **What is the ethical problem? Carefully consider and define the problem at hand.**
2. **What organizational policies and professional standards apply? How do your station's guidelines and codes apply here?**
3. **What is the journalistic purpose?**
4. **Who else should be included in the decision-making process? Staff members, your news director, other colleagues?**
5. **Who are the stakeholders affected by my decision? If the roles were reversed, how would I feel as a stakeholder?**
6. **What alternatives are there?**
7. **Do I have to decide now?**
8. **Could I go on the air and justify this decision to my listeners?**

Steering Clear of Libel

1. **Is there anything in the story that could potentially damage someone's reputation or income?**
2. **Could my story be perceived as presenting anyone in a negative light? If so, is the information grounded in verifiable facts or attributed to official sources?**
3. **Am I absolutely sure of the accuracy and completeness of my reporting in crime and legal stories? Do I have the charges correct, and have I not assumed guilt?**
4. **Have I used any loaded terms in my script?**
5. **If I'm challenged on the facts in this story, how will I establish them to be true?**

Note: If these questions raise a red flag, tread carefully. Consult with your managers and, if necessary, legal counsel. Money paid for a session with an attorney now is well spent if it heads off a libel suit later.

C H A P T E R

Conflicts
of
Interest

4

Credibility

Just as public radio as an institution must be independent from external influence, so too must individual public radio journalists be free of conflicts that impair their ability to gather and present the news in a fair, accurate and balanced way. Whereas the previous chapter dealt with making sound decisions about ethical problems — putting out fires, say — this chapter is concerned with fire prevention. How might public radio journalists create an organizational culture marked by high ethical standards, in which they steer clear of conflicts of interest? Because, as noted earlier, public radio journalists must not only be fair, accurate and balanced, our listeners must be confident that we are.

In journalism, conflict of interest refers to conflicting loyalties, the clash between responsibility to the public and benefit to the individual or the organization. We gather information in the name of the people, with the public interest as our motive. If our motives are mixed — if

“When a man assumes
a public trust,
he should consider himself
as public property.”

• • • • •

Thomas Jefferson

we act out of other interests, such as personal gain, ideology or friendship — we may have a conflict of interest. Conflicts of interest may be

real or perceived; either way, they damage a journalist's credibility and contribute to the growing climate of public mistrust and cynicism about the media.

“Above all, (public broadcasting) gives us information we need to participate in the debate about where we want our society to go and what we, as a species and as a society, aspire to.”

• • •
Donald Mullally
Director
of Broadcasting
WILL

Of course, there is a sure-fire formula for avoiding conflicts of interest altogether:

- Don't vote
- Don't belong to any groups
- Don't have any family or friends
- Don't have opinions or worry about social concerns.

But journalists are people, too. Obviously, not every personal interest is in conflict with the public interest.

Should a reporter with school-aged kids be expected to avoid covering education issues? Reasonable people would not consider that a conflict of interest. But if the education reporter decides to run for the school board, that's another matter.

Keep these questions front and center:

Keep these questions front and center:

- Might my activities and relationships compromise my ability to produce a fair, accurate and balanced report?
- Further, might anyone reasonably think my activities and relationships could influence my ability to report?

Conflicts of interest frequently involve politics, freebies or money. We'll consider those issues, then deal with topics of particular relevance to public radio. If your organization lacks a policy covering these issues, this discussion may spur you to draft one.

Politics and the Journalist

Just as many public-spirited people are drawn to politics out of a desire to right what is wrong with society and to better the lot of the disadvantaged, many people are drawn to journalism for similar reasons. Compassion and a sense of community are not liabilities for public radio journalists; quite the contrary, we want reporters who care. Concern for our listeners as people and citizens, not consumers, underlies what we do daily.

The rise of the movement known as public, or civic, journalism underscores this point. Proponents say public journalism focuses coverage on citizens and their efforts to find solutions to local problems, instead of merely reporting on candidates and conflicts. NPR's Election Project, in which more than 50 public radio stations took part during the 1994 election campaigns, is rooted in this philosophy.

While we should convey to our listeners that we have a stake in the well-being of our communities, political activism and advocacy should be avoided. Where should the line be drawn? *Sound Reporting* lists the following activities as out of bounds for journalists: running for elective office, working in electoral campaigns, writing speeches for candidates, lobbying for candidates or ballot measures, and publicly endorsing candidates. Common sense also dictates that reporters avoid public expression of their political views, such as displaying posters and wearing campaign buttons, marching in rallies, or writing partisan op-ed pieces.

Some journalists don't even vote. However, journalists are citizens, too, and voting is a civic right and duty, carried out in private (though in some states voters must declare party affiliation to vote in primary elections, and those lists are public information). We should also feel free to participate in community, religious and professional groups, provided our activities could not reasonably call into question our impartiality. But if you're a member of a civic group that's being sued, for instance, someone else should cover the story.

Stay away from active memberships in groups whose partisanship or militancy could challenge your impartiality as a journalist. As a corollary, ask yourself if there are any issues about which you feel so passionately that you would not be able to report fairly. Sometimes there might be no *overt* conflict of interest, but a journalist nonetheless might be unable to put personal feelings aside. If there's a doubt, get someone else to cover the story.

One television anchor became embroiled in a controversy when he moderated a debate involving a political candidate to whom, public records disclosed, he had made a campaign contribution. Would you be comfortable if your associations were disclosed on the air? If not, perhaps there's a conflict of interest brewing.

Freebies

Reputable news organizations strictly limit the kinds of gifts ("freebies") journalists may accept, and in many cases forbid them outright. Freebies may include meals, travel and lodging, tickets to entertainment or sporting events, books, and the like. The danger is that the gift-giver often hopes to instill in the journalist a sense of obligation or appreciation or simply good will — perhaps to be paid back sometime in the form of favorable coverage. Even if the journalist feels no such sense of obligation, it may appear to others that the reporter "could be bought." Conventional wisdom holds that if the public pays, the journalist pays.

Some news organizations have written codes, which vary in their scope. From the National Conference of Editorial Writers: "Gifts of value, free travel and other favors that can compromise integrity, or appear to do so, should not be accepted." NPR states that reporters "receive nothing of value from those about whom they report or who are sources of information for their reporting."

In the area of cultural programming, however, many organizations (NPR included) will accept free books and movie or play tickets if they are going to review them on the air. It's also OK, NPR's Murray Horwitz says, to accept free admission from an arts organization whose performances you are considering broadcasting.

Is accepting a cup of coffee from someone you're interviewing OK? Some codes make common sense exceptions in cases where the gift is of insignificant value or would be awkward to refuse. The Grand Forks (North Dakota) *Herald* puts it well in that newspaper's code: "We must remember that many of the kindnesses offered...are tendered on the basis of friendship or courtesy and without any self-serving motive. It's important that we avoid appearing rude or narrowly self-righteous in living within the spirit of this policy."

But when the sheriff sent over a bottle of fine Scotch at Christmas, as a Midwestern sheriff did each year to all the local reporters, was it offered on the basis of friendship, or to curry favor with journalists

who would be reporting on his activities during the coming year? While some reporters savored the Scotch, other thoughtful journalists politely declined the gifts, citing station policy.

Moonlighting

Most journalists don't get rich, especially not those working in public radio! So, some journalists supplement their public radio paychecks by activities such as teaching reporting classes at local colleges, or by selling free-lance articles to magazines or newspapers. Such moonlighting generally doesn't pose ethical problems.

But sometimes our communication savvy, resonant voices and name recognition in the community bring other opportunities our way, which may raise conflict of interest issues. Public radio journalists and announcers have been asked to record voiceovers, or even appear on camera, for commercials to be aired on other stations. One classical-music host stars in car commercials. Is this a problem for noncommercial broadcasters? Provided the spots are recorded on the individual's time, is it reasonable for the public radio station to object? On what grounds?

Other public radio journalists have been asked to offer public relations consulting to clients, both non-profit and for-profit firms. Is there a difference between consulting with the local humane society on how to get more publicity for animal adoption efforts, and working with local car dealers to improve their public image?

Broadcasters are often in demand as speakers, too. It's good to have your staff out in the community. But what if the speaker pockets a hefty fee from a group that he or she covers? A few news organizations have gone so far as to ban their journalists from receiving speaking fees.

