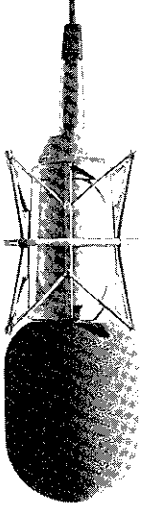
X-2

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO



November 20, 1984

George Gerbner
Professor of Communications and Dean
The Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania
3620 Walnut Street C5
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-3858

Dear Dean Gerbner,

I'm looking forward to hearing more about the outcome of our October conference. Each day in the office reinforces in me the need for information for our audience on science and technology. Yet there are too few qualified reporters working in the field and too few staff positions with national news organizations to attract newcomers.

As you requested, I've enclosed a copy of my remarks from the conference. I've also enclosed my travel expenses and receipts.

Thank you again for an enlightening session at the Annenberg School. And my thanks to the Annenberg's for making it possible and for participating.

My best,

Anne Gudenkauf
Science Editor/Producer

cc:file

2025 M Street NW Washington DC 20036 Telephone 202 822-2000

The Annenberg School of Communications

Conference on

SCIENCE AND THE MEDIA: IMAGES, INFORMATION, EDUCATION

October 21 - 23, 1984

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Presentation By

Anne Gudenkauf
Science Editor/Producer

National Public Radio

Washington, D.C.

In 1978 National Public Radio began discussions with the National Science Foundation about supporting science programming on public radio. At first our intention was to produce a weekly science radio program, but that concept gave way to the idea of providing increased support for science reporting on our daily news programs. Our thought was simple: we wanted to reach the greatest number of people with science news and feature reporting. In a sense we opted not to consider science as a special area of interest but instead to be true to our own trademark to consider all things. It turned out to be a good idea.

The financial support we have received from the NSF, Hewlett Packard and others has made a difference. Right now nearly twenty percent of All Things Considered and Morning Edition -- news reports, interviews, feature pieces -- talk about science, the environment, technology and related public policy.

But we don't usually assess our work with such numbers. It's perhaps as important to note that, in our executive editorial meeting each morning, there are five "source" editors present. They represent reporters covering politics, government, domestic news, foreign news and, notably, science. That meeting is crucial because we share ideas and now more of the ideas are about science. Where the editors might have passed over, say, a story about the development of a vaccine for infant diarrhea, now they take note. I'm able to explain what the vaccine could mean to millions of children in developing countries. And I'm able to point out that, for those children to benefit, we'll need more than just the vaccine. Those countries will probably need refrigerators to store it, people to give it, and money to buy it. The story becomes meaningful and understandable. Those are key words in journalism.

But if the editorial meeting decides that we're to have time on the air for the story, we still have a job ahead of us. We have to make the story meaningful and understandable for our audience too and reporting the story on radio is especially difficult at times. We have no pictures, our listeners can't back up and reread a complicated paragraph and we must use the voices of scientists in our pieces, scientists who don't always speak without using technical jargon.

If it's our goal to capture the attention of people with information about science and technology, science journalists could use some help. We have to have more money and more stable funding. Young science journalists won't stay in the field if there isn't a steady pool of jobs. Financial support is growing. It seems that the more we do on the air, the greater the recognition of the value of the work. But, while we can work hard to raise funds, that's not enough.

A lot of things that are crucial are out of our hands. We need a larger pool of journalists with strong science educations. We will always live in a world where reporters, even those specializing in science, must work in the same week on stories about particle physics, immunology and paleontology and no one can be expert in all fields. But reporters in science must have a clear sense of at least how science functions. We also need more continuing education for working science journalists, more opportunities for science fellowships, for example. And we need scientists to recognize the need to communicate clearly. Science journalists can never turn over their responsibility to explain their stories themselves (then we wouldn't be journalists) but articulate scientists can convey their ideas so that we are more accurate, more complete and more interesting. Scientists must also find that working with the press won't hamper their research or standing among their peers. Right now it can. I'm advocating science in journalism schools, writing and literature in scientific curricula, and challenging fellowships for reporters and editors.

People are interested in science. One of the first special projects we took on following our NSF grant in 1979 was a story about the then growing support for what was called scientific creationism in school science classes. Ira Flatow and I travelled to Boston, Atlanta, San Diego and Tampa to talk with people involved in the movement and with scientists who opposed it. After several late nights in our studios, we had two twenty minute reports ready to air, reports that allowed the people involved to tell their own stories. In fact, Ira said very little in those forty minutes on air. Reaction to the reports was interesting. Almost everyone who'd been involved with the pieces was unhappy that the other side had been given too much time or too generous a treatment. People within NPR kept arguing about the issue long after the pieces had aired and our Public Information Department called to complain that they hadn't been warned that they would receive such a flood of calls and mail. Everyone was agitated and some even angry... and that made us very happy.

No one complained when we took on less emotion-ladened science stories than creationism. Cosmology, genetic engineering, ethnobotony, artificial intelligence -- all of them are well received...when we do them well. We even snuck in a little background piece on retroviruses and not too many people squirmed. We can capture the attention of people listening to a general news program, make them want to listen to science and learn something about it. But we have to tell the story well. For us to do that, scientists and reporters have to understand each other better. We have to learn to understand each other's language, to communicate.

It's not just NPR or PBS, the world of public broadcasting, that has an eager science audience. I've heard talk about the unusual and highly-educated public broadcasting audience. They'll listen to and watch what most Americans won't. Well, my mail isn't from PHD's. We try to stretch imagination, not comprehension. My bell weather is Susan Stamberg who told me that if she understands, anyone will.