

Case 32

America's System of Public Broadcasting and Public Radio

Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1965

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Background. In 1964, the U.S. Office of Education issued a grant to Educational Television Services to host the first national conference on the Long Range Financing of Educational Television Stations, to be held in December of 1964.⁴⁸² Ralph Lowell, a conference attendee who represented WGBH and was a prominent civic leader in Boston, was invited to deliver a statement.⁴⁸³ Lowell enlisted the assistance of WGBH general manager Hartford Gunn and his assistant, David Ives.⁴⁸⁴ Ives, a friend of Carnegie Corporation officer Arthur Singer, was familiar with the Carnegie Corporation's pivotal work in bringing objective voices to bear on other problems of national importance, particularly Flexner's report on medical education and Myrdal's study of race. Ives contacted Singer to inquire if Carnegie would be interested in directing a similar effort in the arena of educational television.

Singer, who thought that the Carnegie Corporation officers and board would embrace such an opportunity, made the case for the effort to Carnegie president John Gardner. On the spot, Gardner decided that Carnegie would commit resources to study educational television. Knowing well that the Ford Foundation had long dominated educational television funding, however, Gardner called Ford president Henry Heald to be sure that such a study would not be interpreted as an attempt to invade Ford's territory. Heald, on the contrary, expressed his belief that, given Ford's longstanding activity in the field, a Carnegie study would carry much more weight in public opinion as an objective and unbiased voice.⁴⁸⁵

At the 1964 conference, Ralph Lowell advocated the establishment of a public body of civic leaders to "collect information, listen to testimony, and recommend a national policy" regarding educational television in America.⁴⁸⁶ That conference produced eight mandates for the direction of educational television, the last and most important of which urged that "[i]mmediate attention . . . be given to the appointment of a Presidential Commission to make recommendations for educational television development, after intensive study of a year or more duration."⁴⁸⁷

In preparation for Carnegie's planned study, Singer contacted S. Douglass Cater, special assistant to President Lyndon Johnson for domestic policy issues, to ask for the president's reaction to Lowell's proposal. Cater noted that the first lady owned television properties in Texas and that he would not want to pursue a policy that would adversely affect those properties. Further, President Johnson himself expressed some unease about the potential political implications of initiating a presidential commission on educational television because of the possible appearance of self-dealing.⁴⁸⁸ The president expressed no reservations, however, about a privately-funded committee, to be coordinated by the Carnegie Commission. Such a commission seemed likely to provide a politically insulated means by which educational television policy could advance.⁴⁸⁹

Gardner presented the proposal to the Board of the Carnegie Commission at a meeting on April 21, 1965; the proposal met with unanimous approval.⁴⁹⁰ The Annual Report of the Carnegie Corporation for 1965 discusses the grant in optimistic terms: "Under a Carnegie grant the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television will examine the role of educational television broadcasting and recommend how educational television can be strengthened and financed so it will make the most effective contribution possible."⁴⁹¹

Strategy. In November 1965, with President Lyndon Johnson's endorsement, the Carnegie Corporation established the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. A grant of \$500,000, spread over 1965 and 1966, funded the activities of the Commission.⁴⁹²

Singer, the Carnegie program officer with responsibility for the Commission, recruited Stephen

White, a colleague from earlier projects and a documentary writer for CBS, to direct the Commission's activities. White and Singer had both worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; when White suggested as Commission chairman Dr. James R. Killian, Jr., chairman of the corporation of M.I.T., Singer enthusiastically approved. Killian had been Science Advisor to President Eisenhower, and he also had a technology background. Killian, Singer, and White collaborated to identify and recruit the remainder of the commissioners.⁴⁹³ Though the Carnegie Corporation officially controlled the selection of the commissioners, the White House recommended the appointment of two individuals, for the dual purposes of protecting Johnson's interests and of keeping the White House informed of the Commission's progress.⁴⁹⁴ Other Commissioners included Harvard President James B. Conant, author Ralph Ellison, United Automobile Workers Vice-President Leonard Woodcock, Polaroid founder and President Edwin Land, and former North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford.⁴⁹⁵ The Commission held its first of eight formal meetings in early 1966.⁴⁹⁶ To help it understand the existing providers of public television, the Commission contacted all 124 educational television stations that were operating in 1965 and visited ninety-two of those stations. Its report on those television stations was the first collection of nationwide information on all educational television stations.⁴⁹⁷

From early in the process, the Commission staff planned, on release of the Commission's report, to recommend legislation enacting the proposals it would likely contain. Accordingly, White and Killian began to visit various congressmen in Washington, as well as the presidents of the three major television networks, to present briefings of the Commission's findings and to float legislative ideas. Cater similarly briefed others at the White House about the Commission's work.⁴⁹⁸

Impact. The Commission published its findings and twelve recommendations in January 1967.⁴⁹⁹ The detail of the Commission's recommendations reflected two major goals—that federal support should be significantly increased and that a Corporation for Public Television should be established.⁵⁰⁰ Near the conclusion of the Commission's work, the Commission staff hired a Washington law firm to draft legislation enacting the report's proposals in hopes that such legislation might win quick passage.

