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“A certain stigma” of educational radio: Judith Waller and “public service” broadcasting

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Abstract

This paper explores Judith Waller's radio programming philosophy over her career that began in 1922 at WMAQ Chicago. In the 1940s, representing the interests of her employer NBC, Waller began to use the phrase “public service” as a way to break free of the “stigma” of educational radio. The concept of public service programming shifted during the 1930s and 1940s in the US, redefined and negotiated in response to assumptions about radio listeners, the financial motivations of commercial radio, and Federal Communications Commission rulings. This paper brings renewed attention to the past and present political economy of media in the US, providing a window into the historically complex relationship between commercial and noncommercial media that continues to this day.

KEYWORDS: Public service, education, political economy, Judith Waller, NBC, radio

Originally created to address the uneven educational opportunities for lower-income pre-school children, the public service program *Sesame Street* has aired on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) since 1970 (Morrow, 2006). In 2015 the Children's Television Workshop announced a new production and distribution deal with HBO, a premium subscription channel best known today for its boundary-pushing original television series (Steel, [2015](#)). This unlikely partnership provides funding that will allow *Sesame Street* to increase the number of episodes it produces each year, from 18 to 35. As Rosenberg ([2015](#)) writes, *Sesame Street* "is a perfect example of the kind of thing that many of us feel instinctively ought to be some sort of public trust, but that we're not exactly lining up to pay for as if the show were public infrastructure." Rosenberg locates two conflicting notions that frame our understanding of public service programming. While programs dedicated to educating young viewers continue to garner vocal support, they invariably struggle to find the necessary funding. The positive veneer of this partnership, of bringing educational television to young children in their homes, belies the policy decisions that transpired decades ago that made these types of financial interventions necessary. Rather than demonstrating a new model for funding public service programming, this partnership reveals the porous relationship that has always existed between commercial and noncommercial media in the US. From the mid-1920s onward, public service and educational radio have been forced to work within the economic demands of the commercial market. In this regard, this funding partnership brings renewed attention to the political economy of media in the US, providing a window into the historically complex relationship between commercial and noncommercial media that continues to this day (McChesney, [1993](#))

As Shepperd ([2013](#)) writes, political economy "has been effective for identifying political and institutional precedents, and how precedents have influenced consequent structures of organization and policies" (p. 26). Contemporary public service media's need to seek out auxiliary funding dates back to regulations enacted in the 1927 Radio Act and the 1934 Communications Act, both of which supported the growth and expansion of commercial radio while curtailing options for noncommercial, educational alternatives. Although this type of profit-centered, advertising-supported radio thrived in the US, it was not the sole vision for the possibilities of radio. As Sloten ([2009](#)) writes, colleges and universities played "a key role in the establishment of an alternative, noncommercial, public-service model for broadcasting" (pp. 9–10). Noncommercial radio stations and educational institutions offered an alternate system, one that "had the potential to uplift the masses" (Richardson & Johanningmeier, [2006](#)). However, funding and licensing issues caused the closure of many stations that prioritized educational and public service programming, diminishing the number of noncommercial, university stations. The commercial networks attempted to replicate the types of programming that had previously aired on noncommercial radio. In doing so, they redefined the parameters of "public service" to integrate these programs into existing commercial programming practices.

One underexamined but important figure was frequently caught between these competing visions of radio and radio programming. As the manager of the Chicago radio station WMAQ from its inception in 1922, Judith Waller molded the station into a purveyor of public service programming—including opera and orchestral performances, music appreciation programs, and lectures by university professors. After National Broadcasting Company (NBC) purchased WMAQ in 1931, Waller became the Educational Director, and later the Public Service Director, of NBC's Central Division (Sochen, [1999](#)). As a result of Waller's prominence in the industry—balancing success in commercial radio with an appreciation of the needs of educational and public service broadcasting—she was viewed as being capable of bridging

these two groups. Drawing on Judith Waller's books, primary documents located in the NBC papers, and unpublished dissertations and master's theses, this article explores how Waller, representing the interests of her employer NBC, utilized the phrase "public service" as a way to break free of the "stigma" of educational radio and comply with the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) public interest mandate. On the surface this move from "educational" to "public service" represented a minor language modification meant to demonstrate that these programs were palatable to a wide variety of listeners. However, this shift in language disguised a different motivation, as NBC used "public service" to navigate federal regulations while shaping the industry to ensure commercial radio's continuing profitability.

