

# Why All That On-Air Begging?

A local public-TV station manager says former CPB chairman compromised the system's editorial integrity.

By Jan B. Jacobson

**W**hen Jack Parris started in public television in 1954 as a student worker at KUON TV in Lincoln, Nebraska, he did it all, from running the camera and directing to serving as on-air talent, all for just one dollar an hour. He worked at a station that didn't even have its own studio.

As this multiply honored veteran of 51 years in broadcasting approaches retirement he fondly recalls his "great ride" but he is clearly worried about the future of public broadcasting, a medium in which he spent nearly half of his career and where he still labors.

"In the early days at KUON, we were inventing television," Parris recalls. "We used the studios at our neighboring commercial station, KOLN, in the afternoons, to do our programming. There were no video tapes and it was all just black and white."

Two university instructors, Jack McBride and Ron Hull—both of whom went on to national prominence in public broadcasting—were instrumental in getting him into the television business. Following his

graduation from the University of Nebraska, Jack took a "32-year detour" from educational broadcasting to work in commercial television. He was a producer and director at KETV and KMTV in Omaha and WJRT in Flint, Michigan. He later worked as a station manager and program manager for KMEG in Sioux City, Iowa and as Vice President and General Manager for KGUN in Tucson.

"When I began working in television, there was educational TV, no PBS as we know it today. National Education Television (NET) came into being during the 50s. In the following decade, with the introduction of videotape and color, educational TV took a great leap and went through many changes."

In 1988, Parris returned to educational television at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, as Assistant General Manager for KUAT Video Services, a post he held for 10 years. He was promoted to CEO, Director and General Manager of KUAT's Communications Group in July, 1998, where he remains today.

## Public Versus Commercial Broadcasting

“It was an interesting transition,” he recalls. “A lot of things were similar between commercial and public television, such as the cameras, microphones, engineering, transmitters and microwaves. One thing stood out for me in commercial broadcasting: there was a sales force to sell commercials. In public television, our focus was on fund raising, which we did through memberships and development. We asked our members to support our station. through our pledge drives, and that has not changed.”

As General Manager, Parris was in the position of asking for major gifts. In fact, it was part of his job. Parris was quick to point out that the mission of public broadcasting is dramatically different from commercial broadcasting.

“Commercial stations seek to attract viewers and in turn attract advertisers. We at public television try to respond to viewers and reflect it in programming, We do not look at or worry about ratings in the same way. Rather, we assess how our programming is doing.”

### **In public broadcasting the staff stays for many years because they believe in its mission.**

He added, “At our station, KUAT, we try to be an alternative to what is offered by commercial television. We strive to provide educational and cultural programs that are not available in other places, and to attract audiences who ask for this programming.”

Parris points out that PBS stations seek input from their members on what



**Jack Parris, winner of an Emmy among many other honors.**

they want to view.

“We ask members for their opinions, through our communications and solicitations and get phone calls and written feedback. Senior management looks at the information received, to try and identify any trends. That is what we pay attention to.”

The people are yet another big difference Parris sites, between the commercial and public broadcasting stations.

“Although I have worked with and had wonderful and talented people in commercial broadcasting, they are much more transient. In public television, the staff stays for many years, and are generally here because they believe in the mission of public broadcasting. At KUAT, we have many staffers who have worked here for 20 to 25 years, because they are proud of what they do and want to stay.” He added, that remuneration at PBS stations is not terrific, but the workers truly enjoy what they are doing.

## PBS Station Challenges

Parris openly admits that the introduction and expansion of cable television has made it more competitive for his station and other PBS affiliates.

### **“Digital technology offers a great opportunity for public television stations to do more!”**

“Many say public broadcasting is not needed anymore, because there are now Discovery and History channels ... but it’s just not true! We are providing a service by doing innovative programming that others are not.”

Like other local PBS stations, Parris’s station purchases some of its schedule from PBS, others through distributors, and also does its own creative programming. They produce a nightly newscast five nights a week and offer bilingual programming.

Their flagship program, *The Desert Speaks*, is the only nationally syndicated program produced from Tucson, Arizona and the first and only one done from Tucson in high definition.

*The Desert Speaks*, an Emmy Award-winning program, is currently in its 15th season. It takes KUAT about a year to shoot these programs. Their next project is photographing the deserts of Australia. While the show is costly to produce, since it requires extensive travels annually, it is what sets this PBS station apart from other public and educational stations. The money generated from the show’s distribution through American Public TV supports general funding of the station. The show has also been sold to HD Net and

Discovery HD Theatre.

Parris has witnessed many changes during his career in public broadcasting.

“We’ve gone from no videotape to tape and now record on servers with digital technology. I expect the technology improvements to continue and that we’ll be recording on things not yet invented.” Parris projected.

Parris oversaw the launch of the first digital television system in Southern Arizona at KUAS- DT.

“Digital technology offers more opportunities to do more programming and other things like data and wireless transmission and others. It offers a great opportunity for public television stations to do more!”

Parris notes that funding issues have been an ongoing struggle for PBS stations.

