



Minding Our Media

A Conversation with Norman Lear
and Marty Kaplan

PBS's *NOW*
David Brancaccio, Host

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USC ANNEBERG

The Norman Lear

CENTERTAINMENT

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. For more information, please visit www.learcenter.org.

Norman Lear

Norman Lear has enjoyed a long career in television and film, and as a political and social activist and philanthropist.

Known as the creator of Archie Bunker and *All in the Family*, Lear's television credits include *Sanford & Son*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, *Fernwood 2Nite* and the dramatic series *Palmerstown U.S.A.* His motion picture credits include *Cold Turkey*, *Divorce American Style*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Stand By Me* and *The Princess Bride*. In 1982, he produced the two-hour special *I Love Liberty* for ABC.

Beyond the entertainment world, Mr. Lear has brought his distinctive vision to politics, academia and business by founding several nonprofit organizations including People For the American Way (1980-present); the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School for Communication (2000-present), a multidisciplinary research and public policy center dedicated to exploring the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society; and the Business Enterprise Trust (1989-2000), an educational program that used annual awards, business school case studies and videos to cast a spotlight on exemplary social innovations in American business.

He is currently chairman of Act III Communications, a multimedia holding with interests in the recording, motion picture, broadcasting and publishing industries.

Marty Kaplan

Martin Kaplan is the director of the Lear Center and associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication. A summa cum laude graduate of Harvard, a Marshall Scholar to Cambridge University, and a Stanford PhD, he has been an Aspen Institute program officer; a federal education staffer; a Vice President's chief speechwriter; a Washington journalist in print, television and radio; a deputy presidential campaign manager; a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production and a film and television writer and producer. His film credits include *The Distinguished Gentleman*, which he wrote and executive produced and *Noises Off*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich, which he adapted for the screen.

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Minding Our Media

David Brancaccio: Welcome to ***NOW***. It's nice to know that Americans, in all their diversity, agree on something: Media in this country could use some serious improvement. Pick your peeve, it'll be reflected in any number of recent public opinion surveys: Trust in the news media continues to crumble; the media have an axe to grind; the media are profane. Media – from television, radio, and newspapers to books and the internet – are increasingly dominated by a few big companies.

There has to be a way forward because nothing less than the health of our democracy depends on it. We're about to talk with two guys who have some ideas on both the problems and some solutions. One is Marty Kaplan, the Director of the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School. The other is that center's prime benefactor: Archie Bunker's father, the legendary television producer Norman Lear.

All in the Family still gets cited as the most important show ever. Norman Lear's had loads of other important hit shows – the list is on our website if you want to reminisce. These days Norman Lear stands behind the liberal advocacy group he created, People for the American Way. He's also been a major backer of the careful academic study of the intersection between media and democracy.

David Brancaccio: Well, hello, gents.

Marty Kaplan: Hi, David.

Norman Lear: Good evening.

David Brancaccio: Norman, given the state of the media, why don't you just wash your hands of the whole thing? I mean, you're a man of means. Go off and learn oil painting, or retreat on a yacht somewhere. Why stay engaged with the media?



I think this is the best of television today, the Golden Age.



Norman Lear: Aren't we on a yacht? What am I doing here?

[Laughter]

Norman Lear: My life has been spent in media. It's something I understand a good deal better than I understand other things. I think this is the best of television today, the Golden Age, as it were, because you can find anything you want.

If you are looking for quality of any kind, it's there. There's a science channel, and Discovery Channel and an Arts and Entertainment channel and Geography. It's all there. And some great drama, and some classic comedy. But, you have to hunt, you have to wish to find it. And then hunt to do that.

So, on that level, and because we're living now, this is the time. This is the Golden Age.

Marty Kaplan: You wouldn't say that if you were dead.

Norman Lear: Quite correct, I wouldn't say it if I were dead. I find there are a number of things I would not say if I were dead.

David Brancaccio: So, why study it, I mean, if it's kind of a Golden Age, why study –

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Every realm, from news to politics to religion to architecture to retailing depends on becoming part of show business in order to perform their missions.

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Norman Lear: I'm not studying it! I'm working it!

