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From Statement to Purpose: An Interview with Bill Siemering

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Abstract

This article is an interview between RadioDoc Review Editor Neil Verma and Bill Siemering, founding Director of Programming at National Public Radio and lifelong proponent of public radio. Siemering and Verma discuss Siemering's role at the founding of NPR, his early career in Wisconsin, WHYY Philadelphia, WBFO and KCCM, as well as his enduring work in community radio development in Africa.

Keywords

Bill Siemering, NPR, Public Radio, Democracy, Friendship, Radio, American Archive of Public Broadcasting, Fresh Air, All Things Considered, WBFO, KCCM, Developing Radio Partners

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From Statement to Purpose: An Interview with Bill Siemering

By Bill Siemering and Neil Verma

The following is an edited transcript of an interview from the “[Presenting the Past](#)” series on the Aca-media podcast, sponsored by the American Archive of Public Broadcasting (AAPB). We are grateful to Ryn Marchese, Casey Davis, Bill Kirkpatrick and especially to Christine Becker, host of Aca-Media, for introducing the series and for allowing publication of the transcript.

Neil Verma

In order to welcome Bill Siemering, let me start by introducing him a little. Bill Siemering began his career in radio working his way through the University of Wisconsin at the University station and their statewide FM network many decades ago. As a member of the Founding Board of Directors of National Public Radio, he was asked to write the original Statement of Purpose for NPR, and he also was in charge of implementing that statement as the first Director of Programming. With staff, he developed *All Things Considered*. While he was the manager of WHYY in Philadelphia, he developed a show many of you will know: *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, and it went from a local to a national program, where it is today. He was also Manager of Public Radio Stations WBFO, SUNY Buffalo, and KCCM in Moorhead, Minnesota, and was Executive Producer of the documentary series *Sound Print*. He began working overseas in 1993 as a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Since then, he's worked for the Open Society Foundation for about 10 years. That took him to Eastern Europe, Southern Africa, and Mongolia. In 2004, he started Developing Radio Partners to enrich the programming of community radio stations in Africa. Bill Siemering is presently a Senior Fellow at the Wyncote Foundation in Philadelphia.

Bill Siemering

Nice to be here with you, Neil.

NV

To start out I think the way many of our listeners will know of your work will really focus on the first mission statement, National Public Radio Purposes, which was established in 1967 by the Public Broadcasting Act, and began in 1971. This year, we're celebrating the first half century of programming and NPR, quite a landmark. I thought it would be interesting to start with the context of that statement. A lot of people now have lived their whole lives with NPR always in the background, and so it's hard to think of a time before that was the case. Could you tell us a little bit about the Statement and what NPR was responding to in the late 60s?

BS

Well with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with it becoming not just ‘educational’ radio, but ‘public’ radio, to me, that meant inclusion. It meant everybody. And so when I was thinking about writing this statement, I thought a lot about how to begin. It's not serving commercial interests. It's not serving institutional interests. So I really came up to the conclusion that it was serving the individual. And because it was in the 60s, I felt a lot of emphasis on diversity and the importance of celebrating diversity. So, some have said that they feel this is even more relevant now than when I wrote it 52 years ago. Anyway, I'll read this and then we could talk some more about it, okay?

NV

Sounds great.

BS

So it said:

National Public Radio will serve the individual: it will promote personal growth; it will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness.

National Public Radio, through live interconnection and other distribution systems, will be the primary national non-commercial program service. Public radio stations will be a source for programming input as well as program dissemination. The potentials of live interconnection will be exploited, the art and the enjoyment of the sound medium will be advanced.

In its cultural mode, National Public Radio will preserve and transmit the cultural past, will encourage and broadcast the work of contemporary artists and provide listeners with an aural esthetic experience which enriches and gives meaning to the human spirit.

In its journalistic mode, National Public Radio will actively explore, investigate and interpret issues of national and international import. The programs will enable the individual to better understand himself, his government, his institutions and his natural and social environment so he can intelligently participate in effecting the process of change.

