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CHAPTER 32

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

US Public Radio's Roots in Education and Research

JOSH SHEPPERD

INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN public radio is a noncommercial media industry that is underwritten by a private, nonprofit government corporation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It distributes block grants not only to National Public Radio, its highest-profile nationwide program provider, but also to the Public Broadcasting Service and its affiliated stations, their offshoots, and a wide variety of independent program producers. Those divisions underwrite, produce, or distribute a range of programs, from news and documentaries to children's shows to cultural programming, at a cost to the US government of \$3.16 per person in taxes per year (Benton 2022). America's public system is a difficult phenomenon to study, because it is composed of a pastiche of historical policies, contrasting visions of media technology, and a tangle of limits and pressures exerted by philanthropic groups, government agencies, media practitioners, and commercial broadcasters. Public radio began as a New Deal-era aspiration to extend equal access to education to both agrarian and urban audiences, and much of its history can be framed in terms of how teachers idealistically envisioned media technology as an extension of universal public education.

This chapter details how this educational concept of nonprofit radio drove its goals and structures and how public radio's "mission-statement"-based origin was shaped by a multitude of bureaucratic, regulatory, activist, and philanthropic agencies (Douglas 1989). The history of US public radio provides a novel research opportunity: a phenomenon distinct from both commercial and state-run models that shows how mass media technologies develop when they are influenced by purposive visions of social relations (Peters 1997). This chapter does not claim that public radio is a more worthy endeavor than commercial broadcasting; instead, it argues that public radio's history reveals something about the way that ideological investments are materialized and sustained

through its technologies, forms, and structures. The study of the idiosyncrasies of US public radio details new pathways for understanding how and why media industries form and make subsequent organizational decisions (Gomery 1989).

Much of the research around public radio is critical of its deficiencies in connecting principles to consistent practice (Loviglio 2011). Scholars tend to begin with the perspective that public radio has never been a sufficiently activist noncorporate influence (Ouellette 2002). This is certainly true if one views NPR as a wing of the media reform movement and if one holds its practitioners to the standard of promoting a progressive agenda. As McChesney (1995), Pickard (2015), and others have written, there were several historical moments when social reform advocates invested in the concept of a noncommercial service, especially during the New Deal and Great Society eras. But much of public radio's history is composed of a struggle to solve technical and structural problems while striving to fund facilities and provide socially ameliorative programming without the influence of advertising dollars (Macy 1974). Public radio in the United States is a legacy institution derived from educational policy (Shepperd 2014). Program genres, operational policies, and forms of socially activist strategies that can be counted among the sector's many innovations, alongside its many political concessions and contradictions (Perlman 2016), can only be understood by interpreting its institutional decisions as attempts to translate primary, secondary, and university classroom practices into mediated content.

As a government service, public radio's definition of "public" lines up less with public sphere theory as coined by Habermas (1989) or scholarly correctives to Habermas's concept of "lifeworld" by Fraser (1990) and Warner (2002) than with a Deweyan (1938) framework. Educational radio in the 1920s was structured in line with what Dewey called an "intentional agency," institutions formed to promote equitable access to the community and political blocs within a capitalist system. In many ways, the service's long-term adherence to a nonprofit mission statement makes it a palpable and symbolic counterpoint to free-market, privatized media. But in terms of its institutional, programming, and political history (Slotten 2009), public radio represents an attempt to develop programming that addresses state mandates such as the provision of local news; programs encouraging "cultural uplift" such as classical music, documentaries, drama, and other arts-based offerings; and educational programming for both adults and children across every US region (Blakely 1979).

If one dispels the assumption that public radio should be held to a higher "moral" standard than commercial media (Rowland 1986), its history and contemporary practice represent a fascinating philosophical contrast to CBS and NBC radio (Gregory 2016), the two biggest commercial radio networks in the twentieth-century United States. From the late 1920s through the founding of NPR in 1970, noncommercial radio advocates were loyal to the belief that a media industry need not be structured solely under the influence of advertisers (Russo 2010). Public radio absorbed influences and evolved over decades to implement an economy of scale as an educational extension service (Keeler 2016) with a philosophical goal: that mass media might serve as a forum to complement state laws compelling equal access to classroom instruction (Darrow 1932),

while providing fair reporting and maintenance of national dialogue, and hypothetically to institute programming that was respectful of even the smallest regional demographic listenership (Engelman 1996).

