

James L. Loper Lecture in Public Service Broadcasting

Delivered by David Fanning

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Thank you Geoff Cowan, and Dean Wilson, for your kind words, and especially for your invitation to come here to the Annenberg School to give the annual Loper Lecture.

This also gives me a chance publicly to thank Jim Loper, for the years of work he gave not just to KCET but as a leader in public broadcasting. It's an honor to be invited in his name.

I would also like to thank Mr Russell Smith for his sponsorship of this lecture. I have a special reason for doing so, beyond the obvious. I am honored to meet him here today -- I know how long Mr Smith, and his late brother, Elden Smith, have been supporters of public broadcasting and its mission, back to the creation and building of KCET in the 1960s...

How do I know all this? Well, as they say in my business, I have my sources...

But let me just this once reveal them... I want to show you another short video, of someone very important in my life and work -- Mr Smith's nephew, Elden Smith's son, Martin Smith...

(video: Obama's War)

That was a couple of clips from "Obama's War", FRONTLINE's powerful film about Afghanistan and Pakistan which opened this fall season of the series...

The correspondent you saw was Martin Smith, who has been with FRONTLINE

from its earliest years. Marty made his first film for me in 1986. It was called "Who's Running this War?" and it was about the Contra War against Nicaragua. It was also, I believe, the first time that anyone had drawn attention to a mysterious "Colonel North" who was operating out of the basement of the Reagan White House...

What impressed me so much about working on that first film with Marty Smith was not just his skill as a filmmaker, a director who could craft scenes and tell a good story, but his tough-minded reporting. He dug up that story about Oliver North and named names...

It would take too long to go over all the films Marty has made for FRONTLINE since -- I asked him to count, and we came up with well over 30.... It was only recently that I pushed him into turning the camera on himself and his questions -- until then, he had like most documentarians, stayed behind the camera...

But all along his natural ability to ask hard, probing questions, his indefatigable curiosity, and genuine courage, has led to some of the most important works we have done at FRONTLINE... "Hunting Bin Laden" was made two and a half years *before* 9/11. It was the film we rebroadcast two days after that tragic event, to extraordinary public response... In fact, the morning after, PBS got a call from the White House, saying Vice President Cheney wanted a copy. "We'll send it right over,"

they said. “There’s a car downstairs already,” was the reply...

Those next days, in packed screenings on Capitol Hill, we were literally briefing the Congress and the US government on who was Osama Bin Laden and what was Al Qaeda... What an awesome responsibility for journalists.

I tell that story not so much about Marty Smith, or Lowell Bergman, with whom he worked on that film, as I do about the importance of public broadcasting. And the potential impact and influence of our journalism.

Over the years FRONTLINE has been able to bring a focus to the serious issues, in film after film, and occasionally to do what we always say we want to do – “make the beast blink” -- get the attention of the powerful.

That was illustrated most vividly, again with Marty Smith, who just this summer, while making “Obama’s War”, was interviewing General Eikenberry, now the US ambassador to Afghanistan... Afterwards, Eikenberry told him a story – that he’d had such difficulty getting Bush and Cheney to pay attention to the problems in Afghanistan, that he’d got them to screen “Return of the Taliban”, Marty Smith’s 2006 film on the resurgent Taliban. He said it got their attention in a way that all his power point presentations couldn’t...

That evening, after the interview, Marty was invited to dinner with a visiting congressional delegation. Sitting on the roof of the Embassy, with the lights of Kabul around them, Eikenberry introduced Marty to the visitors, as the man responsible for the

film that “changed US policy in Afghanistan...”

Now, I’ve devoted so much of this time to Marty Smith, I know he would be embarrassed. But I’m doing this, not because of his family who are here – but because it illustrates how important this work is.

And it tells us something much more profound, about what it takes to make good journalism. It takes talent and intelligence, it takes a lot of guts and the courage to go places, and it takes time...

Time. It is the most precious commodity we have been given at FRONTLINE. And Marty and all the other FRONTLINE producers who have done this work all these years know more than anyone how valuable that is. What a privilege. It is the investment of time, not just to research, but the time to collect, to parse out the meanings of the interviews, the scenes, the fragments of stock footage... and the time to think – and rethink – the ideas and their progress through the narrative. And then to re-edit, and get it right.

This is the most difficult of journalistic crafts, I believe. That’s the reason so few places, like the networks, do this any more. Making a major narrative documentary is an expensive and time-consuming task. It doesn’t make economic sense. It only makes journalistic sense. And that’s if you believe that in an increasingly complex world, someone needs to pick through the mass of information that comes flooding at us day and night, and choose a path through it. A great narrative documentary is a bright line, an intellectual journey that helps us

make sense of the world around us, and that challenges our intellects.