The total service should be trustworthy, enhance intellectual development, expand knowledge, deepen aural esthetic enjoyment, increase the pleasure of living in a pluralistic society and result in a service to listeners which makes them more responsive,

informed human beings and intelligent responsible citizens of their communities and the world.

This was aspirational, as well as practical, I thought, and the idea that people need to be informed is a fundamental for us to survive as a democracy. We have to have intelligent citizens, I might say that now one of the dangers of our country's democracy is so much public ignorance in our society. Now, some people might argue that well, journalistic enterprise shouldn't be that kind of thing. But I was believing that this is more than just a passive transmitter of the news of the day, that it has a larger mission than that.

NV

The kind of individual you describe is someone who's very much participating, understanding, responding, constructing – it's a much more 'active' idea of a listener than maybe many people at the time would have thought of, when it comes to the audience out there for large national programming. It's striking that it's not just 'the individual' you're trying to reach, but to encourage a kind of individual who might be more beneficial for representative democracy.

BS

Yes, right.

NV

When I read this to students, one of the things they find surprising is the premium you place on feeling, and the language of affect that you can see throughout this document. Words like joy, aesthetics, enrichment, spirit. It leads me to want to ask you what did you want NPR to *feel* like?

BS

I wanted it to feel alive. Radio is a very intimate medium. So I want the listeners to feel they had a friend, an advocate for them, someone who's helping them participate in democracy. I know that sounds kind of lofty, but going back to the importance of accurate information for democracy, that was really important because the actions of the individual is the only way that things happen.

NV

Maybe we can step a little bit backwards from this moment in the late 60s, early 70s, and talk a little bit more about your own personal history and growing up in Wisconsin, a state with deep history in educational broadcasting. Some of the first regular broadcasts in terms of point to mass distribution came from the University of Wisconsin. I've read that you literally grew up in the shadow of a transmitter tower in Lake Forest, Wisconsin. You've written that you've listened to WHA FM during lunch breaks as a teenager, working bailing hay in the fields, which is quite an

image. I think maybe it's a good time to play a little bit of tape of what early WHA sounded like and those kinds of programs you might have heard back in those early days.

[Excerpt from the first day of WHA FM broadcasting, March 30, 1947]

First Speaker

Look at the label carefully and read the name FM radio. Something new under the sun and stars. FM radio, clear as a bell. Hey, free from static. FM—the radio, the future, here now, today.

Listener

I still don't understand.

Second Speaker

FM is a new method of radio wave propagation. Letters FM stand for frequency modulation. And in this type of broadcasting, the power of the transmitter remains constant. Whereas in conventional broadcasting the power of the transmitter varies.

Second Listener

What is he saying? I don't understand.

Second Speaker

That is amplitude modulated.

Third Listener

What the guy means is, they got radio fixed so you can hear it better.

First Speaker

You're right, my boy, they got it fixed. And the professor can tell how they did the big thing but for you and me man.

First Listener

What about me? What's all this to me?

First Speaker

To you and to all of us, FM means a new kind of radio, means you can sit down and tune the program in, comes sweet and true, the music comes clear. You'd think the violin were there, playing in your room. It's easy on the ears. Fresh and clean. The words get through, no static cuts in to interrupt the speaker. FM radio means you're going to listen comfortably. That's good.

First Listener

Oh mighty good. But tell me do I have to get a new radio set?

Third Listener

Oh, sure, lady, who wants to be old fashioned? Did you keep burning gas lights after Thomas Edison invented the electric ones?

NV

The style of this program seems a little over the top to us now, but it was also quite common in the 40s. I'm curious about how it sounds to you now.

BS

Hokey. You know a minute or two in, it really sounds like they were modeling it after "Our Town." I don't know why they made it so hokey, but it is kind of fun too in a way. Kids around, you know, 11 minutes in or so, there's this wonderful interplay, with H.B. McCarty and William Lighty.