As Kellner ([2009](#)) notes,

political economy calls attention to the fact that the production, distribution, and reception of culture take place within a specific economic and political system, constituted by relations between the state, the economy, social institutions and practices, culture, and organizations such as the media. (p. 101)

Investigating these inseparable elements in radio's past allows for the uncovering of interconnected layers of policy decisions and business practices at different organizational levels across both commercial and noncommercial media. At the center of this particular historical inquiry is Judith Waller, and to what extent she was leading or following the institutional, profit-driven reinterpretation of public service that NBC was communicating to the public through its programming practices and rhetoric. In line with previous political economy research, this paper delves into how several entities battled for the power to control and define radio programming in its formative years, and the consequences for both commercial and noncommercial media in the US (Mosco, [2009](#)).

In order to understand the forces that shaped Judith Waller's programming philosophy amid the fledgling American radio industry, the next section will explore the origins of public service broadcasting. Despite nearly a century of general use, there remains little consensus as to the definition of the term "public service," which has been used to describe programming emanating from the British Broadcasting Company Corporation (BBC) since the 1920s. As this paper will demonstrate, the concept of public service programming shifted across the 1930s and 1940s in the US as it was redefined and negotiated in response to assumptions about radio listeners, the financial motivations of commercial radio, and FCC rulings—all of which set the precedent for the current structure of programming "governed by laws of the market" (Kellner, [2009](#)).

Public service broadcasting's origins and changes

According to Scannell ([2003](#)), the meaning of "public service" broadcasting originates in the emergence of the BBC's attempt "to formulate what the general purposes of broadcasting should be" (p. 213). The term first arose to define broadcasting in the UK as "a public utility" and as "public property" in order to stymie efforts toward either complete government control or commercial dominance (Scannell, [2003](#)). In 1925 Sir John Reith wrote his *Memorandum of Information on the Scope and Conduct of the Broadcasting Service*, which outlined the parameters of public service broadcasting in the UK. According to Scannell, Reith saw the following ideals as central to the BBC's mission:

The service must not be used for entertainment purposes alone. Broadcasting had a responsibility to bring into the greatest possible number of homes in the fullest degree all that

was best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour, and achievement ... Broadcasting should give a lead to public taste rather than pander to it ... Broadcasting had an educative role and the broadcasters had developed contacts with the great educational movements and institutions of the day in order to develop the use of the medium of radio to foster the spread of knowledge. (2003, p. 214)

According to Reith, public service meant that the BBC had a responsibility to create and air programming with the primary goal of improving its listeners, rather than entertaining them. However, as Hall (1993) reminds, this mission to serve the public “inevitably leads to the imposition on ‘the people’ of the tastes and interests of some elite group, restricted caste or state-paid bureaucracy” (p. 25). Reith’s ideal was very much “one within which an enlightened political and cultural elite” made the decisions about what programming was appropriate to impart “upon a public whose views and tastes were not to be trusted” (Garnham, 1983, p. 22).

The ideals put forth by Reith also served as a model and countermodel for the emergence of other broadcasting systems throughout the world (Lacey, 2002). In what Hilmes (2003) terms the “battle of the paradigms,” the two systems—commercial in the US and “state-chartered” in the UK—often represented two seemingly opposite broadcasting options (p. 54). While each system developed along its own intricate trajectory, deeply connected to its social, cultural, and political environment, each looked to the other system as a negative model (Hilmes, 2003, p. 55). The *perceived* central difference came down, in a way, to its audience—commercial broadcasters in the US claimed to program what their audience *wanted*, while the BBC’s public service mission sought to give its audience what BBC programmers felt listeners *needed*.

