USC ANNENBERG
SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION

The Inaugural James L. Loper Lecture in Public Service Broadcasting

A Public Trust Revisited

Delivered by
Mary G. F. Bitterman
President
The Bernard Osher Foundation

Thursday, November 10, 2005
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Mary G.F. Bitterman
President, The Bernard Osher Foundation

Before becoming president of The Bernard Osher Foundation, Mary G.F. Bitterman most recently served as president and CEO of The James Irvine Foundation, an independent grantmaking foundation serving Californians, and as president and CEO of KQED, one of the leading public broadcasting centers in the United States. She has served also as executive director of the Hawaii Public Broadcasting Authority, director of the Voice of America, director of the Hawaii State Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, and director of the East-West Center's Institute of Culture and Communication.

Ms. Bitterman currently is a director (and chairman) of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), The Bernard Osher Foundation, Bank of Hawaii, Barclays Global Investors, Santa Clara University and the Commonwealth Club of California. She has produced several documentaries for public television and has written on telecommunications development and the role of media in developing societies. She is an Honorary Member of the National Presswomen's Federation and a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration. Bitterman received her B.A. from Santa Clara University and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr College.

ABOUT JAMES L. LOPER

James L. Loper
Director, USC Annenberg Program for the Study of Public Broadcasting

A veteran broadcaster and television industry executive, James L. Loper has been a visiting scholar and executive-in-residence at the USC Annenberg School of Communication since retiring as executive director of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 1999. Loper spent almost 20 years in various positions at KCET, the Los Angeles public television station, including vice president and general manager, and president and CEO. He was the founding chairman of the board of the Public Broadcasting Service and served three terms as PBS chairman during its formative years.

Dr. Loper has been involved with USC Annenberg since its founding and started the School's Program for the Study of Public Broadcasting. He earned his Ph.D. from USC and holds a master's degree from the University of Denver and a bachelor's degree from Arizona State University. He and his wife, Mary Lou, live in Pasadena, California. They have two children.

ABOUT THE LOPER LECTURE SERIES

Inaugurated on November 10, 2005, the James L. Loper Lecture in Public Service Broadcasting honors Dr. Loper's more than four decades of service to public broadcasting.

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A Public Trust Revisited

Our public television service came into being in 1951, when Frieda Hennock persuaded her fellow FCC commissioners to reserve 209 television channels for educational use. Commercial television was already established – we are the only country in the world in which commercial broadcasting preceded public broadcasting – which put us at a certain disadvantage, but an array of bright, irrepressible people saw the great promise of public television and overcame many difficulties to launch it in communities across America. They started in Houston and East Lansing, then moved on to Pittsburgh, Madison, San Francisco and, in 1963, to Los Angeles. These pioneers have been called "tele-visionaries" by Jim Robertson, formerly of KCET, in his book of the same name. Visionaries they certainly were, and prominent in the group was James Leaders Loper, whose middle name portended the mark he would make.

I met Jim in November 1974 at a PBS meeting in Houston – my first PBS meeting. I had become the director of the Hawaii Public Broadcasting Authority only the week before. Hartford Gunn was president of PBS and Ralph Rog-

ers was chairman of the board. Those were exciting days. There were problems enough, to be sure, but there was also a winning combination of strategic vision, unbridled energy and a strong dose of optimism. Jim Loper was one of public television's new stars.

Winter Horton, who helped to found KCET and was later a CPB Board member, recalls that when the idea of starting an educational station in Los Angeles was brought to Jim, the Loper response was an unhesitating "Yes, let's see if we can do it." Win noted that Jim's "ability with people, his ability to remember everything and his ability to make things happen were apparent from the start." Ron Bornstein, long affiliated with WHA in Madison, served on the PBS Board with Jim, who was its first chairman. As Ron put it, Jim knew program quality, how to seek out and work with the right talent, and how not to micromanage the creative process. As chairman of the PBS Board, he was noted for his stately demeanor and his wry sense of humor. Larry Grossman, who succeeded Hartford Gunn as president of PBS, remembers Jim as one of American public broadcasting's most astute programmers – a person who took a weak UHF station [in Los Angeles] and turned it into a significant player with great productions such as "Hollywood Television Theater" and "American Playhouse." And that wasn't all. Legendary programs such as "The Advocates" (with WGBH), "The Belle of Amherst," "Cosmos" (one of the most watched series in the history of public broadcasting) and "Meeting of the Minds" with Steve Allen, who considered the series his proudest achievement, also were part of the Loper legacy.