That's it: intelligence. It is, and has to be, our watchword. If we can't say that the idea, the story, the film, we're working on is *intelligent*, then we shouldn't be doing it. In fact, we shouldn't be given the means to do it. Someone should take away the money they give us to produce these films.

There is only one way to justify the public money that comes to FRONTLINE – and it has been considerable over the years, an extraordinary commitment by public broadcasting to this series and this idea – and that is if we keep making something that is both smart and excellent.

That's the test we should be applying to everything we do in public broadcasting. Excellence. Sadly, we often fail at that. There is really too much second-rate work that gets by. If it finds funding, it often gets broadcast.

That's the most profound challenge to public broadcasting, I believe: that while we argue for increased funding, for more accessibility, for new programs and innovative applications in the multi-platform world, we have to consider the decision makers, the programmers and the gatekeepers -- the leadership of this enterprise.

They have to demand excellence. Frankly, they don't deserve more money, until they do. Of course, there are some smart and dedicated people who want excellence, but it's often risky stuff -- and many more are in positions where they have learned to protect their flanks, and to look over their shoulders at boards, and university presidents, to noisy station members (or member stations) and

choose the easy way. Take the safe programming, the anodyne, the familiar. It's educational isn't it?

Sometimes the problem lies simply in the way in which they see their jobs. Is it to bring the best and smartest and most provocative programming we can find -- or afford -- or is that just too subjective and complicated a quest? Or maybe, it's just easier to try to get an audience at any price.

Not long ago I visited a station, as a favor to speak to their major donors. I was picked up at the airport by the program director, a nice and enthusiastic lady who had worked at the station for 25 years. She was a big supporter of FRONTLINE, she said, and programmed it right next to Nova at 9pm...

But, she said, she doesn't program those other documentary programs after FRONTLINE -- POV, Independent Lens -- because, well, they sometimes have odd lengths, and that disturbs the scheduling of the "Britcoms" she has on afterwards... And besides, they generally cause a lot of phone calls from unhappy viewers who don't like the politics.

So out they go -- off to the alternative channel where, "anyone who wants them can find them". Oh, and Charlie Rose -- he's on at 6 in the morning... The station does no local news. It does produce pledge programming.

This was perhaps not as disturbing as the station I spoke at last year for their annual fundraising dinner in their studio. I stood at a lectern against a backdrop covered in logos for Nova, and Masterpiece Theater, and Nature and FRONTLINE... I told them why this endeavor is important, how

valuable their support for this station is, and for FRONTLINE, and urged them to keep donating.

Then, I went back to my hotel, and lying in bed, I was scrolling through the channels when I came across a shopping channel with a dubious doctor selling nutritional supplements. I was interested in a perversely fascinated way as he promised all sorts of remedies, including -- and I'm not exaggerating here -- *results for cancer sufferers*. And then the shot changed to a woman with him who said that if you bought these supplements you'd be making a donation to... yes, the public television station I'd just left. And there, in the wide shot, was the backdrop I'd stood before that evening... Nova, Nature, and FRONTLINE...

This is our deepest embarrassment as public broadcasters. I have heard the arguments, and I understand the imperatives, but to think that, hucksters aside, we spend more of our energy and on-air promotional time, pushing programs that have nothing to do with our mission, is shameful.

I won't get into a rant about pledge. You know it; we've all complained about it for years. It is the curse of public broadcasting, especially public television, and it doesn't seem like a subject worth analyzing for an erudite audience at a Journalism school. And yet, it goes to the heart of the issue about funding.

Is this an endeavor that keeps an important station on the air for the people of the community, or has this station become a vehicle for raising money for its own existence? And what's inside the bricks and mortar, the fancy new buildings we've

raised with so many capital campaigns? I wish I could be more hopeful about them being places that encourage new young producers to try out their talents and bring some verve and risk to the local programming.

I walked through a newly converted digital production facility in a Midwestern city with a big university nearby. The public station was showing it off -- new editing rooms and studios -- and as I walked around with the head of production I started to enthuse about all the young people with new cameras, editing on their laptops, who could be brought in here and encouraged, given a chance to show their work, get an extra polish, perhaps reveal a real talent amongst them (there always is). Perhaps a late night broadcast, a chance to get their work on the air... what about connecting with some bloggers, local online journalists? Maybe giving them a space too... He looked at me with distrust, didn't seem to know what to say, and the thoughts went nowhere.

So I went off to greet the major donors, in the company of Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch... to whom I offered the job of hosting FRONTLINE.

