

By Commissioner James H. Quello
"The Role of Public Participation in
Public Broadcasting"
Before the CPB Advisory Council of National Organizations
February 2, 1977, Chevy Chase, Maryland

First, when your Chairperson gave me the list of representative organizations comprising ACNO, I was most impressed ---here is a true Public Interest Conglomerate --- offering complete range ascertainment and advice to any broadcaster - public or private.

As I said, I was impressed --and I could have been overwhelmed except that my organizations didn't seem to be represented -- the Sons of Italy, AMIT (American-Italian Club) and the VFW. On further reflection, I realized that many Italians and VFW members also would be members of your organizations - AFL-CIO, Consumers Federation, League of Women Voters, the PTA, the various religious organizations in ACNO - so my special ethnic interests too were represented - in this enlightened day and age of comprehensive and amalgamated representation, the potential is unlimited - for example, Franco Harris, as I understand it, could be eligible on an ethnic basis for both the Sons of Italy and the Black Media Coalition or NAACP --and I'm sure there are many others out there somewhere that could justifiably claim multiple cross representation among your impressive list of organizations.

I want you to know that "ACNO" has my profound respect and admiration -- (1) respect for your individual organizations and your voluntary dedication to the highest standards in public broadcasting; (2) admiration for your sheer courage in even attempting a consensus advisory program from a so widely diversified group of social, ethnic, and religious philosophies.

In this day and age when most of us can't even get a consensus agreement within our own families, it must be a sight to behold the democratic processes at work when your many organizations deliberate the advisory priorities for CPB. It must be difficult to define or recommend an advisory platform except on a broad general basis. I remember a gentleman appearing before the Commission on an evenly-divided controversial communications case, stating he represented 110 million consumers --- he obviously overstated his case. He didn't represent the thousands of consumers who opposed his views ---I never delegated the authority for him to represent me or my family ---even though in this instance I happen to agree with his argument--- and I was born a consumer not a Commissioner! I've been a consumer over 60 years; a Commissioner less than three. The point is that it is almost impossible for one central figure to claim representation of a group of organizations except in broad general terms of desirable and undesirable--- and even the judgment of what is "good" and "bad" in broadcast programming is a subjective judgment subject to great individual differences.

I'm especially interested in your deliberations both as a Commissioner who has expressed special interest in learning more about public and educational broadcasting and as a former broadcaster who benefitted from a good representative advisory committee. This advisory committee was back in the early 50's before they became fashionable and before the official FCC ascertainment requirement. I had early experience with a cross section of social, religious, ethnic, governmental, labor, industry and educational groups---only on a small regional basis instead of on a large national scale such as yours.

I surmised rather early that many members of our advisory committee believed the most pressing need was for better understanding and appreciation of their work and their own organizations - which translated into more media access and more publicity for their own cause and organizations. Even on a small local basis, it was impractical, if not impossible, to give a large group of organizations or bureaus all the favorable publicity they were entitled to. (Of course, this is a pervasive problem for all broadcasters today, yesterday and tomorrow). We explained our position (and that included informing several groups that the Fairness Doctrine guarantees the right of the public to be informed rather than the right of any individual to broadcast his views). After our explanation, we engaged in exceptionally fruitful dialogue and exchanges. If you will pardon some pride (which I now consider justifiable), the advisory committee gave us numerous constructive suggestions for news, documentary, cultural and public affairs programming that played an important role in our station's programming and public service leadership. Naturally, some of the strong characters of the committee would prefer "directing" to "advising". But most of our advisory committee resisted that temptation.

However, it is worth mentioning here that we did have an active, well meaning volunteer group in Detroit called the "Listeners Lobby" that believed in something more substantial than advising. It consisted of over 700 Detroit listeners, mostly women, genuinely interested in better broadcasting -- as they perceived it. They were not part of our advisory committee -- they were most generous with advice and praise for our particular station. The Listeners' Lobby was a self-appointed, enthusiastic and dedicated advocate of its own version of better broadcasting. And, in my personal opinion, they did stand for better broadcasting.