NV

Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

BS

Yes. In Radio Hall, there's a huge mural of the beginning of radio. And one of the characters in there is William Lighty. And he was the first Program Director for what became WHA, and so he really set the tone and the values for this. It's very significant and he quotes University President Van Hise, who had said "I want the beneficent influence of the University to be felt in every home in the state." That single sentence is so important because it establishes the idea of the extension services. It was a land grant university. They had a commitment to extension to reaching all the farmers.

Christine Becker

And we can actually listen to this. So here is Professor William Lighty quoting from University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise, followed by program director Harold McCarty.

William Lighty

On this campus a light sentiment was expressed by President Charles R. Van Hise, when he declared I shall never risk content until the beneficent influences of the University of Wisconsin is made available in every home in the state. That spirit gave inspiration and purpose to radio broadcasting from this campus and supported our efforts through the years. The event we celebrate today brings us closer to a realization of the Van Hise

ideal, lifelong learning and the promotion of universal enlightenment and understanding. This is indeed an important event in the happenings of our new world from here.

H.D. McCarty

Yes, and we're mighty glad you're here to celebrate with us today, Professor Lighty. You remember back in 1929, when I first saw you, the station was on the air only an hour and a half a day then, when it gave service to the farmers and the homemakers, and it was good service. They've come to count on it. Moreover there was a university radio committee to vote under the Van Hise ideal and eager to work at it.

BS

So Lighty had been a social worker in St. Louis and he's brought up to the university to run the extension service. One day he and his teenage sons were walking along the campus, and they saw this light and they heard noise coming from Sterling Hall where the experimental station 9XM was located. So he went down there, and he saw what they were doing. Immediately he thought this is great for adult education. He saw the potential of that right away. And so that's how this built up. And so from the very beginning of radio, it was thought of as an educational, not a commercial, enterprise, and that the government had a need or an obligation to inform its citizens. It's that simple. And so in 1921, they even had, I think, five live concerts, and professors gave lectures and some of them were a little reluctant. They didn't know about this thing radio, so he would read their scripts. Anyway, I just find him a very interesting character in all this and in fact that you know whenever the beginning of anything is, whether it was this or NPR, as I said, when we started NPR, I said this is a blank canvas and there'll be lots of strokes of paint on this. But the very first one, they're very important to set the tone and style. And so that's what I think William Lighty did for radio there.

NV

Maybe you should talk a little bit about your own entry into radio, the first brush strokes that you had on it and how you came to work at WHA.

BS

Well, growing up in Madison or outside of Madison meaning I did go to a rural country school, and we listened to the Wisconsin School of the Air. So from first grade on, I regarded radio as a source of information and imagination because I learned art, music, social studies, nature studies, all from radio. I thought, gee, every time the radio is turned on I learned something. And it's true today I listen to public radio. Every time I turn on the radio, I learn something new. So then I was active in speech and theater in high school. And my speech teacher was Ruth McCarty, and I didn't know quite what I was going to do in the summer after I graduated so she said, why don't you go down to the radio station, see if they have something for you. So I did. And that's how I first started working in radio as an engineer, board operator, stuff like that. And then I was on air,

reading news, and then I was an actor for their dramas and stuff. So that's my beginning. H.B. McCarty, the director, was husband of my speech teacher, and he and the program director Bill Harley would answer questions from listeners, and it was a nice way to interact with the audience that way. I kept that in mind when I came here to Philadelphia 43 years ago. I knew I was going to make a lot of changes to the station. I really believed in transparency, so they didn't think I was just being arbitrary or capricious. They would know why we're doing this. I called it "dialogue with listeners." And for the most part, they were positive things. I really believe, as I said in the beginning, we like to think of our listeners as friends and you know, so the transparency is part of that. We're accountable to the listeners.

NV

Let's move ahead to your time at WBFO in Buffalo. So one of the major themes of this period in your career was bringing indigenous and Black voices to radio. Can you tell us a little bit about the challenges with that, the opportunities that you felt were there? What were some broadcasts you're particularly proud of?

