# “All Things Considered” (first broadcast) (May 3, 1971)

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**Essay by Tom McCourt (guest post)***

*William Siemering*

National Public Radio was formally incorporated on March 3,1970. William Siemering, the former general manager of Buffalo's WBFO-FM, was hired as NPR's program director. Siemering was a tireless advocate for grassroots radio; under his leadership, WBFO established a satellite station operated by Buffalo's minority community that broadcast 25 hours of programming a week. According to historian Ralph Engelman:

> Siemering envisaged a decentralized system reflecting the diversity of the nation: a system of local audio laboratories to train radio producers, submissions of programs to the network by affiliates, and reciprocal trade of material among stations. By fulfilling this mission, Siemering believed that NPR would revitalize the medium of radio.

NPR's mission statement called for “an identifiable daily product...[that] may contain some hard news, but the primary emphasis would be on interpretation, investigative reporting on public affairs, the world of ideas and the arts. The program would be well-paced, flexible, and a service primarily for the general audience.” At its January 1970 meeting, the NPR board agreed that its first effort would be a public affairs program service featuring contributions by member stations. NPR's flagship program, “All Things Considered,” made its debut on May 3,1971.

“All Things Considered” drew on several antecedents, including NBC’s long-running “Monitor” newsmagazine as well as a daily local magazine had aired on Ohio’s WOSU in the 1950s, and NPR’s predecessor, ERN, broadcast “Kaleidoscope,” from 1961 to 1963. “All Things Considered's” primary model, however, was the Canadian Broadcasting Company's “This Country in the Morning,” whose long-form narrative reports interspersed with “actualities” (taped interviews and ambient sound) marked a significant departure from the 60-second news spots that dominated commercial network radio. Siemering stated that “All Things Considered,” “really came out of a reaction against the superficiality of commercial radio, and also the

grayness and lack of timeliness of educational radio." He sought a return to the folksiness of the land grant radio of his youth; senior NPR producer Art Silverman stated that "as much as people need to hear two more reports about Eastern Europe or the Third World, they also need to hear about how to pick rhubarb for a pie."

Nonetheless, professionalism was an integral part of "All Things Considered" from the outset. "We did not regard NPR as an experimental alternative to commercial broadcasting," Siemering stated. NPR president Donald Quayle staffed the network with experienced print reporters, believing it was easier to turn print journalists into broadcasters than vice versa, and "New York Times" reporter Robert Conley was tapped to be the first host of "All Things Considered." The NPR board originally proposed that the program air in the morning, during peak radio listenership. Instead, it began at 5 p.m. because many educational stations did not sign on before noon. After debating whether "All Things Considered" should air for one or two hours, the program's 90-minute length was chosen as a compromise. The program's focus on news rather than the arts also was partially due to the fact that NPR's live programming would be distributed on AT&T landlines, which had limited frequency response.

The first broadcast, on May 3, 1971, begins with a rudimentary synthesizer theme followed by 37 minutes of coverage of an antiwar demonstration in Washington, DC. The protest was intended to stop traffic and halt government activities; a five-minute report by host Robert Conley describes the scene as chaotic, while reporters Stephen Banker, Jeff Kamen and Jim Russell provide onsite accounts and interviews with protestors and policemen from various sites around Washington. The clashing perspectives of Conley (whose halting, tentative delivery reveals his inexperience as he ad-libbed to fill time) and the reporters are striking. While the host takes a dim view of the protest, the sympathies of the reporters are clearly with the demonstrators: "Today, it is a crime to have long hair," one reporter states as police battle protestors. Coverage concludes with a brief discussion between Conley, Banker, Russell and Trudy Rubin of the "Christian Science Monitor." Next is a 15-minute CBC piece about World War I featuring works by poets Wilfred Owen and Jacques Prevert interspersed with songs and sound effects. The narrator states that Owen wrote of war "in a way young people have yet to discover."

"All Things Considered" shifts abruptly to the sole contribution from a member station, a fluffy five-minute report from WOI in Ames, Iowa, in which reporter Wayne Olson interviews a barber who proposes to shave women's legs as a means to address waning revenues. Jack Mitchell then provides a nine-minute hard news summary that includes a speech by US Undersecretary of State John Irwin to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's hearing on ending the Vietnam War. Reporter Anthony Lawrence adds comments on the process of troop withdrawal. The next report, by Gwen Hudley, is the broadcast's highlight. Hudley profiles "Janice," a 26 year-old single mother and former nurse addicted to heroin. Hudley offers minimal commentary, allowing the subject to tell her story in her own words. Referring to her habit, "Janice" states, "Harry [heroin] is always at the door." A recording of guitarist Roy Buchanan's "The Messiah Will Come Again" provides a stark coda, followed by a brief interview with Hudley regarding drug treatment programs. The broadcast concludes with an interview of father/son poets Louis and Allen Ginsberg by Fred Keller that develops into a debate over drugs and crime. Conley, expected to

ad lib for the final six minutes, failed to do so, and stations were left with five and a half minutes of dead air.

Early station reactions to "All Things Considered" were uniformly negative, given the varying quality of reports and stretches of dead air. NPR board member Karl Schmidt complained, "Our child has been born and it is ugly." Conley was replaced as host in July 1971 by cohosts Mike Waters and Jim Russell. Jack Mitchell (formerly of WHA), became the producer of "All Things Considered" in March 1972 and immediately replaced Russell with Susan Stamberg as Waters' cohost. Mitchell also formalized the program's structure: "All Things Considered" would begin with a billboard listing of stories, followed by five minutes of hard news and then by news and feature stories as time permitted. Reporters also developed NPR's signature "acts and tracks" formula, in which a story begins with a "full-up" ambient sound that fades under the announcer's script and concludes with a brief interview segment.

While nearly everyone associated with NPR lauded Siemering for his conceptual skills, his day-to-day abilities as NPR program director were frequently questioned by NPR management, and he resigned in December 1972. "All Things Considered" won a Peabody Award for excellence in radio journalism the following year, yet the program remained a flashpoint for national-local tensions within the public radio system. Siemering had intended for station submissions to account for one-third of "All Things Considered," but relatively few were aired on the program. NPR's Washington staff complained that local stories were often of poor quality and lacked interesting subject matter, while stations charged that their stories were judged by inconsistent standards and that their tapes became dated while awaiting decisions or were lost altogether. The stations' arguments were buttressed by the fact that empty airtime was filled with ad-libbed pieces by Stamberg and her cohosts, such as a four-minute discussion of Fig Newtons. Neil Conan, NPR's acting managing editor, admitted that "what was considered 'a marvelous sense of spontaneity' was really programming put on the air out of pure desperation to fill airtime."

The biggest complaint, however, was that much of NPR's "populist" programming was at odds with the high-culture agenda of member stations. The initial broadcast of "All Things Considered" underscores this divide, with reports focusing on the young and minorities (the protest coverage features extensive comments from African American participants and bystanders). While these stations may have welcomed the heightened profile and prestige afforded by national programming, many chafed at carrying programs that were not tailored exclusively to elite audiences or did not fit into precise categories. The edges were gradually trimmed and NPR would develop into a news powerhouse by the end of the decade with "Morning Edition." For all of its flaws, the excitement and ad hoc nature of "All Things Considered's" initial broadcast provides an insightful snapshot of its fierce and restive era.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.