David Brancaccio: Well, you are working it, but you're also enabling the study of it.

Norman Lear: There's a new mission statement that Mr. Kaplan came up with very recently.

Marty Kaplan: If I had memorized it, I'd be a better person. It's perfect material as a cut away.

Norman Lear: Ad-lib it.

Marty Kaplan: The mission of the Norman Lear Center is to study the impact of entertainment on society. But when I say that, I want to ask you to think of entertainment differently. Don't think of it just as leisure activities, as what Wall Street would define the entertainment sector. Think of it as the way that everyone in society is looking for an audience. Think of how every realm, from news to politics, to religion, to architecture, retailing – all of them depend on becoming part of show business, in order to perform their missions.

David Brancaccio: How is that relevant to our democracy, to the health of our society?

Marty Kaplan: Because democracy should not *just* be governed by the values of show business. There are some issues, to understand them, you might have to risk just a teensy bit of boredom. Sometimes, things are so complicated that they can't be said in 15 seconds, but might,

God forbid, take a minute and a half. Our need to be constantly entertained, constantly stimulated has, potentially, a corrosive effect on our ability, as a society, to focus on anything.

Norman Lear: But when you say, "our need," there, that would assume the audience's need. I think the audience has been brought to that place by advertising, by the consumer-oriented culture, by corporate America, and so forth, that finds it can own their attention best by moving fast and juggling fast, you know. If the audience sat back and had the opportunity to think about it, they might not like it.



**If you dangle something
shiny in front of us, we've
got to pay attention to it.**



Marty Kaplan: It's true.

David Brancaccio: Well, that's part of the paradox. Because you say it's a Golden Age, for instance, for television, but the challenge is people don't always choose the best stuff. Opposite us tonight, you can turn the channel and right now, the goofy America home video show has got a tree falling on a man in a hammock, a child getting a toilet seat stuck around his head. I mean, this is not –

Marty Kaplan: I'm missing that? Sheesh! Can you Tivo that?

David Brancaccio: But surely, this is not ennobling.

Marty Kaplan: Well, the more you give them, the more they'll watch. Even Saint Augustine wrote in *The Confessions* that it was amazing how the most moral of all his friends was the most blood-thirsty when faced with the spectacle of the gladiators. We're still that way, and if you dangle something shiny in front of us, we've got to pay attention to it.

That's what's in the power of the people who run the media: enormous responsibility.

David Brancaccio: That's the key, the enormous responsibility on the part of people who run the media. You have to raise consciousness. You have to, what, tell them that there should be a higher purpose?

Norman Lear: Well, that comes to the whole question of responsibility. You know, at the very beginning of television, the people who owned television stations, the great figures – the Paleys and the Goldensons and the Sarnoffs – were broadcasters. They considered themselves broadcasters.

"Broadcasters" suggested to them some sense of responsibility. And so, the seven o'clock news – it was seven o'clock then – the nightly news was a loss leader. They didn't have to make money.

All of that's vanished, in the pursuit of ratings, which translates to the quarterly profits. If the name of the game is a quarterly profit statement, this quarter larger than the last, it will be at the expense of all other values.

Marty Kaplan: And at the same time, the media are alleged to be fulfilling a public interest obligation. They get free licenses to broadcast on the public airwaves.

David Brancaccio: From the government.

Marty Kaplan: From the government, which acts as the trustee of the people, who own the airwaves. And the media promise to fulfill a public interest obligation when they get those licenses. So, when you ask them, "What is it you do?" they talk about their 10k walks for breast cancer. Well, that's very nice, but it would also be nice to cover elections.

David Brancaccio: I want to ask you this, Marty, in that regard: We've just come out of an election. If it's as bad as people say, how do you account for the results? Everyone says it was a

referendum on corruption in politics and also on a strategy in Iraq that has gone awry. People who voted that way, the public got it from the media. So, something's working...

Marty Kaplan: Well, I think to some degree, it's despite the media, rather than because of it. And it's because of the new media, rather than the dinosaur media. Many of the candidates who ultimately prevailed were not known nationally or locally through the so-called "mainstream media." It was things like the internet and blogs –

Norman Lear: The blogosphere.