The move toward creating “public service” programming in the US grew out of the complicated relationship between commercial and noncommercial radio that began in the 1920s. Alongside the emergence of commercial radio in the US, another concurrent, noncommercial model emerged that was more in line with the BBC. These noncommercial stations were some of the earliest radio experimenters in the US, linking urban and rural areas with university extension classes, agricultural information, and weather reports. Claims about electromagnetic spectrum scarcity and the emergence of tiered licensing in the 1920s pitted these noncommercial, educational stations against radio’s growing commercial entities. These circumstances led to the passing of the 1927 Radio Act, which as Rinks (2002) notes, “had an immediate impact on stations operated by educational institutions. When the Act went into effect in 1927, there were more than 200 such stations. That number had been reduced to 49 by March 1931,” signaling to many the death knell of educational programming on radio in the US (p. 310). However, the 1927 Radio Act employed an important (and often cited and debated) phrase, that broadcasting must be “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity” of the American people. This phrase would come to be interpreted by contrasting groups to justify each entity’s programming practices.

As the number of university stations diminished, the commercial networks insisted that they could meet the public interest mandate and fill the gap left behind by these closures. As Hilmes (2003) notes, “one tactic was to emphasize the public service that the major networks claimed to perform,” precipitating a “sudden outpouring of symphonies, public affairs, and serious dramatic programs” (p. 60). This overnight emphasis on cultural, “public service” programming demonstrated the network broadcasters’ desire “to have it both ways during this period,” to continue to broadcast (and to profit) from the

commercial system while also offering piecemeal attempts to allay critics who called for more substantial changes to the American system (Hilmes, [2003](#), p. 63).

As many noncommercial, educational stations shuttered, and the commercial radio networks promised to air educational programs, industry professionals began to display a marked shift in how they discussed this type of radio. According to Heistad ([1998](#)), “the term [educational] was gradually replaced by the networks with the phrase public service” (p. 8). In all, “public service” denoted “programming with the primary intent of educating, informing or uplifting, rather than merely entertaining the audience” (Heistad, [1998](#), p. 113). As Goodman ([2011](#)) demonstrates, “public service” came to stand for a complex set of ideals that helped commercial broadcasters to navigate the regulatory landscape while circumventing any additional federal regulations, as “a kind of insurance policy in uncertain times against the possibility of government deciding to establish a national public broadcaster” in the US (p. 35).

This redefined notion of public service programming took root at NBC when the network hired James Angell, the former president of Yale University, to serve as Educational Counselor beginning in 1937. In this position Angell insisted that the network conclude each broadcast of educational programming with the sentence, “This has been a public service feature of the National Broadcasting Company” (Goodman, [2011](#), p. 49). In 1940 Angell disseminated a report, *NBC Interprets Public Service in Radio Broadcasting*, which delineated the shifting terminology. It noted, “Dr. Angell suggested that NBC re-define its terms and that the word ‘education’ be limited strictly to those programs which are a supplement to the teacher and the textbook” ([1940](#), p. 3). In making assumptions about what audiences wanted, the report stated that “the public wants to be educated but it wants its education ‘sugar-coated.’ We believe it is our responsibility to provide public service programs of the highest quality and with a satisfactory degree of entertainment in them” (Angell, [1940](#), p. 5). Angell’s report communicated a vision of public service that would not challenge listeners too much, nor force NBC to alter its existing programming. This type of radio at NBC would change in name only.

Despite Angell’s, ([1940](#)) report that addressed NBC’s commitment to public service programming, the network’s actions did not always meet its high-minded rhetoric. NBC’s actions following two FCC rulings in the 1940s made clear that the network’s financial success remained its foremost interest. Following the FCC’s 1941 *Report on Chain Broadcasting*, NBC was forced to divest one of its two networks over monopoly concerns. Of its two networks, NBC Red aired many of its “more popular and commercial” advertising-supported programs, while NBC Blue housed much of the network’s “sustaining,” public service programming (Hilmes, [2007](#), p. 14). NBC chose to sell its Blue network, which would later become rival network American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and maintained the more financially profitable Red network. While Angell’s Report spoke to NBC’s outward commitment to public service programming, the decision to retain the Red network indicated that NBC would continue to interpret the public interest mandate in ways that would ensure its profits above other considerations.

