

Frank Stanton: A Great American Hero

By Bill Baker

In the final week of 2006, America lost a great hero. I'm sure that many members of the public – especially younger people – did not recognize his face or even his name. But there are few Americans whose lives were not touched by Frank Stanton.

I first came to admire Frank Stanton when I was a student of broadcasting back in Cleveland, Ohio. His epic defense of the First Amendment during the Nixon era and his willingness to go to prison for his beliefs were soon to become the stuff of legend. In *Fighting for the First Amendment* (Praeger, 1997), Corydon Dunham recounts Stanton's historic battles. I recommend the book to every student of radio and television, and, indeed, to any American who cares about the integrity of the free press.

From early on, I was deeply impressed by Dr. Stanton's ethics and values. It was his courage and vision, in fact, that inspired me to go to graduate school. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of this great man who cared so passionately about the



Frank Stanton (l.) and Paul Lazarsfeld, co-inventors of the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer.

media and so keenly understood the power and responsibility that came with broadcasting.

You can imagine my thrill when I had the opportunity to interview him during my doctoral research in the early 70s. For a young, aspiring broadcaster, it was an unforgettable encounter with a man who was making modern history. Yet, even though he was larger than life, the impression that stays with me to this day was one of kindness. Frank Stanton was a man of great importance, but he

felt it was important to take the time to talk to a kid trying to get a toehold in the business. That's the kind of person he was, and – perhaps more so than any of his storied accomplishments – that early encounter showed me why he was such a great man.

Over the years, I was fortunate to develop a relationship with Frank that has enriched my career and my understanding of the media immeasurably.

It was Frank who hired me to be the president of Thirteen/WNET, one of America's foremost public television stations, back in 1986. At the time, I was the head of a big commercial and satellite television company and I hadn't really considered public television. But Frank persuaded me that I could do more good and make a bigger impact in public-service broadcasting than anywhere else in the industry. And he was right.

Over the past two decades, as president and CEO of Thirteen/WNET, I have received invaluable guidance and insight from Frank. It was he who called and suggested I meet Charlie Rose, proposing him as a strong candidate for the host of a public-affairs program we were planning. The result of that phone call to me was the birth of an American media icon and one of the most respected series on television.

One of the things that stands out so markedly about Frank Stanton is that he was not a producer or a journalist or any of the other so-called "creative" types that we usually put on pedestals for their great achievements. Frank was a corporate executive. But his effect on

this industry was as profound as anyone's. That's because his style and business ethics infused this powerful, omnipresent medium with purpose and value.

Today, unfortunately, we find ourselves in an era where media executives often treat media content as nothing more than a way to maximize the corporate bottom line. Regarding television and radio as nothing more than commodities diminishes the media's potential to serve the public. The airwaves are a public trust and deserve to be treated with respect and care. Frank Stanton understood this and devoted his life to creating a media environment defined by thoughtfulness, integrity and the highest standards of civilized discourse. Today's media executives could learn much by studying Frank Stanton's life and work.

The Stanton legacy lives on in this great industry. It is indelible. Stanton touched the very fiber of American media and strengthened it. I am just one of hundreds of people he touched directly and personally with his special genius. And through us, he reached nearly every television viewer and radio listener in the nation; that is, nearly every person in America.

Not long ago, at a benefit in New York, he leaned over to me and said, "Always fight for the First Amendment, there is *nothing* more important." Among all the glitz and glamour of broadcasting in America, Frank never forgot what was essential, what truly mattered. And those of us who care about the power of the media in our lives will never forget him.

Prior to assuming his position at Thirteen/WNET New York, Dr. Baker was president of Westinghouse Television and chairman of the cable and programming companies. During his 10 years at Westinghouse, five cable networks were launched, including Discovery Channel and the Disney Channel. He established PM Magazine and introduced Oprah Winfrey as a talk-show host.