BS

So I went to Buffalo from Madison, where I grew up and of course went to school. So anyway, Buffalo's an Eastern city. It's very diverse. So I was exploring it, I was interested in it all. And so there were Native Americans, the Tuscarora is part of the Iroquois Confederacy near Niagara Falls. I did a series of programs with them, and they called it *Nation Within a Nation* and they were telling their story, their history and so on. Then in Buffalo itself, I was very much aware of the Black community, so I did kind of a porch-to-porch survey, walking through and talking to folks and finding how they were doing with media. And there were no people of color really on the radio except in commercial music programs. And there were no people of color in the news or television or even newspapers. So I realized that Caucasians didn't really understand what life was like for Black people. So I did a series called *To be Negro*, now in the 60s, that was the term for Black people. They said what, what living in America or Buffalo was like for a Black person. I realized that out of that, that they needed to amplify their voices further. So I got money from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to have a studio in the heart of the Black community and 27 hours a week originated from there. We had a live arts festival with live jazz, and we had people bring in their art and photography into the studio, poetry, that was in our program guide that we distributed. So this is a wonderful celebration of Black culture. And I also learned from working with students that you don't need a lot of experience to be on the radio. You know, if you have something to say, you can learn how to use a microphone and a tape recorder in half a day, you know, interviewing takes a little longer, and some of those things, but basically, it's so accessible, and that's one of the beauties of the medium. So I've always realized that curiosity and passion and something to say is more important than how to do a radio program and hiring. You can learn those other skills, but you can't learn compassion and curiosity. So you have to come in with that.

NV

Do you think part of your role was finding people who had that kind of compassion and curiosity? Was that something that was a priority for you?

BS

Yes, I think one of my gifts has been to hire good people, and then to manage as I would like to be managed. When I was at NPR, I got criticized for my hiring. So my colleagues, as directors, according to the history, said that they had disdain for me, when they saw who I was hiring because some of them didn't have radio experience.

NV

Oh, really? Could you say more about that?

BS

Yeah, it goes back one step further, I think. So when the network was created, I think a lot of station managers believed that we would sound like the big guys now. We had our own network, live network, for the first time. The programs had been distributed by tape before that. So they thought, now we'll be just like them. What they heard was not like that. There already was that network. That's why I hired people that had curiosity and were sharp or smart.

NV

Can we just maybe back up just a step and just tell us a little bit about how you became involved with the founding of NPR and it fell to you to write the Statement.

BS

When CPB set about to create NPR, as they were mandated to do, they had an election for the board members, based upon geography. I was in the Northeast, and so I was elected to be on the board. And I had been writing about, what we've been talking about really, is what is this going to be like? There's an article called "Public Radio, Some Essential Ingredients." And so actually some of that is turned up in the into the purposes statement, because I really thought that through quite a lot. And I think partly because I had written that and then when we were interviewing candidates for President, Carl Smith from Wisconsin, read part of the Purposes Statement, and he asked Don Quayle who were interviewing for President, he said, well, you think you can make this real? And he said, I will, if I can hire the man who wrote it. That's how I became the Director of Programming.

NV

Some of the first days of NPR were sort of famously chaotic, or exciting, I should say. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

BS

Well, we were starting something new. And there wasn't an NPR sound, and as I wrote in the purposes statement, we thought, you know, a lot of stations could contribute to it. And so it was really in beta form for a while, you know, we'd have a brilliant piece one day and in the same program, there'd be something that we were kind of ashamed to put on the air, but the shelf was empty. So we'd have to put that on.

NV

Now I really want to know what you were ashamed to put on the air.

