

Shadows in the corridors: a Capitol Hill Day dialogue

The scene: a small conference room of the Senate Committee on Commerce, late on a February afternoon. The players: a senior committee staffer and her longtime acquaintance, a public broadcasting general manager. The author is president of Colorado Public Television (KBDI) in Denver.

As told to Willard D. “Wick” Rowland Jr.

“Well, the bastards have you right where they want you!” growled the aide, barely looking up from her papers spread across the conference table.

“Is that how you greet an old friend?” the station manager grinned, as he settled opposite her, the rays of the late-winter afternoon sun glancing across the table.

“Right,” she smiled back at him, “I know I can be brusque, and it’s probably been a busy day for you, visiting all the members of your delegation. But I haven’t got much time. There’s an important vote coming up and I need to brief the Senator.”

“Should we re-schedule?”

“No, it’s OK. You know I care about you guys, and I’ve really wanted to talk with you about some things you need to hear. Don’t want to miss this chance.”

“I appreciate that.”

“You may not think so when I’m finished,” she said.

“Is it going to be that rough?” he winced.

“Let’s cut to the chase: I just don’t think you and your friends are getting it. Look, it’s been years since you’ve had an authorization for CPB. Your total appropriations are less than \$500 million, barely growing with inflation, and every year you have to fight tooth and nail just to retain that. Meanwhile, the FCC does nothing about your regulatory problems, because it thinks Congress doesn’t really care enough about you.”

“But at least we’re continuing to get appropriations,” he said, “and two years ago we won a huge battle.”

“Are you kidding?” she snorted. “Some big battle. As I’m sure you noticed last year, they did it to you again. The proposed cuts for 2007 were every bit as serious. They don’t stop attacking the two-year advance provision. And they were pulling back from their commitment for digital transition funds.”

“But didn’t the election results last November change everything?”



Illustration: Elene Usdin

“Not by a long shot, my friend. We may have gotten rid of the rabid GOP appropriators, but don’t ever think this new Democratic majority is going to turn it all around for you.”

“Why not? Don’t you think these rough spots are just bumps in the road? Surely, with this new situation in Congress, we’ll start moving ahead again.”

“You can’t be serious,” she snapped.

“Sure, it all adds up,” he continued.

“We’ve got all our stations, a large distribution infrastructure, and total revenues of nearly \$2 billion a year. Nationally and locally we provide superb services, we’ve made great progress in our digital conversion. And the polls show that the public loves us. Doesn’t all that count for something?” he asked.

“That’s just what I’ve been afraid of. You really don’t understand what’s going on,” she countered. “Don’t you see that they’re playing you?”

“What?”

“Yes, it’s so obvious. Look, the policy establishment loves having you in this position. They’ve agreed to build you up to this level — just large and productive enough to serve as a safety valve for commercial broadcasting and cable, by deflecting the public criticism of them. But they’ve kept you too weak to really challenge big media.

And all the while they threaten cuts every year, rocking you back on your heels, never giving you any sense of security.

“But isn’t that just the doings of our most dedicated enemies among the Republicans?”

“Make no mistake,” she warned, “your problems are bipartisan. The radicals of one party might want to get rid of you, but your ‘friends’ in the other party don’t have much more in mind for you than status quo survival. When will you figure this out and start making a case for changing the terms?”

“Do you mean about funding?”

“No, it’s broader than that; it implicates the whole policy nexus.”

“The *what*?”

“The nexus, the entire inter-linked regime of national media and culture policy—of communications law, federal regulation and money. You’ve had regulatory structural policy problems that come from soft statutory support.”

“Like what?”

“Like censorship, for one. And digital must-carry and copyright.”

“You’re making it appear that it’s all pretty stacked against us. Surely it’s not that systematic,” he protested.

“And why not?” she asked. “It goes way back to the origins of media policy. In the 1920s and all through the so-called ‘Golden Era’ of radio in the 1930s, neither Congress nor any of the four presidents in

those years, Democrat or Republican, made any provision for you. Truth be told, they forced the vast majority of your educational radio predecessors off the air. They expected you weren't necessary."

"But why?"

"Most everyone assumed that, under the light-touch, 'public interest' regulatory regime of the 1927 and 1934 laws, the commercial system would provide all the public service dimensions."

"But," he countered, "some college stations held on, and in time they got reserved FM frequencies and then TV channels."

"How inadequate," she snorted. "No national charter, no federal funding, *nada*. They never intended for noncommercial broadcasting to have a central role in the broadcast culture, as it did in virtually every other industrial democracy. The media in this country were already in private hands—the press, film, even telegraph and telephone. Even during the New Deal, this very capitalist country had great faith in the links between free enterprise and free speech."

"What was wrong with that?" he asked.

