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Radio gets in on the Act

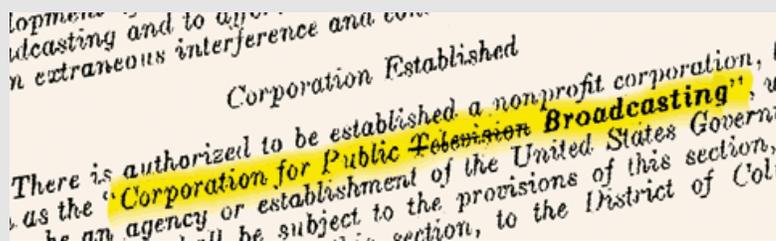
Adaptation published in *Current*, March 28, 2005
By **Jack W. Mitchell**



The plan was for a Public Television Act with no mention of dusty old radio. Not everyone signed on to the plan.

Readers' sympathies will be divided by this narrative adapted from Jack Mitchell's new book, Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio, issued in March 2005 by Praeger Publishers. You may root for the TV side or the radio side out of professional allegiance. Or you may instinctively align with the underdog, despite its rascally tactics — or perhaps because of them. The underdog in 1967 was radio, then a has-been technology that TV expected to leave behind. Mitchell is the storyteller here but within months after this caper ended he was working at the brand-new NPR as the first producer of All Things Considered. He ran Wisconsin Public Radio for 21 years and served three times on the NPR Board, including a term as chairman.

Educational radio was pathetically weak and its prospects bleak in the mid-1960s. More than a third of the 326 noncommercial radio stations operated with only 10 watts of power, barely enough to reach more than a couple of square miles. Half the stations had budgets of less than \$20,000 a year. Most were owned by universities; all but a few had only one staff member, usually a faculty member who managed the station part-time.



Official text of the act creating CPB shows the eventual addition of educational radio to Carnegie's TV-only proposal (yellow highlighter added by *Current*).

More ominously for the future, the federal government's first systematic aid to educational broadcasting, a grant program to subsidize station facilities enacted in 1962, put money into television stations but not radio. Then in 1964 the Ford Foundation, the primary source of national funding for educational radio and television, ended all support for radio to focus its resources on the more promising medium of educational television. When educational television leaders organized a campaign to seek federal operating support for educational

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television, they likewise decided not to include radio.

The word “radio” did not appear in the recommendations of the first Carnegie Commission, the key document of the television campaign. The report, published in January 1967, was a product of educational television advocates through and through. Few cared that radio was left out. Though most of the major public broadcasting licensees included both television and radio, television was dominant in all. Radio stations unattached to television stations tended to be so understaffed and poorly funded that they had no time or resources to devote to building their futures. They were barely surviving the present.

Certainly, no impetus for change came from listeners. Those few who were satisfied by educational radio had no reason to fight for a new vision for “public” radio. The much larger public that did not listen to educational radio also had no reason to care, particularly when public television was promising so much.

A very few crusty old radio guys did care, however, either because they just weren’t interested in the visual medium or because their schools had not gotten into TV for one reason or another. The most notable such institution was the University of Michigan, which ran WUOM, one of the country’s largest FM radio operations, but never built a television station in Ann Arbor. (I was a young journalist there at the time.) The guerrilla operation organized by WUOM leaders was noble in intent but shady in implementation. To win a place in the future of public broadcasting, the radio guys would use misrepresentation, temper tantrums and connections with a Johnson administration insider.

If it succeeded, however, it would give public radio the money to begin with virtually a clean slate and no public expectations that would have limited or overpromised what it would be.

One of the guys was the manager of WUOM, Edwin G. Burrows, who was chairman of the radio division board of the professional group that served both TV and radio, the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. Using a federal grant intended for a different purpose, his radio board decided to hire what amounted to a radio lobbyist at the NAEB office in Washington.

