

Introduction

Our democracy requires some space in our vast system of communications that is not controlled by the imperatives of power or profit. This would be space where issues can be explored without censorship, where scripts are not designed around product placements and commercial interruptions, where program ideas are not driven by the selling of audiences to advertisers, where minorities can be served without concern for ratings.

The current trend of increasing concentration of media ownership into the hands of fewer and larger corporate giants makes the need for alternative perspectives and sources of information even more crucial. This was the mission envisioned for public broadcasting by the Carnegie Commission: to serve as “a forum for controversy and debate” and “a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard,” so that we could “see America whole, in all its diversity.” In doing so, public broadcasting could act as a watchdog on government and corporate abuses, create space for public discussion, and make it possible for citizen groups to form around the issues of the day.

I have been a friend of public broadcasting all my adult life. I love its mission and cherish many of the programs it has brought me over the years. I believe our ability to support an independent, noncommercial forum for public debate and artistic experimentation is a measure of our maturity as a democracy. So it has been with a great deal of sadness and regret that I have watched as this wonderful service has been attacked by government forces hostile to editorial independence and forced over time to become increasingly beholden to corporate sponsorship in order to survive. At times, it has seemed like the Tories were taking back the commons and replacing the speakers’ stands with video billboards.

Over the years, I found myself watching public television less and less as the pursuit of great ideas gave way increasingly to the pursuit of big bucks or flashy productions. There were fewer programs that challenged the mind and more shows on business, investing, and collecting. There were fewer performances of original drama or serious music and more imports, reruns, and overproduced pop. There were more and longer commercials. Several recent books published on the subject tell the story: public broadcasting has been characterized as “for sale,” a “vanishing vision,” even as dead.

Then something happened to change my grumbling into activism. An

editor friend extended an invitation to write a feature piece on local media for her paper. Then came an invitation from the group Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) to testify at a scheduled national hearing in Pittsburgh on PBS programming. The financial troubles of my local station, WQED, became front-page news. I began to ask questions, talk to friends, and think seriously about whether the institution that I cared so much about could be taken off the block, brought back to life, and restored to its original vision.

This is my story and that of others who feel as I do that we have a responsibility to save our friend from hostile forces and itself—to put the public and the public interest back into public broadcasting.

I am a scholar/activist in the humanist tradition. I was recruited to Brandeis in 1964 by Morrie Schwartz (of *Tuesdays with Morrie*) to do graduate study in sociology. As an NIMH fellow, I was thoroughly trained in qualitative research methods by Everett Hughes, Jack Seeley, and other distinguished Brandeis faculty. My dissertation was based on qualitative methods and I have regularly taught courses on the subject at the University of Pennsylvania (with Renee Fox) and West Virginia University over the past thirty years. Thus it is second nature for me to take copious notes on all my professional interactions as well as to maintain large files of documents and clippings on relevant issues. My interest aroused by my participation in the WQED story, I began to read widely in the relevant literature.

Over time, I interviewed dozens of public broadcast officials, communications attorneys, media activists, and others. As I developed insights into the subject, I started presenting papers to colleagues and publishing opinion editorials and short articles. I did not intend to write a book. A few years into the project, however, it seemed inevitable.

My research could be characterized as “participatory” insofar as it represents scholarly activity in the service of members of the community who received and acted on my findings. I followed what scholars in applied sociology call the “advocacy model,” utilizing “conflict methodology,” which entails recognizing conflicts of interest between various institutions and the public and being willing to use adversarial strategies to secure information about corporate activities that would otherwise be kept secret.

In the final analysis, however, this is a personal book about my efforts to make public broadcasting more accountable to my community. I hope it will inspire as well as inform. I have spent the past six years with other citizen activists fighting for a more democratic and pluralistic public broadcasting service. With limited material resources, my colleagues and I took on

WQED, a \$32 million a year public broadcasting complex, and stopped it from cashing in its second station, WQEX, to cover debts incurred from mismanagement and possible embezzlement.

Because of the precedent-setting potential of the case, we played a major role in saving up to seventy other public television stations from being sold off—maybe one in your town. We opened up spaces for labor and public interest groups on our local station's board of directors and community advisory board. We got programming for working people on the station's schedule, where it didn't previously exist. We even produced a program on domestic violence. And we're not done yet.

