

CHICAGO'S NEWS & ARTS WEEKLY • FREE • DECEMBER 10 - DECEMBER 16, 1992

# NEW CITY

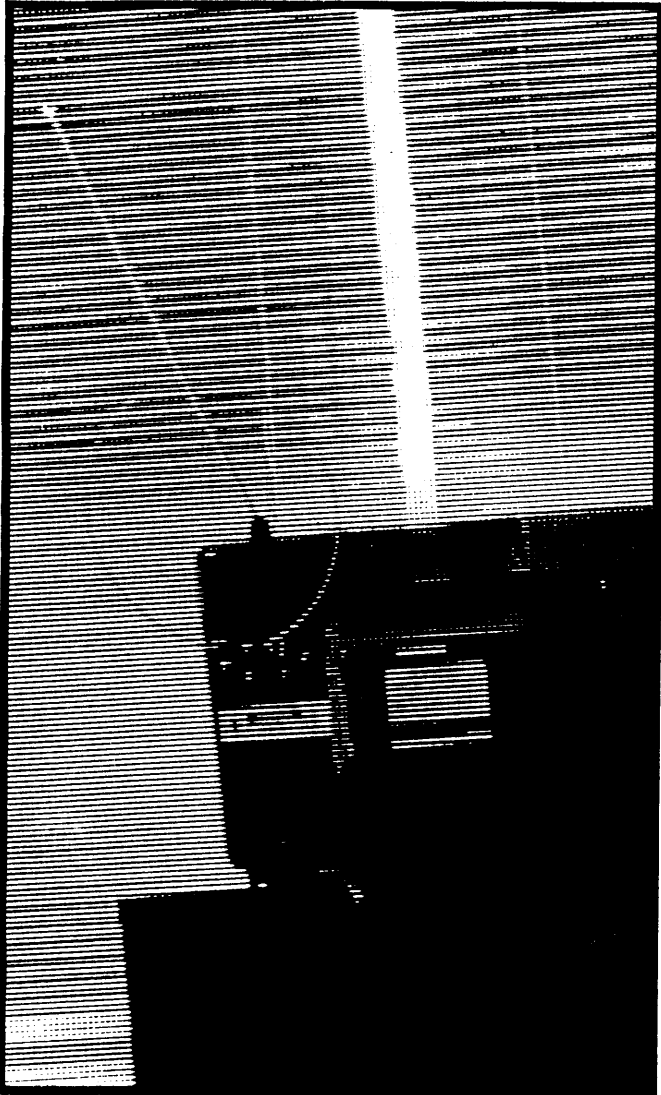
*Where's  
the public in  
public TV?*

# MIXED SIGNALS

*Liz Stevens  
tunes in  
to Channel 11*

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# MIXED



*Where's the public in public TV?*

*Liz Stevens tunes in to Channel 11*

**T**eady Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons and Our Environment" is a powerful piece of filmmaking. In its 29 minutes, the emo-

tionally riveting documentary links GE to radioactive contamination of the land and people living around its Knolls Atomic Power Lab in upstate New York and makes a strong case against the company's involvement in the weapons industry. Beyond its news content, the film is noteworthy

*Dorothy Perry*

# SIGNALS

for its artistic merit: it won the 1991 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short-Subject.

Earlier this fall, Chicago's public television station, Channel 11-WTTW, along with the Public Broadcasting Service and almost all public-broadcasting stations around the country, decided not to air "Deadly Deception." WTTW issued a statement saying that the film's funder, the grass-roots organization INFACT, was too closely linked to the project. (The group led a boycott of GE to force it out of the nuclear industry; the boycott is specifically promoted at the end of the film.) The station says the fact that GE is its largest corporate donor—\$2.9 million in 1990-1991—had nothing to do with its decision.

Since the early 1980s, when the federal government reduced funding to public television, stations have become increasingly dependent on money from the business sector, so much so that previously non-commercial stations now unabashedly bookend their shows with image ads for multinational conglomerates. The result, critics say, is a worrisome amount of corporate influence over public television, which leads to programming that is increasingly "mainstream" and fails to represent the diverse tastes and concerns of the public. At the same time, they say, corporate influence has effectively muffled the public's voice.

Media activists aren't the only ones who've noticed the problem of public access. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the federal funding arm of the PBS, has decided to address it as well. Last week, the CPB announced it will open phone lines to take public comment and hold town meetings around the country to find out what people want to see.

The CPB's actions, however, don't necessarily mean independent public television stations such as WTTW are going to follow suit. And some local media activists are pessimistic that the change in Washington will affect a mind-set here that, they say, is uninterested in developing a meaningful relationship with the community.