Although the educational emphasis of noncommercial radio has mostly disappeared since its foundational period, its programming still features a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives and reports information with a more pronounced goal of neutrality than its for-profit counterparts. Over the course of its first forty years, public radio's practitioners were forced to make strategic adjustments on almost a yearly basis to meet the expectations of university administrators, state and national regulators, commercial industry interests, listeners, and educators (Hilmes 2011). Composed of a rotating assemblage of true believers, experimenters, activists, and popularizers, US public radio's dynamic production culture was so active that it influenced almost every connected sector, from research and development (Shepperd 2022) to public policy to program genres. Calling on community-building and educational practices, with the additional influence of commercial media aesthetics, educational and, later, public broadcasters grappled with a dizzying array of technical, political, and aesthetic decisions before they were finally instituted as a government service. This chapter examines public radio's roots in education and calls on Michele Hilmes's (2011) approach to media institutional dialectics by examining its participating organizations, key regulatory acts, and changing structures from early educational broadcasting activism to NPR. It closes with a discussion about recent changes in public radio administration, programs, and distribution.

PUBLIC RADIO'S ORIGINS AND ROOTS IN EDUCATION

Public radio can be broken down into two major historical moments. The first is its period of discovery and educational extension advocacy, when broadcasters sought to learn how to use media to meet distance-learning mandates provided by universities, typically between 1921 and 1952. The second is its period of national institutionalization, which included settling on genres such as news (Stamm 2016), civic programs, public affairs, and public interest stories that found their origins between 1953 and 1971.

Public radio originated as an educational experiment. Stemming from the late Progressive Era, the concept that public institutions could be utilized to manage the assimilation of immigrants and the building of new communities led states to set aside public spaces for participation and education (Reese 1980). Between the 1880s and 1910s, education became synonymous not just with training but also with civic engagement, and the nation funded public resources across the country, from universities, to parks, to public spaces such as playgrounds, typically proximate to schools (Cohen 1992). By the early 1900s, universities and school districts aspired to reach every part of

their states, famously articulated in the Wisconsin Idea that every resident should have access to the services provided by their state university. Distance-learning programs were typically conducted as correspondence courses (Cain 2017), but the excitement around wireless telegraphy and the amplification capacities of the audion tube (Adams 2011) inspired engineering and physics professors to develop early forms of sound relay. The serendipity of the near-simultaneous emergence of wireless sound technology and correspondence courses culminated in early broadcasts at the University of Wisconsin, which provided service programming such as weather reports as early as 1917 (Davidson 2007). It did not take long for other universities to follow suit, and by the early 1920s correspondence classes were facilitated through radio instruction. Education by radio satisfied three goals: first, it expanded the reach of universities to every student regardless of location; second, it served as a form of public relations that brought positive attention to universities; and third, radio provided universities with the ability to offer live adult education without students having to commute long distances (Vaillant 2004). These logistical breakthroughs help to meet the Progressive Era goal of offering an efficient technological framework to provide information in a changing labor environment.

By the mid 1920s, radio had been embraced as a technological extension of university and state educational mandates. Its practitioners held a very different concept about what radio technology was for than, for example, RCA's goal of producing content so that audiences might purchase radio receivers (Smulyan 1994), sometimes credited as the origins of NBC. Early educational programming resembled classroom instruction (Good 2020). At the same time, a broad general listenership enjoyed programs in music appreciation, home economics, cooking, and classical theater. Students took courses in language, science, math, or trade work such as new farming technologies (Gregory 2016). And university practitioners of educational radio articulated a philosophy to substantiate why these opportunities should be free. They believed that equal educational access should take precedence over any individual interest. The early "public" practitioners of educational radio were steadfast in their belief that they were providing a service to their local communities, be it in the form of a public forum (Goodman 2011) or a correspondence course. In the process, early broadcasters learned to adapt their goals to university bureaucracies. As educational radio practitioners communicated with each other with more frequency in the late 1920s, they agreed that educational broadcasting should be something different from commercial broadcasting. A philosophy began to emerge that educational technology was an extension of shared public spaces.