BS

Well, they were things from the station that just were poorly produced, I thought. It was very painful for me, they were the most painful two years I've had in my professional life, I would say, because it made me very uncomfortable to hear stuff. And we were, as I say, trying to find our way and develop our sound. People came from very diverse backgrounds. The news director came from the *New York Times* Washington bureau, Cleve Matthews, because we didn't have the journalistic heft to hire you know for the journalistic part of it very well. And one guy came from the American Red Cross, and some came from stations and various different places, so it was a matter of all working together and you only get that by working together. So that's why it was sometimes rough. In September, the manager of WETA in Washington came and said, you know, if this isn't better soon, we're gonna take it off the air.

NV

This was September of the first year.

BS

Yeah, right. I mean we did get better. And we used three quarters of the *Christian Science Monitor* to help fill out the reporting staff. And the program that was broadcast in October of 1972 was the first Peabody we got for it. So we did turn it around.

CB

And what does that take? Does it just take experience and people learning from their mistakes?

BS

Exactly. And we were, we believed in what we were doing, and it was exciting to be doing something new like that. Everyone was really working hard to do their very best. I give the staff of course, all the credit. I mean, as I say, I was I think I hired good people, but they're the ones that made the music. I was kind of recruited for an orchestra. And I think maybe the Purposes

was, like playing middle C or something to tune the instrument. I'm given too much credit, I think, for that, 'cause they, they really did it.

NV

One of the things that is also true of this period of your career, both at NPR and WHYI is that you've had a hand in fostering the careers of a number of women, some folks that people know like Susan Stamberg, Terry Gross. At this time, there was a whole sort of pseudo-scientific discourse about how women's voices wouldn't be as authoritative or as important on air and it seems like you're one of the people who helped change people's minds about that. So can you tell about some of the ways in which you've helped kind of promote women's voices literally and figuratively?

BS

Well, going back to my work at WHA, the most popular program was Aline Hazard's *Homemakers Program*, and she's a very strong woman she had taught in China for several years, she lived there. She was very bright. And she was good on the air. So I had a model there. I never thought twice about a woman being on the air. I really wasn't thinking about gender when I was hiring people, they just happen to be the brightest, most capable that I hired. Susan Stamberg was a good example of this. I didn't need to look at her resume to know I wanted to hire her. I mean, she just exudes curiosity, and she has a very strong air presence. Not every reporter is good as a host. But I could hear her as a host. And she has this wonderful rich voice that shows tone color. She'd go from a serious piece to a light piece, and wonderful laugh. She wanted to just work part time because she had a young son at the time. She became the host in March 1, 1972. And that was the first woman to host a national news program. So that was groundbreaking.

NV

Was there a public response that you can remember from that time?

BS

There was a station response. I mean, some of the station managers said you know, Bill, with FM, women's voices, you know, you should look at the meter, those higher frequencies. And the other kind of thought was, well, the women can do the soft features, but they lacked the authority to do the hard news. It's a very sexist thing to say, but I ignored all that, of course.

NV

Can you tell us a little bit about *Fresh Air*?

BS

If you want the long story, the genesis of *Fresh Air* was in Buffalo. I started a program called *This is Radio*. And I meant it as "This is Radio, Damnit" and I was so damn tired of having people belittle radio. One time somebody asked what I did and told him, he said, Oh, just radio? Yes, damnit just radio! What do you mean, just radio?

NV

That reminds me, the famous story about the 1967 *Public Broadcasting Act* is that "radio" was kind of tacked on at the end, right? It was a Bill about television and then at the last moment they had to kind of paste in "and radio" too.