In any event, some review process would be appropriate. For instance, all invitations for journalists to speak for money could be checked by a supervisor, who would evaluate whether a conflict of interest existed.

The issue, simply put: When does moonlighting affect the individual's (and the organization's) credibility? The organization should decide where the lines are drawn, and draft a clear policy on conflict of interest, if one doesn't already exist. Standards should be based on the questions posed earlier in this chapter.

Let's return to some of our examples. In the case of the classical car pitchman, the station decided that the commercials didn't affect his

ability to host a music program. But the same station might conclude that a journalist, who may likely report on auto issues, should not be consulting with the car dealers' association. If, in the organization's view, an activity compromises an individual's ability to act independently — or would appear to compromise that ability — it's reasonable to forbid that activity.

In addition, because many public radio stations are licensed to institutions supported in part by tax dollars, it's a good idea to suggest that staffers not use station equipment for their freelance work. As WSSU's Jim Howard notes, "I cover state government and regularly do stories on officials who use state-owned equipment for purposes other than official business. Thus, I do not cross that line myself."

Here's another point about money. Some journalists have financial investments that may entangle them in conflicts of interest. Say you hold stock in the local phone company, which is launching an ambitious, expensive fiber-optic cable project. Should you cover the story? Might your report have an impact on the value of your stock? Journalists should discuss potential financial conflicts of interest with their editors and managers, and err on the side of avoiding stories in which their money may be involved. Better yet, avoid acquiring money interests in areas that are at all likely to involve you as a journalist. (The Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policy for *Marketplace*, a public radio business and economics program, is reprinted in the appendix as a reference.)

The "Dick Salant" Conundrum

For public radio, the facts of life include the need to seek outside money to pay for what we do. Money, of course, often comes with strings attached. NPR's John Dinges calls it the "Dick Salant conundrum," a reference to the late former president of CBS News who, as an NPR board member, criticized NPR's practice of accepting grants from funders dedicated to specific areas of news coverage. How can public radio stations, networks and producers obtain the funds they need for production, while keeping the money from unduly influencing their broadcasts?

Funders frequently offer money to cover particular subjects. The American Association of Retired Persons funds and produces a public radio program, *Prime Time Radio*, on issues related to aging. Journalists who consider that arrangement a conflict point to AARP's lobbying activities and strong political stands. Local foundations make money available to address the needs of specific geographic areas, as well as

topics such as health care, child abuse and education. The challenge for the public radio journalist is to determine which subjects may pose problems, and to distinguish between philanthropic interests and other motives.

For example, a Northwest foundation offers funding to encourage coverage of a portion of the Pacific coast largely unserved by other media. In this case the funder's interest appears to be strictly altruistic, to bring high-quality journalism to a neglected region. The foundation does not stand to benefit financially or politically from news reports that result from its largesse.

Contrast this with a hypothetical situation in which a pharmaceutical company offers grants for coverage of AIDS research and treatment. Because the use of prescription drugs is a part of this story, the company could conceivably profit from publicity about pharmaceutical advances. And even if the company and its products are not included in the report, the perception may linger that the funder influenced the coverage. Look long and hard at the motives of the prospective funder.

Dick Salant was particularly concerned about the ability of funders to "shape" public radio's news coverage by their ability to decide *which* of our proposals to accept.

News organizations often submit a list of proposals to funders, which then accept some ideas and reject others. As a result, journalistic attention is paid some issues and denied others, a function not of our editorial decision-making, but of the funder's agenda. Does that constitute external influence upon our programming, even though we did initiate the proposals?

There are no easy answers here. Again, consider your journalistic purposes and the motives of the funder:

- Is the issue a legitimate topic for a story, one you wanted to cover anyway?
- Is the funder's interest altruistic, as opposed to seeking financial or political benefit?
- Would it appear to listeners that the funds come with strings attached?

If you can answer "yes" to the first two questions, and "no" to the third, feel free to pocket the money, then don't speculate about whether your program would please or displease the donor. Produce the same fair, accurate and balanced report you would generate if there were no funder. And tell your listeners who provided the funds.

Cultural programmers should apply parallel standards to achieve

the same end: insulation from funders. In dealing with potential donors, Don Lee, senior producer of NPR's *Performance Today*, stresses that "editorial staff must remain isolated from the funder... (and) editorial independence from the funder must be maintained." Regardless of the type of programming, the intent is the same, to keep editorial decision-making independent of funding considerations.

Journalists as Fund-Raisers

Another thorny area involves the extent to which journalists should be involved in fundraising.

Sound Reporting offers the following guidance: "News staff should have as little contact with funders as possible. Under no circumstances should news staff contact funders directly to propose grants for projects in which they would personally benefit through assignments or travel." In cases where journalists have suggestions about possible funders for a project, their managers or other staffers should contact the prospective donor. It would be similarly inappropriate for journalists to solicit underwriters.

For independents, the hunt for money to finance their work often brings them face to face with funders. And they don't have the benefit of development staffers as a buffer, as station- and network-based journalists do. "I make it clear up front there's no editorial input allowed from any funder," Jay Allison says. But because producers must also be sensitive to appearances, Allison seeks his funding almost exclusively from government or foundation sources that would not have an economic or political interest in the particular subject matter. Finally, in the spirit of full disclosure, he lists all funders on the broadcast.

"The idea comes first," says Sandy Tolan, "the funding strategy second." But the ethical decisions sometimes aren't easy. Tolan noted how his Homelands Productions considered seeking funds for a series on sustainable development from a timber corporation that environmentalists had linked to global deforestation. Troubling questions were raised. Tolan wrote: "When is an underwriter inappropriately buying an image?... (H)ow do you draw the line between 'good' and 'bad' money — and could the 'bad' money turn 'good,' depending on the programming?" Ultimately, Homelands decided not to seek the funding, out of concern about the appearance of impropriety.

But it should be noted again that there could be a similar appearance of impropriety if producers take money from funders whose interests

coincide with the subject matter — so-called “good money,” in Tolan’s words (e.g. an institution that promotes sustainable development, in the case mentioned above). Consider the motives.

Building a Fire Wall

The common thread here is the need to separate editorial matters from funding matters as much as possible. Managers and development staffers should be cognizant of the line as well; one station-based journalist told of a station head who shared the reporter’s list of story topics and potential sources with an underwriter.

Many stations don’t allow journalists to read underwriting credits, using music hosts or prerecorded announcements to handle the job adjacent to newscasts. But what about on-air fundraisers, when stations may seek contributions during news programs? Some stations rely heavily upon journalists to raise funds, taking advantage of their passion for the news and their relationship with listeners. Still other stations won’t allow their newspeople to pitch for money, believing it puts reporters in an awkward position. Whatever the station policy, we shouldn’t think that contacts with listeners compromise our independence or represent a conflict of interest. Listening to listeners and serving the public interest is what we are all about.

Checklist

Avoiding Conflicts of Interest

- 1. Might my activities and relationships compromise my ability to produce a fair, accurate and balanced report?**
- 2. Might anyone reasonably think my activities and relationships could influence my ability to report?**
- 3. Do I have a role in making editorial decisions about causes or issues in which I am personally involved?**
- 4. Would people on the other side of the issue consider me to be fair, if my involvement were known?**
- 5. If we are offered funding to cover a particular subject, is it a legitimate topic for a story, one we wanted to cover anyway? Or are we covering it because we got the money?**
- 6. Is the funder's interest altruistic, as opposed to seeking financial or political benefit?**
- 7. Would it appear to listeners that the funds come with strings attached?**
- 8. In the interest of full disclosure, have all the funders been named on the broadcast itself?**

C H A P T E R

Program
Decision-Making:
Minding
the Gates

5

Tough Choices

Editorial decisions are made at every level in public radio. To this point, we've been concerned primarily with journalistic considerations, those decisions that shape news broadcasts. But we haven't forgotten that station managers, network executives, program directors, music directors, and cultural producers and hosts make important decisions daily about what will be heard on public radio.

Scholars often use the term "gatekeepers" to refer to media professionals who select from a vast range of possible materials the limited amount that will be published or broadcast. They could be, for instance, a newspaper or magazine editor, a cable-television system operator, or the executive responsible for a television network's schedule. While some public radio programmers dislike the term, it does make a fundamental point: There are lots of people and programs seeking access to the air, and programmers must make some tough choices. So

"I sit in an
empowered hot seat."