Once upon a time I walked into a place like that -- I was a young, enthusiastic journalist and producer. It was 1973 and I walked into a brand-new public television station in Huntington Beach, California -- KOCE-TV.

I had made my way out of South Africa, where as a young journalist, I'd tried my hand at making documentaries. I had to teach myself, mostly because there was no television in South Africa then -- the government didn't allow it until 1976 -- and

had tried to figure out the grammar and syntax of this strange medium.

Film of course was expensive – the cost of a ten-minute roll of 16mm film meant that you had to think hard before you turned the camera on. It made me appreciate the preciousness of that act – that what you did had to count, that it was worth talking about what you were trying to say. And that it was all about collaboration. Finding the best people to work with was my best guarantee that I'd not altogether waste that roll of film.

Somehow I had managed to make a couple of films, about the tragedy of *apartheid*, and I was invited to screen one of them for the BBC. I sold my motorbike, bought a one-way ticket and found myself re-editing it at the BBC. I learned a lot, was offered a job, but thought the place was too wet and full of Brits, so one night in a noisy BBC pub, with the smell of damp wool and stale beer, announced, "I think I'll go to California!" "Oh really?" someone said, and I fled.

KOCE was where I really learned my craft. I started as a volunteer, but soon began shooting and editing stories for the local political news program. Because there was federal education money at the time for "distance learning programs", a few of us young filmmakers were able to take chances – drive all over California in a station wagon, to make documentaries, about poverty, and racism, and the environment. Our bosses didn't really know what we were doing, but it was our education.

I persuaded the BBC to do a co-production and took my fellow cameraman from KOCE to Alabama to make a film on the 20th anniversary of *Brown vs Bd of Education* -- "Deep South, Deep North" . I got to fly

Rosa Parks from Detroit to Montgomery to ride a bus for my film. It was a wonderful, heady time for a young man, and a time for public television when we were all inventing ourselves.

And then, in 1977 I was invited to go to WGBH in Boston. My boss, Peter McGhee, who would become my mentor, took a chance on me: he offered this young, itinerant filmmaker/journalist the job of Executive Producer of an international documentary series, *World*.

What I found at WGBH was an extraordinary culture of enquiry – a place which celebrated ideas. It was a place that valued debate in programs like "The Advocates" and took on tough subjects like "Vietnam: A Television History".

That respect for a wide range of opinion under-girded the journalism I found there. It was also a place that respected conclusions honestly come by: journalism has an obligation to fairness, but when it uncovers uncomfortable truths, it has an obligation to publish, without fear or favor.

In 1980, I wrote and produced a program called "Death of a Princess" which made very serious charges against a senior member of the Saudi royal family – in effect, it accused the King's elder brother of murder. It caused an uproar at the time, and led to the breaking of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Great Britain. There was a serious threat of similar action here in the United States. It was in a time of oil shortages, and the State Department and members of congress leaned very heavily on PBS to cancel the broadcast. At WGBH, my management was faced with their own

pressures. The major underwriter for Masterpiece Theater was Mobil Oil, which took out ads in the New York Times protesting the program.

Not only did WGBH not flinch, but in case the pressures got too powerful on PBS in Washington, they actually booked time on the satellite, so that we could feed the program directly out of Boston, for anyone in the system who wanted to broadcast it. But in the end, PBS held their ground and the program went out. I've never been prouder of the place I worked for.

As Peter McGhee said later, "It put a chock behind the wheel of public television." It proved that the system could withstand great political pressure, and in many ways, laid the ground for FRONTLINE. And gave me great faith in the people I worked for.

Soon afterwards, I came to a meeting at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting looking for funding for another short season of *World*. Lewis Friedman, then the Programming Officer, challenged me to think about something bigger. "What about domestic programs as well as international?" he asked. "Of course," I answered. "How many?" "26 weeks", he said. And in one stroke, Lewis Freedman made a three year commitment to start a new documentary strand, just as he done for drama, and children's programming.

That was the beginning of FRONTLINE. It was an extraordinary act by CPB -- a bold gesture of trust -- that given the time and resources, with people of talent, we would make something worthy of the public mission. And that's what we've tried to do ever since in over 500 documentaries.

Of those, there was one documentary that made a real difference in the way we work...

It was back in the early years of the world wide web -- way back, in 1995... FRONTLINE was about to broadcast a film about the tragic confrontation in Waco, Texas. We'd got hold of tape-recordings of the secret negotiations between the FBI and the Branch Davidians, but we could only use part of them in the documentary, a few minutes at most.

We were sitting around the office, and I was asking if we could make some radio out of them, when someone -- we can't remember who, probably the intern -- said "you can put them on the web". Really? What else can we put up? Interviews? Documents? The whole film? No, not yet...