The disconnect between NBC’s written support of public service programming and its actions was further evidenced by the overall industry backlash against the FCC’s 1946 Report, *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees* (also known as the Blue Book). As Pickard ([2011](#)) writes, the Blue Book “took the unprecedented—and unrepeated—step of making the privilege of holding broadcast licenses contingent upon meeting substantive public interest requirements” (p. 172). Although many individuals and groups supported the Blue Book’s guidelines, it sparked a fierce industry backlash over

accusations that it would “BBC-ize American broadcasting” and “censor and control media content” (Barnouw, [1968](#), p. 183). The Blue Book’s overall industry dismissal meant that, by the late 1940s, no formal rules were in place to define public service broadcasting, outline what programs belonged under this umbrella, or provide any real oversight as to how many hours of this type of programming should air on radio. The Blue Book’s failure to influence commercial radio largely allowed the networks to continue to operate regardless of how, or if, they chose to interpret the public interest mandate.

Judith Waller was at the center of these disputed interpretations of public service programming and its place on commercial radio. In line with Angell’s, ([1940](#)) NBC Report, Waller wrote about creating public service programming that was simultaneously entertaining and educational, housed within a descriptive framework that would not discourage listeners from tuning in. After expressing her dissatisfaction with educational radio in 1934, Waller wrote two books in the 1940s that encouraged both an expansive interpretation of public service programming and collaboration between educators and commercial radio professionals. As Tworek ([2015](#)) writes, “for Waller, institutional arrangements necessarily led to particular ideas of the audience and programming” (p. 465). As an employee of NBC, Waller was a product and proponent of the commercial radio industry, and thus the network’s profit-minded imperative remained the primary factor that shaped her public discussions of NBC listeners’ wants and needs. However, several of Waller’s internal letters and memos reveal a complex relationship with NBC, and frustrations regarding the network’s treatment of public service programming. The next section explores these complexities.

Judith Waller and public service programming

Many who admired Waller’s career saw “education” as central to her programming philosophy. Charlotte Lawson ([1942](#)) celebrated her work, proclaiming that Waller had “believed in educational radio since the very beginning of radio broadcasting” (p. 8). Indeed, in a 1951 interview, Waller recounted that “some people have felt that [WMAQ] always had a public service background ... we were endeavoring to render a service” (June 1, 1951 Interview with Judith Waller conducted by Frank Ernst Hill, pp. 9–11). In her position at WMAQ, she worked with University of Chicago and Northwestern University faculty members in 1922 to air lectures (Caton, [1951](#), p. 95). In 1926 she agreed to air radio programs on art and music appreciation for Goudy Elementary (Lawson, [1942](#), p. 9). As the collaboration gained momentum, Waller supervised two to three features that ran for 30 minutes a day, five days a week, reaching 275,000 school children (O’Dell, [1997](#), p. 200). In 1931 Waller worked to bring *The University of Chicago Round Table*, a weekly current events discussion program featuring local scholars and invited guests, to WMAQ (Slotten, [2009](#), pp. 216–220). However, Waller’s programming philosophy at WMAQ was multifaceted. In 1926 she persuaded Chicago Cubs owner William Wrigley, Jr. to air Cubs baseball games on her station (O’Dell, [1997](#), p. 198). That same year Waller brought *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, one of the most popular, long-running, and controversial radio programs of all time, to WMAQ (Interview, 1951, pp. 17–19).

Despite these successes, by the 1930s Waller had grown dissatisfied with the state of education by radio. In 1934 she delivered a paper titled “Achievements of Educational Radio” as part of the Fifth Annual Institute of Education by Radio. In this paper she demonstrated the first of many critical denunciations towards educators and noncommercial radio programming. Waller opened her equal-opportunity polemic on a bleak note, heavy with doubt about the future of radio and education: “I am inclined to pessimism when I think back five years and survey what has been accomplished in the field of