• • • • •

Don Hein
Program Director
KLCC

program decision-making in public radio requires attention to high editorial and ethical standards, whether the program is labelled “news,” “music,” “public affairs,” “cultural” or whatever. We’re all gatekeepers. Let’s look at the various levels at which gatekeeping takes place at public radio stations.

Levels of Gatekeeping: The Licensee

The ultimate gatekeeper is the station’s licensee. Because the broadcast spectrum is a public resource, all radio stations must be licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to operate in the public interest. Under the Communications Act, license holders are responsible for all programming on their stations.

Reflecting our educational origins, more than half of U.S. public radio stations are licensed to colleges and universities. Roughly one-third of public radio station licenses are held by non-profit community groups, and the rest of the stations are licensed to a variety of public entities, such as state and local governments, school districts and libraries.

Public radio stations are generally governed by boards, with responsibilities set forth in the licensee’s charter. In some cases, particularly with colleges and universities, the governing board may be the institution’s board of trustees, which may seldom, if ever, get involved with station business. Local university administrators usually serve as liaisons between these distant governing boards and the stations. (Some public radio professionals have expressed concern about the intervention of university administrators in station editorial processes; we’ll discuss that later in this chapter.)

At the other extreme of involvement in station affairs are boards at some community licensed stations, which include station managers and take an aggressive stance toward running the station. These active, locally based governing boards may actually determine what programming will be heard on the station.

Because public input is important for public broadcasters, the Public Broadcasting Act requires all stations licensed to community groups to establish community advisory boards, comprised of local citizens. The difference between an advisory and a governing board is that advisory boards have not been granted decision-making authority by the licensee. For example, the by-laws for KLCC’s Advisory Commission provide that major policy matters are referred to the commission

for recommendations, but the station manager and staffers make the decisions.

(In 1984 a group of governing board members and station managers met in what became known as the Wingspread Conference, to draft guidelines intended to ensure the editorial integrity of station management. The guidelines, referred to as the "Statement of Principles of Editorial Integrity in Public Broadcasting," are excerpted in the appendix.)

Gatekeepers Within the Station

General managers, station managers, directors of broadcasting, whatever the title, you call them "Boss." The station manager is the guardian of the radio station's license. Though station managers generally have final authority to determine what is broadcast, many take a "hands-off" approach to gatekeeping, delegating programming responsibility to program directors, news directors and other staffers. The manager is generally in charge of the station's public file (maintained in accordance with FCC regulations) and serves as the primary link with the licensee.

The program director "is the audience's representative in a station," according to the *Public Radio Program Directors (PRPD) Handbook*. PDs oversee the station's program schedule and how it sounds to listeners. As with station managers, program directors vary in their decision-making styles. Some have a hand in all program decisions, others allow news and music directors, as well as individual producers, broad discretion for programming within their bailiwicks.

KLCC Program Director Don Hein, speaking at the Conference on Public Radio Journalism, called his position "an empowered hot seat." He has an opportunity to shape his station's programming, but must also take the heat from various constituencies within and outside the station who are denied access to airtime or who disagree with programming choices. Station managers, news staffers, music programmers, volunteers, community groups, all may object at some level to a program decision or being denied access to airtime. "But listeners aren't sitting around the table when program decisions are made," Hein says, "so the PD must represent them." PDs actively represent listeners by regular consultation with all segments of their communities.

Reporters, music hosts, and cultural programmers are also gatekeepers before the microphone. Individual choices may range from which stories to include in a newscast, what soundbite to use, what

music selection to play, or what question to ask of a visiting artist whom you're interviewing. It's all part of the sifting and winnowing of material that determines what information reaches your listeners. Now let's consider some of the issues that affect program decision-making.

Issues: Whither Local News?

The onset of satellite distribution in 1980 and the emergence of competition among American Public Radio (now PRI), NPR and inde-

"The only
excuse
for a local public
radio...station
is local
programming."

• • •

Mike Ziegler
General Manager
WSKG

pendent program producers created a dynamic marketplace of high-quality programs in public radio. No longer were stations dependent upon local production or NPR to fill broadcast schedules; programmers could just pull programs "off the bird," perhaps even at less cost than producing it locally. And when stations schedule programs produced elsewhere, local productions are sometimes bumped from the air.

In this mediascape some public radio professionals fear that local programming is endangered, especially local news. Because news is expensive to produce rela-

tive to other forms of programming, participants at the Conference on Public Radio Journalism expressed concern that local news will be replaced at many stations, either by network news programs or by music. Similarly, much of the talk at the 1994 PRNDI conference centered around the need to defend local news.

Clearly a challenge for public radio programmers today is to strike an appropriate balance between high-quality network offerings and local productions that speak to local needs. WSKG General Manager Mike Ziegler was quoted as saying in PRNDI's October 1994 newsletter: "The only excuse for a local public radio...station is local programming. Otherwise just plug the transmitter into the satellite receiver."

Local information in various forms is an important part of the comprehensive news package we provide our listeners. Further, as WSKG's

Mike Ziegler noted, without it stations are vulnerable in the brave new technological world. They could be bypassed by program distributors that transmit national programming directly to listeners via satellite or wire.

As KMUW's Gordon Bassham wrote in PRNDI's newsletter, the key is a clearly articulated mission statement, with the support of licensee and station alike. If local programming is down on paper as a central part of your station's commitment to serving its community, your program decisions should reflect that.

The goal is an array of programs across the schedule that is fair and balanced from the perspective of the many elements of our communities. Standards of fairness and balance that apply to local production also apply when choosing national programs. Likewise, there is an obligation to preserve the editorial integrity of the national programs we broadcast, to avoid distorting, misidentifying or otherwise manipulating them in ways that confuse our listeners.

Issues: The Rise of Audience Research

A major development in public radio during the 1980s was the acceptance of audience research as a tool for program decision-making. For many years public radio managers had resisted ratings as representing encroaching commercialism. However, during the past 15 years, what some people have described as a "research revolution" swept across the industry. Research is widely used by station and network managers and programmers today. The extent to which public radio has embraced research was apparent at the 1994 Public Radio Conference when consultants Tom Church and David Giovannoni were honored with CPB's Edward R. Murrow Awards for service to public radio.

The rise of audience research, however, has been a lightning rod for criticism, and participants in the Conference on Public Radio Journalism engaged in spirited debate over research. Some conferees blasted "the numbers" for moving public radio from an emphasis upon mission to an audience-driven approach, similar to commercial broadcasting. But others at the conference argued that we must know about our listeners if we are to serve them. You can't fulfill your mission if you're not reaching an audience, they reasoned.

"Research is listening to listeners," wrote KCFR GM Max Wycisk in *Current*. "Research informs the decision-making process; it does not make decisions for you." The distinction is an important one. "Ratings

information does not drive our programming,” says WBUR GM Jane Christo, “but it gives us important feedback about how important (our programming) is to our listeners.”

It’s not a matter of “audience versus mission”; research may be applied *in the service of mission*. Indeed, the PRPD Handbook defines public service as “mission times audience.”

Your mission should — and can — guide your use of research. Clarify your purpose for broadcasting, and then draft a clear statement of mission that everyone at the station — as well as officials of the licensee — can “buy into.” Use research to *support* that mission. (More about mission in our next chapter.) “If you know what it is you want to provide — say, local news,” says KPLU PD Roger Johnson, “it’s very appropriate to use research to determine the best way to do that.”

Issues: Licensee Intervention

Consensus around mission is important in resolving cases of licensee intervention, when university administrators intervene in station affairs in ways journalists consider inappropriate. At the Conference on Public Radio Journalism, a number of news directors described efforts by university officials to use stations for public relations purposes, to hand down programming decisions, and to block reporting of stories that put their universities in a bad light.

In some cases the university’s organizational structure is the root of the problem. Some stations, for instance, report to public relations offices, whose promotional function may conflict with the station’s commitment to providing credible coverage of the community, *including* the university. Other stations report to instructional media centers; to university presidents, to extension services, to academic units, as well as a variety of other arrangements. WILL Director of Broadcasting Donald Mullally prefers reporting to an academic unit, where the dean and faculty generally have a strong journalistic ethic. “You have an automatic cheering section who would defend the right of a journalistic organization to do what’s necessary — even if it’s unpopular,” Mullally told *Current*.