Jerrold Sandler, program director at Burrows’ station, became radio’s man in Washington, a position suited to his gregarious personality. Then the radio board engineered Burrows’ election as chairman of the overall board of the NAEB, a move totally unexpected and deeply resented by the television forces. Burrows, an unabashed advocate of educational radio, was now the official chief spokesperson for television as it lobbied for federal funding. Burrows and Sandler engineered an invitation from the Wingspread conference center in Racine, Wis., to host a conference on the future of educational radio in 1966. The conferees told Sandler to compile a report to supplement television’s Carnegie Report. He hired consultant Herman Land to write the report, ultimately called *The Hidden Medium*.

In Washington, Sandler fought a losing battle within the NAEB. His powerful television counterpart, Scott Fletcher, worked relentlessly to secure federal monies for educational television and to engineer its transition from Ford Foundation funds, which Fletcher had administered at Ford, to the new federal assistance.



Sandler

Fletcher promised to help bring radio along at some future time, but as Sandler recalled in a 1978 oral history interview with pubradio pioneer Burt Harrison, the promise was not reassuring. “Jerry, you know I love radio,” Fletcher told him one day. Some of his best friends, he assured Sandler, were in radio.

“Scotty, I know that, and I believe you, and I’ll always love you for it, but we have a problem on our hands,” Sandler recalled saying. “We are being totally neglected in this. You know better than I that you can’t put it aside for a later time. The future is now.”

The issue had been decided, Fletcher said. Congress would pass the Public Television Act and create the Corporation for Public Television. To bring radio in at that point, he concluded, would “change the scenario.”



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Burrows

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"So be it," Sandler replied.

"But you can't change the scenario." "Why not?" Sandler persisted.

"Because it's been written that way; it's got to be that way," Fletcher answered.

"Well, it's very simple," Sandler explained. "You change it to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and you change it to the Public Broadcasting Act."

"Well, the word broadcasting doesn't have the right sound. It's not television."

"You're damn right it's not television," Sandler replied.

The efforts of Burrows and Sandler would have proven futile, however, if not for those of a third WUOM staffer, Dean Coston, former chief engineer.

An active Democrat in Ann Arbor, the radio engineer went to Washington at the start of the Kennedy administration as an aide to a Michigan dean who was assistant secretary of health, education and welfare. Coston stayed on after the former dean returned to academia. By 1966 he was a deputy undersecretary of HEW, responsible for drafting and shepherding through Congress all administration legislation relating to education, including educational TV.

When the Johnson administration's public television legislation based on the Carnegie recommendations emerged from Coston's office in the winter of 1967, careful readers found the words "and radio" following nearly every appearance of the word "television." No public discussion preceded the insertion of the two little words. No political movement demanded it. Coston simply complied quietly with the request of his former boss, Burrows, and his former colleague, Sandler. The proposed legislation was called the Public Television Bill and it created a Corporation for Public Television, but the fine print extended federal tax support to educational radio as well.

Needless to say, the public broadcasting leadership, which had deliberately written off radio as a waste of money better spent on television, was less than happy with Coston's sleight of hand.

On the Saturday morning before the White House was to send the Public Television Bill to Congress, the telephone rang in Sandler's home just outside Washington. Sandler found himself talking to a journalist with the unlikely name of Tack Nail. Despite his cartoon name, the editor of the trade newsletter *Television Digest* had Sandler's respect, and the two had developed a close reporter-source relationship. Two days earlier, Sandler had confirmed reports from Nail's other sources that the bill would include radio.

That morning, however, Nail had new information. Radio was out of the Public Television Bill. Had the television forces pressured the White House? Had the White House staff acted on its own? Had someone just made a mistake? Whatever had happened, President Johnson's education message, minus radio, would go to Congress on Monday.

"But Tack," Sandler protested, "I just spoke with the White House yesterday, and I spoke with Dean Coston of HEW."

"Jerry, that was yesterday," Nail insisted. "That was Friday. Today is Saturday, and you are no longer in the act."