"I don't know that [WTTW] lives up to its name," says independent producer Bob Hercules. "Where is the public in public television?"

**I** found myself asking the same question when I dropped in on a meeting of the Channel 11 board of trustees—quarterly gatherings that are open to the public. I'd pictured being greeted by the kind of bubbly station employees you see on the air during fundraisers. I'd assumed they'd be just as pleased to see me here as they would be to see me volunteering to answer phone calls from donors.

But what I encountered was not the warm and fuzzy world of tote bags and coffee mugs that the pledge drives portray. The trustees had already taken their seats when I was taken into the meeting room: a dramatically lit TV studio that had been transformed into a dining hall for the occasion. While board members lunched at banquet-sized tables, I was led to a row of six plastic-backed chairs in a dark corner and reminded there would be no public comment. In the hour I sat there, no one other than a few security guards looked my way.

Besides the cool atmosphere and unaccommodating logistics, something else stood out about the meeting: the trustees. Though an able and intelligent body, the board is also, and perhaps expectedly, homogeneous. Its 33 members include the president of the Chicago Bears, a former head of the Federal Communications Commission, the director of the Illinois Lottery, the dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, a number of high-profile philanthropic professionals, and a heavyweight bunch of corporate executives. They serve one- to three-year terms and choose their own successors. Though the station contends that its board reflects the public it serves, there are no Latino trustees, one Asian American, three African Americans and no representatives of the working class.

"We're looking for a diverse group," says Director of Communications Bruce Marcus, referring to the trustees. "A group that, as an entire body, has people that represent all facets of the community as much as one can. This happens to be such a diversely made up

city [that] it's literally impossible with 30 or 40 people to cover every group. [We look for] people who, through their work or their philanthropic efforts or their day-to-day activities, have a lot of contact with a lot of people.

"It is 100 percent not a fund-raising board," he adds, although most trustees are "extremely influential people...with a lot of money. Do most of these people give us a lot of money? No. Is it a condition of coming on our board? No."

Nonetheless, critics point to the board makeup as a prime example of how far removed WTTW is from the public it is required to serve.

"The board of directors needs to be entirely democratically elected from the community, like [KQED] in San Francisco," says Larry Duncan, an independent producer and labor activist. "The station needs to return to its founding philosophy that underrepresented voices are given a forum in American society. All the other issues of [program] content will come out of that."

KQED is no doubt an oddity among public television stations. California law requires that its 240,000 members vote on the trustees. Anyone can run for a seat, and the station provides air time to each candidate. It's a costly \$100,000 process, but "it gives us a much more vital sense of what people are thinking," says Communications Director Greg Sherwood, "and it adds a connection to the membership that is important."

KQED is one of the few stations in the country, along with WNET in New York and KTEH in San Jose, that has aired "Deadly Deception." Like WTTW, KQED initially turned down the film, but the station reassessed its decision after a loud public outcry. "It's hard to argue about the show until people have seen it," Sherwood says. "Until that, people believe that you're hiding something."

The station also was one of the first to air "Stop the Church," a controversial documentary about the confrontation between ACT UP and the Catholic Church, and "Tongues Untied," a film about African-American homosexual men. WTTW did air that program but rejected "Stop the Church."

Sherwood says KQED trustees are "strong advocates of local programming" and their influence has led to local shows such as "Viewpoints," a showcase for independent point-of-view journalism and the soon-to-air "Living Room Festival." This 13-week series is a compilation of independent work from eclectic film festivals held around the Bay area. Another effort inspired by board input was "Q," a late night arts and entertainment show that focused on the local art scene and was cancelled after eight months for lack of an audience. The station also shelved "The Lawrence Welk Show" after board members "made their feelings known."

"The board has a basically good understanding of the station's mission," says Sherwood, "and they defend that mission even if they know it's going to cost us members."

The way KQED organizes public input may not work for WTTW, says Scott Sanders, a local media activist who co-owns a Skokie video company. "But the fact that Channel 11 doesn't even want to have one elected seat, even just to throw a bone out there, that, to me, is very odd. Somewhere in there, there could be a mix. It could be half and half."

In the case that governing boards do underrepresent certain groups in the community, the federal government provides some remedy. The Public Telecommunications Financing Act of 1978 requires that public television stations receiving federal dollars develop a "community advisory board," the composition of which "reflects the diverse needs and interests of the community served by such stations."

"The board shall be permitted to review the programming goals established by the station, the service provided by the station, and the significant policy decisions rendered by the station," the law reads. "The role of the board shall be solely advisory in nature...In no case shall the board have any authority to exercise any control over the daily management or operation of the station."