Whatever the lines of authority, however, KPLU’s Michael Marcotte says stations would benefit from getting a statement of editorial integrity in writing. The staff of KPLU and its licensee, Pacific Lutheran University, spent nearly nine months drafting a policy in which the university administration expressed support for the station’s editorial independence.

Under the policy, which is reprinted in the appendix, “the university is committed to maintaining the full confidence of the public in the editorial integrity of our news and programming, and to assuring all citizens that station management has the freedom necessary to provide KPLU’s services effectively.”

KPLU’s experience provides a model for other stations to follow. The best defense against unwarranted licensee intervention is to demonstrate to the licensee that a station with a reputation for integrity and high journalistic standards is an extension of the university’s service to the community. Universities hold dear the principle of academic freedom for faculty members as critical to seeking knowledge and truth. In the same vein, university administrators should value and protect the editorial freedom of their public radio professionals, who share the goal of helping the community better understand itself.

It’s our job to make that case. At one university, for example, an administrator initially blocked coverage of an academic unit’s unfavorable accreditation report. The public radio station’s news director and general manager put down in writing why the story should be covered, then went together to meet with the administrator, who relented. The story aired.

The relationship with the licensee should be cultivated, just as station staff carefully tend to relationships with advisory board members, volunteers, underwriters, community leaders and the like. As WILL’s Mullally says, “You have to help them understand what you’re doing, and why it’s for them.” A friend you make in the good times might see you through the bad times.

Criteria for Program Decision-Making

This book is about standards, so which standards can we apply to programming? At the Conference on Public Radio Journalism, PRI’s Ken Mills and KLCC’s Don Hein offered models for program decision-making, which we’ve synthesized here. When trying to decide whether to add or drop programs from your schedule, or change or adjust your format, consider these questions:

- Does the decision serve our mission?
- Will the decision serve our audience?
- Will it build audience?
- Does the decision make sense economically?

Let's look at these questions one at a time, though they are, of course, interrelated.

Does the decision serve mission?

What sets us apart from commercial radio is our sense of mission. Our desire to reach an audience is rooted in our desire to serve people by providing in-depth journalism, an outlet for cultural expression, giving voice to neglected communities, or a combination of these. So a crucial first step in program decision-making is to consult your mission. Think of the decision in terms of the values that guide your station, network or production entity. Is the new program or format change in keeping with what you have traditionally done? With what you want to be doing?

As noted earlier, sometimes program decisions are forced upon us. Some university station programmers say their licensees have, in fact, directed them to broadcast programs that didn't fit with their formats or missions. Examples abound of stations told to broadcast public relations events, instructional programs, or sporting events. If the GM or PD objects, it falls to them to demonstrate to the licensee how such programming is not in keeping with the station's mission. Again, the need to have a consensus around that mission with your licensee is apparent.

Does the decision serve audience?

Programming can't serve your mission if it doesn't have an audience. Therefore, another basic point to consider is whether programming has — or is likely to have — appeal to listeners. Assuming the program is in harmony with your mission, will people want to listen? To be attractive to listeners, programs must meet your high standards for both content and production values.

Sounds logical. But what's particularly vexing here is that who's to say how much audience is enough? And is there ever a point when attracting a wider audience clashes with mission? Here lie some of the toughest programming calls. But audience and mission *both* count. Public radio exists because of both. The ideal programming decision boosts audience in harmony with your mission.

Does the decision make economic sense?

Just as you can't serve mission without audience, you can't do much of anything without money. Accordingly, programmers must consider

the revenue implications of their decisions. Will the new program or format generate revenue? It could do so by delivering a larger audience, and thus a bigger pool of potential subscribers, or by providing better service to listeners, making them more likely to pledge at fundraiser time. Another decision may save money — say, by dropping a national program to have money for local production, or the reverse. But programmers need to weigh the prospective savings against the loss in service to listeners. Be creative.

While fiscal considerations are important, they must be viewed in the context of mission and audience. Put another way, if your new idea will raise or save money, that's great, but it needs to serve mission and audience first. The best decisions are those that serve mission, build audience and make economic sense. The tough decisions are those where you can only check two of the three boxes, and mission needs to be one of them. There's no perfect formula, but the ideal decision will boost audience and make fiscal sense in harmony with your mission.

Tending to Stakeholders

Change is often unsettling. Stations and networks that have made major programming changes have sometimes taken heat from listeners, licensees, even their own staffs. The PRPD handbook recommends that, before making changes, programmers should list the parties affected by the decision, and consider how to smooth the adjustment. Among your "stakeholders" are:

- Listeners
- Station management and staff
- Licensee officials
- Boards of directors
- Advisory boards
- Station volunteers
- Other local media

Stakeholders should be informed before the change takes place. Those who should have a say in the decision should be consulted as part of your decision-making process. And it's often advisable to tell listeners and other media in advance. That courtesy might defuse some of the controversy that naturally surrounds change, although it can backfire in some cases and bring on criticism of the move.

“Know Thy Community”

The Three Commandments

The first commandment is “Know Thy Community.” You can’t serve people you don’t know. Audience research is a form of feedback, but so are phone calls and letters from listeners. Create opportunities for listeners to comment on how you’re doing; put your managers on the air to field calls about programming. Set up an answering machine to be a listener comment line, and solicit e-mail messages. Encourage input, and take it seriously. Put your community first.

Second, innovate! Be on the lookout for new ways to serve current listeners and to attract new ones. Break the mold. Who would’ve thought an old-style variety program set in fictional Lake Wobegon would prove a hit? Or a couple of wise guys joking about car repair? Be open to experimentation: listen to all ideas and programs submitted by producers. And give them honest, constructive criticism and advice in return.

Finally, exercise independent judgment when making programming decisions. Seek counsel from a broad range of people, to be sure. But when it comes time to act, base the decision on *your* criteria, not someone else’s agenda.

Checklist

Effective Program Decision-Making

- 1. Does the programming decision serve our mission?**
Is the programming decision in accordance with the values that drive your station, network or organization?
- 2. Will the decision serve our audience? Is it likely to attract new listeners?**
- 3. Does the decision make economic sense?**
- 4. Does the program meet our high standards for content and production values?**

C H A P T E R

Editorial
Leadership:
Putting
It All Together

6

Editing as Leadership

We used to think of editing in terms of editing copy or audio tape, and leadership in terms of managing people and budgets. It's time for a new mold: leadership as an editorial function.

Put simply, editorial leadership is the task of implementing the standards described in these pages. It's about setting the editorial direction for your organization, building consensus around a mission of quality journalism, and then putting journalistic standards into practice. We could go on endlessly about the issues, the promise and the problems. Now it's time to pull it all together with a call for strong editorial leadership. What really does that mean? Effective leadership, above and beyond standard management functions, involves:

- Vision — knowledge of where the organization should be headed, and how to get there

“One of the key problems facing American (media) organizations is that they are underled and overmanaged.”

• • • • •
Warren Bennis
Management Expert

- Communication — the ability to describe that vision to people and get them to “buy into” it, as well as fostering an environment of participatory decision-making
- Insight — a knack for evaluating talent, solving problems and generating innovative ideas
- Commitment — reflecting genuine concern both for the listeners and the staff, building a climate of trust.

Leaders move their organizations forward. They help make working in public radio fun, which is what it ought to be. (A representative listing of contemporary books about leadership techniques and management styles is in the bibliography of this guidebook.)

Applying the Vision of Carnegie II

The Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting, generally referred to as Carnegie II, was convened in 1977 to “reappraise the condition of public broadcasting” a decade after passage of the Public Broadcasting Act. “What public broadcasting tried to invent was a truly radical idea,” Carnegie II wrote, “an instrument of mass communication that simultaneously respects the artistry of the individuals who create programs, the needs of the public that form the audience, and the forces of political power that supply the resources.”

Carnegie II’s report, *A Public Trust*, presented an articulate statement of goals for public broadcasting:

- “Public broadcasting must be noncommercial”
- “Public broadcasting must be independent”
- “Public broadcasting must become public telecommunications”
- “Public broadcasting must consistently set a standard of excellence”
- “Public broadcast journalism must be carried on by professionals prepared to accept and live by the requirements of responsibility that go hand in hand with freedom.”