Marty Kaplan: And activists, who made these candidates plausible, who did a lot of fundraising for them, and who created a kind of national grassroots network that they couldn't have dreamt of if they had to go through a top-down machinery. So, that's one of the great joys of the new media: it allows a kind of democratization of the grassroots, which really has atrophied in recent years.

Norman Lear: That's true, and there was also a lot of dry grass out there waiting for the spark. And I think off the blogosphere came that spark.

David Brancaccio: So, you're encouraged by the proliferation of voices on the internet, and people with web logs and so forth?

Marty Kaplan: Do you want me to depress you?

David Brancaccio: Well, I know, the word on the street, in recent public opinion polls, is that we've got a problem.

Marty Kaplan: Let's start with this. The Radio and Television News Directors' Association, which is the collection of all the people around the country who create local news, did a poll. And they asked Americans, "What source do you turn to for your information?"

David Brancaccio: The answer was?

Marty Kaplan: Sixty-five percent said, "Local television news." Dramatically beating out broadcast news, cable news, papers, internet. Sixty-five percent said, "local TV news." Now, I would be the first to say that there are heroes and heroines out there in local TV news who are doing a phenomenal job against all odds. On the other hand, if a cat is up a tree, or if someone is slaughtered at the Boy Scout den, that will be wall-to-wall, every day, every night, and will always drive out the kind of informative programming that people are desperate to get.

David Brancaccio: The place where most Americans are getting their political news –

Marty Kaplan: Right, offers the least amount of news. And, when you look at what they do get, it is dramatically skewed toward who's ahead, who's behind, how much money have they raised and what strategies are they using. If you're looking for an issue-story that will actually explain where the candidates stand on something, you'd have to work for the FBI to find it.

David Brancaccio: Do you think this has a connection to democracy, Norman? That it's not just local newscasts that, by and large, stink, but a much bigger issue?

Norman Lear: There's so much to be said on the subject. Yes, I think leadership is there to lead. Leadership isn't leading when it turns around and asks the questions of the sheep they're supposed to be leading. And I don't mean sheep in a pejorative sense at all. I mean, I'm here to

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be led. I want a President who's gonna treat me like he's my dad and help me understand in context what is going on in our country and what is going on in the world. Lead me.

David Brancaccio: So if we don't fix the state of the media, so citizens get the information they need, we're not going to get the leaders we need.

Norman Lear: I think that's correct.

David Brancaccio: But Norman, you spent your career in the commercial side of all this. You know about ratings pressure.

Norman Lear: And I've spoken to it all of my life.

David Brancaccio: Indeed you have, but how did you pull it off? Because you always had bean counters, probably, nipping at your heels and saying, "We have shareholder value to think of."

Norman Lear: Well, look, at the same time they wanted to put *All in the Family* on the air, I had an opportunity to write, produce and direct three films for United Artists. I had done a film they liked – it's called *Cold Turkey* – and they offered me a three-picture deal.

So, when CBS wanted to put *All in the Family* on the air, it didn't take any courage at all to say "my way or no way." I mean, somebody's belly has to be the slide rule. It's my show, it's gonna be mine.



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David Brancaccio: But every news director of every local station can't set himself up or her up with a three picture deal and go in and say, "We're gonna cover the news the way it should be."

Norman Lear: Of course they can.

David Brancaccio: Can they?

Marty Kaplan: Well, what they can do is apply the same storytelling show business skills that they apply to everything else to *real* news. They are brilliant at capturing our attention. They do reenactments, they do shadow play that have grave narrators. They do chyrons. It's really exciting to watch. It draws you in, it works. We have lizard brains, and they do it because it actually works.



This experiment in democracy, as it used to be called, depends on an informed citizenry.



David Brancaccio: Norman, you're on the record as being quite concerned about the direction of the media in this country, in terms of increasingly fewer companies dominating whole stretches of the media. Why is that a problem?

Norman Lear: If all of the news and information and entertainment passes to all of us through three or four funnels – that's all there are – and every bit of news and information you get comes to you from those three or four funnels, something is wrong. Who can say that all of the news and information that comes to us can be distilled by three companies only?