Still incredulous, Sandler called Coston at home and related Nail's report. He asked Coston to check it out. Coston did not report back until 5:30 Sunday morning, almost 24 hours later. Sandler heard the voice of a very tired Dean Coston at the other end of the phone line. Coston had worked all day Saturday and throughout the night with Douglass Cater, the President's assistant in charge of the public television legislation at the White House, because radio indeed had been taken out.

Coston and Cater put it back. The document, revised in a decade before every office had computers, clearly shows insertions in a different typeface. With midnight oil and Scotch tape, radio got into the President's draft of the Public Television Bill. The television forces were not happy and not inclined to give up. They could make radio disappear again at any point. Indeed, the Senate worked off a draft bill without Coston's last-minute insertions.



Dean Coston (left) came to the White House when President Johnson (right) signed the law creating CPB. As a radio guerrilla, Coston had been there before when the TV people weren't looking. (Photo courtesy National Public Broadcasting Archives, University of Maryland.)

Sandler alerted his NAEB radio board members that they would each be assigned to contact members of Congress. "You're going to work your butts off, but we're going to cover that Congress," he said. The six radio board members were not sure exactly how to do it but committed themselves to blanket the Capitol with visits, calls and follow-up letters.

Jack Burke, manager of the educational radio station at Kansas State University in Manhattan and Burrows' successor as NAEB radio chairman, recalled the campaign as a series of calculated risks by the radio forces, essentially working at cross purposes with its parent organization. "You just knew you were going to catch hell at the next NAEB board meeting, and probably before that," Burke told Harrison. "Some of the television people . . . would give Sandler a tough time, and Jerry Sandler was the workhorse in this thing. He

really was the architect of public radio as we know it today."

Before the Senate convened its hearings, the radio dissidents compromised with the television-dominated NAEB leadership. All would support the President's version of the bill, which now included "and radio," and no one would ask for changes. The television forces agreed not to try to delete radio again, and radio accepted the ancillary nature of its inclusion in what was still the public television bill creating a Corporation for Public Television.

"These funny-looking fellas all gathered around this big table and nervously drank water and smoked cigarettes," Burke wrote confidentially to radio colleagues a few days later about an NAEB meeting between the television and radio factions. "Friday night was spent in careful love-making, with TV and radio both getting what they wanted and giving up a few points relative to bill 1160 and our testimony," he continued. "We agreed that in our testimony, neither (the radio insurgents) or NAEB would push for a change in title of bill or corporation. Ed (Burrows) got to lead off testimony and we got to present a pot pile of witnesses."

But the public radio guys did not intend to keep their promise, as Burke made clear in his report: "I propose to keep up the effort to have 'Public Broadcasting' replace 'Public Television' in the bill. This change is more than academic, I feel."

The tone changed considerably after the peacemaking when NAEB's television forces took note of overspending by the radio side. "Our budget and irresponsible spending was the main topic. . . . [The TV forces] . . . made it an around-the-barn attack on radio," Burke wrote. "We lost and the executive committee passed a motion stating: 'No division can exceed its total budget without the approval of the officers of the Association and the Executive Committee. Within a budget, no line item can be exceeded by more than 15 percent without similar approval'."

"This is designed to stop us from the Herman Land association. Since we have already spent our money, we should be able to live with this."

Land, of course, was the consultant Sandler hired to write radio's version of the Carnegie report. Sandler had expected the Ford Foundation to pay the \$25,000 cost, but Ford had no intention of helping the radio insurgency even with this relatively small amount. Though the foundation had refused to pick up the bill, Sandler didn't tell Land to stop his work.

He simply dumped Land's bills on the parent NAEB, which, in turn, handed them to its sugar daddy, the Ford Foundation. In the end, Land delivered the case statement that radio would present to Congress.