At KQED and public televi-

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# MIXED SIGNALS

ation stations in Boston and Minneapolis. For instance, community advisory board members are elected (in a variety of ways—by the trustees, station members or the community at large) and serve specific terms. Members represent blue- and white-collar professionals alike (teachers, police officers, youth counselors) and typically reflect a much greater cross section of the community than the boards of trustees. The community groups meet anywhere from once a month to several times a year.

"The goal is to end up with 21 people who represent the population our community is made up of, by race, by age, by special interest," says Ann Sunwall of KCTA in Minneapolis, where the chairperson of the community advisory board was recently elected a trustee. At WGBH in Boston, community advisors hold monthly evening meetings that are open to the public. Its programming lineup includes weekly African-American and Latino public affairs shows.

WTTW, on the other hand, has no definitive group of community advisors. Organized public input comes once a year via a gathering of community leaders at the station for an afternoon of discussion. The group is chosen and convened by a trustee committee and its recommendations are put into a report, which is distributed to the rest of the board at its next meeting.

Marcus stresses, however, that the annual meeting of community leaders "is not just a session where everyone pats us on the back at all. It's a give-and-take session."

As far as the absence of an elected community board, Marcus says every public station interprets the federal regulations differently according to what works best for that station. "In the end," he says, "you hope that all of them are trying to do what's right for the community. Is there a better mechanism for hearing about how 5 million people feel about our programming? There may be. Are we satisfied with the efforts we do now? Yes, we are."

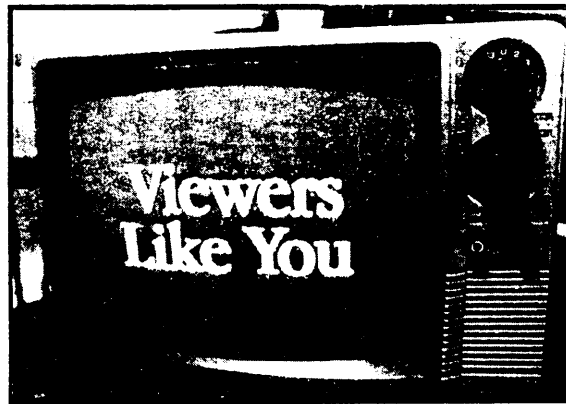
**W**TTW is a difficult institution to criticize. It boasts the highest ratings of any public television station in the country and produces more programs for its local audience than any other. It is financially sound at a time when many public stations are struggling to stay viable. But while few people would deny that Channel 11 is a welcome alternative to the networks, offering a wide variety of excellent programs that explore important cultural and social issues, local critics say WTTW's programming reflects a dearth of alternative voices.

"I don't think the programming on the channel now reflects the broad spectrum of the public," Sanders says. "I think it only reflects certain segments and units, others. And the only way to change that is for people to become more involved."

Like most public television stations, critics say, Channel 11 has grown away from what the 1967 Carnegie Commission report, the blueprint for public television, intended it to be: "a forum for debate and controversy...a voice for groups in the community that

may otherwise be unheard. [Public television] should seek out able people whose talents might otherwise not be known and shared. The search for new or unrecognized ability should include but not be limited to conventional ideas of talent."

Unconventional, says independent producer Alejandro Riera, is not the first word that comes to mind



*As long as WTTW is "getting most of its money from a white suburban population," programming will remain "safe" and "near-sighted," claims one producer.*

when looking at WTTW's programming. The November/December "highlights" list includes: "Liza Minelli Live!" "Ann of Green Gables, The Sequel," "Holiday Cooking Shows," "Christmas Songs with Mel Tormé, Maureen McGovern and Doc Severinson" (and several other holiday specials with Luciano Pavarotti, Diana Ross, and Peter, Paul and Mary), "The Metropolitan Opera Presents..." and "New Year's Eve with the Berlin Philharmonic." The list also includes "Kwanzaa: A Cultural Celebration," a Maya Angelou-hosted program about an inner-city church, and a locally produced show on intergenerational living.

About 80 percent of WTTW's schedule is bought from PBS. It includes educational programming, cooking shows, British sitcoms and mysteries, nature documentaries and shows such as "Nova," "Masterpiece Theatre" and "Frontline." From its state-of-the-art production facility, the station puts out nationally aired shows such as "Sneak Previews," "Image Union," and Bill Curtis' "New Explorers," and it co-produces the GE-underwritten "McLaughlin Group," a talk show with a conservative slant. Local fodder includes "Wild Chicago" and the public-affairs programs "Chicago Tonight" with John Callaway and "Chicago Week in Review."