The origins of public radio's genres and practices can consequently be interpreted as articulations of the public service goals of universities and school districts. The aesthetics of early genres were quite different than those of commercial broadcasting and typically took the form of one or two people delivering, for example, a math lesson into a microphone. Educators did not explore best mic practices, nor did they have the funds to improve broadcasts or compete with entertainers on commercial radio. In contrast with the comedic rhythms of vaudeville performers who helped to create early variety shows (VanCour 2018), the early aesthetic history of educational broadcasting can be

understood more as a comedy of errors that frequently left listeners with an unpleasant listening experience. Noncommercial media was strong in vision and weak in practice, but its adherents felt strongly about their nascent mission. These practitioners communicated through a trade organization called the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB). Between 1926 and 1948, the NAEB aggregated broadcasters and activists (Hill 1954), and NAEB-connected records chronicle the arc from instructional radio through NPR.

ORGANIZATIONS, REGULATORY CHANGES, AND STRUCTURES

Both the 1921–1952 and the 1952–1971 periods of educational radio growth absorbed a mix of influences that informed educators’ translation of educational philosophies into best practices. One way to think about public radio is in the terms set by Bill Siemerling, one of NPR’s founding figures, as a mission statement–based media industry (Siemerling 1970). The loyalty to a nonprofit framework that educators developed in the 1920s is the major throughline of public radio history. Yet refusal to take advertising dollars combined with the lack of a clear funding plan made it difficult for noncommercial radio to field challenges from competing commercial broadcasters. Educational radio weathered persistent setbacks between the 1920s and 1950s. This compelled its advocates to build strategic alliances with different sectors to increase their support and fueled educational radio’s omnivorous absorption of influences from the broader media field (Avery 2007). Its administrative history consists of the continuous streamlining of its decentralized production, distribution, and funding mechanisms. From public radio’s origins as university and school district extension services with relatively inadequate early programming to a mature noncommercial media industry that provides educational entertainment, the service is marked as much by its historical relationships as by the representational tropes of its programming (see Cunningham and Craig 2019).

The US Office of Education, Office of the Secretary of the Interior, and several philanthropic groups took notice of educational radio’s capacity to serve public programs and national policy in the 1920s (Sterling and Kittross 2002). By 1930, they had encouraged the creation of two small trade groups, the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER) and the National Advisory Council on Radio and Education (NACRE). Each group was assigned the job of articulating a public service philosophy to both the regulatory and the educational sectors. The NCER and NACRE were successful at generating a national discourse about educational technology, but while they accumulated momentum on behalf of a disorganized educational radio landscape, commercial broadcasters constructed a wired infrastructure, streamlined a manufacturing base for receivers, and mastered production for broadcasting performance (Melnick 2014). When the Senate passed the second major piece of regulation, the Communications Act

of 1934, Congress sided with the Federal Radio Committee's 1927 Radio Act precedent of favoring infrastructure and technical mastery over any kind of preferred programming (McChesney 1995). The act famously charged radio broadcasting with the mandate to serve the "public interest convenience and necessity," with the protean term *interest* generally understood to mean high technological standards. Whether or not regulators were correct to place the mechanics of broadcasting over content and goals, the "interest" requirement became deeply incorporated into the political-economic fabric of American broadcasting. Although the NCER and NACRE repeatedly warned educators that pending regulation might strip them of licenses, universities were caught off guard by the act and many were unable to protect their frequencies from reassignment to private industry. The act decimated the early experiment of educational radio (McChesney 1995) but it is crucial to point out that the loss of frequencies additionally served as the inception point for the shift to public radio.

The Communications Act was not overtly antieducation, but its emphasis on high technological and production standards made arguments that there was a "purpose" for radio inevitably contested. After 1935, educators shifted from what might be called their speculative phase to a more enterprising period in which they worked together to construct a sustainable service. Influenced by philanthropic organizations, national regulations, and commercial broadcasting aesthetics, educators remained determined to air high-quality content without seeking advertising income. Universities hired station managers, presenters, and engineers and conducted audience research to improve their standard of broadcasting. The beginnings of what would later become public radio can be seen in this professionalization period that responded to the 1934 regulation.

