

**ENGAGEMENT AND CONTROVERSY
STANDARDS AND PRACTICES
FOR WISCONSIN PUBLIC RADIO & TELEVISION
June 15, 2004**

Overview

In his April 6, 2004 guest column (*Wisconsin State Journal*), UW Extension Chancellor Kevin Reilly wrote:

“In Wisconsin, we believe that our public university system exists to serve all 5.3 million residents, not just the 160,000 enrolled students. The *Wisconsin State Journal*’s March 22 story describes how UW-Extension faculty and staff bring objective, research-based information to bear on controversial issues, in ways that help a broad public make informed decisions. Some folks don’t like us to do that, especially if it gets in the way of their private agendas. Nevertheless, that’s the job of the extension arm of any committed public university — to disseminate widely the most accurate information and analysis, without fear or favor, for use by residents whose taxes support the institution.”

Wisconsin Public Radio and Television are perhaps UW-Extension’s most public manifestations of this mission, serving radio and television audiences throughout the entire state. Licensed to both the University of Wisconsin (UW) Board of Regents and the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board (ECB), these broadcast media organizations serve in the public interest at the direction of these boards and in accordance with FCC regulations and accepted journalistic practices.

Programming decisions for WPR and WPT are made in accordance with guidelines developed by the ECB, the UW, National Public Radio, PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Every program exists within the overall context of current local, national and international events and the evolving interests and needs of the communities we serve. The essential criterion for any such program is that it be of value to the people of Wisconsin. Of course, only a rare program will be valuable to all people, so each programming decision is a professional judgment reflecting the interaction of many factors.

In producing and selecting programs, both WPR and WPT adhere strictly to the journalistic standards for editorial integrity developed over the years in concert with the Corporation for Public Broadcast, National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System. At the heart of these standards lies a fundamental commitment to “objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature.” This mandate from the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 informs the journalistic standards and practices that WPR and WPT bring to bear on decisions to produce and broadcast programs on controversial matters of public importance.

Wisconsin Public Television

Wisconsin Public Television adheres to established funding and editorial policies of the ECB and the UW. Controversy has no intrinsic value, and we neither seek out nor avoid it. However, we recognize that it is not possible to engage in discussion of important issues without encountering or creating controversy. We do not pursue any social or political agenda. We do not program nor provide outreach services for the loudest, largest, or best organized interests, nor any special interest group. Where there are issues of public policy we try to provide programming and services, which help people, gain the deepest possible understanding of issues, and the most effective ways for them to engage in personal development and community life. Inevitably, there will be some programming and activities which some may find objectionable.

Among other considerations, such as the day and time of the broadcast, we ask these questions:

- Is the issue important?
- Does the program provide important information or insight?
- Is the program or the information available elsewhere?
- Is the program good television?
- Is it a responsible representation of that opinion or insight?
- Can we provide an appropriate context?
- Is there an appropriate and valuable outreach component?

Finding common ground and recognizing the balance between differing values is essential to a democracy. Public broadcasting both participates in and reflects that process, and it happens every day, in every program decision we make. There are sometimes competing values between free expression and community standards; between formal and informal education; the needs of children and adults; between presenting diverse views and voices and the application of consistent and fair standards in programming choices. Ultimately, a decision is made, and a program either is or is not created or broadcast. Any given viewer may see only one or two shows, and that experience defines their understanding of Wisconsin Public Television. Our responsibility is to see that each decision is connected not just to that single viewer, but also to all of our viewers, and to every other programming decision we make.

There are few “right answers”; there is only informed judgment. In the end, the value of public broadcasting is best viewed through a long lens, over time, and not just in the high contrast close-up of each program, each day, each issue or crisis.

Regarding outreach activities, we recognize the critical importance of maintaining the public trust, as providers of credible, useful information that helps people engage with their communities, and improve their lives. Most outreach activities will be widely perceived as beneficial, for example, **FIRST BOOK** and **READY TO LEARN**. On occasion, outreach activities deal with issues that are closely tied to public policy—such as health care or voter awareness—and in these cases, we apply the same standards as to broadcast: fairness, balance, and objectivity. Unlike broadcast, however, the goal of outreach is often to provide opportunity and resources for people to take action. For example, when we provide health information, people are not directed to specific providers.