It’s more important than ever to be true to these ideals. The public is mistrustful of much of what passes for journalism these days; and rightfully so at times. And critics of public broadcasting challenge our independence.

The Conference on Public Radio Journalism was an important step

toward attaining these goals. This chapter contains a collection of ideas — some generated at the conference, others contributed since — to keep the momentum going, promote innovation and help us reach our goals.

The Mission Is the Message

Your mission answers the question, “Why are we doing public radio, anyhow?” Clearly we’re not here for big money, or for “bulk audience delivery,” to draw upon jargon from our commercial counterparts. Idealism rather than pragmatism probably drew most of us to public radio in the first place — the opportunity to be of service to listeners and to be creative with the wonderful medium of sound.

Just as there’s the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, your mission likely has two dimensions. There’s probably a mission statement written down somewhere for your station or network, and there is the intuitive sense of mission that may or may not be shared by staff. Written statements vary as to their specificity and their value; some express vague platitudes about public service, while other statements clearly set forth the organization’s reason for being. Some mission statements are an important part of the organizational culture, some are largely ignored.

Strive for specificity. If local news is part of your mission, say so, as Oregon Public Broadcasting does: “to provide in-depth coverage of news in and affecting the Pacific Northwest, going beyond the coverage provided by other broadcast and print media to create a unique and useful perspective for a diverse audience.” If furthering the goals of a university licensee is part of your mission, make it clear that your journalistic mission takes priority.

As for the *spirit* of your mission, again there’s divergence. Some public radio professionals are fortunate to work for an organization with a strong, shared sense of purpose. But in other cases there’s “mission confusion,” a lack of clarity about the organization’s role as a

“Mission
is the best
heat shield.”

• • •

Gordon Bassham
KMUW

broadcaster or producer. Pat Aufderheide, a scholar at American University, has written that public broadcasters sometimes suffer from “unarticulated assumptions.” For example, does public radio exist to be “better radio” — producing programs similar to those in commercial radio, but of consistently higher quality — or “different radio,” providing an alternative? Is our role to meet the information needs of a democratic society, to “skim the cultural cream?” Both?

These are the sorts of fundamental questions to be addressed in the valuable process of discussing, drafting and embracing a mission statement. Answers will vary from place to place, a function of differing philosophies, licensee considerations, and factors related to your particular market. For example, the mission statement for a Pacifica station is likely to be quite different than that of a station licensed to a school district. Consistent with your station’s mission, your news department may have its own mission statement, apart from cultural programming or other units. Independents may have mission statements for the programs they produce, too.

Such diversity is a special part of public radio. We don’t want “cookie-cutter” mission statements. But we do want clearly defined and articulated missions. Mission statements guide our daily practice and provide common ground for all station stakeholders — licensees, boards, managers, newspeople — to judge past performance and plan for the future. They can also, as KMUW’s Gordon Bassham notes, serve as a “heat shield.” Under pressure we point to our mission and say, “We did what we set out to do.”

This book does not presume to tell you what your mission ought to be, beyond our discussion of independence and integrity. It *does* presume to tell you to:

- Think about your goals and your purpose for broadcasting
- Discuss it with anyone who’ll listen, inside and outside your organization
- Put your mission in writing, with clarity and specificity
- Tell your community
- Take it to heart.

After you choose your goals and determine your mission with care, act on it. And if it’s too soft and vague to be useful, go back and refine it. Face up to the hard questions: Do funders — directly or indirectly — dictate what you offer listeners, or do you make program decisions independently, based on public-interest criteria? Is news coverage determined by staffers’ political leanings or are strict standards of fairness

and balance applied?

Your mission is too important to be consigned to an annual report boilerplate or a dusty file cabinet!

The Essential Editor

We have made a case for leadership as an editorial function. But let's not forget the traditional editing role that is fundamental to public radio journalism. Editing in public radio transcends basic notions of editing copy and tape: to clarify, to shorten, to catch errors. For us, editing is a continual process — deciding what to cover, who to interview, how to treat the story. This approach to editing works at several levels and begins long before the story is written or the tape is cut.

We edit ourselves, and some of us edit the work of others. Good self-editing involves more than just reading our scripts aloud, with a critical eye and ear, for accuracy

and time. It's a matter of adhering to the standards of fair, accurate and balanced journalism described in this guidebook, and following those standards *throughout* the reporting process. Edit yourself *before* and *after* you write the story.

For the editor who reviews the work of other journalists, the job begins with advising reporters on how to handle stories, giving clear and constructive feedback, editing copy and tape, and carefully checking facts. These are all indispensable editorial tasks. However, the editor's role also includes setting up systems to ensure:

- Every story, no matter how small, gets an edit and is checked for accuracy
- Everyone in the newsroom knows and applies the station's standards for fairness, accuracy and balance
- The station's performance is regularly monitored by the news staff to ensure the standards are being met.

"Get an edit!"

• • •

PRNDI
Slogan

To the editor also falls the added responsibility of fostering innovation, communicating a vision for the organization, and building consensus around it. All in a day's work for the editorial leaders of public radio.

Public Service

Think about it. People send public radio stations money for a service they could get for free. But

“Regarding public radio, in a nation with almost 9,500 commercial radio stations, exactly why is it necessary to give federal subsidies to about 600 public stations?”

• • •
*George Will
Columnist*

public radio is an important part of their lives and many consider their public radio stations to be community assets. It's a different kind of relationship than listeners have with commercial stations. That's why our listeners write the station checks, volunteer, and wear our station sweatshirts around town.

Our challenge is to build upon our status as community assets, expanding the service we provide and making ourselves even more central to our listeners' lives.

Public radio is already a leader in the movement for public or “citizen-oriented” journalism, discussed earlier. There are numerous approaches:

- Organizing and broadcasting community forums
- Improving political coverage through initiatives to focus coverage on an agenda identified by citizens rather than candidates
- Forging partnerships with other local news organizations to convene citizens to solve community problems
- Providing “saturation” coverage of local concerns
- Sponsoring public-service campaigns, such as Oregon Public Broadcasting's drive to immunize children, WAMU's volunteer-recruitment, or food drives.

Some stations have provided “value-added” service by setting up shop in cyberspace. For example, KBSU has a space in Boise's community

computer network. In addition to information about the station and its programming, KBSU provides on-line access to local and national government data and updates on community events. The station helps inform the community and promotes itself at the same time. Doing well by doing good. These examples are by no means a complete list. Add your own innovations. And share your ideas.

The Virtual Newsroom

We've talked in this guidebook about increasing communication with our listeners and about building bridges with our licensees. Another theme that emerged from the Conference on Public Radio Journalism was the need for the public radio community to hang together (so we won't hang separately). This is especially important for independents and for journalists in one- or two-person news departments, who often feel isolated. There was a palpable sense of excitement at the 1994 Public Radio Producers Conference, for instance, as producers — many of them independents — stayed up long into the night at "listening sessions" in which they shared and discussed their work.

Some ways to stay connected and to carry this process forward:

- Participate in public radio's "virtual newsroom," which has come into existence through initiatives such as the NPR Election Project and the Conference on Public Radio Journalism. Use computer networks to share war stories. Distribute programs and produced reports, and generally develop an electronic community of public radio journalists. (See the appendix for information on computer resources.)
- Collaborate on programs, whether informally sharing pieces or entering into formal arrangements among stations and independents for co-productions
- Schedule sessions at regional and national meetings (such as the Public Radio Conference, PRNDI, AIR, PRPD, West Coast Public Radio, etc.) to discuss issues of editorial leadership and journalistic standards and ethics
- Make these topics the subjects of training workshops and system-wide interconnects
- Develop a PRNDI/AIR "phone tree," in which PRNDI and AIR board members and news directors periodically phone station-based journalists and independents, just to "talk shop."

Public Radio & the Info Superhighway

Newspapers don't see themselves as just ink on paper anymore. Many publishers have established audio text systems in which readers can phone in for information; other papers are now available via computer. (During the fall 1994 San Francisco newspaper strike, for example, both the strikers and management were "publishing" on the Internet.) Today, the newspaper industry is coming to see itself as a

"Radio is what we do.
It's not what we are.
We are in the
business of taking
information and
cultural programming
and packaging it in
ways that are
accessible to people."