"WTTW has become as formulaic and traditional

as any network station," says Riera, one of many local, independent producers critical of WTTW. Of the half dozen who provided their opinions, all concluded the same thing: the station does too little local programming and is unwilling to take risks. "Image Union" and "Chicago Tonight" were repeatedly mentioned as the station's strong points but "it's just not enough," says Hercules, who clashed with the station this fall over the editing of a segment he shot for "The 90's." "Where are the programs that address the needs of the communities of Chicago?"

"The amount of local stuff that's done is minimal and that's too bad," says Tom Weinberg, creator of two PBS showcases for independent producers, "Image Union" and "The 90's," the latter which, despite critical acclaim, just lost its PBS funding. "It's a budget priority; it's a level of comfort; it's a definition of who [WTTW is] internally. They have to say, who are we? Are we experimental in a way or are we a representative upper-middle-class institution? They are a representative upper-middle-class institution, and I don't think that's the totally right thing to do."

Dropping "The 90's" is a great example of just how "bland" public television has become, says Riera, adding that as long as WTTW is "getting most of its money from a white suburban population," programming will remain "safe" and "near-sighted."

Callaway strongly disagrees with the premise that the station's cultural programming caters exclusively to the upper echelon. "It is absolutely condescending to say that lower-income people are not interested in classical music and other high-brow cultural programming," he says, adding that airing too much classical music "is an accusation I would proudly bear." As to serving white suburbanites, Callaway says that it is the group probably least served by "Chicago Tonight," which spends the preponderance of its time on urban issues.

"Programming-wise, yes, we're pretty mainstream," adds Marcus, "and I think that's because we're striving for overall balance. But there are a lot of programs that are on and on issues that are discussed that are extremely risky, and we could've taken a far more conservative stance and said we're not going to deal with that. So I don't accept that premise [that the station doesn't take risks]. To put a program like 'The McLaughlin Group' on, that's as risky as any programming decision anyone is going to make."

Representatives of the African-American and Hispanic communities acknowledge that WTTW's programming has improved in the area of racial diversity over the past several years, but they are still looking for a greater voice at the station.

"Chicago is the only city in the country with a major Hispanic population that doesn't have regular programming [on its public television station] aimed at a bilingual audience," Riera says. (For the record, WNET in New York City also does not air a regular program for Latinos.)

Operation PUSH leaders plan to sit down with the general managers and programming directors of all the major television stations in Chicago, including WTTW, to discuss representation of the African-American community.

"The broadcast media in general has provided an inaccurate and unfair presentation of African Ameri-

Dorothy Perry

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cans," says Executive Director Janette Wilson. "As we look at Channel 11, we see it not only has the opportunity but the mandate" to present a balanced picture. The station, she says, has a mistaken perception of who the city's African-American leadership is, and continues to draw from the same unrepresentative sources when it needs people to comment on issues.

Callaway says "Chicago Tonight" does the best job in town as far as African-American representation. "In our political analysis, we probably do rely on a coterie of about six to eight people as opposed to 200," but the show's guests come from all segments of the African-American community, he says.

To its credit, WTTW recently held a racial-sensitivity seminar for its staff in conjunction with a series of programs it will air in 1993 on issues of race.

**L**iane Clorfene Casten is an Evanston-based freelance journalist and, along with Sanders, a member of the newly formed Chicago Media Watch, a group that plans to focus some of its efforts on WTTW. Though she believes Channel 11 is "the only relatively decent place where Chicagoans can get serious reports on major issues," she is a strong advocate of more in-depth public affairs reporting by WTTW on issues such as health care, education reform, city-wide layoffs and toxic waste. Casten, who has written for "Mother Jones" and "The Nation," says she sees "a serious lack of coverage from a more progressive point of view... We are paying all that money and [Channel 11] just is not reflecting the needs of its constituency out there."

Callaway disagrees. He believes the station does an admirable job in covering the city and that his show, "Wild Chicago," "Image Union," and the station's documentary series "WTTW Journal" make up one of the strongest packages of local programming anywhere. "Anytime you wanted to you could come in and say we are inadequate in this area and this area and this area, and I could show you 80 others" that the station is doing a good job of covering. "I just can't walk down a hall [at the station] without seeing an editing room filled with images of this community," he says. And, overall, the amount of public-affairs programming has increased a hundred times over what it was 10 years ago, he adds, when the station had no nightly public-affairs shows and less in the way of documentary work.

Marcus says station management chooses programming based on what it thinks is best for the marketplace. "For us it's a juggling act. If you just deal with percentages, you're not going to find programs that satisfy every group or that cover, in any given year, any particular race or religion. Could we do a better job? Yes, that's one of the challenges.