"Because" she said, "it was all organized around commerce. Government allowed audiences to become commodities, as markets to be delivered to advertisers, nothing more."

"But the law said that the spectrum was publicly owned," he argued. "Didn't the broadcasters have a duty to serve a range of public interests?"

"In theory, yes," she said, "but the reality was otherwise. Under the private ownership system, the government gave businesses the vast majority of frequencies to develop largely as they pleased. They formed an incredibly lucrative private oligopoly. And what did Congress require them to give back in return?" she spat. "Nearly nothing!"

"But we got those reserved channels . . ."

"Yes, but they relegated you to a relatively dry, narrow notion of instructional broadcasting. There was no mandate to provide wide-ranging, general audience programs. Heaven forbid that you should be entertaining and draw large audiences!"

"Well," he replied, "after the Carnegie report we got legislation establishing CPB, and some federal funding in the late '60s, leading to PBS, NPR, more and more stations and a broader program mandate."

"Emphasis on *some* funding," she

Online: For more about the 1930s battle that gave U.S. broadcasting to commerce, see Current.org/coop.

snapped. "It came very, very late in the day. Even then, many of your own people and their friends in Congress were uncomfortable pushing much beyond the narrow educational

mandate."

"Well, we did rename it *public* broadcasting."

"That may be, but you have never proposed to take a significantly larger role in the media. You don't ask Congress to recognize that objective. You don't go for the resources you'd need for high-quality popular drama and entertainment. You're still begging in that little fenced-in area they gave you."

"But how could have it been otherwise?" he asked.

"Simple," she said. "Virtually all the other democracies took a different approach. From the beginning they saw broadcasting first and foremost as a cultural institution, not as an agent of commerce. It was understood as an extension of language, of the theater and the arts. It would express social and national identity. The emphasis was on quality."

"Well, that's all pretty elitist," he countered. "How could it work in this country? To many that would sound un-American."

"It actually would have been *very* American and decidedly *non*-elitist," she said. "Listeners and viewers would have been respected and valued as citizens, not as mere consumers. Public broadcasting would have been seen as a major way to live up to the ideals of the nation's founders. Through its influence, broadcasting would have been understood as having primarily a civic purpose. What could be more essentially democratic than that?"

"But how could one support that approach?" he wondered. "It would have needed large government subsidies right from the start."

"And, your point is?" she asked, exasperated. "That's precisely the issue. Effective, worthwhile public-service broadcasting requires substantial tax-based subsidy, just like the rest of arts and culture."

"But . . . but, we don't believe in that philosophy in the U.S.," he stammered. "It smacks too much of government control, makes us too vulnerable to political manipulation."

"What's this 'we don't believe' nonsense?" she barked. "That's a major part of your problem. You and your friends in public

broadcasting don't fully believe in what you could accomplish even if you did have much more assistance."

"*Wha . . . what?*" he sputtered.

"This is what I've wanted you and your colleagues to understand. Despite the continuing failures of the so-called 'free and open marketplace' in media, you continue to pussyfoot around its inadequacy. You give the private system a pass. You almost never lay out a full case for the public media as legitimate, core elements of the broadcasting system—as a really substantial counterpoint to the commercial media.

"But our leaders do this all the time, and some of our station people are very articulate about it."

"Sure, but it's pretty much empty rhetoric, with too little to back it up. You have no real plan to be anything but a lightweight, marginal alternative."

"How can you say that?" he bristled at an outsider claiming to be more of a believer than he was. "We bleed and sweat for this institution. That's why we're here on the Hill every year. We don't deserve this critique."

"Oh, yes, you do," she said firmly, though more gently. "Because over and over again you've played right into the game. Let me be clear. This has nothing to do with what services you provide, or with your capabilities. It has to do with your own low expectations. You are so darned deferential in your approach to public policy. For more than 40 years you've been willing participants in a Faustian bargain."

"Faustian? We sell our souls—how so?"

You almost never articulate a comprehensive vision for anything truly grand and ambitious. To earn a minimal amount of federal funding, you've accepted a peripheral role in communications policy, never really challenging its preference for developing private investment opportunities in media. You're caught in a perpetual trap, with limited support, limited capacity and limited vision."

"A trap?" he asked.

"A perfect one," she said. "They convinced you that you can't do better. They periodically pretend to consider some form of dedicated tax-related funding mechanism, but they always discover 'it just isn't practical at this time.'"

"Well, that's often the case, isn't it?"

"Don't you get it?" she snapped. "It turns out that it's *never* practical and there's *never*

a good time. Instead, you're sucked back into the annual ritual, spending all your energies fighting a threatened cutback or some other brushfire. Every year you come to your Capitol Hill Day to hear the latest bad news and the short-term strategy for overcoming it."