We believe that people of Wisconsin are responsible, curious and intelligent, and do not wish to be shielded from important and sometimes provocative ideas and issues. In fact, it's inherent in the mission of Wisconsin Public Television, and in that of the UW, that we will present controversial issues. We subscribe to the philosophy and practice of fairness in relation to controversial issues. We do not believe that every point of every program must be met —"balanced"—by a counterpoint; but we will ensure that across the sweep of our programs, there is a diversity and balance of views and that neither action nor point of view is promoted. In the case of a strongly held opinion or viewpoint, we will do our best to ensure that an appropriate context is created, which will most often include balancing ideas and views.

There are increasingly diverse and sometimes strident voices clamoring to be heard across the country and across Wisconsin, and our response must be to hold firmly and honestly our responsibility and public trust. As the world becomes ever more fragmented, the issues ever more complex, and the stakeholders ever more entrenched, public broadcasting must be an important public forum, a source of diverse views. Some programming decisions will never be easy, because we are dealing with powerful issues, sometimes life and death issues. We believe that Wisconsin Public Television has an increasingly important role to play in helping illuminate this era of change.

Wisconsin Public Radio

Wisconsin Public Radio produces two complementary 24-hour broadcast services tailored to the listening preferences of its stations' audiences: the NPR News and Classical Music Network and the Ideas Network. Each network in this statewide system of 27 stations provides Wisconsin residents with local, state, national and international programs that keep them informed on current matters of public importance.

The *Ideas Network of Wisconsin Public Radio* (with a weekly cumulative audience of 399,600 listeners and an average quarter hour audience of 25,300¹) engages state residents in discussion and analysis of current issues by producing over 40 hours of live call-in programs each week. These statewide broadcasts, featuring in-depth discussions with newsmakers, lawmakers, authors, experts, public officials and university faculty, provide an open forum for Wisconsin citizens to participate in live discussion and debate on controversial matters affecting their daily lives. In addition, the Ideas Network broadcasts 30 hours of national call-in programs each week in which Wisconsin citizens have the opportunity to enter the national conversation on these and other issues of importance to them and their communities.

The WPR News Department produces a daily statewide news service that is heard on all of WPR's 27 stations. The WPR News Staff keeps Wisconsin citizens informed about current and breaking news of state and local interest with regional coverage originated by reporters staffing bureaus at Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, Milwaukee, Superior and Wausau, as well as in Madison. These regional broadcast facilities also produce weekly programs of interest to audiences in their areas. During 2001, the Wisconsin Associated Press named WPR's news department as the "Outstanding News Operation" among its member agencies. The 10 stations of Wisconsin Public Radio's *NPR News and Classical Musical Network* also feature more than 40 hours of national news magazine and public affairs programming from National Public Radio (NPR) in Washington, D.C., including "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered".

Additionally, through webcast audio streaming, the program services of both WPR networks reach listeners across the country and even internationally. Creative partnerships enable Wisconsin Public Radio to strengthen its promotion and outreach strategies while building new audiences. For example, WPR has collaborated with Wisconsin Public Television to develop a website featuring text, audio and video of election information and voting tabulations. The two WPR broadcasting networks continue their partnership in the "We the People" civic journalism project, with WPR producing series on such topics as the state Supreme Court election. Other outreach projects have included programs and initiatives on health issues for the elderly and baby boomers and, most recently, a *Preserving Cultures* series.

¹ Source: Arbitron-Radio Research Consortium, Inc. Primary Signal Area Report (PSA) AQH & Cume 12+, Mon-Sun, 6AM-12M, Spring 2003.

In providing news, issues and advice, and call-in talk programming on important and controversial public policy matters, WPR has consistently adopted and followed the journalistic standards for public broadcasters as framed by NPR and the Public Radio News Directors professional organization, PRNDI.

Key NPR standards most germane to public engagement and controversy adopted by WPR are outlined below. The PRNDI Statement of Ethics is attached as a separate document.

Statement of Principles: NPR News Code of Ethics and Practice

Our coverage must be fair, unbiased, accurate, complete and honest. As journalists, we are expected to conduct ourselves in a manner that leaves no question about our independence and fairness. We must treat the people we cover and our listeners with respect.

1. **Fairness** means that we present all important views on a subject – and treat them even-handedly. This range of views may be encompassed in a single story on a controversial topic, or it may play out over a body of coverage or series of programs. But at all times the commitment to presenting all important views must be conscious and affirmative, and it must be timely if it is being accomplished over the course of more than one story.

2. **Unbiased** means that we separate our personal opinions – such as an individual's religious beliefs or political ideology – from the subjects we are covering. We do not approach any coverage with overt or hidden agendas.