• • •
Jim Paluzzi
General Manager
KBSU

provider of information through a variety of distribution channels. Public radio must do the same.

Content is still key. "We get power from our status as providers of excellent content," says Wayne Roth, GM of KUOW. But as digital technology changes the mediascape, public radio must come to think in terms of public *telecommunications*.

This isn't to say that over-the-air broadcasting won't remain the core of our enterprise for years to come. However, as far-sighted public radio pros have begun to do, we should think about other ways to deliver our informational and cultural content and to establish new connections with our listeners.

The KBSU on-line model discussed above provides one way to start. Indeed, dozens of public radio stations have made that transition. Look into creating a "home page" on your licensee's computer system or your local community "free-net." "Publish" program listings, photos and bios of your air personalities, details on how to subscribe on-line or underwrite, articles about programs, listener comments and requests. With "hypertext links," you can direct people from your computer space to other data bases, such as that of NPR (see the appendix for more information on NPR's "home page") or the Library of Congress or your local city hall. The Soundprint Media Center has built an electronic resource of this kind with a federal grant.

You can start simply. Eventually actual programs will be available to you on-line. In a demonstration of this technology, a University of Oregon journalism class produced a program that aired on KWAX, and was then "published" on the Internet in the university's computer server. "Net surfers" can download the audio file and hear the program through the speakers on their computers.

NPR has begun a pilot project with Bloomberg Business News to distribute NPR news programs as digital "radio on demand" to Bloomberg's 40,000 terminal users around the world. The CBC is also experimenting with putting its programs on-line.

Along with putting this technology to good and regular use, public radio must find ways to benefit from it. If public radio is to have a strong hand in shaping telecommunication policy, it's critical that we become involved in this evolution now.

As broadcasters we have spectrum reserved for us. But whither the "wired world"? Will public broadcasting be allocated "a lane on the information superhighway"? It's critical that representatives of public radio (and television) be at the table — alongside cable, telephone, commercial broadcasting and other powerful interests — when crucial regulatory and policy decisions are made that will affect public media access to the coming technological infrastructure.

Green-Light Journalism

As long as we're using transportation metaphors, let's close this book with a call for "green-light journalism."

"Red-light journalism" refers to a newsroom culture of timidity. It's grounded in fear of making mistakes, of covering your backside, of living in the past.

"Green-light journalists," on the other hand, relish the challenges and the obligations of their profession. Theirs is a newsroom culture of service, of innovation, of the future.

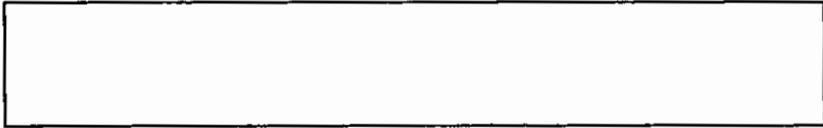
So set your standards high, clarify your mission, and hit the road. Keep the momentum going.

And enjoy the trip.

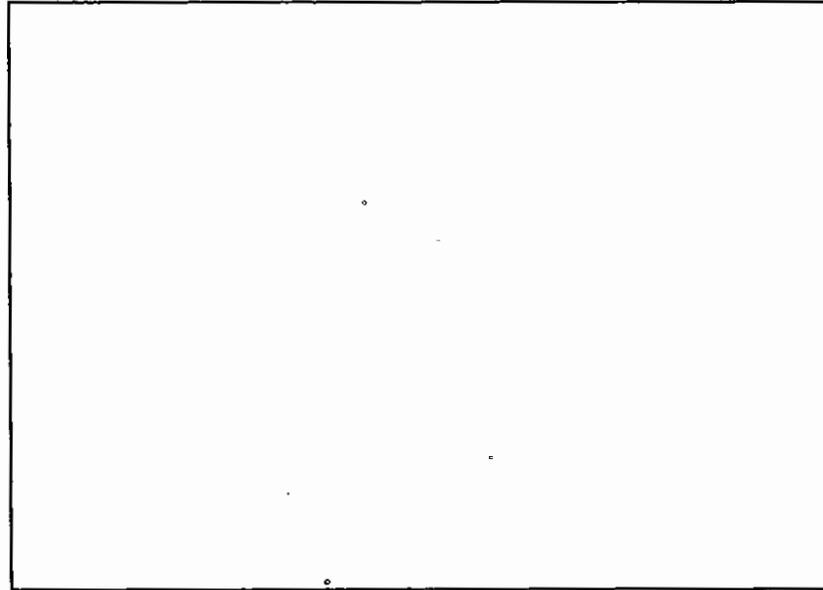
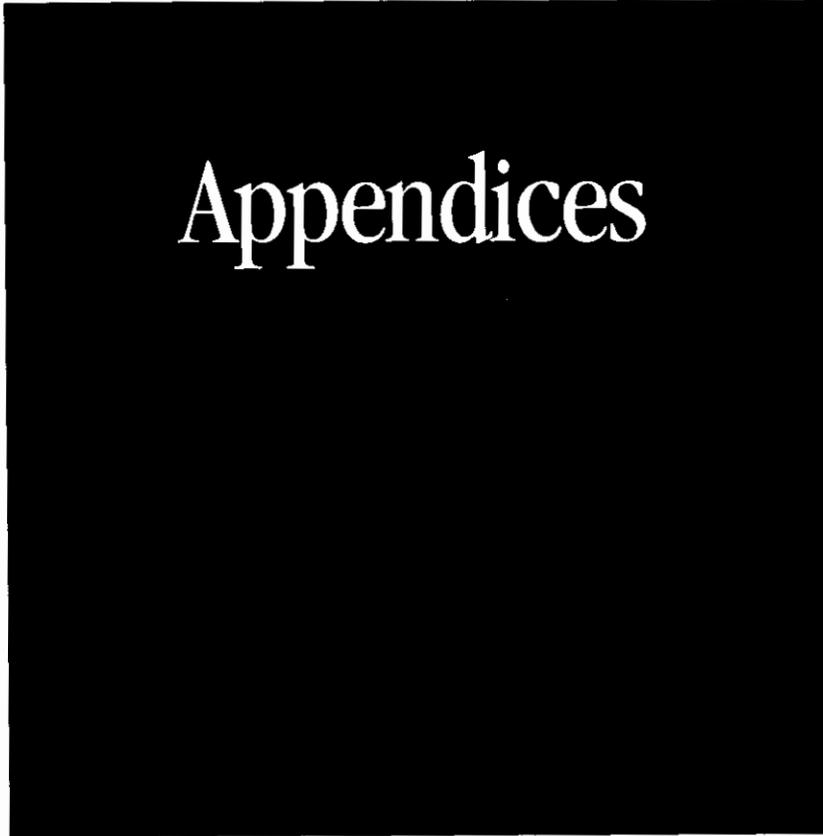
Checklist

Editorial Leadership

- 1. Do we have a clear, actionable mission statement?**
Have the entire staff and licensee "bought into" the mission?
- 2. Are our newsroom standards and editorial policies**
backed up by a system for editing, fact checking, and self-mon-
itoring for fairness and balance?
- 3. Are we involved with our community?**
- 4. Are we considering new ways to deliver content?**
- 5. Are we staying connected with the broader public**
radio community?



Appendices



Appendix A

Codes and Policy Statements

PRNDI Code of Ethics

Whereas Public Radio News Directors Incorporated (PRNDI) was formed in December 1984 to enhance news and information programming, and

Whereas PRNDI was formed to encourage professional development, and

Whereas PRNDI is to foster events to pursue developmental goals of journalists, producers, editors, independent contractors, students, and volunteer news and public information aides, and

Whereas PRNDI members serve many communities and interests that deserve news programs of the highest standards of honesty, fairness, integrity, balance, compassion, and technical quality;

Now, therefore Public Radio News Directors Incorporated does advance and call upon members to follow this code of ethical conduct...

- 1) Prepare and deliver news programs accurately to maintain public trust. All errors of fact, bias, or omission must be corrected immediately.
- 2) Strive to eliminate personal, station, or community bias and balance matters of race, creed, religion, ethnic origin, gender, and sexual preference.
- 3) Recognize, understand, and vigorously pursue our public's right-to-know laws. Members must evaluate the merit and news value of materials provided by anonymous sources. After deliberation, members must insure the sanctity of those sources based upon right to privacy and guard against its violation.
- 4) Make efforts to name those who provide newsworthy information and avoid all sound presentations not generated at the news site.
- 5) Responsibly evaluate the newsworthiness of all broadcast items and guard against undue pressure from non-news personnel.