"Surely you're not saying we should give up fighting," he protested.

"Of course not," she agreed. "But all you do is protect that pitiful little tip we give you,"

"Tip!?"

"Sure," she almost laughed. "You're like some scrawny Oliver Twist, bowing and scraping, asking only for a bit of porridge. We buy you off with tiny percentage increases for a small new project. You seem to have no ambition for securing anything more."

"That seems a bit unfair," he sniffed.

"We do seek more."

"Do you?" she shot back. "Hard for us to see. When, in the past decade or so," she demanded, "have you ever made a halfway inspiring case to really step up your aspirations and your funding? You did funding studies now and then, or foundations did, but then you look at 'political realities' and back away from any much larger vision and funding ask."

"Well, recently we've been pulling together ideas for all sorts of digital services."

"Always appropriate and useful elements, of course, but somehow short of the mark," she countered. "I know this seems harsh, but as usual you're struggling to find a compelling social hook—education, national security, new media, that sort of thing, just to add incrementally to the CPB money. But you focus on these bits and pieces and ignore the big picture. You avoid the really important fight."

"What fight?" he asked.

"It's back to that nexus thing," she said. "You set your sights low and miss the major dramas being played out in communications policy. You have only a supporting role if you're involved at all."

"Oh, come on," he said. "What are these big dramas?"

"How about media concentration, telecom 'reform,' spectrum privatization and auctions, and the lack of net neutrality?" she snapped. "Regardless of which party is in charge, the U.S. government is going to continue the huge communications giveaway and firesale-priced auctions to major private interests without requiring any payback to public-service institutions. There's no commitment to create a significant, permanent *public dividend* from this huge spectrum sell-off."

"I hadn't seen it this way. So, what can we do about this 'whole nexus,' as you put it?" he asked.

"First, you develop your case," she said. "The irony is that you have been doing great things. I've seen your CPB, NPR and AGC research, and all those local station service models are impressive. Meanwhile, over and over again you do excellent work in national programming. And many of you *do* get it about the new interactive, VOD, V-pod Web world. But you're not making as clear a case as you should that you can and will do more."

"Well, like what else?"

"Like offering really substantial local news every night. Like solid, regular documentary and independent video work in every community. More engagement with local and regional arts and culture, everywhere."



And on the national level, great American drama, entertainment and even comedy."

"But we can't do all that. It's too much in the commercial franchise."

"See, that's what I mean. You act as if you don't want to be a comprehensive public service institution. I wonder if you really would know how to accept the challenge if you *had* adequate resources."

"Boy, that's pretty rough. Is that all?" he asked.

"Not by a long shot," she said. "Link your past and present accomplishments to a clear plan for expanded and improved services, and put a firm price tag on it. Outline the positive regulatory measures that would support your work. It's not just funding; it's structural, too. And you've got to be incredibly more proactive politically."

"Politically? In what ways?"

"Across the board. Ready for a question? Which candidates for the House or the Senate have ever been asked, in public, by a citizen or member of the press, about their stances on public broadcasting funding, or for public culture generally?"

You keep letting these guys off the hook. You beg and plead with them privately and yet almost never press them on these matters publicly."

"Well, what should we be doing differently?"

"Everything!" she exploded.

"When have advocates for public media ever gone to the state parties and insisted that they make support for public broadcasting a clear, unequivocal platform item for all federal candidates?"

"I can't do that," he complained. "It would look too partisan."

"I said your advocates—your boards of directors, advisory boards, volunteers," she signed again. "And they should be pounding on all political parties, not to just one."

"Hold on," he said, raising his hand. "We get their help all the time. Today, here on the Hill, I had my chair and a major donor with me."

"Keep it up. But the heavy lifting is done at home, back among the faithful, the supporters. That's where your board chairs and volunteer leaders should be pressing things. They need to visit their county and state party leaders regularly and camp out in the local offices of your congressional delegation."

"So, what should we be asking for?"

"I rest my case!" she exploded again. "You should have that all worked out by now. Let me run a little experiment with you. What would it cost to do what you should be doing in the digital age?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but I suppose a few dozen more million?"

"Just 'a few dozen'? Get serious. What you've been talking about will cost *at minimum* three to four times the system's funding level now. OK, another experiment. Can you tell me, please, what taxes raise for the BBC? Or for NHK in Japan?"

"Well, uh, no," he stammered.

Six billion a year. Let me repeat that, *\$6 billion!* They receive from their national treasuries three times more than all your resources put together—12 times the amount of federal support. Doesn't that tell you something about what it takes to be a world-class public broadcasting system?"

"But that's too much to ask for, especially when we're dealing with costs of the Iraq War and tax cuts," he said. "The cupboard's pretty bare."