3. **Accuracy** means that each day we make rigorous efforts at all levels of the newsgathering and programming process to ensure our facts are not only right but also presented in the correct context. We make every possible effort to ensure commentaries are correct in assertions of fact. We attempt to verify what our sources and the officials we interview tell us when the material involved is argumentative or capable of different interpretations. We are skeptical of all facts gathered and report them only when we are reasonably satisfied of their accuracy. We guard against errors of omission that cause a story to misinform our listeners by failing to be complete. We make sure that our language accurately describes the facts and does not imply a fact we have not confirmed.

4. **Honesty** means we do not deceive the people or institutions we cover about our identity or intentions, and we do not deceive our listeners. We do not deceive our listeners by presenting the work of others as our own (plagiarism), by cutting interviews in ways that distort their meaning, or by manipulating audio in a way that distorts its meaning, how it was obtained or when it was obtained. The same applies to photographs used on NPR Online. Honesty means owning up publicly and quickly to mistakes we make on air.

5. Treating the people we cover and our listeners with **respect** means we recognize the diversity of the country and world on which we report, and the diversity of interests, attitudes and experiences of our audience. We approach subjects in an open-minded, sensitive and civil way

Finally, as a licensee of the Board of Regents and a unit of UW-Extension's division of Broadcast and Media Innovations, WPR has adopted a rigorous set of internal standards to insure the integrity and transparency of its editorial and program decision-making process with regard to UW administration and the other partners in the WPR enterprise, including the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board and the Wisconsin Public Radio Association. This document, *WPR Program Decision Making Process*, authored by WPR Director, Greg Schnirring, is also attached.

Ultimately, however, the responsibility for making editorial decisions in public broadcasting rests with its practicing journalists who are obliged to resist outside pressure from sponsoring institutions, funders, social or political interest groups or foundations. Quoting from the recently updated CPB/NPR *Ethics Guide for Public Radio Journalism* on the core issue of editorial independence:

Most public radio stations are licensed to colleges and universities. While most such licensees respect principles of editorial independence and integrity, journalistic values and institutional interests sometimes conflict. In these instances the needs of the listener should prevail. Journalists can help reduce these conflicts by keeping their licensees informed of stories that may affect them.

To provide listeners with the information they need to make informed choices in our democracy, we cannot be beholden to government, business underwriters or foundations, although we appreciate and acknowledge their important and sustaining contributions. However, keeping faith with

our listeners requires us to maintain our editorial independence, and we must be alert to attempts to compromise our standards.

Wisconsin Public Radio is the second-largest public radio network in America but, arguably, second to none in providing its listeners with locally produced programming that deals with controversial issues of public importance and allows them to join in live discussion and debate with their elected representatives, opinion leaders, experts, scholars and public officials. Maintaining and constantly striving to improve this service, we believe, comports with the core mission of UW-Extension and the University of Wisconsin System: "... that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found".

**WISCONSIN PUBLIC RADIO
PROGRAM DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

**Greg Schnirring
Director of Radio**

June 17, 2002

INTRODUCTION

Wisconsin Public Radio is a service of the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board and the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin. These two organizations are responsible for the programming services provided on the radio stations to which they have been granted licenses by the Federal Communications Commission. This responsibility is administered for the licensees by the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board and the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Extension. The Director of Wisconsin Public Radio, who reports to the Executive Director on the ECB/WPR side of the WPR Partnership and the Director of Broadcasting and Media Innovation (BAMI) on the UWEX/WPR side of the WPR Partnership, carries out the day-to-day operation of these stations. The procedures outlined below describe the internal processes used to develop a schedule of programming services for Wisconsin Public Radio.

THE PROGRAM PLANNING TEAM

The Program Planning Team (PPT) is responsible for continually monitoring performance of the WPR program service, evaluating needs, and developing proposals for improvement.

The team includes the Ideas Network Program Director, the Music Director, the News Director and a Regional Manager. Team members are provided with information packets compiled by appropriate staff to be used as background in making recommendations.

DECISION MAKING CRITERIA

Wisconsin Public Radio listenership is monitored and evaluated by recognized research, such as Arbitron and AudiGraphics surveys, as well as periodic listener and member surveys including strategic surveys of WPR's major communities.

The ability of any particular program to serve a significant audience, as measured by research, will be an important criteria for determining whether the program should continue, be canceled or moved.

Program economics, including fiscal, technological and staff resources will be considered in making program decisions.