6) Honor legitimate requests to hold or embargo newsworthy material provided in advance.

7) Avoid making false representations to obtain materials from those who might otherwise object to discussing matters with reporters, editors, producers, independent contractors, student aides, or volunteers under your direction.

8) Inform news sources when conversations are being recorded.

9) Make no promises or guarantees to report, promote, or advance materials without true news value.

10) Avoid the reality or perception of all conflicts of professional and personal interests. These include rejection of gifts, favors, commissions, privileges, or special access which cloud perception.

11) In every case possible, maintain a separation of duty during station pledge drives and other fund-raising efforts. If possible, this separation should include all news-related personnel.

12) Reconsider the associations with community events, service projects, boards, councils, or commissions when conflicts of interest arise and to work to assign stories on those organizations to reporters.

13) Avoid employment that involves work for politicians, corporations, companies, sponsors, underwriters, or station donors which strain professional obligation and public trust.

14) Avoid participation in any event (marches, demonstrations, picketing, rallies) that compromises professional integrity and future news or public information assignments.

15) Maintain and upgrade these standards as circumstances require.

16) Require all news employees, independent contractors, producers, editors, talent, aides, and volunteers under member direction to adhere to these standards.

And, upon acceptance of these standards, members should advance them by personal action. By doing so, members maintain a standard of excellence which enhances the value of the news delivered. Members doing so provide worth to their stations, their communities, and the employees under their direction. This provides the public with a trustworthy product that is beyond reproach.

**Radio-Television News Directors Association
(RTNDA)**

Code of Ethics

The responsibility of radio and television journalists is to gather and report information of importance and interest to the public accurately, honestly and impartially.

The members of the Radio-Television News Directors Association accept these standards and will:

1. Strive to present the source or nature of broadcast news material in a way that is balanced, accurate and fair.
 - A. They will evaluate information solely on its merits as news, rejecting sensationalism or misleading emphasis in any form.
 - B. They will guard against using audio or video material in a way that deceives the audience.
 - C. They will not mislead the public by presenting as spontaneous news any material which is staged or rehearsed.
 - D. They will identify people by race, creed, nationality or prior status only when it is relevant.
 - E. They will clearly label opinion and commentary.
 - F. They will promptly acknowledge and correct errors.

2. Strive to conduct themselves in a manner that protects them from conflicts of interest, real or perceived. They will decline gifts or favors which would influence or appear to influence their judgments.

3. Respect the dignity, privacy and well-being of people with whom they deal.
4. Recognize the need to protect confidential sources. They will promise confidentiality only with the intention of keeping that promise.
5. Respect everyone's right to a fair trial.
6. Broadcast the private transmissions of other broadcasters only with permission.
7. Actively encourage observance of this code by all journalists, whether members of the Radio-Television News Directors Association or not. (revised February 25, 1994)

**Code of Ethics, Society of Professional Journalists
(excerpted)**

III. Ethics

Journalists must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know the truth.

1. Gifts, favors, free travel, special treatment or privileges can compromise the integrity of journalists and their employers. Nothing of value should be accepted.

2. Secondary employment, political involvement, holding public office, and service in community organizations should be avoided if it compromises the integrity of journalists and their employers. Journalists and their employers should conduct their personal lives in a manner that protects them from conflict of interest, real or apparent...

V. Fair Play

Journalists at all times will show respect for the dignity, privacy, rights, and well-being of people encountered in the course of gathering and presenting the news.

1. The news media should not communicate unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without giving the accused a chance to reply.

2. The news media must guard against invading a person's right to privacy.

3. The media should not pander to morbid curiosity about details of vice and crime.

4. It is the duty of news media to make prompt and complete correction of their errors.

5. Journalists should be accountable to the public for their reports and the public should be encouraged to voice its grievances against the media. Open dialogue with our readers, viewers, and listeners should be fostered...(adopted 1926; revised 1973, 1984, 1987.)

KQED Programming Policy

KQED has legal, regulatory, social and ethical responsibilities for the programs it broadcasts. The ultimate task of weighing and judging programs, however, belongs to the viewer or listener. Accordingly, KQED strives to make professional judgments about individual programs based on a broad range of educational, informational, aesthetic, and technical considerations. KQED also strives to assemble a broadcast schedule which contains a broad range of opinions and points of view, heterodox and orthodox, and which encompasses the highest standards of quality, integrity, and excellence.

Integrity

KQED strives to achieve the highest standards of journalistic integ-

rity in its news coverage. KQED's news reporting should not permit bias through distortion, withholding, or manipulation of facts or program elements. Because facts can be subject to different interpretations, KQED attempts to present information in an ethical manner that conveys, fairly and honestly, a range of views.

Programs containing analysis, opinion and points of view also play an important role in KQED's broadcasting mix. While these programs do not always necessarily embrace the objective and dispassionate presentation of facts, KQED recognizes that the airing of such programs is consistent with the ethical discharge of its responsibilities.

Diversity

KQED strives to broadcast a wide range of subjects from an equally wide range of views. KQED recognizes that diversity can be accomplished not only within the confines of a particular program but also may be accomplished by airing, over time, a rich mix of programs.

Controversy

KQED seeks programs that provide courageous and responsible treatment of controversial issues. With these programs, KQED seeks to report and comment with honesty and candor on social, political, and economic tensions, disagreements, and divisions.

***Marketplace* Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policy (excerpted)**

1. Confidential Information: Employees and contractors should not use, directly or indirectly for their own or any other person's financial gain, any information which the employee or contractor obtained in connection with *Marketplace*/USC employment. Further, employees and contractors should not disclose to anyone confidential information obtained in connection with *Marketplace*/USC employment until such information has been made available to the public...

3. Real or Perceived Conflict: *Marketplace* employees and contractors are expected to bend over backwards to avoid any action, no matter how well intentioned, that could provide grounds for even suspicion:

- that an employee or contractor, his family or others close to the employee or contractor made financial gains by action on the basis of "inside" information obtained through a position on our staff before it was available to the general public. Such information includes plans to run stories, items that can affect price movements;

- that the writing or airing of a news story was influenced by a desire to affect financial transactions for your or someone else's benefit;

- that an employee or contractor is financially committed in the market so deeply or in such other way as to create a temptation to bias writing or scheduling;

- that an employee or contractor is beholden to anyone we cover, through acceptance of favors, gifts or payments for performing services, or to anyone in the financial community for tips or for any other purpose.

4. Stocks and Investments: We do not want to penalize our employees or contractors by suggesting that they not buy stocks or make other investments. We do, however, want employees and contractors to avoid speculation or the appearance of speculation. Therefore, we are adopting the *Wall Street Journal*'s approach: employees and contractors who are in a position to influence stock prices by engaging in primary reporting on a specific company or stock issue must not engage in short-term trading; they must hold securities a minimum of six months unless they get prior approval from the Vice President of National Productions to meet some special need. They must not buy or sell basically speculative instruments such as futures or options. No employee should engage in short-selling of securities. No employee or contractor regularly assigned to a specific industry should invest, nor should his family, in any company engaged in whole or significant part in that industry. Any employee or contractor may be asked to reveal his list of owned securities...

**Statement of Principles
of Editorial Integrity in Public Broadcasting
(excerpted from the Wingspread Conference proceedings)**

I. We Are Trustees of a Public Service.

Public broadcasting was created to provide a wide range of programming services of the highest professionalism and quality which can educate, enlighten and entertain the American public, its audience and source of support. It is a noncommercial enterprise, reflecting the

worthy purpose of the federal and state governments to provide education and cultural enrichment to their citizens.

As trustees of this public service, part of our job is to educate all citizens and public policymakers to our function, and to assure that we can certify to all citizens that station management responsibly exercises the editorial freedom necessary to achieve public broadcasting's mission effectively.

II. Our Service is Programming.

The purpose of public broadcasting is to offer its audiences public and educational programming which provides alternatives in quality, type and scheduling. All activities of a public broadcasting licensee exist solely to enhance and support excellent programs. No matter how well other activities are performed, public broadcasting will be judged by its programming service and the value of that service to its audiences.

