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Jones, Dyfrig

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“Go the Way of Radio”? American public broadcasting, media reform, and the federal communications commission’s hearings on educational television, 1950–51

Dyfrig Jones

Introduction

On November 21st 1950, the prominent educator and media reformer Robert Hutchins wrote to friends, colleagues and fellow campaigners that American broadcasting was “confronted by a crisis”. “If we do not act now” he wrote, “television will go the way of radio and this magnificent educational and cultural medium will be lost to the people irrevocably”¹. According to Hutchins, it was imperative that the good citizens of the US band together “to protect one of our greatest cultural resources from almost total debasement”².

Hutchins’ letter was prompted by the decision of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to hold a series of hearings on the future of educational television. This chapter re-examines the history of those hearings, with a view to better understanding how debates surrounding the future of broadcasting in the USA, represented by television, were shaped by past battles regarding the regulation of radio broadcasting. Building upon the arguments found in the work of Balas³, among other scholars, the chapter presents a new analysis of the 1950–51 FCC hearings based upon the original record of the proceedings held at the US National Archives. The chapter’s approach to

¹ Robert M. Hutchins, *JCET Appeal letter, dated November 21, 1950*. [Unpublished Correspondence]

The Papers of Morris S Novik. Subject Files: The Institute for Education by Radio Television.
Box 5. National Public Broadcasting Archives at the University of Maryland.

² Ibid.

³ Glenda Balas, *Recovering a Public Vision for Public Television*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

the archival material draws upon Pickard's⁴ analytical methodology, seeking to better understand the normative foundation of the American broadcasting system through an exploration of the conflicts and contingencies that both challenged and contributed to the formation of the status quo.

Beginning by looking at some of the key scholarship that exists on the hearings, the chapter will then set the broader historical context, briefly outlining the way in which the debate surrounding educational and commercial television had developed during the period from the 1920s to the 1950s. The main section of the chapter will look in detail at the hearings themselves, focusing specifically on the debate about the distinctions between educational and commercial television. Particular attention is paid to the arguments presented by a small number of media reform advocates who argued in favour of a hybrid model of educational broadcasting that combined elements of educational and commercial television together using a non-profit (rather than non-commercial) model of ownership and regulation. In conclusion, the chapter will briefly examine the outcomes of the hearings, and their significance to the history of American broadcasting.

Existing scholarship

In 1948, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had announced that it would temporarily cease to issue new licenses for television stations – the so-called “Television Freeze”. What followed was a series of hearings that would last until 1952, where the FCC sought to map out the future of the new medium. These hearings were initially motivated by purely technical questions; problems with the criteria for allocating VHF frequencies, issues relating to the soon-to-be-available UHF band, and how to standardise colour television. Yet what had begun as a series of technical hearings would eventually evolve into a debate on the nature of the medium itself; how it could best

⁴ Victor Pickard, Historical Analysis in *The Palgrave Handbook of Methods for Media Policy Research*. Edited by Hilde Van den Bulck, Manuel Puppis, Karen Donders and Leo Van Audenhove. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 511.

serve the American public, and what would be the relationship between commercial and social imperatives. Boddy argues that these hearings, and the *Sixth Report and Order* that was published at their conclusion, put in place “economic structures and routines that would remain substantially unchanged for twenty-five years”⁵.

Despite the significance of this moment in American broadcasting history, the body of academic research on the subject is relatively small. There is a wealth of literature on the development of the media reform movement in the pre-war era, but the majority of scholarship tends to focus on a period stretching from the late 1920s to the mid-1940s. Blakely⁶, Day⁷ and Powell⁸ have all written detailed accounts of the emergence of educational television in the 1950s, that draw upon their personal history of involvement with educational television and which provide a solid basis for further research. However, few recent scholars have attempted to build on the foundation provided by these early historians of public television. The most notable exceptions are Glenda Balas and more

⁵ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critics*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

⁶ Robert Blakeley, *To Serve the Public Interest: Educational Broadcasting in the United States*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979.