In April 1967, just three months after the Carnegie Commission turned the phrase "public television" in its report, the Senate Commerce Committee approved the President's public television bill and passed it on to the full Senate and the House of Representatives, where it sailed through with barely a dissent. "And radio" remained in the approved language. Moreover, the Senate committee soon renamed the bill. The Public Broadcasting Act would create the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

It was a Michigan legislator, Sen. Robert Griffin (R), who raised the issue of the new corporation's name during Sandler's testimony. Sandler stopped short of endorsing the idea but agreed that, yes, "public broadcasting" would be a more accurate name for this new thing.

He declared afterward that neither he nor any of his people had talked with Griffin about such a change. In the literal sense, he was right. He would have had more difficulty answering honestly, however, if someone had asked whether NAEB Chairman Ed Burrows had talked to Sen. Griffin's staff about making the change.

The public radio guerrillas could not believe their good fortune. They had had no right to beat the television juggernaut and few of them had believed they would. It was the most exciting escapade of their professional lives. Concluded Burke: "You know, the snotty-nosed kid that has to wait for his turn at bat. No one wanted us in the act. That's pure and simple. . . . Then we entered a whole new ball game. It was exciting. We saw some possibility of getting in. . . . We said, 'God damn it, this is important. We're going to do it.'"

Indeed they did. LBJ signed the Public Broadcasting Act in November 1967, CPB was incorporated early in 1968, NPR incorporated in 1970, distributing its first programs in 1971. An improbable campaign had secured a financial foundation for National Public Radio and the hundreds of local stations that make up public radio today.

Their victory cost the individual insurgents any role in public radio's future, however. Their less than honorable tactics had offended the very people who would run public broadcasting.

None of those who went to battle for radio won a leadership role in the new public radio system that emerged from their efforts. Not Jack Burke of Kansas State University. Not Will Lewis of Boston University. Not Marjorie Newman of Florida State University. Not Myron Curry of the University of North Dakota. Not Burt Harrison of Washington State University. Not Martin Busch of the University of South Dakota. Not Jack Summerfield of the Riverside Church in New York. Not Al Fredette of the State Medical College of New York. And certainly not Ed Burrows or Jerry Sandler.

Burrows and Sandler applied for positions at NPR, Sandler many times. Neither was hired. Instead, the task of developing public radio would fall to radio managers who sat on the sidelines as Sandler and company waged war, to those who sided with television, and to those, like me, who were too young to have played any significant role one way or the other.

Shortly after passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, Sandler was on his way out as executive director of National Educational Radio at the NAEB. He was not surprised.

"I was warned by a very wise man named Herman Land . . . that to the extent we were successful in our efforts as underdogs to get the act changed, to the extent that we succeeded, that I personally should be prepared to be persona non grata among members of the establishment," Sandler recalled. "I said I thought I understood that, and he said, 'Well, I think you really ought to think hard about that. Are you prepared for that? It may have some very serious consequences for you.'"

In 1976, I was hired to head WHA and the Wisconsin State Radio Network. The runner-up candidate was Ed Burrows. In 1990, Wisconsin conducted a national search for a new program director. I set up a five-person search and screen committee to go through applications and recommend four or five finalists for interviews. After the committee made its selections, I leafed through the unsuccessful applications. One was Sandler's. He was working at a public television station in Moline, Ill.

Hardly anyone on that search committee could have known what Sandler had done for public radio 23 years earlier or could have understood why this public television guy would want a job in public radio. His radio experience was not recent enough for the committee to consider him.

Instead of inviting him to interview, the committee sent Jerrold Sandler of Moline, Ill., the form letter for unsuccessful applicants, thanking him for his interest in public radio.

He died in Moline in 1995.

Adapted from *Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio*, by Jack W. Mitchell, copyright 2005 by Greenwood Publishing Group. The author is a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin, where he teaches courses in public broadcasting, broadcast journalism, and mass media and society. He received CPB's top pubradio honor, the Edward R. Murrow Award, in 1998.

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