It was clear by the mid-1930s that without advertising income, noncommercial radio had to locate another persistent and reliable source of funding. This opened the door for other nonprofit organizations to step in, making a lasting impact on the contours of the service. The two earliest influences on the creation of public radio's unique voice were a Rockefeller-funded experiment in the Rocky Mountains and a program of cooperation with the British Broadcasting Corporation. The Rockefeller Foundation had already funded several influential studies in education. In 1935, the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) formation of its Federal Radio Education Committee encouraged the Rockefeller Foundation to believe that educational goals could be efficiently executed through radio. The Rockefeller Foundation was encouraged by the Office of Education to underwrite research in audience reception and by the FCC to investigate technical networking between universities. The result was that the first infrastructure for educational radio, from 1935 through the mid-1950s, was almost entirely supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, which funded over a dozen projects that streamlined and standardized technological and audience research practices. The first experiment in infrastructure for noncommercial media was funded by a Rockefeller Foundation grant to the Rocky Mountain Radio Council. Between 1937 and 1940, the council worked to persuade educational institutions to test the possibilities of educational radio by either relaying broadcasts by shortwave or playing recordings of the programs in classrooms,

a particularly salient solution for mountain communities that found it impossible to access in-person classrooms. The Rocky Mountain Radio Council experiment succeeded in networking thousands of square miles into a shared classroom through radio. They were the first to coin the term *public broadcasting service*, which consciously synthesized the terms public interest, public service, and public space (Shepperd 2020).

In 1936, the Rockefeller Foundation turned to the BBC to set up a consultation network for educational broadcasters, under the direction of its Humanities Division executive, John Marshall. Marshall sent a young Edward R. Murrow to England to study British reporting practices, in return bringing two BBC broadcasting experts, Lloyd James and Charles Siepmann, to the United States. Lloyd James was invited to help US broadcasters develop standardized modes of delivery (James 1936). Director of Talks Charles Siepmann was sent to the United States after a falling out with BBC head John Reith. James's influence was limited, though he did persuade the networks to develop improved strategies for reporting. Siepmann, however, stayed in the United States and served as a strong influence on educational broadcasting (Siepmann 1946). In the 1930s, he consulted with NAEB stations on how to better prepare for broadcasts. In the 1940s, Siepmann worked with the FCC to produce policy reports that made a case for educational media and helped to found one of the first university-level communication programs in the United States, at New York University. Siepmann can broadly be associated with many of the successes of media reform during the New Deal, and his influence looms large over the history of the public broadcasting service (Pickard 2016).

The Rockefeller Foundation also underwrote the Princeton Radio Research Project, a foundational research initiative that employed logical positivist researchers, social psychologists, radio practitioners, and commercial media industry researchers to develop methods to determine if educational broadcasting was as effective as classroom instruction (Studebaker 1941). By combining discoveries in social psychological and advertising demography, the Princeton Radio Research Project consolidated an early behavior predication model by which modes of demographic affiliation across geographic spaces reflected parallel responses when presented with similar stimuli or aesthetic content. Princeton Radio Research Project studies influenced research practices across media industries, including nascent public radio. Academic research later became a core element of the Public Broadcasting Act.

The production culture of public radio was also influenced by interactions with and collaborations between commercial and educational radio that began in 1935 and continued for decades. Although commercial media sometimes undermined educational broadcasters as they competed for AM frequencies in the 1930s, they nonetheless provided internships, funding, shared channels, and internal house talent to help to produce educational broadcasts after 1934 (Marshall 1936). Working with universities was good business, because educators were consistently training talent that could pipeline into the system. Further, commercial broadcasters collaborated with educators during World War II to create propaganda and instructional content for soldiers and in the Cold War era underwrote anticommunist documentaries and programs (Cain 2017). Their notion that public radio should be as professional as their commercial and British

counterparts, networked nationwide, provide a standardized curriculum, and rely on academic research anticipated the later practices of public radio.

While the Federal Radio Education Committee and the Rockefeller Foundation underwrote efforts to mitigate effects of the Communications Act, the NAEB focused on supplying poorly funded stations in rural areas with high-quality programs. Although educational radio practitioners had not yet achieved the professionalism of commercial radio, the NAEB increased its lobbying footprint in the 1940s by framing its nonprofit mission statement in regulatory language. Employing arguments developed by political economists and sociologists, the NAEB helped to persuade the FCC to allocate reserved FM channels in 1945. Research conducted by NAEB sociologists such as Dallas Smythe in the late 1940s was so unexpectedly successful at building support for the approach that noncommercial media attracted support from a new generation of regulators and philanthropic groups in the 1950s (Hull 1949).