Well, short of that, we did most of it, and as best we know, that FRONTLINE website, *Waco: The Inside Story*, was the first deep-content editorial website in history. Not only that, but in publishing all those interviews and documents, we had made our journalism transparent. Anyone could hold our documentary up against the primary materials, and test our conclusions. It was a profound act, a big bang moment -- a real change in the contract between the viewer and the producer.

Think about what we did before: all those months of work were directed at one hour, one night at 9 o'clock. We threw it up in the air, some of it hit the satellite and bounced back, but the rest of it just kept going... on past Mars. Television slipped through your fingers; it was ephemeral. You hoped someone tuned in at the right time.

Now, for the first time, serious work on television could have the weight of permanence. That has great implications – you’re doing it for the long view. And for the viewer to find whenever he or she wants.

We were early in that game too – by 2000 FRONTLINE was streaming its first video. We built our own video player for the website, and then added timed embedded links to other materials. We have taken the bright line of the documentary narrative, and re-connected it to its context. That’s the goal now, that when a FRONTLINE films travels out, away from our website, syndicated to whoever wants to feature it, it will carry those links, that intellectual armature.

Today, a program like *Bush’s War* has had over 6 million video views; *Obama’s War* has had almost 2 million just weeks after broadcast. What started with our Waco film has become something much bigger.

Recently I spoke at a breakfast at my local Rotary club. Afterwards, the pastor of the Congregational Church came up to me. He told me that he’d been contacted by an old college friend who he’d not heard from for years. Apparently his friend had been in the ATF, and he wanted to talk to the pastor.

As it turned out, the former ATF agent was haunted by guilt – he’d shot and killed one of the Branch Davidians in the first confrontation at Waco. The pastor told me that in order to call him back, and counsel him, he’d gone to the web, and the most useful place he’d found to help understand what had happened to his friend, was the FRONTLINE website, our very first.

That’s our original “long tail” – its lasting value. It’s also the measure of our impact, as important as changing public policy, as influential as one viewer to whom our work made a difference.

Today, we are engaged in a new challenging set of online projects, with our colleagues at some of the non-profit investigative centers. We are trying to invent some of the new grammar for this new medium. At ProPublica, we have a producer in their newsroom, shooting and editing and reporting together with one of their crack reporters. We’re investigating a series of unsolved killings in New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, from the actions of violent white militia to the failure of local law enforcement to protect African Americans in the wake of the storm.

We are creating an investigative website which will continually update developments in the reporting of these homicides. Now we’ve added the New Orleans Times Picayune as another reporting partner on the story. Soon we’ll start posting photographs, video and print stories, and solicit help from the public to verify and add information to the reporting. Eventually, the joint investigation will emerge as a full broadcast story for FRONTLINE. And then its life will continue online...

As we move more and more onto this new platform, the symbiotic relationship between our reporting and our broadcast will keep being in tension. Each feeds the other, and drives audience. Where we can distinguish ourselves from most of the rest of the online journalistic endeavors is not just our broadcast megaphone -- which gives us a very powerful competitive edge -- but a commitment to keep making high quality

work. The demand has to be: keep doing better – keep the bar high.

That bright line of narrative has to be vivid enough to keep attracting – and holding – an audience increasingly distracted. That’s our challenge. And don’t do anything that doesn’t rely on Intelligence and Excellence.

I have one caution about our new public broadcasting ventures on the web. I am particularly concerned about a threat to our essential public identity. This is already happening. They’re called “sponsorships”, but they are essentially commercials all over public broadcasting websites, local and national, radio and television. I’ve argued strenuously that we are threatening our special status as non-commercial media. I’m told that in surveys the public doesn’t notice them, and is not offended. No wonder, we all swim in a sea of commercialism, and that’s precisely why we need to keep ourselves clean of it.

One day, I’m afraid, when most of our work is experienced on the web, we will wake up and the public will say we’re no different from the rest of them. Why should we give you our membership money? And why should the government give you our tax dollars?

Soon, I’m told, PBS will be generating ads to fill the banners and boxes we are being instructed to design into our website at FRONTLINE. When I object, I’m told that it’s because PBS is under financial pressures from the stations, who don’t want to pay for all their web efforts. So to pay for the pipes, we will take ads?

I don’t get it. Setting aside the real question whether these ads will even generate enough

revenue, do we want to sell our birthright so cheaply? Isn’t this the essential infrastructure for the new public media platform? Once, we built a satellite delivery system for broadcast; now, we should have all the bandwidth we need to build the new ideas we have to develop to thrive in the future. That’s a necessary investment in the future.