As trustees, we must create the climate, the policies and the sense of direction which assure that the mission of providing high quality programming remains paramount.

III. Credibility Is the Currency of our Programming.

As surely as programming is our purpose, and the product by which our audiences judge our value, that judgment will depend upon their confidence that our programming is free from undue or improper influence. Our role as trustees includes educating both citizens and public policymakers to the importance of this fact and to assuring that our stations meet this challenge in a responsible and efficient way.

As trustees, we must adopt policies and procedures which enable professional management to operate in a way which will give the public full confidence in the editorial integrity of our programming.

IV. Many of our Responsibilities Are Grounded in Constitutional or Statutory Law.

Public broadcasting stations are subject to a variety of statutory and regulatory requirements and restrictions. These include the federal statute under which licensees must operate, as well as other applicable federal and state laws. Public broadcasting is also cloaked with the mantle of First Amendment protection of a free press and freedom of speech.

As trustees we must be sure that these responsibilities are met. To do so requires us to understand the legal and constitutional framework within which our stations operate, and to inform and educate those

whose position or influence may affect the operation of our licensee.

V. We Have a Fiduciary Responsibility for Public Funds.

Public broadcasting depends upon funds provided by individual and corporate contributions; and by local, state and federal taxes. Trustees must therefore develop and implement policies which can assure the public and their chosen public officials alike that this money is well spent.

As trustees, we must assure conformance to sound fiscal and management practices. We must also assure that the legal requirements placed on us by funding sources are met. At the same time, we must resist the inappropriate use of otherwise legitimate oversight procedures to distort the programming process which such funding supports....

KPLU Statement of Editorial Integrity

KPLU is a major unit of Pacific Lutheran University which, like many other institutions of higher education nationally, views broadcasting as participatory in the mission and work of the university through provision of public service which is educational in the best and broadest sense. PLU has nurtured and supported KPLU from the station's inauguration in 1966, and KPLU is an integral part of university planning for the future.

Public broadcasting is rooted in the constitutional guarantees of a free press and free speech. The Radio Act of 1927 articulates the basic policy that broadcasters operate "in the public interest, convenience and necessity." Therefore, Pacific Lutheran University, in holding a federal broadcast license, does so in trust for the primary and fundamental purpose of providing services for the public...

In providing its public service, KPLU produces and broadcasts a wide range of programming of the highest professionalism and quality. As a trustee, the university is committed to maintaining the full confidence of the public in the editorial integrity of our news and programming, and to assuring all citizens that station management has the freedom necessary to provide KPLU's services effectively. Editorial integrity in this context is defined as the responsible application by professional practitioners of a free and independent decision making process ultimately accountable to the needs and interests of all citizens.

We recognize that as surely as programming is KPLU's purpose and the product by which our audiences judge the value of the station, that judgment continues to depend upon their confidence that our pro-

programming is free from undue or improper influence. We underline the importance of this issue and reaffirm University support and assistance to KPLU so that the station continues to meet this criterion in a responsible and efficient way.

In keeping with our responsibilities, the University will:

- Continue to create the culture and sense of direction which assure that KPLU's mission of providing high-quality programming remains paramount.
- Continue to adopt and monitor policies and procedures which enable professional management to operate in a way which insures full public confidence in KPLU's program and editorial integrity.
- Support KPLU management in its responsible exercise of activities necessary to achieve the full KPLU mission effectively.

This memorandum is consistent with the 1986 "Statement of Principles of Editorial Integrity in Public Broadcasting" prepared by the Editorial Integrity Project sponsored by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and responds to "A Path to Excellence," the KPLU strategic plan.

(Adopted August 1994)

Appendix B

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Appendix C

Organizations

Association of Independents in Radio (AIR)
1718 M Street NW, Suite 361
Washington, DC 20036
417-537-8374
Fax 417-537-4959

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)
(London) Bush House, Strand / London, England WC2
0114471-240-3456
Fax 0114471-836-6729
(New York) 630 Fifth Ave., Suite 2153
New York, NY 10111
212-373-4034
Fax 212-245-0565

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)

P.O. Box 500, Station A
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5W 1E6
416-205-6222
Fax 416-205-7430

Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)

901 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20004-2037
202-879-9600
Fax 202-783-1039

National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB)

666 11th St. NW, #805
Washington, DC 20001
Phone/Fax 202-393-2355

National Public Radio (NPR)

635 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20001-3027
202-414-2000
Fax 202-414-3329
WWW: <http://www.npr.org/>

Pacifica Radio

702 H Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
202-783-1620
Fax 202-393-1841

Poynter Institute for Media Studies

801 Third Street South
St. Petersburg, FL 33701
813-821-9494
Fax 813-821-0583

Public Radio International (PRI)

100 North Sixth Street, Suite 900A
Minneapolis, MN 55403
612-338-5000
Fax 612-330-9222

Public Radio News Directors Inc. (PRNDI)
c/o Tripp Sommer, KLCC
4000 East 30th Ave.
Eugene, OR 97405-0640
503-726-2222
Fax 503-744-3962

Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA)
1000 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 615
Washington, DC 20036
202-659-6510
Fax 202-223-4007

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Appendix D

On-Line Computer Resources

What follows is a partial list of discussion groups on topics of interest to public radio journalists, as well as other computer-based resources. "Discussions" are conducted over the computer Internet by electronic mail. You subscribe — at no charge — to these groups by e-mail, and the postings come directly to your e-mail accounts. Messages sent by one person go automatically to everyone who has subscribed to the list.

To subscribe, send an e-mail message to the subscription address listed below. The message should read:

subscribe LISTNAME YOURFIRSTNAME YOURLASTNAME

For example, *subscribe carr-l zina doe* should get Zina Doe onto the carr-l list. No need to write anything else; a computer is signing you up.

Be sure to save the welcome message you get back, because it contains information about how to post messages, how to get off the list, etc.

PUBRADIO

An on-line discussion group of public radio issues, moderated by Jim Paluzzi, KBSU. This group also maintains a directory of its participants' e-mail addresses.

To subscribe: LISTSERV@IDBSU.IDBSU.EDU

RTVJ-L

Established by the Radio-TV Journalism Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, this group focuses on discussion of broadcast journalism. Though the group was set up by educators, many professionals post messages.

To subscribe: LISTPROC@LISTSERV.UMT.EDU

CARR-L

This group deals with computer-assisted research and reporting topics, such as how to find and use data in stories, and relevant software programs.

To subscribe: LISTSERV@ULKYVM.LOUISVILLE.EDU

FOI-L

A project of the National Freedom of Information Coalition, based at Syracuse University, this list is concerned with freedom of information issues, such as open records and meetings.

To subscribe: LISTSERV@SUVU.SYR.EDU

IRE-L

Sponsored by Investigative Reporters and Editors, the focus is on investigative reporting.

To subscribe: LISTSERV@MIZZOU1.MISSOURI.EDU

SPJ-ONLINE

The discussion group of the Society of Professional Journalists.

To subscribe: LISTSERV@NETCOM.COM

PUBLIC RADIO WEB SITES

NPR's "place in cyberspace," a data base available on the World Wide Web, provides program listings, bios and photos of NPR personalities, information on ordering transcripts and tapes, and links to dozens of other public radio-related computer sites — stations, USENET discussion groups, and WWW sites for CPB, BBC and CBC (addresses listed below).

NPR's WWW site "locator" address: <http://www.npr.org/>

CPB's WWW site: <http://www.cpb.org/>

BBC's WWW site: <http://www.bbcnc.org.uk/index.html>

CBC's WWW site: <http://radioworks.cbc.ca/>

Monitor Radio's WWW site: <http://town.hall.org/radio/monitor/>

NPR ELECTION PROJECT

The NPR Election Project creates partnerships in citizen-oriented election coverage.

To subscribe to this group: MAJORDOMO@NPR.ORG

POYNTER ON-LINE

The Poynter Institute's home page contains information on Poynter's programs and faculty, as well as links to other journalism resources on The Internet.

Available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nando.net/prof/poynter/home.html>

EDUPAGE

Not a discussion group, but a thrice-weekly digest of items from newspapers dealing with telecommunication technology and media issues.

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