BS

Right. And then really, I mean, the TV people were kicking the sand in our face, you know, I mean, I was so fed up with that. Once there was some radio TV meeting or something before we got going with NPR. There were some TV guys saying, so Siemering, what do you think *New York Times* is gonna say about NPR? I said, we're not programming for the *New York Times*, being a smartass, you know. They thought we were an embarrassment and would take money away from them, which is really important, you know. It's a long story to say, this interview program then, because it was in the afternoon, and we had interviews and we had a lot of writers in Buffalo then, John Barth, Robert Creeley, Leslie Fiedler, so on. So we would interview them and others. Later when I left for NPR and the producers of that and Terry Gross moved to Philadelphia, they renamed it *Fresh Air*, and Terry was the host. So when I came to Philadelphia, it was a three-hour live program. And she was really hustling to, to get the interviews and so on. I got money for *Fresh Air* to get more staff like Danny Miller, he became the Executive Producer and so on. So they could do a good job. Frequently as the guest was going out, I'd thank them for coming. They'd say, well, that's the best interview I've ever had. Yeah. So that's why we evolved to getting it on national program. I was on the NPR board at the time. And there were a lot of stations that were getting restless about wanting *All Things Considered* to start at 4:00, the staff were saying it's hard enough to meet a five o'clock deadline, in the first place. I wanted it to start at 5:00 because I wanted to be the very first broadcast record of the day's news, because TV came on at 6:30, then PBS at 7:00 was kind of a background, I didn't want to cede anything to it.

NV

You wanted to scoop them.

BS

That's right. I wanted to radio to be that important, to be during the drive time home. And I respected how hard it was for the reporters to file earlier. I thought, why don't we run *Fresh Air* in there as a lead in, it's the like the "Arts" or the "Style" section of the *Washington Post* or something like that. It'd be arts and music and so on. Robert Siegel thought that would work. So that's why we designed *Fresh Air* with longer interviews at first, this was when we started it, so it

had the same pace as ATC as it went on. And we had, at the beginning, we had live-to-air Robert and Terry, and so she'd say about 50 minutes in, she'd say, "so Robert, what do you have on "ATC" tonight?" And he'd give the rundown. So it was a seamless program that way.

NV

So the idea was to kind of have a twin for "All Things Considered," a strong lead in, and it worked that way. That's interesting that like the interview format would be the way of kind of creating a certain kind of receptivity in the listener. And then that prepares them to sort of hear the news. You know what I mean?

BS

Yeah.

NV

Why don't we move on to kind of the next phase of your career. I think when after your time back east you would eventually come back to the Midwest to work in Minnesota.

BS

So I was forced out of NPR and still wanted to stay in radio and Bill Kling said you can come out here and get it, the station up in Moorhead, Fargo, Moorhead, CPB qualified, and then you can put your feet up and think. It was very tempting, so I did. I mean, I needed a job. I was hunting around in DC for one and I couldn't find one. Then I, because, you know, I had said the stations should contribute to NPR, I set a goal for us at the station to contribute 52 pieces a year to NPR. Now that includes not news features so much as art features and things like that. And we made it, so I thought if you could do it for Moorhead you can do it anywhere. No excuses.

NV

Do you want to talk a little bit about the way you left NPR?

BS

I've never talked about this, on the record, before. Well, I'll tell you, Jack Mitchell wrote a history of it. And he pointed out that the other directors, they said, had disdain for me so they were not helpful to me, if you will. He thought they kind of undermined me more than anything. They were all also from television, I might add, and I have this thing about TV. Anyway, so I wasn't doing so well, I guess, and so Don Quayle took me aside and said, you know, these are some of the concerns I have for your work, and I said, okay. I said just let me know as I go along if there's any problem. He said, okay. But then on December 10, a Sunday, he called me into the office and said it's time for you to leave and I said, well, I thought I met all your needs. And he said, I corrected all the things he said, yeah, you did, but it's too late. So I was a little baffled by that and quite devastated, you know.

NV

I can imagine.

BS

I felt like well, it was really bad.

NV

Did you get more of an explanation?

BS

No, that was about it. So that's why, you know, I wanted to stay, you see I went to a landscape outfit to try to work there, but you needed a truck driver's license, and I didn't have a truck to get a license. So I welcomed Bill Kling's offer and it was it was a very happy time out there. Because we had a lot of creativity. I mean 140 miles from the home office, so no one was paying that much attention, and I like it that way.

NV

I wanted to take some time to talk a little bit about your overseas career which has been so extensive and over such a long period.