education by radio compared with what might have resulted from the same amount of effort and time” (Waller, 1934, p. 22). She observed that the previous years had largely served as an experiment in delivering different types of programs “in an endeavor to see what method or attack was best suited to this new medium” but that this experimentation had not led to improvements in programming (Waller, 1934, p. 24). Waller faulted educators, stating that “the profession has not seen fit to devote the necessary time and attention to radio” (Waller, 1934, p. 25). In Waller’s opinion, educators were not “radio minded” and were using “the *same* programs, the *same* techniques, with the same results ... after five years of experimentation” (Waller, 1934, p. 28, emphasis in the original). Despite Waller’s clear dissatisfaction with radio programming on a variety of levels, she attempted to end on a more optimistic note. She called on educators to collaborate with commercial stations in order to improve this type of programming. While Waller could envision “a really vast people’s university, brought about through the cooperation of the universities, the colleges, and the regular commercial stations,” she felt that this type of collaboration was not happening (Waller, 1934, p. 30). She noted that such a collaboration “cannot be made without funds,” suggesting that the lack of funding was a clear obstacle to educational broadcasting (Waller, 1934, p. 31). Waller implored educators to follow commercial radio’s successful model of reaching listeners, but this suggestion put educators in a difficult position. Here, Waller put the onus on noncommercial stations and educators to change their programming to match a vastly different kind of radio, one financed through on-air advertising that largely focused on “entertaining” its audience. Furthermore, having acknowledged that adequate funding was essential to produce effective programming, Waller provided no clear insight as to how to facilitate these collaborations or where to secure this additional money. Over the next 20 years Waller would repeatedly express similar sentiments without truly delving into the growing number of obstacles, from funding to radio station licensing, that impeded the success of educational programming on both commercial and noncommercial radio.

After detailing her dissatisfaction in “Achievements of Educational Radio,” Waller turned towards molding the next generation of broadcasters by helping to create the NBC-Northwestern University Summer Radio Institute. In June 1942, Waller instructed this eight-week summer course that was designed to train students in program production, directing, and writing. After the program’s first year Waller wrote *Broadcasting in the Public Service* (Waller, 1943), a book detailing the inner workings of radio programming. Throughout the book Waller embodied NBC’s redefined notion of public service programming. Waller wrote:

It has often been asked, “What do you mean by Public Service as applied to radio?” To answer, we might include everything that is broadcast from the time a station goes on the air in the morning until it signs off at night. Broadcasting, itself, is a public service. It is the purpose of all radio stations to build programs, whether for pure entertainment and amusement, or for informative purposes, that will be a service to the public. Obviously, however, this is not what is meant when radio speaks of “public service.” (Waller, 1943, p. 1)

Waller told her readers that NBC was “using the phrase ‘public service’” to reference programs “formerly called ‘educational’” (Waller, 1943, p. 1). She noted that NBC was attempting “to steer away from” labeling programs as educational, as “a stigma has grown up around” the word “educational” and that it did “not connote a type of program which will be amusing, entertaining or easy to listen to” (Waller, 1943, p. 1). As a result, Waller wrote, people no longer wanted to listen to these types of programs. In winnowing down her interpretation of public service, Waller cited Dr. W. W. Charters of

The Ohio State University, who broadly defined educational programming in 1936 as that which “raises standards of taste, increases the range of valuable information, or stimulates audiences to undertake worth-while activities. In short, an educational program is one which improves the listener” (in Waller, [1943](#), p. 2). Waller employed Charters’ definition as the basis of her two-part definition of public service broadcasting. She asserted that public service radio programs should “improve the listener,” and in doing so they would “[render] a public service” (Waller, [1943](#), p. 2). NBC’s expansive new interpretation of “public service” gave the network the flexibility to label an enormous range of programs accordingly. This new definition demonstrated one way that NBC and Waller could increase the number of programs that might fulfill the public interest mandate without disrupting the network’s profit-minded imperative. Nonetheless, with this definition Waller was claiming that to garner an audience, public service programs needed not only a new label, but also needed to become more easily consumable entertainment. This sentiment betrays the very idea of programming designed to serve the public by educating or challenging them. Here Waller was following NBC’s lead, as set by Angell’s *NBC Interprets Public Service in Radio Broadcasting* ([1940](#)), where he wrote that “the public wants ... its education ‘sugar-coated’” and that NBC should provide “public service programs of the highest quality and with a satisfactory degree of entertainment in them” ([1940](#), p. 5). Both Waller and Angell continually communicated this assumption about what listeners wanted to hear on radio as though the audience consisted of only one type of listener who wanted only one type of programming.