⁷ James Day, *The Vanishing Vision: The Inside Story of Public Television*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

⁸ John Walker Powell, *Channels of Learning: The Story of Educational Television*. Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1962.

recently Alison Perlman⁹. Balas' work¹⁰ identifies the FCC's 1950–51 hearings on educational television as one of three key moments in the early history of public broadcasting, the other two being the passage of the Communications Act of 1934, and the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. During each of these three historical episodes, according to Balas, “broadcast reformers fumbled, hedged, and compromised. Making choices in 1934, 1950–51, and 1967 that maintained the status quo, their chances for increased resources and greater social influence slipped away”¹¹.

In 1950–51, media reformers were offered an opportunity to outline a fresh vision for public broadcasting, one tailored to the new medium of television. The failure of 1950–51, according to Balas, was that they did not press the case for television as a public service medium, designed to appeal to a broad cross-section of society. By privileging the idea of educational, rather than public service, television, the reformers “restricted non-commercial broadcasting’s sphere of influence largely to the classroom and silenced much of its progressive potential”¹². For Balas, this compromise was a response to the stultifying social and political climate of the early 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy had given his “Enemies from Within” speech at Wheeling, WV, in February of 1950, and the early 1950s would be typified by a culture of fear that pervaded both the public and private sphere. The veneration of domesticity and the suppression of difference and dissent are the two factors that Balas blames for the timidity of the media reformers, and their failure to establish, foster and protect television as a public good.

⁹ Alison Perlman, *Public Interests, Media Advocacy and Struggles over US Television*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

¹⁰ Glenda Balas, *Recovering a Public Vision for Public Television*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 65.

This chapter seeks to develop some of the arguments that Balas has introduced, arguing that the Television Freeze hearings represent a significant missed opportunity for the media reformers. The settlement announced in April 1952 offered thin gruel for those who sought sponsorship and support for a new model of public broadcasting, and socio-political factors certainly played an important part in limiting the terms of the debate. But this chapter argues that the defeats of the early 1950s were not simply caused by external pressures; they were, in part, caused by the failure of some media reformers to properly engage with the new medium, and their inability to comprehend the demands of the television audience of the 1950s.

Media reform from the 1920s to the 1950s

In order to understand the debate surrounding commercial and educational television in 1950, it is important to grasp how the media reform movement had developed since it first emerged at the end of the 1920s. The term “media reform movement” was originally used to describe a broad coalition of educators, social activists and broadcasting regulators who worked together in an attempt to build what Pickard¹³ has termed “media democracy”, a public alternative to the purely commercial American system of broadcasting. Broadly, their work focused on lobbying for increased government regulation of privately-owned profit-driven broadcasting, and for the development of an alternative system of non-profit or non-commercial broadcast media. This work had been ongoing since the

¹³ Victor Pickard, *America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

emergence of radio broadcasting in the 1920s, but with limited success. Indeed, Barnouw¹⁴, Benjamin¹⁵, McChesney¹⁶ and Smulyan¹⁷ all argue that the media reform movement had, to all intents and purposes, been defeated in 1934 following the passage of the 1934 Communications Act.

Some, more recent scholarship, has taken a different view of the media reform movement post-1934, arguing that following the passage of the 1934 Communications Act the movement assumed a new set of priorities, and a different approach to campaigning. Goodman, for instance, argues that the post-1934 focus of the media reformers shifted “from public or private ownership to cultural and social questions about radio’s civic role”¹⁸. During the debates leading up to the passage of the Communications Act, media reformers emphasised the need to ensure that specific interest groups – educational institutions, trade unions, churches and ethnic associations – were given direct access to the airwaves through the setting-aside of portions of the broadcast spectrum for their exclusive use. But by the late-1930s concerns about the propaganda effects of radio saw less emphasis being placed on this direct access model of broadcasting. Goodman writes of an emerging

¹⁴ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Vol. 2 – 1933 to 1955*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

¹⁵ Louise Benjamin, *Defining the public interest and protecting the public welfare in the 1920s: parallels between radio and movie regulation* in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 1992, 12(1), pp. 87–101.

¹⁶ Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy: The battle for control of US Broadcasting 1928–1935*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹⁷ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

¹⁸ David Goodman, *Radio’s Civic Ambition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. p. 7.