While much of this book concentrates on our effort to save and improve public service broadcasting in Pittsburgh, I will also tell the stories of activists fighting for accountable public broadcasting elsewhere around the nation. In the process, I will map out the terrain of the U.S. commercial media and public broadcasting systems, and introduce you to weapons that can be used to represent the public interest where it is not being served. Before we're done, you will be alerted to the corporate giants that threaten the public interest in this age of media merger mania. More important, I hope you will be impressed with the thousands of media activists winning small battles for media democracy in cities and towns across America.

Finally, I hope you will support the efforts of public interest organizations gearing up for the major battles over national media policy that loom ahead. This includes an exciting new plan to restructure public broadcasting as an independent public trust, free from undue government and corporate influences.

Chapter 1

Trouble in Three Rivers City:

WQED Debt Comes Due

In April 1993, the front page of my daily newspaper headlined the troubles of Pittsburgh's local public broadcasting corporation, QED Communications, Inc. (now WQED Pittsburgh). Facing a \$7.4 million loss of revenues, CEO Lloyd Kaiser had dismissed fifty-four employees (about 25 percent of his staff) and, after twenty-one years, resigned his position. Don Korb, a member of QED's board, accepted board chair Elsie Hillman's offer to serve as acting CEO for the year.

Korb, a former Westinghouse vice president and treasurer, had served for ten years as chair of the QED board's finance committee. Elsie Hillman is the wife of billionaire Henry A. Hillman, one of the forty richest men in America. She has been a major power in the national Republican Party, former chair of the Pennsylvania Republican Party, and widely acknowledged kingmaker for Pennsylvania senator John Heinz, governors Richard Thornburg and Tom Ridge, and former U.S. president George Bush, a distant relative. She was also the power behind WQED.

From Community Station to National Center

Pittsburgh's WQED, VHF channel 13, was reserved in 1952 and launched in 1954, subsidized by 60,000 Pittsburghers who contributed two dollars each.

It was the first community-owned noncommercial television station in the nation. In 1958, the corporation persuaded the FCC that “there was a compelling need for a second educational channel in Pittsburgh.” With the granting of UHF channel 16, WQED became the first public station to operate a second station, WQEX.

In the early days, WQED’s *Heritage* series featured filmed visits with great artists and scientists. Its portrait of Martha Graham was the first in public broadcasting to win a national award. From 1954 to 1961, WQED produced an hour-long, award-winning program called *Children’s Corner*, featuring Josie Carey as host and a young puppeteer named Fred Rogers.

In 1961, Carey left and her show was replaced by *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, starring Fred Rogers and produced by his own Family Communications, Inc. In 1968, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* became an instant success on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) nationwide. The program continues to be broadcast from the studios of WQED.

Carey recalls the early days at WQED: “We went door to door collecting two dollars per family, we collected money from the schools for in-school programming, we did local shows—the Kilty Band concerts, shorthand, remedial reading, game shows, ‘Children’s Corner,’ We never intended to be the equal of networks; we were a community station.”

In contrast, Lloyd Kaiser reported in his farewell interview that Elsie Hillman had hired him in 1970 with a mandate from the board of directors to change the city’s image from “a dirty little steel town” into a national media production center. The big turning point had occurred in 1975, when Hillman brokered a deal between Bob Dorsey, of Gulf Oil, and the Mellon Corporation to fund WQED production of a new round of *The National Geographic Specials*, a series which had been canceled in 1973 after a nine-year run on commercial television. For the next sixteen years this series brought over \$50 million in production and promotion money to WQED.

Other programs followed, and at one point WQED ranked fourth among member stations in supplying programming to PBS. These nationally distributed productions brought WQED more than \$3 million a year in additional income from other PBS stations. In the salad days, corporate underwriters would “forward fund” such programs. For example, Gulf would give WQED up to \$2 million and let it float for a couple of years while the *National Geographic* programs were in development. The series had high production costs (for example, producers might take multiple shots of “a

zebra jumping over a log” until they got one that they thought was perfect, and station officers enjoyed generous expense accounts, including world travel and leases on luxury automobiles.

