

FREEDOM
OF THE PRESS

A FUNNY THING IS HAPPENING TO TV'S PUBLIC FORUM

PBS funding comes with strings attached. Could that be why the "safely splendid" is driving out bolder fare?

BY PAT AUFDERHEIDE

This past July, public TV's *P.O.V.* (for "point of view") aired Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*. But eighteen of the Public Broadcasting Service stations in the top fifty markets refused to run the video poem on African-American gay identity. Too risky.

In August, before there was even a whiff of controversy, PBS yanked another scheduled *P.O.V.* film, *Stop the Church*, which documents AIDS activists' disruption of a mass led by Cardinal John O'Connor. Way too risky.

Public television is supposed to be a place

Patricia Aufderheide teaches at the School of Communication at The American University in Washington, D.C. and is a senior editor of In These Times.

where freedom of expression can flourish — not only in gutsy journalism and wide-ranging talk shows, but also in creative work that showcases the range of perspectives in a multicultural nation. Television viewers value its First Amendment functions; they rate the service a highly valuable community institution (more so than newspapers), and rank it higher than commercial television as a source for understanding important issues.

At the very least, public television is supposed to do what commercial television won't or can't. But, all too often, public television won't or can't.

Consider national public affairs, a weak spot in commercial TV. And then look at the Voters Initiative debacle. The John & Mary R. Markle Foundation had pledged \$5 million for 1992 electoral coverage — a chance to break out of sound-bite-driven campaigns — if PBS could come up with something new and convince stations to carry the programs. After more than a year had passed and \$400,000 had been spent, Lloyd N. Morrisett, the foundation's president, withdrew the offer in despair. PBS had never even gotten stations to agree to air programs. One potential co-funder and longtime supporter of public television, Eli N. Evans, president of the Charles H. Revson Foundation, said he was "stunned" that the deal fell through "because of an unwillingness to commit that level of time to something they felt would not generate as much membership revenue and support as their other programming."

A few weeks later, PBS proudly announced joint political convention coverage with NBC. "You get the newsgathering of NBC plus the perspective Robin [MacNeil] and Jim [Lehrer] give to those activities," PBS president Bruce Christensen said. "It's a wonderful match and marriage." Not everyone agrees. "If PBS and NBC have so much



in common, why do we need public television?" muttered one PBS station staffer. In mid-October, the Markle Foundation gave \$3.5 million to an organization it thought *could* deliver innovative election coverage — CNN.

Community news and public affairs — another weak spot in commercial television — is also ailing on public television. In the face of cutbacks in 1990, Boston's WGBH cancelled its unique, fifteen-year-old *Ten O'Clock News*, substituting cheaper public affairs shows. WNET in New York, which had already dropped two local news programs last year, shrank staff for its replacement "talk-television" shows. Los Angeles station KCET, which in palmier days had a nightly news show, has cut back the production cost of its remaining local programming, emphasizing studio segments and talk rather than investigative field reporting. (Last year, before the cuts, its local public affairs won more Emmies than any other station in the market.) Smaller stations axed shows as well. WLIW, the only broadcast station on Long Island to provide in-depth local news, killed its nightly news show and two other local programs, substituting a weekly journalists' talk show; WSKG-TV in Binghamton, New York, dropped four of five local public affairs series.

Suddenly-unemployed producers are angry, but they won't speak on the record, and with good reason. They say their only hope of doing local journalism again, however slim, is public television. "In-depth local news disappeared a long time ago in commercial television," said one, in words sim-

Stop the Church, a film documenting the disruption by AIDS activists of a mass led by Cardinal John O'Conner, was yanked from PBS's schedule a month after another documentary sparked controversy.



T.L. Litt

ilar to those used by many. "It's a tragedy that public television is not stepping into that void and telling people what's going on where they live."

Sometimes it's hard to tell public television from other channels on the cable lineup. The Discovery Channel now delivers public television's longtime staple — animal shows. Arts & Entertainment seems to be cornering the market in BBC programs, which used to go to public TV. Recently, WGBH and ABC jointly produced an AIDS special for teenagers, which will air on ABC stations the day after it airs on public television.

And sometimes cable is more daring than public television. At the same time this summer that Washington, D.C.'s WETA was airing *Hollywood*, *The Golden Years*, an affectionate tribute to the old RKO studio days, A&E aired *Naked Hollywood*, a scathing BBC take on the U.S. film industry.

The founding vision of today's public television featured its First Amendment functions. Essayist E.B. White, in a letter to the 1967 Carnegie Commission on Public Broadcasting, had imagined noncommercial television as "our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's, and our Camelot. It should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle." But the 1967 legislation failed to enact the Carnegie Commission's dream of a service that could "help us see America whole, in all its diversity." Rejecting many of the report's recommendations, it provided no permanent endowment for the Public Broadcasting Service, never defined "public," and created a Rube Goldbergesque bureaucracy.