This experiment in democracy, as it used to be called, depends on an informed citizenry. There's nothing at the core of all of our domestic problems more important than that.

David Brancaccio: But you have to roll a social conscience into this whole paradigm, when you're talking about journalism. And Norman, you did that on the entertainment side, didn't you?

Norman Lear: Our first commandment was to make people laugh. And not the tee-hee and ha-ha variety, but to bring them to their knees. And it didn't take long to learn, if we didn't learn it going in, that the more you had an audience caring – we had 240 people sitting there, every time we taped – the more they cared, the more they were on the edge of their seat and the louder would be that belly laugh.

David Brancaccio: But you could've left it at that. You could've said, "We made 'em laugh." But you wanted to go further. All your shows have some thought put into it about, "How can we make the world slightly a better place, or how can we –"

Norman Lear: Well, somebody once said, if you want to send a message, use Western Union. So, it was a naughty thing to be sending a message. I truly never thought about – or any of us thought about sending messages. We were parents, we were citizens, caring individuals. And if drama is your subject and you just lean in that direction, you find that if they're caring, they're gonna laugh harder. So, it all worked together. It wasn't, "Oh, what can we do now about this?"

David Brancaccio: Well, like, when you had your character, Archie Bunker, say some retrograde thing, then you'd have the son-in-law, Meathead, answer him. And you had to be sure that the answer was factually correct and made sense, I would assume. That would require some attention to that kind of detail.

Norman Lear: Well, we paid that kind of attention. But then, because Archie was such a fool – intended to be a fool – there was nobody who was on his side that we ever convinced he was a fool. Because the mail I would get from people who cared about Archie in that way, was "Well, you make such a fool of him at the end of every show." They got it.

You know, people got it. But we came along with Maude, because we felt it would be only right to have a liberal on the tube who knew as much about what she was talking about as he did, the fool that he was.

David Brancaccio: But you also, in a sense, made a bit of a fool of Maude.

Norman Lear: That was intentional. I mean, a big-hearted fool. I think of myself – I said this recently and got an enormous reaction – as a bleeding-heart conservative.

David Brancaccio: You?

Norman Lear: Conservative, yes, because you will not mess with my First Amendment or my Constitution, my Bill of Rights. I feel "mine" very strongly. And is my heart bleeding for anybody I can help? Or that child that George Bush will not leave behind, but I, as a bleeding heart, understand I will have to give up something, maybe a good deal, to see that no child is left behind. My heart bleeds in that way.

Marty Kaplan: The thing about Norman's shows was that they started from the premise that the shows are, yes, entertaining, but they also had an impact on people's lives. And so, the people who make those shows, should be good stewards of that impact. And so, if there's a rape, if there's breast cancer, how people deal with it is not just what happens in some show, and that's the end of it.

This goes into the breakfast table conversations of families. It affects how people think about their own lives. I mean, when on *Happy Days*



I think of myself as a bleeding-heart conservative.



Fonzie got a library card, kids all across the country went out and got library cards.

David Brancaccio: Modeling good behavior.

Marty Kaplan: Exactly. And, you know, a lot of show producers say, "I don't want to be in that business; every advocate in the world is gonna come to me and say, 'Pimp for my cause.'" But on the other hand, anybody who makes creative entertainment should be aware of the amazing power they have in their hands.

They are, literally, playing with fire, that has an impact on not just kids, who are especially vulnerable, but on everybody, even sophisticated people. If it didn't, then advertising wouldn't work. We are all susceptible to those kinds of messages.

David Brancaccio: Is there a way to institutionalize this more, Norman? This idea of getting the producers of entertainment programs or even news to think about the larger purpose in communication.

Norman Lear: You know, I don't know where that conversation can get started if not at the top at the biggest bully pulpit. We're back to leadership, the whole question of leadership. Either we, the media, can appeal to the baser instincts of people. And certainly we have them, all of us. Or we can appeal to the aspect of us that sees some transcendence, that can reach for something better. Leadership suggests that we would at least spend some of that time and some of that drive and some of that money and some of that effort toward giving them something that would help them, lift them.

David Brancaccio: Well, Norman Lear, Marty Kaplan, thank you very much.

Norman Lear: Thank you.