"But the assumption that there's a level of unhappiness or discord out there about what we do is an erroneous assumption. What a few independent producers say, what a few people reacting to a particular program might say, they have to be factored into the entire community. For anyone who's trying to balance as much as we're trying to balance, it is literally impossible for us [to please everyone] unless we wipe out what we feel is our basic programming service, and we're not about to do that because we don't think, in any sense, that that is what the public wants us to do."

**D**efining what the public wants its public television station to be may be the fundamental chasm between WTTW and its critics. Sanders, Casten and the others view Channel 11 as an opportunity to explore the alternative, as a voice for the under-represented and as a vehicle for change. Marcus believes the public's priorities are different, that viewers want a quality product and don't object to being represented by the city's so-called best and brightest. And besides, says Marcus, a completely democratically run institution has its downside. KQED is currently facing extreme financial difficulties, which the station admits is not helped by having fewer "fundraising heavyweights" on its

board than other stations, such as WTTW.

"The community's preference, from our standpoint," Marcus says, "is that we run a sound financial organization and that we are technically as advanced as any major television station in the country."

Even the station's admirers, however, would like to see it become more accessible. Ed Morns, a former WTTW programming director who heads the television department at Columbia College, believes the station "is doing as good a job as any station could possibly do in meeting community needs," but "is not as community involved as it should be." Nevertheless, says Morns, airing shows on toxic waste and other social ills would be counterproductive because "nobody's going to watch them." He also says programming directed at specific ethnic or racial groups would be a mistake. "I don't think that ought to be [WTTW's] priority just because they're a public station. That's narrowcasting." (A role, some would say, increasingly filled by cable public-access stations, although others like Weinberg note that WTTW's licensed mandate is still "worth insisting on.")

The station's biggest problem, Morris says, is its lack of "unencumbered funds"—dollars donated without strings attached.

From July 1990 to June 1991, Channel 11's revenues amounted to a little more than \$38 million. The station received \$3.8 million in federal and state government grants, while public donations amounted to \$21.4 million. The largest segment of that, about 45 percent, came from individual donors. The second largest, 27 percent, came from national corporate underwriting and PBS production contracts. Local corporate donations represent a little over 10 percent of public donations.

"A lot of what we do is limited by money," Marcus says. "If we somehow had an incredible year in fund-raising and we brought in another \$5 million, the lion's share of that would go into producing more programs, and my guess is they would be the types of programs that some disgruntled people would like to see us do. But the days of unrestricted money coming in out of the goodness of people's hearts are gone. Corporations want something in return."

Who's giving money to Channel 11? In general the majority of individual donors fit into a certain demographic profile, says Marcus: older people with above average incomes and levels of education. Corporate gifts in '90-'91 included the \$2.9 million from GE and donations from Illinois Bell, United Airlines, Harris Bank, Metropolitan Life and True Value Hardware, to name a few.

"There are vast conflicts of interest with corporate funding," says Hercules, raising this question: what kind of position could guests of "The McLaughlin Group" take on the Gulf War knowing that their sponsor, GE, is a major supplier of weapons to the U.S. military?

Sanders, who has been working since the early summer to convince WTTW to air "Deadly Deception" describes it this way: "Picture a room filled with large soapboxes that GE is standing on. Now here's this 29-minute film that takes an opposing viewpoint and it can't get on the air. There is no comparison. It's 29 minutes versus years."

Would more public representation at WTTW improve what the station has to offer? Though Callaway believes the board should strive to make itself more reflective of its viewers, he challenges the idea that just because it isn't means that it can't serve them. "Yes, you've got some white folks there," he says, but "these people have almost all dedicated their lives to inner-city issues."

Marcus says the current amount of oversight by the board is enough. "Is the community overall satisfied with how we run the station? Yes, they are. Do people have their problems from time to time? Yes. But they do with every business in this city and with every television station."

But those determined to change the way WTTW operates believe the station's public mandate makes it an exception. "If Channel 11 is really being supported by public funds, then surely they should be open to every bit of scrutiny we can ask for," Casten says. Adds Duncan, "there's a huge debt of balance that has accumulated in public television, and we want to cash that check." ■

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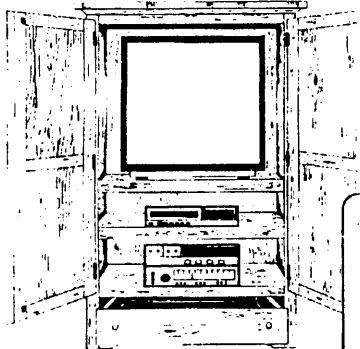
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