At the culmination of the FCC “TV Freeze,”¹ educators emerged successful when the NAEB persuaded the FCC to provide set-aside television frequencies, which piqued the attention of the Ford Foundation (McCarthy 2010). With Ford funds available, practitioners produced educational entertainment that could compete with commercial broadcasters. Most Ford Foundation money went to television, but it permitted the NAEB to develop a radio distribution mechanism called the “bicycle network,” which allowed underfunded radio stations across the country access to acquire recordings produced by better-funded educational stations in Wisconsin, New York (Lanset 2017), Ohio, and Michigan (Mitchell 2017) through a complex duplication and postal distribution scheme. This innovation exponentially improved the reputation of educational radio programs among listeners, and NAEB broadcasters pushed to compete with the respected programming of the CBC (MacLennan 2016) and BBC (Hilmes 2011; Hendy 2022). Many of the Rockefeller-funded Federal Radio Education Committee participants had joined the Ford Foundation project, and a tremendous amount of money was poured into the development of genres that aired on both commercial and noncommercial channels. Ford-connected research encouraged NAEB affiliates to improve the aesthetic value of broadcasts by funding research into performance, the flows of a broadcast, and pre- and postproduction techniques. In the mid-1950s, the NAEB instituted the National Educational Television and Radio Center—the sector’s equivalent of Research and Development in commercial industries—which streamlined the production of content based on research into program effectiveness. By the late 1950s, educational broadcasting had grown to encompass hundreds of stations, and the television allocations of 1952 set the expectation that educational radio might eventually become a federally funded agency.

In 1958, the National Defense Education Act (Urban 2010) mandated funding of educational facilities, including technologies, and provided the first opportunity for universities to imagine what a national service might look like if it was subsidized by the government. Educational broadcasting received a further federal buy-in with the Educational Television Facilities Act of 1962, which funded educational facilities across radio and television as an extension service of the primary and secondary school infrastructure. By the time the Carnegie Commission released its influential pamphlet in the

mid-1960s, the infrastructure for public radio was already mostly in place. The Carnegie Commission was formed as a fifteen-member committee in 1965 that worked with members of the NAEB and President Lyndon Baines Johnson's staff to influence the final push for noncommercial media. The Carnegie Commission report ratified lobbying and research that had been underwritten by previous philanthropic organizations and called for an educational policy that made educational radio a public service. Commercial broadcasters who had fought so hard to maintain frequency allocations during the 1930s largely supported carving out a special niche for educational programming (Schultze 1967). On commercial stations, educational content was simply unprofitable and forced a "sustaining broadcasting" stewardship on the commercial networks that was both difficult to maintain and often received with less enthusiasm.

In 1967, the Senate passed the groundbreaking Public Broadcasting Act, which had three main mandates: (1) the creation of a private, nonprofit corporation that would provide a degree of separation from the government in terms of funding, oversight, and decision-making; (2) the incorporation of academic research as a central element of operations; and (3) the maintenance of high technical standards in production and distribution of programs throughout the network. Its board was composed of appointees to oversee and interrogate the practices of the institution. One idiosyncrasy of the act was that public media suddenly became separated from their connection to the educational sector. Instead of working in synchronicity with instructional radio, public radio and television were granted their own funding source. Public radio reframed noncommercial radio more as a "fourth network" competitor that provided educationally informed entertainment, so as to compete with the commercial sector.

The unique coalition that comprised American educational radio emerged during the New Deal as a result of the limits and pressures exerted by the technology itself, the goals of educators, the interests of funding organizations, and competition with commercial broadcasting. It went through periods of media reform, professionalization, aestheticization, and federalization. Over time, educational radio evolved from a medium of direct instruction to the provision of informational entertainment. Though direct instructional broadcasting continued until the 1980s (Perlman 2010), public radio in the NPR era focused more and more on professionalized news, entertainment, and public interest content for a broad national audience.

NPR: INFORMING AS LEARNING

The connection between the post-1967 public radio framework and the educational period persisted until the 1980s. The Public Broadcasting Act signaled a major institutional change. Lobbyists no longer had to advocate for channels or funds, and practitioners faced fewer external pressures from fewer sources as they developed NPR's unique broadcasting voice. NPR and its affiliate stations were composed as an unusual media industry that maintained the original vision of nonprofit production but replaced instruction as learning with informing as learning and entertainment. Educational media