In the late 1980s, however, it all began to unravel. Corporations generally stopped forward funding shows. In 1988, *National Geographic* decided it would be cheaper to produce its own shows. Subsidies to WQED dwindled from \$3 million a year in 1987 to under half a million in 1989.

As the relationship with *National Geographic* was coming to an end, WQED got \$10.8 million from Digital Equipment Company (DEC) to underwrite *The Infinite Voyage*, a twelve-part science series, to secure the money, however, WQED and PBS had to permit the show to air with DEC commercials on commercial stations during the same week it played on PBS. After four seasons, the program was dropped in 1991. Similarly, for a time, WQED coproduced a family drama, *Wonderworks*, with the Disney Channel. However, WQED put up only \$5 million of the \$14 million budget and had to agree to Disney airing the shows several times on its own channel before they were permitted to play on public television. Another show, *Space Age*, was canceled after just six episodes. By 1991, WQED had dropped to eighth in PBS national production.

The WQED boat was leaking fast. Money was coming in, but it was going out faster. The Gulf Oil float covered expenses in the short term, but this only prolonged the day of reckoning. As explained by Ceci Sommers, then vice president of public relations for QED Communications, “We could borrow from ourselves without the encumbrance of making interest payments. But in essence that didn’t get us out of debt. We used a loan to offset the deficit, but we still had to pay back those loans.”

In July 1990, Lloyd Kaiser pledged all of QED’s assets as collateral for a \$6 million Mellon Bank line of credit to keep the station operating. Failure to pay up or renegotiate would result in Mellon being able to take over the station, including equipment purchased with federal money. Mellon required that QED keep \$1.25 million from its capital fund on deposit as collateral, but QED wasn’t able to comply.

In a three-part series in October of 1991, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported the corporation’s 2.1 million loss over the previous year. Nevertheless, management and board spokespersons dismissed concerns and reassured supporters. Of about 260 employees, only 3 were laid off in 1990, 12 in 1991, and 19 in 1992 (13 percent over three years). There was no public outcry and no evidence that the board increased its scrutiny of management. More-

over, still seeking the big shows, WQED went ahead with productions that weren't fully funded, running up costs not covered by corporate underwriters or by broadcast outlets willing to prepay for the finished product. By June 1993, revenue from national productions had fallen by 60 percent, but national programming still constituted more than 60 percent of the station's budget.

One consequence of this organizational strategy was the decline of logically produced programs addressed to issues of importance to the Pittsburgh area. In October 1991, the *Post-Gazette* reported that according to a Corporation for Public Broadcasting study, the typical public TV stations produced 105 hours per year of local programming. At WQED, however, local programming hours had declined from 93.75 in 1988-89 to 78 in 1989-90 to 60.5 in 1990-91.

When questioned by the press, Lloyd Kaiser had responded that local programming was a "poor investment and should be avoided to place more resources into purchasing national programming." At the time of Kaiser's announced retirement, QED Communications was producing only two half-hour local shows a week, and WQED suffered rising costs, declining membership, and a flood of red ink.

The corporation's financial officer, Ron Bencke, later mused, "We thought national programming would come back and this was temporary. We got used to the old lifestyle." Kaiser claimed that such "gambles" were necessary. He argued that if you cut staff while grants are pending you will be unable to deliver on projects if funding comes through. Elsie Hillman went along with the gamble. As she told the *Wall Street Journal* in January 1994, "We all had rosy-colored glasses on, thinking things would come along to replace [*National Geographic*]."

The Plot Thickens

Within days of the April 1993 announcement of major staff cutbacks and Kaiser's resignation, the corporation was awash with more scandal. It was revealed that the top four executives enjoyed retirement pensions valued at well in excess of \$100,000 each year. In addition, they each had received \$189,000 in one-time cash-in payments from an insurance fund purchased for them by the board as deferred compensation. Finally, the press uncovered four different for-profit subsidiaries and established that in 1989-90 the same four executives had each received two paychecks—one from QED Communications, Inc., and one from its for-profit subsidiary, Q Produc-

tions in Los Angeles. These second paychecks boosted salaries by an average of 30 percent while the officials involved were publicly claiming to have taken 10 percent pay cuts as a public relations gesture.

