

**Remarks of
Commissioner Susan Ness
Federal Communications Commission
PBS Fall Planning Meeting & Annual Members Meeting
Arlington, Virginia
October 22, 2000**

***Public Broadcasting:
Bright Future, Cherished Birthright***

(As prepared for delivery)

I am honored and delighted to be here tonight -- not only because I am such a big fan of public television, but also because I am such a big fan of Pat Mitchell.

As all of you have come to know, Pat is amazing. She has unrelenting energy. She has enthusiasm, vision and creativity. She has access to the most talented writers, directors, producers, and actors around the globe -- as someone once said, a Rolodex to die for. And above all, she has an extraordinary ability to get things done.

So when Pat asked me to speak at tonight's festivities, how could I say no? May I see a show of hands of those of you here who have ever said "no" to Pat Mitchell when she has asked you to do something?

Pat is terrific working with people. And she is working with terrific people. I've had the pleasure of knowing Bob Coonrod of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for the past two years and he's doing a great job. And so is Colin Campbell, your PBS board chairman.

I see the agenda for your Fall Planning Meeting is brimming with new ideas and initiatives-- including a live demonstration of the next generation of the Internet. Grand food for programming thought.

The Unique Mission of Public Broadcasting

This is a great moment for public television. The future holds boundless potential. With Pat at the helm of PBS, with public broadcasters going digital, and with so much talent at each of the public television stations around the nation, public television is poised to produce great things.

My optimism for the future of public broadcasting is grounded in my belief that public broadcasting will succeed if it focuses on what it does best. You must remain true to your core mission -- to serve the public with noncommercial, educational programming that captures the imagination of audiences, that enlightens as it entertains, that inspires as it informs.

This is your birthright.

Public broadcasting has been successful and will continue to be successful when it clearly differentiates itself from commercial media. In today's media cacophony -- where seven broadcast networks, hundreds of cable and DBS networks, terrestrial radio, soon-to-launch satellite radio, and the Internet all compete for audiences -- public broadcasting must distinguish itself from the crowd.

As Pat has said, public broadcasting plays a unique role in our society. Your goal is not to make money or sell products through advertising, but rather to serve the public. You are differentiated by your mission: to serve citizens, not aggregate them in order to sell them products.

At its most basic level, public television is different because it does not operate for profit. That does not mean you cannot be aggressive about serving your audience, however. Motivated by a desire to educate or inspire, driven by a wish to capture the minds as well as the hearts of your viewers, public broadcasters can and should take risks, be provocative, and accept challenges. And you do.

I believe in the unique place public television holds in the media landscape. That is why, when the Commission held a day-long hearing on the public interest obligations of broadcasters, I insisted that public broadcasting be front and center at the witness table. By including PBS in our hearing, I wanted to make sure that the public recognized the vital contributions that public broadcasting makes every day to our nation's well being. And what are they?

Children's educational programming. Not three hours per week, but eleven hours of non-violent, non-commercial curriculum-based programming for kids every day! No need for excessive violence or gratuitous sex here. Coverage of community issues? No problem! Election coverage? Plenty of it!

This is your birthright -- to serve the public.

There are several ways in which public broadcasting delivers on its unique role: (1) with educational programming; (2) with local programming; and (3) with creative use of its digital spectrum. Let me highlight briefly each of these ways.

Public Broadcasting Differentiates Itself Through Educational Programming

At our recent hearing, the Commission focused on how well broadcasters are meeting their obligation to serve children.

I want to thank Patricia Nugent, Senior Director of Children's Programming at PBS. She represented you with skill and grace, describing the many innovative and successful children's programs on PBS, such as *Dragon Tales* and *Between the Lions*, funded with assistance from the Department of Education's "Ready to Learn" program.

She described the new PBS KIDS all digital, all educational channel. She detailed the innovative work PBS is doing on the Internet, with pbskids.org, a website free of banner advertising. And she previewed some of the projects PBS has in the pipeline, including a new series targeted to older children; interactive educational programs to capitalize on the convergence of television and the Internet; and partnerships with cable networks to develop new enhanced programming.

And as I noted before, public broadcasting delivers not just three hours *per week* of educational programming for children, but rather, eleven curriculum-based hours *per day*.

Public Broadcasting Differentiates Itself Through Localism

The unique place that public broadcasting occupies in the media landscape is enhanced by the localism you bring to the nation through your 347 member stations. I applaud the work of your PBS Executive Vice President for Member Services, Wayne Godwin, for bringing together all your member stations.

You serve a wide audience. Almost 100 million people in 55 million households watch public TV each week. The member stations cover 99% of the American population.

This vast national audience is served by local stations offering community-oriented programming, in-depth local political coverage, and educational programming in conjunction with state universities.

And these stations serve members. By close association with your membership, you insure that your programming remains vital to your community. Few, if any, commercial stations have such direct and sustained contact with the public they serve.

Indeed, public television stations are uniquely positioned to address the digital divide in their communities by bringing enhanced digital services to viewers and to schools.

As the number of national programmers proliferates in the commercial world, public broadcasters occupy a valuable space in the local programming niche. Again, this is a part of your birthright. It is fundamental to who you are, and why you will succeed.