“civic paradigm”¹⁹ where public service radio programs – often broadcast on the commercial networks – were expected to foster “active, critical audiences” capable of “self-improvement, self-government, empathy, tolerance and rationality”²⁰ as well as delivering the traditional educational, high-cultural and religious programming. This new civic paradigm relied not on the separation of radio into public and private broadcasters, but rather on providing a comprehensive service where all sections of society were represented. Pickard²¹ also reminds us that the more traditional battle for media democracy did not end with the passage of the 1934 Communications Act. The 1940s was a period of intense regulatory activism, which included the FCC’s 1943 case against chain broadcasting, the successful antitrust action brought against Associated Press in 1945, the publication of the FCC’s Blue Book in 1946, the Hutchins Commission in 1947 and the adoption of the Fairness Doctrine in 1949.

Instead of ending in 1934, the media reform movement instead developed two distinct but overlapping strands of thought. Many campaigners continued to engage in an activist “revolt against radio”²² campaigning against what they saw as poor program quality and excessive advertising, and for increased government regulation. Others, however, continued to work in collaboration with the commercial networks to develop what Shepperd describes as a “national civic production culture”²³. This process of advocacy involved building partnerships between educational institutions and commercial radio stations, to produce programming, strengthen non-profit and non-commercial

¹⁹ Goodman, *Radio’s Civic Ambition*. p. 69.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pickard, *America’s Battle for Media Democracy*.

²² Ibid., p. 9.

²³ Josh Shepperd, *Infrastructure in the Air: The Office of Education and the Development of Public Broadcasting in the United States, 1934–1944* in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2014, 31(3), p. 239.

broadcasting infrastructure, and grow the audience for an emerging system of public service broadcasting. Barnouw²⁴ described this cooperative approach as “busy work”, a distraction that served to co-opt and undermine the activist zeal of the media reformers. But Shepperd’s work demonstrates that this media reform advocacy was vitally important in laying the institutional foundations for public broadcasting, and had an impact that lasted well beyond the 1940s.

It is important, particularly in the context of this chapter, to note that by the end of the 1940s the constituent nature of the media reform movement had changed. While in the 1930s it had been a coalition of educators, social reformers, trade unions, religious orders and ethnic associations, by 1950 the movement was overwhelmingly made up of those involved in educational broadcasting, or the academic study of communications²⁵. In October 1950, seven national educational organisations came together to form the Joint Committee on Educational Television (JCET)²⁶, an umbrella organisation that aimed to co-ordinate fundraising and lobbying efforts in favour of educational television. Soon after its formation, the JCET succeeded in forming alliances with two powerful forces interested in educational television. The first of these was the Ford Foundation, who – during the Presidency of Paul Hoffman – recruited a number of media reformers and educational broadcasters, including Robert Hutchins himself, to work on this area. The second powerful alliance that the JCET formed during this period was with a member of the FCC itself, Commissioner Frieda Hennock. This chapter focuses on the relationship between Hennock and one of the key members of the JCET, President of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) Richard Hull, during the period in which this alliance was formed, arguing that the relationship between the two strands of the media reform movement can be understood by examining their interactions during the Television Freeze hearings of 1950–51.

²⁴ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. p. 26.

²⁵ Balas, *Recovering a Public Vision for Public Television*. p. 73.

²⁶ Perlman, *Public Interests, Media Advocacy and Struggles over US Television*. pp. 24–25.

The television freeze hearings of 1950–51

The FCC initially authorised full commercial operations on 12 TV channels on March 18th, 1947, a decision that led to a “race for licenses”²⁷. Commercial radio networks had, by the 1940s, developed both an organisational structure and a business model that could easily be applied to the new technology. So, while the early years of radio broadcasting had been typified by a diversity of broadcasters – public, private and amateur – the early years of television would be dominated by the attempts of the major commercial networks to secure as much of the spectrum as they could.