BS

So I was Executive Producer of *Sound Print* in Baltimore and commuting because my daughter was living here in Philadelphia. And I didn't want to not see her. After about five years, I thought it was too much and quit and was on unemployment for a while, and that was going to run out. So I went out to the airport to see if I could work as a driver for a car service. And they trained me for this, and so I was ready to get my assignment. And then somebody called from MacArthur Foundation, said I had a fellowship. And there was an opportunity to go over to South Africa to, this is in 1993, to meet with folks interested in reforming the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the SABC, the state broadcasting, and interested in community radio because they thought that would best serve democracy. And that was very interesting, and I came back and wished I could do that. So that with the fellowship the next year, in 1994, after the elections, the Open Society Foundation, opened an office there, and I said, if community radio is one of your priorities, let me know and he said, yeah, it is actually. So I said, okay, and I set up guidelines for supporting the community radio stations, and equipment grants and things like that. That was very satisfying. I organized training programs for them and this and that. I think overall, the Foundation was the leading developer of community radio there in South Africa. I would say that that was kind of the highlight of my work overseas, was to see that and work with them. And the government in South Africa only awarded licenses to community stations that first year, because they thought, again, it would serve the best interests of democracy. So I was

working with the Open Society Foundation in South Africa and then in some of the other Southern African countries, and working as a consultant with them, and then when my fellowship ended, they hired me full time. And that's how I got into that further. And then that position ended. I don't think I was pushed out. The position was going away. So that's when I started Developing Radio Partners to help enrich the programming in Southern Africa.

NV

And what is some of the programming you remember from that period? What did you learn?

BS

A couple of things. What we would do is have a workshop and have a specialist in the field. It might have been climate or environment or health and we gave them the digital recorder and microphone and they would go out and do some pieces and come back and critique and things like that. So then we would send them a bulletin that had a statement of a problem on one side and solutions and production tips on the other side. And these came from the field itself. And so this is a way that they would produce programs, improve their production, and then we had a woman, Martha Zulu, who was a good trainer, and she would go and mentor at the stations to improve their skills that way. So that that's the way that whole thing worked.

NV

It sounds like it's kind of an echo of the Wisconsin Idea, right? Just in a different context in a different time.

BS

Yeah, we, you know, increased the number of youth-friendly health services programs that would go to the clinic to get reproductive health information or get tested. And the parents were freer to talk about this as well as the clergymen, they for the first time they could talk openly seemingly about reproductive health. So that was a good environment, we would give them money for community activities. And some stations would use that money to have tree planting, and then they would get money from a local agency and do more tree planting. So there's a lot of good stuff that came up that came out of that and is continuing.

NV

I wanted to return just in our last part here to something that you wrote about at the very kind of tail end of the statement of purpose for NPR. And I wonder if you could just read for us the last paragraph where you speak a little bit about the intensity of experience.

BS

This is the first section of the Purposes I said:

Philosophically, time is measured by the intensity of experience. Waiting for a bus and walking through an art gallery may occupy the same time duration, but not the same time experience. Listeners should feel that the time spent with NPR was among their most rewarding in media contact. National Public Radio will not regard its audience as a "market" or in terms of its disposable income, but as curious, complex individuals who are looking for some understanding, meaning and joy in the human experience.

NV

I think a lot of people will know just what you're talking about here, the desire not to be seen just as a kind of target market, especially the search for intense experiences through sound. And I'm curious to know how you feel we are faring in this search and what we should be doing to keep pursuing it.

BS

Well, I think NPR does do this. I think they sometimes have gotten too heavy with news in the last four years. They had to do a lot of that and now there is space for hearing poets on ATC and more getting out of the studio to produce pieces. But of course, there's much more to NPR or for public radio than NPR's flagship program. So I realized that I was probably writing about myself as I was looking for self-understanding, meaning, and joy in the human experience. But I mean, that's really what it's about, I thought. It was having informed citizens to have democracy survive and thrive. And I really believe in the importance of curiosity, obviously, I mentioned that several times. And that differentiates us also from the commercial media, talking about the disposable income and market which is really the way they looked at it.