Near the end of the book, Waller urged commercial broadcasters and educators to work together to create programming beneficial for both parties. She wrote, “it is essential that these programs be built in close cooperation with the educator ... It is well to remember that the teacher knows the most effective teaching tools, just as the radio station knows the most effective broadcasting tools” (Waller, [1943](#), p. 105). Like her earlier calls for collaboration, Waller once again failed to provide concrete plans for creating these collaborative radio programs, or any ideas as to how these initiatives might be funded.

Judith Waller continued to expand her ideas about public service broadcasting in her next publication, *Radio: The Fifth Estate* ([1946](#)). The second edition of *Radio: The Fifth Estate*, published in 1950, adds more information about working in and creating television, but contains no substantive changes to the language examined in this article. Although *Radio: The Fifth Estate* transplants much of its discussion of public service programming from *Broadcasting in the Public Service*, the book reflected a change of course. Rather than let “public service” subsume “educational” programming, Waller separated each into distinct sections and parsed the newly defined differences between them. Waller now used the term *educational* to describe the programs that were being produced by universities and colleges or being created for explicit classroom use. Waller also presented a slightly different take on public service, indicating another shift in how she defined this type of programming. She removed any mention of the word “stigma” and its perceived relationship to “educational” radio, and reworded her statement regarding how the public can learn through radio. Her earlier statement professed that the audience “by and large, does not like to feel it is, obviously, being educated” (Waller, [1943](#), p. 1). In her 1946 book, however, Waller revised this sentence, claiming that “the public, by and large, wants to make its own decisions regarding its education. It does not want it handed out too obviously by radio” (p. 171). This rhetorical shift reconsidered the notion that listeners were turning away from radio if or when they perceived it was trying to educate them. Waller’s reconceived wording instead asserted that listeners would tune in to these types of radio programs *if* they were given the opportunity to do so.

This redefinition of listeners as free to make decisions based on their own desires made implicit connections to commercial radio's rhetoric of giving listeners programs they wanted to hear, and slyly reinforced the perceived differences between broadcasting in the US and the UK. In *Radio: The Fifth Estate*, Waller noted that "in Great Britain the objective seems to be to give the people what they ought to have; in America broadcasters give the audience what it wants" (Waller, 1946, p. 8). She asserted that "the prime objective of any radio station, be it large or small, is to build programs which it believes its listeners will enjoy and listen to. In other words, radio very definitely tries to give the public what it wants" (Waller, 1946, p. 173). In her 1951 interview Waller similarly described her broadcasting philosophy: "I don't think the American broadcaster ought to follow the British example of giving the public what they (the B.B.C. executives) think they ought to want rather than what they do want" (p. 50). Waller defined her programming philosophy in contrast to the BBC's public service mission, which sought to give its audience what BBC programmers felt listeners *needed*. Waller claimed to give listeners what they *wanted* to hear, but this position was merely another instance in which Waller and NBC made assumptions about listeners and the types of programs that audiences wanted to hear, without providing any data to support these assertions about the audience's listening habits. There was a second fundamental tension in her objection to the BBC. Throughout her career Waller had expressed strongly that she preferred programs with a dual educational and entertainment focus—programs that she felt would "improve the listener." It would seem, therefore, that her programming philosophy was actually closely aligned with the BBC's public service mission. It appeared that the difference for Waller was based in the idea of providing *choices* for the radio listening audience. However, as noncommercial radio contracted in the 1930s and 1940s, there were fewer programming options than ever before, paving the way to redefine public service to serve NBC motives, rather than in the public interest of network radio's listening audience.

Radio: The Fifth Estate demonstrated Waller's final publicly disseminated thoughts on educational and public service programming. Although she did not continue to write about these topics in a public forum, Waller did make some revealing and contradictory comments about her interpretations of public service broadcasting in her internal documents and correspondence preserved in the NBC papers. Just as her (1934) paper "Achievements of Educational Radio" had presented her frustrations with the state of educational radio, two documents written several years before her 1957 retirement from NBC featured Waller elaborating on the discussions that populated her books. In an internal document from March 3, 1951, titled "The Relationship Between the Broadcasting Industry and the Educator's Educational Broadcasting," Waller admitted that many people considered her "an expert on the relationship between broadcasters and educators," but that she was unsure as to whether she would "go down in history as the great mediator—or the great meddler!" (1951 Document, p. 1). Alluding to her frequent statements that the greatest success in public service programming resulted from collaborations between commercial broadcasters and educators, Waller drew attention to her work with *The University of Chicago Round Table*, a long-running program crafted through a partnership between commercial radio (WMAQ) and faculty at the University of Chicago. Waller wrote that the *Round Table* was a prime example of the type of radio that could be achieved with "cooperation between education and industry" (1951 Document, p. 17). Furthermore, she acknowledged that "experimentation in educational programming" was "costly" but reiterated that these expenditures were necessary to create effective radio (1951 Document, p. 19). Waller concluded this document by again stressing the importance of collaboration:

I very definitely feel that neither the commercial broadcaster nor the educational broadcaster can render the same quality of service without the other ... Rather, I see a relationship of mutual helpfulness that will continue to grow, through study, resourcefulness and experimentation, resulting in the best programming ... all to the end of truly serving the complete American public. (1951 Document, pp. 23–24)

As with her earlier suggestions for collaboration between commercial and noncommercial radio, she did not indicate a plan of action to facilitate this type of collaborative programming.

Several months later, in June 1951, Waller sent a memo and long statement to Edward Stanley, Director of NBC's Public Affairs and Education Department. In it Waller detailed a number of topics relating to her experience in educational and public service programming. She wrote to Stanley that her transition from WMAQ to her role at NBC as the Educational Director "was not easy at first as my radio experience for the past ten years had been so much broader than that confined within the definition of "education"" (June 2, 1951 letter from Judith Waller to Edward Stanley, p. 1). Waller reiterated that she had "never been able to reconcile the academic definition of the word 'education' with those programs for which I or my department was responsible," a career-long dilemma evident throughout her books (1951 Letter, p. 1). Waller recounted to Stanley that NBC shifted to using "public service" in the late 1930s

because people in the industry did not like the word "education" and educators were loathe, in many instances, to accept certain types of programs which the radio industry classified as "educational" ... we changed the name of the department in the late '30s to "public service." (1951 Letter, p. 1)

Waller told Stanley that this name change to "public service" had been a failure; it did not bring audiences back. She noted that "'public service' began to assume the same unpopular connotations as the word 'education' had previously borne" so the name was once again changed, this time to "public affairs" (Waller, 1951 Letter, p. 1). Reiterating an argument that she had made several times throughout her career, she wrote,

In the majority of instances, all of us are talking about the same kind of programs when we speak of "public service" only we use different words ... of course, they are informational and entertaining, but they are also educational and a public service in every sense of the word. (Waller, 1951 Letter, p. 3)

In an attachment to her letter to Stanley, titled "Vital Statistics," Waller listed several of these types of programs that her department helped bring to NBC and WMAQ, including *Carnival of Books*, *Destination Freedom*, *Your Symphony Scrapbook*, and *Uncle Ned's Squadron* (1951 Letter, p. 10).

Waller expressed to Stanley that recent developments at NBC had given her "new hope" for public service programming (1951 Letter, p. 4). This hope, however, was predicated on NBC's support of these future endeavors with the proper amount of funding—something the network had refused to do in the past. Waller told Stanley that NBC was "never willing to allocate a sufficient budget to build a thoroughly fine and competent department" to create quality public service programming (1951 Letter, p. 2). It was only in these 1950s documents that this fundamental issue with public service programming came to light—that the lack of funding had been the actual obstacle all along. This assertion contradicted

statements Waller had made over the years, including in *Radio: The Fifth Estate* (1946), where she wrote that “commercial interests were doing their utmost to improve their educational broadcasts” (p. 399). Instead, Waller’s 1951 correspondence explicitly noted NBC’s consistent refusal to provide the financial support to create truly effective or engaging public service radio programming. Waller also expressed this sentiment in an interview with Frank Ernest Hill, conducted the day before she wrote her letter to Stanley:

I have always felt that an educational or a public service program ... could be as entertaining and a palatable to the general public as any other type of sustaining program. That is, provided that one was willing to spend the same amount of money for writing and for production as is spent on commercial programs ... I think NBC felt that they didn’t have enough money to spend on our type of program. (Interview, 1951, p. 47)

Waller was correct to implicate NBC for failing to fund public service programming. As Pickard (2011) has observed, any claim that NBC could not afford to help fund public service programs was blatantly false. “Although broadcast profits increased dramatically during the war years,” Pickard notes, “programming improvements did not, thus undercutting industry claims that they could not afford public service programming” (Pickard, 2011, p. 181). Had NBC invested sufficient money into producing educational or public service programming, rather than merely relabeling its existing programming, the network might have created a memorable, and perhaps profitable, legacy that truly served the public and fulfilled the public interest mandate.