FCC Chair Wayne Coy had issued invitations for the educational broadcasters to present evidence to the hearings from as early as 1948. It took until 1950, however, and the formation of the JCET for the various organisations involved in the field to co-ordinate their efforts and to agree a common strategy. By then, they had little choice but to appear before the commission; when the FCC issued its *Notice of Further Proposed Rule Making* on the 11th of July 1949, Commissioner Hennock had decided to publish a dissenting opinion calling for the reservation of 25 % of the spectrum for educational broadcasting. Having been a commissioner for little more than three months, Hennock forced the issue on the FCC’s agenda by securing specific hearings on the question of education television.

Hennock was a New York City lawyer who had been actively involved in Democratic Party politics in the city. In 1948, Clarence Dill resigned as an FCC Commissioner in protest at President Truman’s requirement that all Federal government employees take an oath of loyalty. Hennock was appointed to the seat vacated by Dill, in July 1948, as the first female commissioner. While she is remembered as an independent-minded and outspoken commissioner who left a clear impression on the FCC, prior to her appointment she had no background in broadcasting. By her own admission,

²⁷ Blakeley, *To Serve the Public Interest*. p. 75.

Hennock was largely unfamiliar with the work of the commission, and had only a layperson's understanding of the challenges facing both the FCC and the media that it regulated²⁸. While Hennock proved to be a steadfast champion for educational broadcasting, and should be credited with instigating the hearings on educational television, this chapter argues that her contribution to the media reform movement was not without its problems.

In responding to Hennock's request that they present evidence to the hearings, the JCET was forced to confront fundamental questions regarding the constitution of public broadcasting in the USA, which it had previously struggled to resolve. Made up of seven different organisations involved in educational broadcasting, there existed within the JCET significant differences of opinion on some key questions. Those differences would be thrown into sharp relief by the FCC hearings, and their resolution would have a long-lasting impact on the American broadcasting landscape.

Previously, some media reformers, particularly those associated with Armstrong Perry and the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER), believed that it was necessary to build an alternative system of broadcasting, independent from the commercial network system. Their priority was to support the development of independent non-commercial radio stations, owned and operated by educational institutions. However, some other reformers believed that to reach a significant proportion of the audience, educators had to work with other, non-educational broadcasters, developing and producing educational and public service programming to be broadcast on the commercial networks. This second group were more closely identified with the National Advisory Council for Radio in Education (NACRE), funded in part by the Carnegie Corporation and led by Levering Tyson of Columbia University²⁹.

²⁸ Susan Brinson (2002) *Personal and Public Interests: Frieda B. Hennock and the Federal Communications Commission*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002. p. 2.

²⁹ Hugh Slotten, *Radio's Hidden Voice: The Origins of Public Broadcasting in the United States*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009. p. 160.

What emerged during the Television Freeze hearings, however, were proposals for an alternative, third model. Historically, where educational broadcasters had sought to work in partnership with the commercial networks, it had, by-and-large, been a failure. In the early 1920s, when radio was still finding its feet, commercial broadcasters had been willing to carry educational programs during peak hours, where they could reach the highest possible audience. By the middle of the decade, however, the networks were engaged in a highly lucrative competition for advertising revenue, and few stations were willing to provide educators with evening airtime that could otherwise be sold at a premium to advertisers. Educational broadcasting, if it existed at all on the commercial networks, had been pushed to the margins of the schedule, where it struggled to reach an audience.

During the 1950 hearings, a small number of media reformers argued that while this model may not have succeeded, educators should be willing to explore alternative means of collaborating with commercial broadcasters. Indeed, they were of the view that if educational broadcasting was to have any chance of reaching a mass audience, then some form of collaboration was essential. This new way of thinking about the relationship between education and commerce rejected the previous model, which forced educators to go cap-in-hand to the networks to beg for airtime. But they were also aware of the dangers of establishing television stations dedicated exclusively to educational programming, which they feared would struggle to attract an audience. What they proposed instead was two different, but related, models of broadcast ownership and regulation that drew together commercial and educational television under a hybrid ownership model.