When the time for sacrifice came, it was imposed mostly on lower-level employees. Don Korb revealed that two-thirds of the fifty-four employees fired were earning less than \$40,000 a year; one-third of them earned less than \$20,000 a year. One of those fired was my neighbor, a producer. At the time he was on leave at the University of Chicago, completing an M.A. degree program, and his wife was pregnant with their fourth child.

These cuts were projected to save the station about \$1.2 million in the 1993-94 fiscal year, only about 15 percent of the shortfall. Some fourteen vice presidents kept their jobs. Adding insult to injury, WQEX station manager Michael Fields linked the fiscal scandal to future program policy: "We can't afford to keep shows on the air that the business community doesn't want to support."

I had been a "friend" of public broadcasting for many ears. I had fond memories of the kind of programs that had impressed me deeply and had not been shown on commercial television since the brief "golden age" of live drama and documentaries, in the 1950s and the early 1960s. At the same time, I had been long aware of the drift of public television toward more conservative, bland, and commercial programming.

By 1993, PBS on WQED had become little more than insects mating, British people talking, sauces simmering, beltway pundits barking, and corporations hawking. Now it appeared that this corporate culture had also perverted my station's governance and stolen tax dollars and public contributions. Adding insult to injury, they were using this self-inflicted crisis as justification for even more of the same.

Even the affiliated radio station, WQED-FM, had been captured by conservative elites. Having given up National Public Radio news programming years earlier, WQED-FM was almost entirely devoted to classical music; it broadcast no jazz or folk music, no regularly scheduled news or public affairs shows, and only one locally produced weekly show about happenings in the Pittsburgh cultural scene.

Aimed at subscribers, WQED's *Pittsburgh Magazine* was a big glossy publication filled with very upscale advertisements for a yuppie readership. The *Post-Gazette's* magazine reviewer called it at best attractive but "journalistically timid." It rarely featured investigative journalism or discussion of local problems. Much of it was devoted to celebrity puff pieces, sometimes featuring people WQED would then hit up for money.

The QED Accountability Project

Our movement in Pittsburgh began with four of us in my living room soon after the *Post-Gazette's* revelations. Joining me were Catholic peace activist Molly Rush, a social worker and labor writer Fred Gustafson, and Russ Gibbons, former communications director of the United Steelworkers of America and program coordinator for the Philip Murray Institute of Labor Studies of the Community College of Allegheny County. Gibbons had also directed and cohosted a program, *Labor's Corner*, on WQEX over the period 1989 to 1992.

We were all critical of the drift of public broadcasting away from its founding mission and toward increasing commercialism and pr-corporate conservatism, and we shared a desire to promote more accessible governance and diverse programming at WQED. After three meetings we launched our reform movement on May 19, 1993, calling it the QED Accountability Project. For us the name expressed a value on active citizenship and good government that was nonideological and would make us attractive to a diversity of participants. Within weeks we received formal endorsement from the Alliance for Progressive Action, an umbrella organization for forty-six public interest groups in Pittsburgh.

Kooks with Gripes

Shortly after CEO Lloyd Caizer's announced resignation, I called his office and interviewed his secretary, Michelle Mora, about WQED's governance. I was especially interested in the idea of subscriber election of board members, as practiced at WQED in San Francisco. Mora didn't think the board had ever considered this, but she offered to consult the QED legal division and get back to me. Two days later I got a call from board chair Elsie Hillman and took advantage of the opportunity to interview her for publication.

Hillman said the idea of a subscriber-elected board had "never come up," but allowed that "maybe the public could nominate two to three seats to the board." She noted that the board would soon appoint a bylaws committee to review the stations' constitution. In apparent ignorance of FCC guidelines, she claimed that board meetings had to be open to the public but the board was not required to announce the dates of the meetings in advance. She went on to say that she didn't consider it appropriate to allow non-board members, even subscribers, to get on the meeting agenda because "we could have some kooks come in with a personal gripe.... If we