They loved most of our programming--- we called it "complete range programming with adult appeal"--- that was the old version of "adult" - not the modern connotation. They liked our 55-voice youth chorus, our live orchestra, the Detroit symphony and New York Philharmonic broadcasts, the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, our one hour daily "Adventures in Good Music" and our large local news staff and public affairs programming. Listeners' Lobby complained when we pre-empted the Met Opera for tiger baseball-- only one thing would have been worse in the general public mind - pre-empting baseball for opera! This same group possessed an intense dislike for all rock stations. They were militant and vocal in their public criticism and letters and articles to radio-tv editors. Also, they wanted our support in discrediting rock and soul formats before the FCC. We naturally were pleased with the Listeners' Lobby's taste and preference for our programs, but had to decline discrediting rock competitors. Unfortunately, the so-called tasteless, tight and nervous formatted rock stations found great acceptance by a huge radio audience from age 16 to 25 and even 35 --- and two rock stations enjoyed overall audience domination in several segments of the day. I'm sure the rock listeners of that day could have carried a public referendum. I even suspected some adults who loudly proclaimed preference for our adult quality programming were actually listening to the fast-paced format stations -- and some of the ratings justified my suspicions.

In short, our station benefitted from the cultural interests of Listeners' Lobby. We were flattered; but we also recognized the potential danger of a well-meaning, well-educated, militant group trying to impose its program philosophies on all the public.

The Listeners' Lobby experience had a lesson for our own advisory committee--- and perhaps for all advisory committees.

I would think the varied composition and the experienced leadership of ACNO would guarantee a constructive, reasoned approach to "advising."

The CPB by its organizational goals has a very special obligation to represent the public in policy and programming--I think CPB is both fortunate and wise to have a national advisory council to help them in that complex, thankless task. From my personal experience on a smaller scale with advisory committees, I would make good use of such a group as both advisers and as a bulwark against generalized and unwarranted public criticism. As you know, public broadcasting exists to offer American people programming that is significantly different than that offered by conventional networks and stations-- it exists to provide the public a level of educational and cultural programming not available in other forms - and to accomplish this objective you may sometimes have to purposefully risk some "elite" programming ---but not to an excess. (And I suppose all of us would have different standards of excessiveness.)

In my initial quest for more information on public broadcasting, I was particularly impressed with a quote from the Carnegie Commission which played such a vital role in promulgating the CPB -- the quote is worth repeating--- "Public television programs can help us see America whole, in all its diversity, to a degree unequalled by any other medium; public television should be a mirror of the American style. It should remind us of our heritage and enliven our tradition; its programs should draw on the full range of emotion and mood, from the comic to the tragic that we know in American life. It should help us look at our achievements and difficulties, at our conflicts and agreements, at our problems and at the far reach of our possibilities. Public television programs should help us know what it is to be many in one, to have growing maturity in our sense of ourselves as a people."

I'm saving that quote for my "ready reference" file. Your group can serve as the mirror mentioned in this Carnegie Commission statement. Your organizations and your members reflect the many attitudes, aspirations and faces of the American people.

I had several other thoughts to share with you today but, fortunately for you, this is not a formal after dinner address. I believe brevity at this time would be appropriate and certainly appreciated.

I'd like to leave you some closing thoughts --I don't presume to know enough about your organizations to give you advice on what to do or how to do it-- but I do feel a mutuality of interest or I should say public interest with your

organizations. And, I think I appreciate all the complexities of helping to determine broad broadcast policy. The policy-making role, described in a somewhat different context by Thomas Fuller, a prominent English clergyman in the 17th century, seems to have some application to your task. He concluded that "policy consists in serving God in such a manner as to not offend the Devil." That implies that there is an element of reason and compromise in most policy decisions.

In a different approach, General Patton, my overall Commander in Africa and Sicily, forcefully stated that in battle, when in doubt --attack! A great uncomplicated slogan for war, but not particularly applicable for social and communications problems. I'd advise when in doubt act with reason and understanding--this includes being considerate of each others' goals and needs. With that attitude, you can be most effective as catalysts for unity and for encouraging constructive program policies in the public interest.