The first proposal was to issue television licenses on a shared time basis, an idea that was discussed during testimony offered to the FCC by Richard Hull. Hull gave testimony as the chair of the Television Advisory Committee for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB), the largest and most influential of the organisations that made up the JCET. His opening address made a robust case for the reservation of part of the television broadcast spectrum “for a

regular television broadcast service of a serious and purposeful nature, and of consistently high cultural and entertainment value”³⁰. His was an explicitly forward thinking vision, “marking the errors of the past, and the problems and opportunities in the future”³¹, and one that addressed the needs of a broad public audience, rather than focusing narrowly on educational television and radio. Radio and television broadcasting as a whole had “implicit responsibilities morally, socially and culturally to the public by which it is supported, at whose sufferance it exists, and which it purports to serve”³². The audience, according to Hull, had the right to expect a daily diet of programming designed to foster personal, cultural, political and social growth, but the current system of broadcasting had failed to provide for the American audience, and showed no sign of changing.

One of the answers that Hull proposed was to take away the commercial networks’ discretion regarding how much educational content they would broadcast, and at what times. Hull argued that if an area had sufficient spectrum to accommodate two stations, one license should be awarded to an educational broadcaster, the other to a commercial broadcaster. However, in areas where the spectrum allowed for only a single television station (“one-station cities”) Hull proposed an alternative model, in which the license should “be a matter of shared facilities so the [station] would be able to provide the people in that area with both network and commercial service, and educational service”³³. In these areas, commercial stations would be legally mandated to carry programming produced by a local university on a “shared-time basis”³⁴. This was the position that had been

³⁰ *Official Report of Proceedings before the Federal Communications Commission in the matter of Amendment of Section 3.606 of the Commission’s Rules and Regulations. Dockets 8736 and 8975*, November 2nd, 1950. p. 150909.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15910.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 15911.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15919–15920.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15926.

agreed by the JCET, and was a central aim of their campaign. As Hull pointed out, shared-time commercial radio licenses were already in use in Manhattan, Kansas and in Chicago, where two commercial stations occupied the same portion of the broadcast spectrum, at different times of the day³⁵. Their proposal was simply that a similar system was put in place in other cities, to allow for the limited spectrum to be shared in a manner that allowed commercial and educational television to co-exist on an equal basis.

Hennoch's response to Hull's proposal indicates some of the difficulties that would arise later in the hearings. As Hull elaborated on the notion of a television station that was partly-educational and partly-commercial, it became clear that he considered this not only to be a convenient solution to the use of a scarce resource, but also a means of expanding the reach of educational broadcasting: "I am thinking of something more than simply displaying the wares of the university" he said "I am thinking of making what universities do more meaningful to as many people as possible"³⁶. Hennoch, however, failed to grasp the advantage of sharing time with commercial broadcasters, and suggested that even in cities capable of accommodating only a single television station, the license should be awarded to the educational broadcaster, with no commercial television offered to the audience³⁷.

Hennoch's antipathy towards commercial television radiates from the pages of the hearings' transcripts. When it became time for the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) – the organisation that represented the commercial networks – to give evidence, they called Kenneth Baker, a former educator who had taught at Northwestern, University of Minnesota and Ohio State. Baker argued that criticism of commercial television was often ill-informed and rooted in middle-class snobbery, a "tendency to look down the nose at commercial radio, commercial television [...] It is

³⁵ Ibid., p. 15932.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 15926.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 15924.

an attitude that a university person almost has to acquire in order to get along with his colleagues³⁸. For Baker commercial television had the potential to educate its viewers, albeit in a different manner to educational television – a fact that Hull had grasped, but which Hennock firmly rejected.

Her antipathy towards commercial television was illustrated in a discussion between Baker and Hennock on the educational merits of the Western genre; Baker argued that children watching Westerns could learn about American history, saying, as an example that “children might learn how U.S. Army Officers were dressed at the time. They might learn how people travelled across the prairies”³⁹. In responding to Baker, Hennock betrayed both the snobby “faculty club attitude”⁴⁰ that Baker had complained about, but also her lack of familiarity with commercial television. She failed to understand the moral universe that existed within the Western genre – “The bad men always get punished” as Baker explained – suggesting that if children could learn from Westerns they might learn to “load dice and how to wire your roulette table so you could win at Monte Carlo”⁴¹. But the problem, as she openly admitted, was that network television was, to her, a totally alien cultural form:

There may have been educational Westerns and I have never seen them. I don't look at them [...] I am completely ignorant of what goes on and may be misjudging them. They may be very good. They

³⁸ *Official Report of Proceedings before the Federal Communications Commission in the matter of Amendment of Section 3.606 of the Commission's Rules and Regulations. Dockets 8736 and 8975. January 24th, 1951. p. 17660.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17666.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

may be very bad. I don't know. I just take for granted that Westerns have all these things in them that are bad for children⁴².