New generations have followed in Jim's footsteps, continuing to produce programming of superior quality, both locally and nationally. Children's programming from "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," "Sesame Street" and "Reading Rainbow" has been augmented by new programs such as "Clifford," "Arthur," "Between the Lions," "Maya and Miguel" and "It's a Big, Big World." Parents continue to appreciate the safe haven provided their children when watching public television. Teachers also are strong fans, using not only the television programs but the web content with curriculum guides, bibliographies and educational games. Icon series, like "Nova," "Great Performances," "American Experience," "Nature," "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer" and "Frontline" have been continually refreshed and are still recognized as America's truly great programs.

Special series from Bill Moyers, including "Death and Dying" and "Becoming American: The Chinese Experience"; and from Ken Burns on the Civil War, baseball and jazz; along with Twin Cities Public Television's "The Forgetting: A Portrait of Alzheimer's" and "P.O.V." and "Independent Lens," which let fresh voices be heard, are programs that bring new relevance to the PBS lineup. PBS continues to win countless Emmys for its programs, and, more important, to earn the trust and confidence of the American people. Recent polls indicate that PBS is the most trusted national institution, more than the Congress, the federal government, the courts and the newspapers of the nation – truly, the "public trust" envisioned by the Second Carnegie Commission in its report of 1979.

Public broadcasters have moved forward also with new technologies, more alert to the promise of those technologies than many of their commercial counterparts. They follow in the tradition of the pioneering public broadcasters who took UHF channels and breathed real life into them; who worked with teachers to provide for off-air recording of program material for use in classrooms across America; who developed captioning for the hearing-impaired. They have linked public television stations through satellite interconnection, putting land lines behind them before commercial stations did. They have utilized the Internet as an important and distinctive educational platform, developing one of the most widely used dot-org sites in the world (pbs.org). They have moved forward faster than many commercial peers with the federally-mandated but largely federally-unfunded conversion from analog to digital systems that cost nearly $2 billion, and developed the first full digital channel dedicated to HDTV presentations.

"We have in American public television a great and trusted institution."

Public broadcasters see the enormous potential in digital technology, and they recently participated in a project called the Digital Future Initiative (DFI), supported by the MacArthur Foundation and PBS and chaired by James Barksdale, former CEO of Netscape, and Reed Hundt, former chairman of the FCC. If today's public broadcasters can successfully adapt to the realities of an ever more fragmented market and to audience expectations of programming on demand and on whatever platform or device it desires – and if adequate resources can be acquired – the DFI panel believes that the "potential for enhanced public service" in areas such as education, civic engagement and emergency preparedness "is vast."

Great programming and great technological advance, yes, but there are some difficult challenges to be faced. Consider the problem of structure and governance. We have 169 public television licensees in the membership of PBS, who are operating 348 stations across the country. Each station, whether licensed to a community group, a university, a school board or a state, is a sovereign entity, with its own board of directors, management, strategic plan, broadcast schedule, "culture," and rate card for production and local underwriting. Each has developed distinctive partnerships within its community and has its own record of public service, along with its own history of successes and failures. America is known for its individualism, and public broadcasting is individualism writ large!

Nonetheless, in the wake of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, public television stations banded together to create PBS – the Public Broadcasting Service – so that they could accomplish together what they could not accomplish alone. PBS was created to provide for the interconnection of stations, the distribution of programs and other services to advance the members' interests, both local and national. PBS prepares a national program schedule through acquisition and the commissioning of new programs, mainly from a small number of member stations and selected independent producers, although there are other program suppliers, including American Public Television (APT) and the National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA). There is also a separate entity, called America's Public Television Stations (APTS), created in 1980, that is responsible for lobbying and representational efforts.

It is sometimes asked whether PBS is a media organization or a membership organization. Is its primary focus on objectives of its own or in furthering the objectives of the member stations? And does it further the objectives of one set of member stations over those of others? These questions must be addressed in order to relieve the persistent tension within the local/national partnership. A PBS board task force has been working with the charge to "explore new models for board composition and representation to achieve more effective governance" and to better reflect the interests of the membership. In an attempt to foster greater accountability and efficiency, the membership, at the board's recommendation, voted to reduce the board from 35 to 27 members, including equal numbers of professional and lay directors as well as the PBS president. More recently, the task force recommended, and the membership approved, further changes, including having the majority of directors be professional directors, reducing the number of board committees, and clarifying the respective roles and responsibilities of the board, membership and management.