### **Our funding continues to decline. We are basically living from year to year.**

“There has been a long period of budget cuts from both the state and federally, some minor, and others sizable. Overall, our funding continues to decline. We no longer have any cushion in our funding. We are basically living from year to year.”

State and federal cuts have a tremendous impact on public stations like KUAT. For KUAT, such cuts significantly impact their bottom line, as federal funding accounts for nearly 15% of their total budget and state funding represents about 25% of the budget.

“We have been forced to go back to our members to support us, to make up the difference,” he added, “ and



**The boss frequently serves as an on-air talent during KUAT's pledge drives.**

fortunately, to date, they have stepped up to help. They are loyal and kind to us, because they appreciate our programming. I honestly don't know how much longer we can expect our members to do this."

Funding is an ongoing challenge to KUAT because there are few large businesses and corporations with headquarters in Southern Arizona to support them.

"We are going to continue our members' funding and begin a major gifts program, to identify major givers, individuals and foundations. This is a new area of development we haven't done before. We are hopeful this will help us offset future declines in state and federal funding."

Parris recalls having to make layoffs in 2001, soon after 9/11, because of a decline in funding.

"We always try to protect our local programs like *Arizona Illustrated* and *The Desert Speaks*, as they set us apart. We also do political specials and cover health issues. These shows are about localism, which is our first priority. It is our goal to be a good neighbor in our community."

Funding issues have also had a tremendous impact on national PBS programming service.

"Nationally, PBS is going through similar reductions in their fund raising, as our local stations and their costs keep increasing. We must buy programs from PBS, and the costs to us are now higher. It's really a balancing act."

He explained, that due to funding reductions, and the increased cost of purchased programs, his station now often runs these programs more than once.

"Today's viewers are so busy and are often not available when a show airs," he says. "We are finding that the strong shows continue to get good ratings doing it this way."

PBS stations were caught by surprise when the House of Representatives recently tried to cut \$100 million of public broadcasting funding for both radio and television for 2006. PBS forces joined together and the public was informed of the proposed cut through a grass-roots campaign run by the Association of Public Television Stations.

"When budgets are tight, or we offend someone, de-funding public broadcasting comes up," Parris says.

Attempts to de-fund public broadcasting have become a way of life for us. Many believe that public funds

shouldn't go to public broadcasting. Fortunately, we have strong and loyal audiences who understand the value of public broadcasting, who have come forward and told Congress how important it is to them."

The \$100 million funding was restored and is earmarked for public broadcasting, to provide annual grants to local stations, which allows them to pay for PBS programming and for local programs.

Still another \$100 million of funding is resting in the hands of the Senate. PBS and its affiliates are hoping it too will be reinstated. This \$100 million is comprised of \$39 million for public television satellite internet

connections, another \$39 million for digital conversions and the balance is for outreach programs, like *Ready to Learn* and grants to fund popular PBS educational shows like *Reading Rainbow* and *Sesame Street*.

Parris explained that the federal funding issue comes up periodically. He recalls that similar attempts were made in 1995 to zero out funding for PBS, but it was saved.

When asked what can be done to stop the federal funding battle, Parris said, "Discussions have been held since the 1960s about establishing a 'trust' fund, that would support the operation of public broadcasting. This fund would have a large principal and the interest

would be used by local stations. This would take funding control away from the Senate and Congress.

**"CPB was established to insulate public broadcasting from political pressure. Chairman Tomlinson has brought into question the editorial integrity of public broadcasting."**

He added, "The Corporation for Public Broadcasting clearly isn't working well anymore. There's a lot of politics involved. Perhaps it's time to seriously explore a different model."

When asked his opinion of acting chairman Kenneth Tomlinson's attitude toward the system's independence, Parris commented:

"The Corporation for Public Broadcasting was established to insulate public broadcasting from the political pressure. We have a situation now that the organization charged to protect us is actually introducing political pressure into public broadcasting. Public broadcasting's editorial integrity is extremely important to us."

He added, “We must have the confidence of our viewers and listeners that we are making programming decisions free of any kind of pressure from the outside. If our audiences don’t believe that, we will lose them. CPB Chairman Tomlinson’s recent actions have brought into question the editorial integrity of public broadcasting and that is harmful to the system.”

What’s ahead for PBS? “I’m hopeful that public television will look at itself, at the model it’s been using for the last 30 years. The model needs to be retooled and become stronger in programming and service to the community. What’s been going on is not the best way to run a system.”

Parris believes local stations have a vital role in public television’s future.

“Local PBS stations have to continue striving to improve our mission, to provide value to the community and offer local programs that make our communities better for our viewers. Public stations are a valuable asset to communities, a resource for education and culture.”

He suggests that the public plays an integral part in the medium’s future.

“The public needs to continually give congressmen input of their views regarding public television. The message should be that when federal funding is provided, it impacts our local stations. Members of Congress need to realize that when they try or make national funding cuts, it translates to local stations and impacts those in their own communities.”

---

Jan Jacobson, an internationally published photojournalist and author of books on photography, is past president and a national trustee of the Rocky Mountain Southwest Chapter of the National Television Academy. She is the host and producer of *Valley Focus*, a weekly public-affairs radio show that airs on five stations in Phoenix, Arizona.