Despite this ignorance, Hennock's antipathy towards commercial television was at the heart of her crusade to secure a future for educational television. So strong were her feelings, that she rejected any suggestion that educational television should seek to cooperate with, or had anything to learn from, the commercial networks, even when these suggestions came from within the JCET itself. William Wallin, Chancellor of the University of the State of New York, appeared before the commission to represent the views of the university system's Board of Regents, who were "intensely interested in the use of television"⁴³ for educational purposes. At the hearings Wallin proposed the establishment of a Television Education Authority for New York state, "charged with the duty of providing for the educational needs of the State that can be served by television" and that the Authority have "over-all control of such bands as [the FCC] are good enough to allocate to us in the television field". Crucially, however, Wallin's proposal also called for the new body to have "broad authority which will permit it within bounds to be governed perhaps by your Commission, to put commercials on"⁴⁴.

Wallin compared this proposed model with the Westchester County Parks Commission, which used well-regulated commercial ventures to support the development of a public resource⁴⁵. Not only would the sale of commercial airtime create income to support the work of the proposed new educational television authority, the authority itself would be able to exercise control over the

⁴² Ibid., p. 17681.

⁴³ *Official Report of Proceedings before the Federal Communications Commission*, November 2nd 1950. p. 15949.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 15949–15950.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 15967.

type of program being broadcast: “the people in charge of it would not put on the air over the television things which they felt were bad for their listeners”⁴⁶. Finally, Wallin argued that combining educational and commercial programs would help build an audience, in a way that exclusively educational television channels could not. “Exclusive education” television, according to Wallin, “wastes a good deal of the time on the air and wastes a good deal of effort, because you cannot keep people in school all of the time. They have to have some out”⁴⁷.

This was the second new model that was proposed at the hearings. The JCET’s official position was that, in certain circumstances, the FCC should award a shared-time license for educational broadcasters. In effect, this would have forced commercial broadcasters to surrender parts of their schedule to educational programming, under the control of non-commercial broadcasters. What Wallin was proposing turned this model on its head, giving total control of the license to the educational broadcaster, but allowing them to sell airtime on a commercial non-profit basis. Not only would this allow the educational broadcaster to create income to help subsidise the production of educational television, but would also allow them to use popular commercial programming to attract a larger audience to view its educational offering.

It was a proposal that, in a strict sense, contravened the 1934 Communications Act. The Wagner-Hatfield Amendment to the 1934 act had called for spectrum reservations on a non-profit basis which allowed the license-holder to “sell such part of the allotted time as would make the station self-supporting”⁴⁸, but the amendment had been defeated, and the act made provisions for spectrum allocations on a strictly non-commercial basis. Yet despite the strictures of the 1934 act, the model that Wallin proposed already existed in one specific locality, and had been established thanks

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 15968.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Congressional Record*, 78. 73rd Congress, 2nd session. May 15, 1934. pp. 8824–8837.

to the ingenuity of the JCET's Richard Hull. In addition to being the Chair of the NAEB's Television Advisory Committee, Hull was also the radio-television director for Iowa State College, notable as the license-holder of the first educationally-owned television station in the US, WOI-TV. And due to the limited spectrum availability – Ames, Iowa was a “one-station city” – WOI-TV had been established on a model that was similar to that being proposed by Wallin, albeit under a commercial license from the FCC.