To appreciate the complexity of the organizational picture, consider also the affinity

groups, as they are called, which have grown up largely around the four different types of licensee: state networks (20); universities (56); small stations, with licenses sometimes held by school boards or municipal authorities (6); and major markets, with licenses held by the communities (87). These affinity groups provide opportunities for same-licensee types to look at the world through a single lens and for sharing of experience that may be both instructive and reassuring. There is also a group consisting of the non-primary stations in multiple-station markets – stations that are looking for ways to distinguish themselves from the primary stations. Within the public television community, there are more than 20 markets with overlapping stations, including Los Angeles, which has four PBS-member stations. Finally, there is an umbrella group known as the Affinity Group Coalition (AGC) that helps to coordinate the work of the discrete groups and that is considered by many as the most efficient and broadest-based mechanism for system consultation. Some people complain that the different licensee groups are often uncomfortable with the agendas and priorities of others, feeling that they have to be at every table to protect their respective interests, which makes representative democracy a less than popular form of governance.

There is an old saying that American public television is really a series of meetings interrupted by an occasional program. When one looks at the calendar of public television sessions, the truth in humor is revealed.

Proud of living in a democracy, we could say that there is nothing better than a multiplicity of voices and interest groups, but at some point there has to be focus on what is of shared importance and what will benefit the American people, and a clear sense of who speaks for whom and how we can go about our business in an intelligent, economical and responsible fashion. The existing multiplicity of organizations and voices blurs the image of public broadcasting both for audiences and for funders – whether they are individuals, foundations, corporations, state governments or the U.S. Congress.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was created by the Congress to serve as grand auditor and a political heat shield. A headline on the selection of its most recent board chairman by no less an authoritative voice than

the Los Angeles Times – "Public Broadcasting Meets the New Boss" – displays and promotes considerable confusion. Neither the chairman of CPB nor CPB itself holds any broadcast license, operates any station, or produces or distributes any programs. Public Broadcasting boss? What about the leadership of the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio? Some people would argue that there is no public broadcasting boss or chief – or, put another way, that there are as many public broadcasting chiefs as there are organizations and stations dedicated to public broadcasting. Going forward, we need to exploit the great value of our local/national arrangements while organizing the public television system in a more efficient fashion that redounds to the greatest possible benefit of the communities it serves across America. The newly-elected president of PBS, Paula Kerger, having spent thirteen years at WNET in New York and most recently as the organization's chief operating officer, has committed herself and her tenure to addressing these very issues – along with increasing resources for the enterprise.

And that is the other substantial problem: From its tender start, American public broadcasting has never enjoyed steady, predictable or sufficient funding. Funding deficiencies were clearly

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recognized in 1979 by the Second Carnegie Commission, which recommended the creation of a Public Telecommunications Trust and a Program Services Endowment – sound recommendations that were ignored. There is no media operation in the world funded in the Byzantine fashion of America's public broadcasting system. Funds are acquired from Congress (representing about 14% of public broadcasting's revenue, or $1.30 per citizen), state and local authorities, universities, foundations, corporate underwriters, auction and sweepstakes proceeds, and individual contributions, including those from members and major donors. Imagine what our public-service broadcasters could do if federal funding amounted to $85 per capita as it does in Germany – or $83 per capita in the

Bitterman, Loper and USC Annenberg Dean Geoffrey Cowan

United Kingdom, $49 per capita in Japan, or even $28 per capita in Canada or Australia.

Every few years, regrettably, someone in Washington becomes upset with one program or another, or federal finances are in poor shape, and a march begins to de-fund public broadcasting. Over the past year, with the growing national deficit, the war in Iraq, turmoil in other parts of the Middle East and the need to rebuild portions of the Gulf coast, some members of Congress have expressed the need to end all future appropriations for public broadcasting and to use the money for reconstruction projects and deficit reduction, even as public broadcasters were being hailed for providing the most dependable community security networks in the areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. In fact, the federal investment in public broadcasting has brought an attractive return. Federal funds administered by CPB have been "matched" sixfold by annual investment from local sources – governmental, corporate and philanthropic (both foundation and individual).

This may be just the time when the "federal interest" in public broadcasting should be seen as a uniquely wise investment. A good case might even be made for a larger appropriation to permit public broadcasting to improve and extend its services in the areas of education, civic engagement, and cultural enrichment: To promote an early and sustained interest in learning aimed at reducing our more than 30% high-school dropout rate and to help the 50 million Americans over the age of 16 who are functionally illiterate and cannot even complete a job application form; to enhance responsible citizenship both domestically and in the larger world, to encourage voting and other forms of civic participation, and to provide inclusive mechanisms for engaging Americans in civic debate; to stimulate individual creativity, to introduce Americans to the power of the arts and to the uplifting of the human spirit, encouraging tolerance, if not respect, for that which is new, different, experimental.