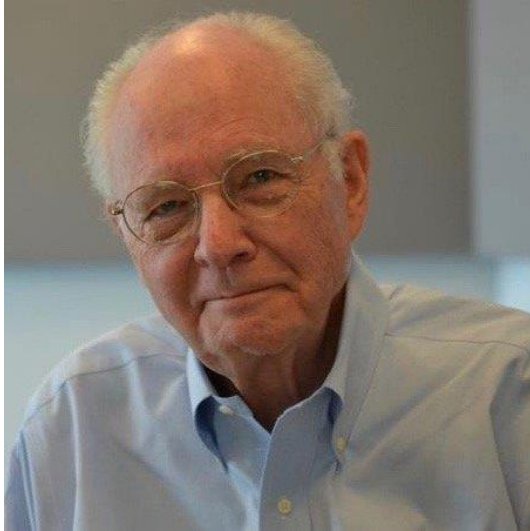
NV

This image of waiting, the intensity of walking through an art gallery and the intensity of standing at a bus stop. It had a particular resonance for me. I think especially during this pandemic time a lot of us have become much more attuned to what the intensities of experience can be like, and maybe to expect it a bit more from their media.

BS

Yes. And just to circle back a little way on in terms of radio as a medium. People identify with the radio hosts a lot. You know, I know with Susan, they would write letters to her and now Lulu Garcia-Navarro is leaving *Weekend Edition Sunday*. And people have just screamed their praise for her, they'll miss her, she was so important to them in their lives. She was the friend. Remember I started off saying that what I wanted NPR to be is a friend, and they have a friend in that way that I don't think necessarily you identify with television. Many, many of the radio listeners will say, I just love radio. I mean, I certainly I don't mean to say that television doesn't have intimacy and wonderful things too. Of course it does. But I think I'm just standing up for

the unique qualities of radio as a conversational, interesting place for curious people to enjoy and learn and grow.



Bill Siemering began his career in radio working his way through the University of Wisconsin at the university station and state-wide FM Network where he learned the basics of broadcasting, from engineering to on-air work. As a member of the founding board of directors of National Public Radio, he was asked to write the original Purposes for NPR. He was then hired to implement them as the first Director of Programming and with the staff developed *All Things Considered*. While manager of WHYI in Philadelphia, with the staff, developed *Fresh Air with Terry Gross* from a local to a national program. He was also manager of public radio stations WBFO, SUNY Buffalo and KCCM in Moorhead, Minnesota and executive producer of the documentary series, *Soundprint*. He began working overseas in 1993 as a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. He worked with the Open Society Foundation for ten years that took him to Eastern Europe, southern Africa and Mongolia. In 2004, he started Developing Radio Partners to enrich the programming of community radio stations in Africa. Bill Siemering is presently Senior Fellow at the Wyncote Foundation in Philadelphia.



Neil Verma is assistant professor of sound studies in Radio/TV/Film. Verma's work focuses on the intersection of sound and narrative, and he is an expert in the history of radio drama and in audio fiction and sound studies more broadly. He is author of *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago, 2012), co-editor of *Anatomy of Sound: Norman Corwin and Media Authorship* (California, 2016), and co-editor of *Indian Sound Cultures, Indian Sound Citizenship* (Michigan, 2020). Verma also maintains a practice in experimental sound recording. His sound compositions have been selected for several sound and radio art exhibitions and festivals around the world. His most recent experimental piece *American Bottom: an Illuminated Audiobook* is under contract with Amherst College Press. His next scholarly monograph, tentatively titled *Radio in Doubt: Narrative Podcasting in the Age of Obsession*, is forthcoming. Verma founded the Great Lakes Association for Sound Studies, serves on the Radio Preservation Task Force at the Library of Congress, and is Editor of the RadioDoc Review.