Having given testimony to the FCC on behalf of the NAEB in November 1950, Hull returned a month later to represent WOI-TV. During his second appearance, he outlined to the commissioners how WOI-TV was constituted, and by example illustrated how a hybrid educational-commercial television station might work in other territories. Hull described to the FCC WOI-TV's typical schedule, blending educational, commercial and public-service programs⁴⁹. During the day-time, the station broadcast a combination of educational films and live classroom broadcasts, while in the evening, during prime-time, the station carried a regular schedule of public service programs, produced by Iowa State College and other educational establishments. In addition, he describes irregular special programs “such as a College football game, a farm meeting, a State civic meeting such as the Iowa PTA Congress, a driver safety clinic, and an interview with some visiting personality”⁵⁰. These locally produced programs were supplemented by what Hull saw as the best of the material produced by the commercial networks, as well as live broadcasts from the United Nations.

WOI-TV was able to pick-and-choose the best of the commercial networks' output due to the deal that they had struck with them. It was common practice for the networks to fund the costs

⁴⁹ *Official Report of Proceedings before the Federal Communications Commission in the matter of Amendment of Section 3.606 of the Commission's Rules and Regulations. Dockets 8736 and 8975 December 7th, 1950. p. 16933–16934.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

associated with linking smaller, rural television stations to national or regional broadcasting infrastructure. In return for technical access, the networks would expect that the local station would broadcast its programs free of charge during specified times of the day. WOI-TV had decided not to adopt this model, choosing instead to fund the technical costs themselves. This allowed them, in Hull's words, to "[switch] on or off the network at point of origin"⁵¹, whenever they saw fit. As a result Hull, as station controller, operated an editorial policy that not only emphasised quality programming, but also closely regulated advertising and sponsorship. As Hull explained:

We give no option time, we sell no local time, our acceptance policy is considerably more critical than a normal commercial station. We regularly refuse patent medicine, beverage accounts, direct mail promotions and similar schemes, and we reserve substantial blocks of time in Class A periods which are not for network use, but are utilized for college and local endeavors⁵².

It is clear from Hull's testimony that he sees the partnership with the commercial networks as enriching WOI-TV's offering to the audience. For Hull, to ensure a future for educational television "calls for purposeful, bold and cooperative action in programming, audience-building, research and teaching"⁵³. The emergence of the new medium provided an opportunity to do things differently to the ways of the past: "Television is yet new – in many parts of the country unknown. No patterns of final expectation have as yet been set up"⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 16944.

⁵² Ibid., p. 16926.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 16935.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 16938.

Hull provided the FCC with an alternative vision of how educational television might be constituted. It was a model of broadcasting that emphasised the importance of the individual program, and sought to curate an offering of the best television from across the USA, regardless of its origin. Crucially, this program offering was organised around a set of civic values, designed to insulate decision-making from the demands of the sponsor and advertiser. Station output was directed by educators and other advocates of public broadcasting, who had a mandate to ensure that educational programs were given prominent placement. Those same people were empowered to regulate both program content, and the placement of advertising.

At the heart of this vision was an appreciation of the power of television as an educational medium. To realise this potential, however, demanded that educators learnt how to communicate with the audience on its own terms, within a context that it understood and was willing to accept. Educational television needed to learn the techniques of network television, but most importantly it needed to persuade the viewer to turn on the TV set. Unless it was able to do so in sufficient numbers, then the entire endeavour was pointless; as Hull explained “Educators using any outlet such as radio or television must count their audiences in thousands, and not in hundreds [...] if I can’t do a good enough job to do that, I might as well send them pamphlets”⁵⁵. For Hull, educational and commercial television could complement each other, but should also engage in a “competition for the attention of people, for their minds”⁵⁶. As Hull argued:

If you have two stations and one is educational and one is commercial and the educational station is worth its salt at all, you are going to have a pretty interesting program competition between the two.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 16953.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 15940.

In other words, education isn't all Shakespeare versus Eddy Cantor⁵⁷. It is not that kind of choice necessarily⁵⁸.

Hennock vociferously disagreed with Hull. She was unable to conceive of how commercial television might be informative and enriching, in part because – by her own admission – she did not watch commercial television. Equally, she could not grasp how educational television could, or why it should, be entertaining and engaging. At best, Hennock could conceive of a public-private, educational-commercial television station as a necessary evil. But it is clear that what she aspired to, and thought the educators themselves should aspire to, was an exclusively educational service that could produce enough educational programs to support an entire day of broadcasting “without the necessity of filling in with comedians”⁵⁹.