Conclusion

Overall, Judith Waller’s ideas about educational and public service programming provide a window into the historically complex relationship between commercial and noncommercial media that continues to this day. This paper has attempted to bring Waller’s public and private discourse into play to provide nuance to the existing scholarship on radio in the US. An examination of Waller’s place in the discussion of public service programming, amid the growing power of the commercial networks, helps to locate some of the precedents and legacy of the organizational and institutional decisions made during her career. In the bigger picture, this analysis of the political economy of media is less about Judith Waller and the specific programs she created. Instead, it is more concerned with how her discussions about public service programming communicated deeper insights about the “media as business” model crystallizing in the US and the ramifications for public service programming on commercial and noncommercial radio (Wasko, 2014, pp. 261–262). Finally, this paper has demonstrated that the existence of public service programming in the US has for nearly a century been, and will likely continue to be, at the mercy of commercial media’s profit motives.

Judith Waller’s statements represented in the NBC papers provide important details about her work at NBC. The limited materials available speak to her programming philosophy but leave many questions unanswered. For example, while we know that Waller taught aspiring radio personnel at the NBC-Northwestern University Summer Radio Institute, her influence on her students remains unknown. Waller’s papers also do not reveal whether her battles over public service programming were undertaken in direct response to critics or policy makers who may have opposed initiatives she was proposing. It is also particularly difficult to tell from these archived documents whether she was leading NBC’s statements about public service programming or being asked to follow the leadership at the

network. However, Judith Waller made one unambiguous claim in her internal correspondence at NBC: that proper funding was the central challenge to the creation of public service programming. Her papers also clearly express the impossible position in which she found herself. As I noted earlier, Waller was often looked to as the person who could bridge the divide between commercial and noncommercial radio. Publicly Waller wrote about working in the commercial radio industry, but in her private correspondence she complained about “people in the industry,” seemingly not referring to herself (1951 Letter, p. 1). This indicates not a person capable of bridging commercial and noncommercial radio, but someone so caught between competing interests that she never wholly belonged to, or was able to fully thrive in, either realm.

In some ways Waller’s desire to satisfy competing interests might have undermined her own vision for public service programming, particularly in her singular focus on commercial radio. Her vision for public service radio was never fully realized, either at NBC or in a “vast people’s university” of the air on noncommercial radio (1934, p. 30). It is unclear why Waller, who in the early 1950s expressed the complexity of her relationship with NBC, chose to spend two decades employed at a network that had repeatedly refused to fund the types of public service programming that she celebrated. What kept her from walking away from NBC, and instead working to advocate for governmental funding of public service radio? Was it not until the early 1950s, in the wake of the industry backlash against the FCC’s (1946) Blue Book, that Waller realized NBC would never accede to the public interest mandate by funding robust, effective, and entertaining public service programming? Although Waller’s books and correspondence during her career at NBC hint at answers to these important questions, the answers remain elusive.

Although the media landscape has changed greatly over the last century as new platforms and technologies have provided alternatives to the traditional networks, the partnership between *Sesame Street* and HBO discussed in the introduction illustrates that the nearly century-long debate over who should create and fund public service programs continues to this day. This collaboration demonstrates the continuing and problematic need to finance and foster public service programming in a neo-liberal era where funding is increasingly scarce, and in which commercial media producers are no longer beholden to programming in the public interest. It appears that public service media, still largely defined by regulatory decisions enacted a century ago, will continue to rely on partnerships that conflate educational interests with commercial motives. Similar struggles can be identified today in the tensions between commercial and noncommercial interests in other services, such as public education, healthcare, and infrastructure. This pervasive tension indicates that in media production, as with many other concerns, we are still searching for answers about how to pay for the public good.

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