I hope there’s a place for FRONTLINE in that future – that it will be able to continue to do what it does best, and that we can adapt and grow. But I also believe that can only happen if we start to think seriously about the reinvention of public broadcasting into public media...

There are a lot of ways in which that could happen, and there are proposals floating around, but I think at their heart we should be arguing that the best hope for this whole system is to build it around a mission for journalism. Radio is already doing that; television has to get better at it.

That means a doubling down on the sorts of ideas that have become current: the joining of new local online journalism entities with public broadcasters. What better way to embrace journalism but to bring it inside? Offer space in our buildings new and old, the ones I walked through... and maybe, if we start recruiting a new media generation (in my mind they’re a lot like a group of twenty-somethings I remember at KOCE in the 1970’s...) -- with their great new HD cameras, their laptop editing, and their web-savvy... maybe we’ll start the act of reinvention. Open up those studios, and let’s begin practicing journalism.

It is, I believe, our salvation for this system. But it has to happen at the local station. It

will take the bravest, and most adventurous, to do this. Taking aim at city hall, the state capitol and powerful financial interests will take courage and leadership, the kinds of editorial protections I was given at WGBH. But it's not that hard: hire a good editor, adopt a code of journalist practices, and protect the firewall.

All it needs is a couple of dozen stations, in regions around the country, to do that, for public broadcasters to become the heart of the public media transformation that is coming. And, as Len Downie suggested recently in a report for Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, those stations should be rewarded with funding, encouraged by CPB and the public financing system to do just that – live up to a public interest obligation... Otherwise, they will, and should, become irrelevant.

If we set that local transformation as a goal, we can begin imagining a bigger idea. What we need most in public television is great journalism. Much more of it. I believe that if we claim this new digital platform -- this "third space" between radio and television -- if we put out the call, and with a relatively modest investment, hire and contract some of the best journalists around – they're out there – we could suddenly become a major player on the national stage. We would get a lot of attention.

And for every grizzled newspaper star reporter, hire three young reporters on the same beat. They understand the daily demands, the drumbeat of reporting in the online world. Set up an apprenticeship model.

Of course you can aggregate and curate -- everyone's doing that -- but more importantly, start doing enterprise reporting.

Partner with the other new public media enterprises looking for publication – like the non-profit investigative units, and when you add the existing assets of public radio and television, programs like FRONTLINE and the NewsHour, as well as public radio -- the megaphones of broadcast -- you can see the outlines of a new powerful journalistic enterprise. It can have the sort of gravitational weight that will rearrange the universe of public media. And it has a feedback loop: we at FRONTLINE will be responsive to that journalism, as will the NewsHour and other programs, and new ideas will come out of that dialogue... We can change the ecology of our broadcast schedule.

Compared to any other New Media startup, this has an enormous asset – that network of local stations and community connections and their new journalistic calling. The stations will be getting a new source of programming for their communities, the network has bureaus, and the best of those stories become part of the national conversation.

And here's where we are different from most new media/journalism startups -- this has a business plan that works. It's been proven. People give to public broadcasting in ways that few other institutions can match. Why is that?

I believe it's because it is a civic trust. Because the government says it is, and puts tax dollars down to prove it. That's why we in turn give to it.

That's a contract unique to public broadcasting. It is what will distinguish this idea -- if you add in philanthropy, you have an existing membership-driven, publicly supported, non-profit model for enterprise journalism.

But here's what really distinguishes it: we have a record of fairness. At a time when many media enterprises are taking a partisan stance, when interest groups are practicing their own versions of journalism, when bloggers and Huffposts publish from their political perspectives, there has to be a place for fairness, for the honest broker. That's our real birthright as public interest broadcasters and journalists. It's becoming an old-fashioned idea, but I deeply believe it will become increasingly valuable. And it's the people who value fairness and honesty who will support it financially and politically.

And that's important because this reinvention is a political challenge of the highest order. At the heart of this big idea is more public funding. It will require the attention of Congress and the administration, the setting aside of egos and unprecedented partnerships. But it is essential, for our survival, and the important idea that has been public broadcasting.

After running FRONTLINE for over 25 years, I want its future to be part of a public media enterprise that is bigger and better... I want us to work with people who set the bar high, who value intelligence and curiosity, who want to produce smart and literate journalism.

I want to keep supporting Marty Smith in his extraordinary work, but more than anything, I want to find the new generation of

reporters and producers like him. If we invest in anything in this system, it should be in new young people, who want to do this work. We're willing to pass on what we know; what we have to help create is the place that will give them the opportunities we've had.

Thank you for listening, and for the honor of being here with you. It's been a privilege.