Shortly after the release of the report, the *New York Times* forecast its importance, with widely-admired columnist James "Scotty" Reston opining that its release "may be recognized as one of the transforming occasions in American life."⁵⁰¹ In January 1967, Johnson used his State of the Union address to urge the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act and the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a direct recommendation from the Commission.⁵⁰²

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 passed the House of Representatives by a three-to-one margin.⁵⁰³ While some witnesses before the Senate Committee considering the bill disagreed with particular aspects of the legislation, each witness supported the overall legislation's passage. Killian and Commissioner Edwin Land, president and founder of Polaroid, were the key witnesses on behalf of the Commission's report.⁵⁰⁴

Some recommendations were eventually rebuffed: the Commission recommended that funding for CPT come directly from an excise tax on television set sales, like that in existence in the United Kingdom, so as to create a dedicated tax and thereby insulate CPB from appropriation politics and possible political control of content, but that recommendation was rejected in Congress. Furthermore, despite the Commission's recommendation that only half of the Corporation trustees be political appointees, all were eventually to be appointed directly by the president.⁵⁰⁵ Despite these changes in the legislation, the bill was reported to have been based "in large measure" on the report of the Carnegie Commission.⁵⁰⁶

The Congressional Reports of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 highlight the importance of the Carnegie Commission and the testimony of Dr. James Killian, its chair, in establishing the need for a Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The Report of the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare to the Senate cited with approval Killian's testimony on the need for the Corporation to

be insulated from political control and for the Corporation's control of interconnectivity among stations.⁵⁰⁷ The House Report also referred favorably to Killian's testimony and the report produced by the Carnegie Commission, particularly the latter's findings and forecasts of the Corporation's costs.⁵⁰⁸ Significant credit for the overwhelming support behind the Public Broadcasting Act can be partially attributed to "the deference given to the prestigious Carnegie Commission, chaired by MIT president James Killian."⁵⁰⁹

While the impact of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting on American life is widely understood to be significant, the Carnegie Commission on Public Television was responsible for more than merely the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. The Commission's report, authored by Stephen White, articulated a vision of great potential for properly financed television in the public sphere. White was the first to transform the phrase "educational television" into "public television," thereby broadening the public understanding of the Commission's work beyond traditional classroom-extension use. In addition to establishing the infrastructure for public broadcasting, the Commission laid the groundwork for connecting the American public to informative, entertaining, and enlightening television and radio programming.

Notes

482. John Burke, *An Historical-Analytical Study of the Legislative and Political Origins of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967* (New York: Arno Press, 1979, reprinted from original, 1972), 76–77.
483. *Ibid.*, 90.
484. Interview with Arthur Singer, 1/6/2005.
485. *Ibid.*
486. Burke, *An Historical-Analytical Study*, 90.
487. *Ibid.*, 93.
488. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 224.
489. Burke, *An Historical-Analytical Study*, 102–03.
490. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 224.
491. Carnegie Corporation, *Annual Report*, 1965, 45.
492. John Witherspoon and Roselle Kovitz, *The History of Public Broadcasting* (Washington: Current, 1989), 19.
493. Interview with Art Singer, 1/6/2005.
494. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 224.
495. Jack Gould, "New Guides for Educational TV," *New York Times*, 11/21/1965, X21.
496. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 225.
497. Witherspoon, *History of Public Broadcasting*, 13.
498. Interview with Arthur Singer, 1/6/2005.
499. Witherspoon, *History of Public Broadcasting*, 14.
500. Witherspoon, *History of Public Broadcasting*, 13.
501. James Reston, "A Base for a Milestone," *New York Times*, 1/26/1967, 27.
502. Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 225.
503. James Ledbetter, *Made Possible By . . . The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States* (London: Verso, 1997), 22.
504. Ledbetter, *Made Possible By*, 22.
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506. Jack Gould, "Pace and 12 Others Named by President to Public TV Board," *New York Times*, 2/18/1968, 79.
507. Legislative History of PL 90–129 Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, USCCAN 1967 Vol. 1, Senate Report No. 222, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 3/24/1967, 1782–86.
508. Legislative History of PL 90–129 Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, USCCAN 1967 Vol. 1, House Report No. 572, 1811, 1827.
509. Ledbetter, *Made Possible By*, 22–23.