Conclusion

It was Hennock’s argument that, eventually, won out. When the FCC ruled to reserve part of the spectrum for the educational television allocation it did so on the basis that educational stations would broadcast “programming of an entirely different character from that available on most commercial stations”⁶⁰. When, in 1952, the University of Missouri applied for a license on a “limited

⁵⁷ Eddy Cantor was a popular entertainer, and one of the hosts of *The Colgate Comedy Hour* on NBC.

⁵⁸ *Offical Report of Proceedings before the Federal Communications Commission*, November 2nd, 1950. p. 15941.

⁵⁹ *Offical Report of Proceedings before the Federal Communications Commission*, December 7th, 1950. p. 15971.

⁶⁰ *Third Notice of Proposed Rule Making (Appendix A)*, 16 Fed. Reg. 3072, 3079. March 21st, 1951.

commercial non-profit basis”⁶¹, it was rejected out-of-hand. The vision of a hybrid system of broadcasting that blended education and entertainment, civics and commerce, was, for the time being, dead.

It is not the intention of this chapter to blame Commissioner Frieda Hennock for mis-shaping the early development of public television, nor to cast Hull as its unheeded prophet and saviour. The media reform movement has a history that reaches back as far as the 1920s, and the FCC hearings of 1950–51 provided a platform for viewpoints and arguments that had been debated for decades. However, Laurie Ouellette has argued that while scholarship on public media has tended to scrutinize the “high-level institutional operations and political economics of public broadcasting, it says very little about its cultural dynamics or everyday implications”⁶². By focusing on the contributions of Hennock, Hull and Wallin to the hearings, and examining the conflicts and contradictions between them, this chapter aims to illustrate some of these cultural dynamics.

By focusing too narrowly on educational television, and by rejecting any attempt to compromise or collaborate with the broadcasting networks, non-commercial television retreated into a cultural space that was out of touch with the vast majority of the public that it purported to serve. As Balas illustrates, this decision to disengage from the mainstream of American society is one of the reasons why American public broadcasting, until today, struggles to find a mass audience.

As we have seen, however, this was only part of the story. More forward-thinking reformers, such as Richard Hull, sought to push the terms of the debate beyond the simple dichotomy of commercial vs. educational. Hull passionately believed in the educational potential of television, but realised that if educators were to make use of the new medium, they would need to surrender

⁶¹ *Sixth Report and Order*, 17 Fed. Reg. 3905, 3908; 41 FCC 148, 158. April 14, 1952. Section 54.

⁶² Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You? How Public TV Failed the People*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. p. 10.

old notions about network broadcasting as a wasteland, to borrow a term from a later age. More importantly, at WOI-TV Hull had developed a practical means of bringing television education to a mass audience, presenting it alongside network television, and drawing upon the production techniques developed by commercial program-makers. This notion of a hybrid public-private broadcaster emerged within the very specific context of Ames, Iowa, but it was far from unique. British television in the 1950s would be revolutionised by the introduction of a model of public-service broadcasting that shares many similarities with Hull's WOI-TV, and which proved to be wildly successful with viewers.

It is important to remember that Hull's particular vision was always unlikely to be adopted as a nation-wide model. Non-profit, as opposed to non-commercial, broadcasting had been rejected by the FCC as far back as 1934, in part due to the objections of the commercial networks themselves, who feared the increased competition for advertising revenue – a decision that had been reiterated during FCC hearings on FM radio allocations in the mid-1940s⁶³. The 1950–51 hearings are significant, however, as they help us to understand the development of a particular discursive thread within the media reform movement. The movement was made up of two distinct but interconnected strands. One strand favoured engagement with, and improvement of commercial media. The other, by contrast, focused on criticising both the networks and, implicitly, their viewers. Following the 1934 Communications Act, the pendulum had swung in favour of the former. The Television Freeze hearings of 1950–51 represent the beginning of a long journey in the other direction, one that informed the “Vast Wasteland” debate of the 1960s and helped shape the philosophical underpinnings of the federal system of public broadcasting that finally emerged in 1967.

⁶³ Alison Perlman *Public Interests, Media Advocacy and Struggles over US Television*, p. 24.