A large part of that bureaucracy is dedicated to dialing for dollars, one way or another, from its three largest kinds of funders. Viewers contribute nearly a quarter of public television's funds, and are the largest single source of funds for public television's billion-dollar-plus annual budget. Taxpayers — through local, state, and federal governments — pay about 40 percent. Corporations contribute about 16 percent of public television's overall budget and 27 percent of PBS's national programming costs.

Public television officials celebrate the editorial freedom granted by the service's multiple funding base. But even if public television isn't beholden to advertisers, it's still true that all money comes with strings. Governments have time and again meddled in public television's affairs, from Nixon's attempt to quash public affairs altogether to congressional phone calls to *P.O.V.* after *Tongues Untied* aired.

Viewers pick up the phone and donate during programs that are tried, true, and genteel — like

Public television is supposed to do what commercial TV won't or can't. But, all too often, public TV won't or can't

Corporate funding inevitably conditions what *doesn't* get made — or even imagined

1991's best draw during pledge week, *Three Tenors* (Pavarotti, Carreras, and Domingo).

Corporate dollars are usually tied directly to the production and promotion of particular programs (many taxpayer dollars pay for basic operations, and viewer dollars are used at the station's discretion). That makes big business the most influential agenda-setter in public television programming.

Corporations use public television to reach audiences suspicious of advertising. Public television's weekly ratings — which show that nearly 80 percent of viewers tune in at some point, although only slightly more than 2 percent are likely to stay tuned in prime time — reflect an audience much like that of the American public. But individual programs, especially when shaped by an underwriter's interest, can pull in that hard-to-reach, upscale, educated consumer. Herb Schmertz, Mobil Oil's longtime marketing guru, boasted that *Masterpiece Theatre* (which he designed and for which he personally selected the programs) turned Mobil into "the thinking man's gasoline."

Public television woos corporations with the promise of burnishing their image. Related organizations go further. Station magazines promise advertisers they will reach readers — contributors to the station — who are 80 percent college-educated, with household incomes more than two-and-a-half times that of the average American family. Public Broadcast Marketing, which places underwriting blurbs on local public TV stations, touts the opportunity to "increase sales, improve your corporate image, and influence the people most important to your company's success."

Corporations have no interest in attaching their names to something controversial or low-rated. Marc Weiss, executive producer of *P.O.V.*, the premier national showcase for independent documentaries, recalls scouring the corporate community for donations. "We knocked on a hundred corporate doors and they said, 'We'll pass, thank you.'" Finally Lands' End, the large mail-order firm, expressed interest. But then executives viewed one of the more controversial programs in the anthology series. Weiss recalls the one-sentence good-bye: "We don't think our customers would like this show."

South Africa Now, an award-winning, half-hour show featuring uncensored news from southern Africa, folded last spring after three years of struggling without corporate backing. *The Kwitny Report* was bumped from New York's WNYC after winning several journalism awards; veteran investigative journalist Jonathan Kwitny has searched in vain for corporate backing to continue it. Even the eminently respectable Bill Moyers has seen corporate backers back away from hard-hitting pieces.

Corporations may fund programs that are entertaining and even informative, but they are hardly forums for public debate. For instance, *The Health Century*, funded by drug companies such as Pfizer, Squibb, and Eli Lilly, discussed the conquest of infectious disease and organ transplants — but not health insurance or the nursing crisis.

Living against the Odds, a PBS series aired this past spring, was launched with more than a million dollars of advertising and promotional money from its sole sponsor, Chevron (maker of Ortho pesticides as well as petroleum products), which has long funded academic research in risk assessment. *Living against the Odds* was Chevron's chance to popularize that research.

The three-part show humorously analyzes the risks to individuals of everything from hang gliding to being struck by lightning. Finally, in part three, the program addresses the issue of industrial pollution — in Poland. It contrasts the bad-guy Polish state to American NIMBY, or "not in my backyard," movements. NIMBYs here are heartening examples of democracy in action, not evidence of a toxic waste problem.

And, increasingly, corporations back programs that cozy right up to their business interests. For instance, Northwest Airlines, which has Asian routes, last year backed the four-part *Doing Business in Asia*.

Nobody from the company that underwrites a program or series needs to tell producers to be careful. Segment producer Liz Schlick recalls her experience several years ago on the children's science series *Newton's Apple*, whose sole corporate funder at the time was Du Pont. "Some things we would want to deal with — such as chemical pollution — [the executive producer] wouldn't let us touch," she says. "I don't know if it was ever even brought up to Du Pont. After a while, we just stayed away from some issues."