All Wisconsin Public Radio programming decisions shall be in accordance with policies set forth by the Educational Communications Board (ECB) and the University of Wisconsin-Extension (UWEX) as outlined in the Radio and TV Program Policies document. These documents detail overall Programming Philosophy (ECB#305 & UWEX #2); Planning, Programming and Scheduling Guidelines (ECB #306 & UWEX #3); and reference the overall formats of the WPR statewide networks (ECB #313 & UWEX #9).

These policies state (in part) that professional staff shall consider the following criteria in the selection and scheduling of radio programming.

DECISION MAKING CRITERIA (Con't)

- Relationship of programs to strategic directions
- Internal precedent at Wisconsin Public Radio
- External precedent; that is the experience of other public broadcasters who have faced similar decisions.
- Ability to manage programs within the constraints posed by scheduling, budget, and technical limitations.
- The policies specify that programming decisions shall not be made solely for the purpose of gaining support, economic or otherwise, of any person or group.

As an assist in making programming and scheduling decisions, the policies direct programming staff to ascertain audience program preferences and community needs at regularly-scheduled times through the following means:

- Periodic surveys and focus groups
- Analysis of mail and telephone calls received
- Measures of actual listening patterns

CONSULTATION

Upon reaching consensus on tentative proposals, the Program Planning Team, the Director of Radio and the appropriate management staff will inform and/or consult with:

- Affected Staff
- The WPR Communications Team
- Key Administrators and Staff of UWEX and the ECB
- The Wisconsin Public Radio Association Board of Directors

Each of these individuals or groups will receive background materials that informed the tentative proposals.

A designated public contact person will develop message points and a one-page statement to respond to possible inquiries before a finalized proposal is released to the public. In such an instance, the contact person should accurately inform the inquirer/s that no final decision has been made regarding the program change under consideration.

PUBLIC INPUT

The WPRA Board consists of ten members elected by the 40,000 contributors to Wisconsin Public Radio and eight additional members appointed by the ten elected members to assure a diversity of interests and talents. The ten elected members come from five regional districts to assure representation from throughout the state. Five members are elected every two years to four-year terms.

PUBLIC INPUT (CON'T)

The WPR Board of Directors committee of the whole has been designated the official advisory group for programming consultation. The WPR Board meets at least three times per year in the Fall, Winter, and Spring, and at other times as needed.

DECISIONS

After reviewing the feedback received during the consultation phase, the Director of Radio will make the final decision.

PROCEDURE REVIEW

At least 30 days prior to implementation of program changes, the Director of Radio will inform the UWEX Director of Broadcasting and Media Innovations, the UWEX Chancellor, and the ECB Executive Director of the decision. This notification will include a description of the decision criteria, policies, protocols, inquiries and issues raised during the review process.

NOTIFICATION

The Director of Radio will alert other key administrators and staff in writing that a decision has been made. They will be reminded of the decision criteria, process and protocol and informed of any inquiries or issues raised by the decisions.

The Appropriate PPT team member, in consultation with the WPR Community Relations Director and other appropriate staff, will establish the timetable for change and develop promotion. He or she will prepare and release message points, timetable, and staff contact person(s) to staff via appropriate communication mechanisms such as e-mail, memoranda, and staff meetings. Message points should explain:

- Why a change is needed
- The benefits of the change to the listener
- How lost programming is justified through cost/benefit analysis

WPR will develop, and coordinate, written information about the decision making process through a primary contact person for the purpose of providing a coordinated and accurate message and to respond to inquiries in a timely manner. As necessary, this individual will route requests for interviews to the Director of Radio or her/his designee. Legislator inquiries will be directed to the Special Assistant to the Chancellor on the UWEX side of the Partnership and the Executive Director on the ECB side.

The primary WPR contact person will brief those who will answer listener questions, including Regional Managers and Audience Services staff. He or she will issue a factual news release based on the message points, and will track media inquiries and coverage. The WPR Director or her/his designee will conduct a call-in show on the program change(s). Staff throughout the state will promote the change through regional guides, speeches, and media contacts.

IMPLEMENTATION

The appropriate PPT staff will work with the Operations Manager and the Traffic Director to update logs, staff schedules and program grids, and send a reminder to staff. The appropriate PPT member and the Community Relations Director will oversee the production and scheduling of on-air promotion of the change.

Promotion staff will develop feature releases, invite media interviews of hosts, pass along information to members through newsletters and provide new grids to the WPR webmaster in addition to developing other outside promotion possibilities. All of this information will include the date of implementation

FOLLOWING IMPLEMENTATION

Staff will continue to promote on-air, periodically accentuate the change through releases or other promotion, and track feedback from quantitative measures such as Arbitron ratings and through non scientific methods such as letter and phone call logs.