"If today's public broadcasters can successfully adapt, the potential for enhanced public service in areas such as education, civic engagement and emergency preparedness is vast."

Federal funds are now more important than ever in the public television financial mix. There has been a small increase (about 3%) in non-federal funding over the past 15 years, but much of it has been absorbed by digital conversion. State funding has been declining; corporate funding has not returned to the high mark reached in the year 2000; foundation funding, while strong, is limited; individual giving by members is not growing, and in some markets even decreasing, although there has been some sign of increase in major gifts.

While trying at least to maintain, if not to increase, federal contributions to public broadcasting, people throughout the industry are eager to engage the foundation and major donor communities in more meaningful ways. To that end, the PBS board of directors recently established the PBS Foundation, which provides "a mechanism for seeking, cultivating and receiving extraordinary gifts at the national level." The Foundation will work collaboratively with member stations across the country to advance the agenda of public television, especially with regard to programming. There is an element of truth in the complaint that some of our programming is stale – and that only babies and oldsters are interested in it. Lack of resources has tended to keep American public television in a condition of permanent adolescence. Our first concern is to find the funds that will make it possible to reach out to larger, younger and more diverse audiences with content that is vital, fresh and daring, that carries new voices and new ideas and reflects new sensibilities. We need now to fund a wide array of producers whose content will make its way as easily on 60-inch plasma screens as on the Internet and palm-sized nanocasters. The head of a major foundation told me only last week of receiving many more exciting program proposals than her foundation, or any individual foundation, could support. It will be the role of our new PBS Foundation to help with the pooling of resources.

Of course, it would be good to have a few immediate success stories with which to accelerate the momentum of giving (or better, investing), and we have some. In its first year of operation,

the PBS Foundation has received several important grants: one from the MacArthur Foundation to underwrite the work of the Digital Future Initiative; a five-year award from the Ford Foundation to support new digital projects and the PBS Foundation; and a matching grant from the Knight Foundation for support of "Public Square," a digital channel devoted to public affairs, local and national, and to civic participation.

In addition to foundations, we must reach out to major donors across America – individuals who value education, culture and citizenship, and who recognize how important it is in a democracy to have a strong, fearless and fiercely independent public broadcasting system. Individual donors who have the freedom and ability to commit to large projects might be encouraged to support (either with endowment or spend-down production funds) new programs in areas that are of broad general interest as well as of special interest to them. The possibilities are legion: children and youth, the arts, science, medicine, public affairs, comedy, religion, and history. Programs and series developed with those funds would become the donor's legacy to the nation. It may be, too, that we could find donors who would themselves underwrite some existing programs of great value, freeing station funds for the development of new content. "Masterpiece Theatre," for example, might well be underwritten by an individual or family committed to the Anglo-American relationship – both as to its provenance and its contemporary importance.

It has been nearly forty years since the Public Broadcasting Act was signed, and much has been accomplished since then. We have in American public television a great and trusted institution – an institution whose job description and good works have led to its being called a "Public Trust" and the "People's Business." Over 80 million Americans avail themselves of its offerings on a regular basis, in addition to the millions of students who benefit from its instructional programming and the community members whose lives are enhanced by its educational outreach activities. Our responsibility now is to build on those accomplishments. We must rationalize our governance, which will require some opening of minds and an infusion of trust in the relationships among colleagues in our multiplicity of public broadcasting organizations, and we must find significantly increased support for programming – programming that will enhance educational opportunity, civic engagement and human dignity for all Americans. Let us then get on with the task. Our great nation deserves no less. ■ ■ ■

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ABOUT THE USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION

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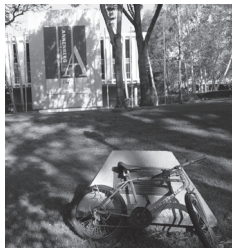

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The USC Annenberg faculty includes renowned researchers, Pulitzer Prize- and Emmy Award-winning journalists, and leaders in fields including law, education, publishing, government, advertising and public relations.

Students at USC Annenberg learn from the best and graduate with a range of experiences and contacts that will be of great value throughout their careers. The School's alumni fill top posts not only in the media and communications industries, but also in government, education and nonprofit agencies throughout the world.

Augmented by dozens of research and public interest projects and programs, including the Norman Lear Center, the Digital Future Project and the Knight New Media Center, USC Annenberg has become a center for discussion among scholars and professionals in communication, public policy, media and education.

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