"Who said it all has to come all at once and all from the feds? Why don't you get creative? Yes, the federal contribution should be much larger, two-to-three times what it is now. But why not build it over time through a matching campaign?"

“With whom?”

“The foundations for one. You’re nickel and diming yourselves. A national program grant here, a local station grant there. Try a whole different tack. Put together a complete package; make it into a major challenge for a real trust fund. Ask for a permanent investment by foundations, corporations, states and this newer, younger public you so desperately say you need to serve. The Kroc gift shouldn’t be an exception; that sort of support should become the norm.”

“So, how do we go about raising this endowment?”

“Treat it like a major gift campaign. You do it all the time for your stations. Why can’t you do it for the entire system? Propose something really new, like a ‘Public Media Contract with America.’ Give it some real meat, hefty goals and don’t be shy about saying what it will cost and what other policy and regulatory measures you need.”

“Whew! Anything else?”

“Yes, don’t be so afraid to challenge the shortcomings of the commercial world.” Draw more attention to the huge profits made by the private media, their tendency toward ownership concentration, and the threats to independent journalism and civic practice those conditions imply. And here’s the kicker: Point out the long-standing pattern of government subsidies they’ve had.”

“Subsidies? Of the private media?”

“Huge subsidies. I’m amazed how few people understand this. In this country, the private media, so-called, have had massive public subsidies whose value far outstrips the penny-ante amounts that have gone to public broadcasting.”

“What?” he asked “That can’t be. They don’t get government grants.”

“Sure they do,” she countered, “they’re just different kinds. Print media get preferential postal rates and legal notices. Broadcasters and cable operators get monopoly grants of spectrum and public rights of way.”

“Gee, I hadn’t looked at it that way.”

“Unfortunately, very few others have either. You also must keep reminding people that the low levels of quality and morality in so much of broadcast and cable are linked to marketplace logic and to continuing de-

regulation. Conservatives and liberals alike are appalled at what’s on the airwaves. Play to that. Remind them that you can create a major safe harbor for the best that the society can offer. Help them see that we should have adequate public compensation as a *quid pro quo* for more commercial deregulation.”

“Compensation? How would that work?”

“Simple,” she said. “Go after the numbers. Let’s try another experiment.”

“Which is?”

“What do you think are the annual revenues of the commercial broadcasting and cable media?”

“Oh, I suppose a few billion dollars.”

“Just a few, you think?” she shot back. “Try \$150 billion.”

“Boy, that sort of dwarfs our funding.”

“Sort of, is right. And what’s 1 percent of that?”

“\$1.5 billion.”

“Yes, about triple what you receive now. So, let’s peg the deal at that. Summarize all your accomplishments. Outline all your local station and national-service plans. Recap all the high public opinion you enjoy. Let them hear how much the public wants and needs your services. Point out, without flinching, that commercial broadcasters routinely fail to meet these needs, despite their profits. And then make the case that a modest tax on deregulation would make for a much better electronic media culture. Whole new ball game.”

“But everyone ‘in the know’ here in Washington would think that’s pie in the sky, totally unrealistic.”

“Of course,” she snorted. “They’ve lived so long in the present policy environment that they’re perfectly conditioned to react that way. You are, too. You have a trained incapacity.”

Ttrained incapacity?”

“Yes, you’ve been told over and over again that you can’t play a bigger role in U.S. media and cultural affairs, that there’s no political stomach for adequate funding, that the timing for genuine advances is never right. And you’ve come to accept it.”

“Well, I’m not sure we can shift gears.

We’ve got to focus on the fight to retain the 2007 appropriations and now this new round of cuts proposed by OMB for 2008.”

“Sure you do,” she said, “but recognize that it’s just the annual rite. Don’t keep falling into the trap. Keep reminding yourselves that public media can make a much larger contribution to education, culture and civic life. If you don’t believe enough in that grand promise, and if you’re unwilling to fight harder for it, you’re letting down the very public you claim to be serving.”

Just then the bell sounded for roll call. “Sorry,” she said. “Need to go.”

“Well, it’s been tough hearing this, but I really thank you for your time and advice,” he said, heading for the door.

“Are you sure?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye. “I’m glad to rant at you as a friend, but I’ll be much happier if—next Capitol Hill Day—I see some movement on these bigger questions.”

“That would be hard for us,” he said, preparing to go.”

“Of course,” she said. “But if in 1965 anyone had claimed that within two years there would have been a Public Broadcasting Act and the beginnings of PBS and NPR, plus stations popping up everywhere, they would have been laughed at.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. Before Carnegie, federal support and national program services were thought to be pipedreams,” she said, ushering him into the hallway and the lengthening shadows of the early evening. “And remember something else.”

“What’s that?”

“No one else is going to do this *for* you.” ■

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