had been moving in this direction since the 1950s, but NPR's early staff made it a point to separate the service from its previous incarnation. Internal memos discussed educational radio as having performed useful institutional services such as training students, but it was not modeled as a national voice. Most programs were decidedly produced for local listeners. To transform the NAEB's National Educational Radio Network into something truly national meant that it was time for educators to develop a formatted, in-depth news and public affairs model with emphasis on analysis, criticism, and "good talk," with some cultural programming. Meeting minutes noted that public radio had to compete with anywhere from twenty to fifty stations in larger markets. The new model would be formed as a network-like nucleus in which affiliates could take what they wanted from the network live or by tape delay, but always with the presence of a continuous, reliable national voice. Unlike educational radio, NPR programming would be formatted and predictable and would air as blocks (NPR Committee on Programming Practices 1968–1969). The schedule would consist of programming "for information" in the morning, "general local and network features" until noon, "performances and features" from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., and "network service for information" during prime time. Later evening was opened up for experimental workshops, and overnight shows would provide "specialty content" and worldview analysis. More emphasis was placed on radio aesthetics and professionalism. The history of educational radio analysis and commentary was a recognized genre specialty, with current events provided for in an unending stream of up-to-the-minute news.

Between 1962 and 1967, the Educational Television Facilities Act and Carnegie Report had roused unprecedented growth by funding the rapid expansion of educational radio and television towers (Senate Committee Attitude 1967). Public radio affiliates now reached every corner of the country. The Carnegie Commission (1965) further inspired the structure of NPR by spotlighting three unique aspects of noncommercial media. First, educational radio innovated original genres: public affairs, cultural uplift, children's programming, travel, and more. Each educational genre was framed in the report as efficiently meeting national goals. Second, the report noted that shows were not only efficiently produced and audience tested but also should be gauged by different standards than commercial media advertising metrics. Programs were valued for social contributions instead of profit. The report positioned program success less as a demographic success than as an implementation of public purpose. It contended that noncommercial media helped to defend and develop an informed citizenry, provided access to information not available elsewhere, and prescribed a vision for noncommercial radio that stipulated that material be presented effectively, that it cultivate appreciation for performances in the arts, and that it stimulate natural curiosity. Third, the report provided a culminating argument to decades of advocacy that noncommercial media remained a counterpoint to commercial media in its adherence to an ideal, which it characterized as a "civilized" voice against the tide of commercial media. Educational broadcasters issued a series of mission statements in line with the report, emboldened by their recent growth, as well as philanthropic and congressional support.

Radio almost was not included in the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, first drafted as the Public Television Act with radio completely excluded. But the pedigree of the Carnegie Report signees, the political influence of those who supported the document, and the established infrastructure set by the National Educational Radio Network and National Educational Television put a thumb on the regulatory scale at the last second and radio's place was preserved. When the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was formed, new public radio appointees came to believe that an educational network would not be able to retain listeners if the service maintained a classroom-like programming schedule. The founding members of NPR, who were pulled from Madison, Buffalo, Ann Arbor, Columbus, and Boston, articulated a new philosophy of "planned programming" to indicate that NPR was informed by educational radio history, but produced a new style of content that was socially educational instead of classroom instructional. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting pressured broadcasters to produce programs with broader appeal, and the classroom extension character of educational radio quickly faded.

The early administrative shape of public radio followed from the funding structure of the Public Broadcasting Act. The bicycle network had grown to represent an archival repository of thousands of recordings. It helped to anticipate the economy of scale of NPR in which a centralized institution produced a good number of shows, with affiliates and even third party-generated content that reached numerous stations. NPR first aired on May 3, 1971. It was incorporated in 1970 with eighty-eight original stations and its flagship show was *All Things Considered*, which emphasized individual agents describing political and cultural events in their own voice, coupled with on-the-scene reporting.

Bill Siemering, founding program director of NPR and architect of *All Things Considered*, concurrently wrote NPR's "purposes" statement as a prologue of educational radio's previous decades. Siemering highlighted public radio's responsibility for "interconnection," "program dissemination," listener access to state messaging, culturally relevant programming, and professional aesthetics. In the appendices of the document, he historicized public radio's relationship to university culture (Siemering 1970). Siemering's mission statement echoed much of the early idealism of educational radio, with a savvy nod to adjustments made by educators in the 1950s and '60s, and public radio's new national format. Public broadcasting served a public purpose that differentiated it from mass programming. The service met cultural needs such as promoting general welfare, maintenance of national infrastructure, discussion of public issues, and a nonpartisan view of information to contribute to public discourse. Listener research had pointed to journalism as the most favorable genre of educational and non-commercial content, and a journalism specialty also made it possible that broadcasts could describe the perspectives of specific experiences without having to dedicate entire programs to localism.