Public Broadcasting Differentiates Itself Through Use of the Digital Spectrum

My optimism for the future of public broadcasting also comes from the innovation, bold risk-taking, and vision that you already have shown in the digital realm, seizing the opportunity to turn a new technology into new opportunities.

Here, too, remaining true to your mission is key to your success. And here, too, is evidence that serving the public need not preclude taking risks and aggressively pursuing a vision.

PBS and public broadcasters have led the way in the transition to digital broadcasting through their example and their innovation.

Public broadcasters are way ahead of schedule in the DTV buildout. FCC rules do not require public broadcasters to be on the air with a digital signal until May, 2003. But rather than wait until the last minute to invest in digital, you seized the opportunity of a new and promising technology.

Today, there are 20 public television stations that have gone on the air with digital, including WETA here in Washington, KCET in Los Angeles, KQED in San Francisco, and KCTS in Seattle. The list also includes smaller market stations, such as WGBY in Springfield, Massachusetts and WLPB in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

PBS also is at the forefront of the broadcast industry in promoting digital television. PBS and Harris Corporation launched the DTV express in 1998 -- an 18-wheeler showcasing DTV technology, that toured the nation and informed legislators, broadcasters, and educators about the technology and promise of DTV.

PBS also aired the first national program to inform audiences about digital television called, "Digital TV—A Cringely Crash Course," out of Oregon Public Broadcasting.

While commercial broadcasters are still searching for a profitable business model for digital, you already are pursuing with gusto a viable educational model.

PBS and member station WETA, here in Washington, broke new ground by broadcasting the first enhanced television broadcast, "Frank Lloyd Wright." Using an Interactive Companion delivered over the digital bitstream, a viewer could take an interactive tour of Fallingwater or view blueprints of Wright's buildings.

Last year, PBS and Intel announced the first enhanced DTV program for children, Zoboomafoo, a wildlife series for preschoolers. The digital broadcast stream included companion data transmitted to state-of-the-art Intel-equipped personal computers capable of receiving digital signals.

And the use of multiple digital broadcast streams to provide an educational programming channel for children and local news and public affairs, once again demonstrates your ability to embrace the versatility of this new medium.

So, just as public broadcasting over the years has been the wellspring of new programming genres, such as the historical documentary, it is proving to be the wellspring of new applications for the digital bitstream in the future.

A Commercial Interruption

And now for a commercial interruption.

As a policymaker, I ardently believe that if you steadfastly deliver on your promise, then Congress and those of us at the Federal Communications Commission and in other policy-making bodies have an obligation to do everything in *our* power to give you the tools to accomplish your mission. I am committed to do just that.

But it is not easy for you to stay focused when your viewers are bombarded with so many different forms of new media. Or when you are tempted to expand commercial messages or lease out a substantial portion of your spectrum for non-educational purposes in exchange for money that could help pay for all of the good things that public television delivers.

Your birthright hangs in the balance.

Like the story of how Esau lost his birthright. You remember that story.

There once were two brothers, Esau and Jacob. As the first born male, Esau had a birthright to inherit the family's property. One day, he came home, hungry and tired, and saw Jacob making some lentil soup. The soup looked and smelled so good that the hungry Esau decided he just had to have some. So he asked Jacob for some soup. "Sure," said Jacob, "but only if you give me your birthright." Esau thought about it for a minute. It would be a long time before he could inherit the family fortune. But the soup was right there, hot and ready to eat, and Esau was starving. "OK," he said, "take the birthright. I hunger for that bowl of soup!"

As public broadcasters, you hunger for new revenue streams to enable you to do all of the wonderful – but expensive – things we expect of you in serving the public. You especially need funds to convert to digital broadcasting. That is understandable.

But if this parable has any meaning for us today, it is that we must be careful *not* to trade in our birthright for short-term gains.

Public broadcasting has a precious birthright – to serve the public with free, over the air educational, noncommercial, programming. But if you allow commercialism to permeate public broadcasting, the picture becomes fuzzy. Your mission is clouded. And your support in your community and in Washington wanes.

Public broadcasting is at a fork in the road. It can elect to be a beacon of stimulating, thought-provoking, educational and entertaining programming for the whole family. Or it can try to imitate its commercial counterparts and lose its way.

Conclusion: Just Remember . . .

I'd like to close by celebrating the contributions of another noble lady, whose heart and soul were dedicated to public broadcasting and who left us far too young. Diane Blair, former chair of CPB, was deeply committed to your mission. She understood the potential of digital television to catapult public broadcasting to the head of the class. She shared your dreams and acted upon them every day. Even at the end, she saved her remaining energy to participate by conference call in a CPB meeting.

At her memorial service, President Clinton recalled Diane's final words to them as he and Hillary were leaving her home. She said, "Before I go, I want to tell you -- remember." "Remember what?" asked Hillary. Answered Diane with a smile, "Just remember!"

Those parting words encapsulate my message to you:

When you are tempted to wander from your non-profit, educational roots – *just remember*.

When you feel great frustration in finding the funding for your digital conversion – *just remember*.

When you feel pressure to deliver numbers instead of impact – *just remember*.

Just remember – what public broadcasting is capable of being and capable of delivering to our Nation – if only we rededicate ourselves to its mission.

Just remember!

Thank you.