More important, corporate funding inevitably conditions what *doesn't* get made — or even imagined. The vice-president for development who lunches with the local corporate v.p. is not shaping the station's production agenda independently. And in this atmosphere, even fully funded noncorporate voices can have a hard time getting on the air, especially if those voices are outside the status-quo consensus. Labor unions, for instance, have waged an uphill battle to place a few programs such as *America Works* on some public television stations.

The Center for Defense Information, a think-tank often critical of defense policy, produces *America's Defense Monitor* with foundation funding (acceptable under PBS rules). The program airs on some ninety public television stations, as

well as hundreds of cable systems, but senior producer Sanford Gottlieb has also encountered fierce resistance.

KPBS in San Diego — a Navy town — recently told Gottlieb it was dropping the show because the station didn't want any advocacy programming. Gottlieb argues that the CDI is not an advocacy group but a think tank that draws research-backed conclusions (some of which could irritate Navy brass, not to mention military retirees who might cancel their memberships). Furthermore, Gottlieb points to KPBS's airing of National Audubon Society specials that boldly advocate environmental protection measures. But the station has held firm.

Public television has come under fire both from the right and the left. Accuracy In Media has, among other charges, indicted the documentary series *Frontline* for liberal bias in Central American reporting. COMINT, a Los Angeles-based conservative watchdog group, has also accused public television of liberal bias, militating against *South Africa Now* when it was still carried by KCET. Meanwhile, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting has criticized *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* for showcasing a preponderance of white male officials, and pointed out that public TV schedules are dotted with conservative and business-oriented syndicated shows (offered cheap or free), such as *Firing Line*, *The McLaughlin Group*, and *American Interests*.

But the most marked bias in public television programming is toward safety, consensus, and the status quo, pushing programming toward the safely splendid. And now cable, too, is going after the safely splendid.

Public TV must now struggle to fulfill its First Amendment promise in a fiercely competitive environment. Recently, public broadcasters staked their future on a reorganization that centralizes programming decisions at PBS's national headquarters. A more homogeneous schedule lets stations benefit from national promotion; central selection permits more efficient pooling of resources, and possibly more daring choices. But will it result in a wider range of perspectives, more programs for and by the kind of people who don't usually get heard from in commercial television, and more vigorous public affairs? Jennifer Lawson, the new head of national programming, vows that, with competition heating up, "PBS's public service role is more singular and important than ever." She proudly cites new series in the works about Native Americans and "the state of American democracy," as well as a game show on geography for school-age children.

But the Voters Initiative debacle was not a

heartening sign of commitment to public service. There were other dismaying omens. For instance, new PBS policies make life even more difficult for second and third public stations in a market — stations that often provide more diverse programming than the main station. And the recent Boston Consulting Group study, commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, recommends cutbacks on production of local programs in favor of the more lucrative national programs. The study frankly analyzes public television as a service "for its consumers" — the same yardstick used by the commercial networks. And it assumes the same logic of '90s media conglomerates: each activity (news, kids' shows) must be a profit center.

Bill Moyers, who has done quite handsomely out of public TV, nonetheless worries whether feeding the ratings monster may in time betray the service's origins as a public forum. In a public television meeting last year, he recalled helping to push through the 1967 law as a press aide to President Johnson: "We didn't think public broadcasting should serve an audience. We thought it should serve the public."

Without an adequate subsidy or a clear mandate, that's easier said than done. Not that public broadcasters don't try. For instance, at Washington, D.C.'s WETA, the recent series *Nine Months* tracked women of various races and classes through their pregnancies. In the process of making the series, the station's staff worked with community groups' prenatal health programs. Another positive sign is the brand-new Independent Television Service, a \$6 million annual fund set up by Congress after years of lobbying by independent producers. Its job: to produce programs that take creative risks and that feature perspectives and cultures often marginalized in mainstream TV.

On the eve of making the service's first funding decisions, John Schott, ITVS's executive director, was optimistic. "It used to be that public television only had to do what the networks *weren't* doing," he says. "Now the environment is changing daily, and in chaos there is opportunity. I think the stations are looking to us to help establish the unique contribution of public television."

To safeguard that unique contribution, public television needs insulated money — whether this is raised by taxing VCRs, by the sale of stations, or by cable revenues — a clear mandate, and a depoliticized funding structure. Most of all, it needs public concern and participation.

And that's the question. Do Americans see their public television service as better entertainment or as a forum for the free expression of significant ideas? Market pressures keep pushing public television toward the former. But its unique role is as the latter. ♦

**Bill Moyers
worries
whether
feeding the
ratings
monster may
in time
betray the
service's
origin as a
public forum**