NPR was more overtly gender equitable than any previous incarnation of educational radio. It featured a number of women as hosts and correspondents, lending a more nuanced perspective than their commercial counterparts. Susan Stamberg, host of *All Things Considered*, and Terry Gross of the discussion program *Fresh Air*

became prominent voices of the network (Napoli 2021). Yet, at the same time, public radio exhibited—and in many ways continues to exhibit—glaring deficiencies in racial and orientation diversity. There are multiple instances in which internal task forces were created to address diversity (Garbes 2017), and while lip service has been paid to changing hiring practices, the service has had trouble retaining talent (Chavez 2021) and meeting its mission statement. For a service that has invested close to one hundred years in promoting equal access to education through technology, this contradiction remains a difficult point for self-reflection among NPR's employees. In some ways the structure of NPR and its latent bureaucratic commitments help to explain public radio's diversity problem. At the same time, archival research reveals few key documents in which National Educational Radio and NPR administrators consulted or collaborated with representatives outside the ivory console (Stoeber 2016). For this reason, there is a paternalistic tone endemic to educational radio history in which the concept of equal access was not balanced with genuine diversity of representation (Casillas 2014), and this administrative legacy has continued at the service.

Some of the work of producing both diverse and local programming has fallen to third-party groups, particularly Public Radio International and American Public Radio. As Michele Hilmes (2013) has written, these two groups underwrote and developed new directions in public radio content, including *Marketplace*, *This American Life*, and *Radiolab*, which have become the new exemplars of noncommercial media programs. As Hilmes writes, Public Radio Exchange and Transom have opened the door for new talent to publish, license, and earn royalties and content. Public Radio Exchange has been particularly instrumental in supporting local and low-power producers, as well as major national programs such as *Latino USA*, *Afropop Worldwide*, and *Basic Black*. More recently, *Code Switch* was launched on NPR from a \$1.5 million grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and has become one of the most important and listened-to podcasts.

Podcasting has provided an interesting turn for NPR because it extends their digital footprint, while providing nonappointment listening. Because podcasts can be produced for small target audiences, the format helps to meet public media's mission statement of serving the smallest populations. Podcasting helps to diversify public radio producers and innovates styles of storytelling and news reporting, while allowing for longform journalism. At the same time, its structure was not anticipated by NPR's original charter, and permits for more advertising that hypothetically undermines its fundamental mission statement. However, with decreased state-based funding, it seems that advertising might become one future of public radio (Meyers 2013).

CONCLUSION

It is fair to observe that the techniques of commercial and public radio programming, production, and program flows are now nearly identical, with consistent talent

exchange between sectors. The ability to locate new revenue streams has been a positive development for radio producers, but at the same time the shift toward podcasting advertising has made it less clear as to why public radio should be government funded, while podcasting companies must seek sponsorship and sell metadata to sustain their businesses (Bottomley 2020). Public radio less represents a media industry that built a broadcasting infrastructure than the culmination of a socio-institutional project that, over time, materialized into a media industry.

The twists and turns of public radio history disclose more than just details of the development of a successful media industry. Its mission statement encapsulates historical discourses derived from media activism history (Battles and Patterson 2018), day-to-day practices of universities, the regulatory sphere, the philanthropic sector, and radio technology. Public radio also opens a new line of media industry research by detailing the ways that communications technologies become inscribed with the ideological investments of institutional players. This piece has attempted to describe how the shape, production practices, distribution mechanisms, and decisions made by administrators and content developers unfolded in response to regulatory and external pressures, while advocates and practitioners maintained loyalty (however contradictory) to a guiding principle about the purpose of mass media.

As a case study, public radio industries—its production cultures and receptive spheres—emerged and thrived around multiple investments beyond logics of accumulation (De La Torre 2022). Researchers do not have to speculate about how different systems might look besides free markets; we have examples with extensive archival records already available to us (Jewell 2022). The idiosyncratic nature of American public radio and its connected policies are best interpreted by taking a historicist view and by examining the strategic and trial-and-error processes pursued by its adherents as they attempted to increase equitable educational access, while they learned to implement the logistics and technical applications of radio production and aesthetics.

NOTE

1. The “TV Freeze” took place between 1948 and 1952 as the FCC deliberated about how to award station licenses. During that time, they considered standards regarding protected noncommercial licenses, how to avoid channel overlaps, and how to expand spectrum availability for station expansion.

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