

September 2008 Comments

CPB

- Complaint about funding solicitations for public broadcasting given the presence of Gwen Ifill [chosen as moderator for the vice presidential debate by the non-partisan Commission on Presidential Debates]:
 - “How can you have your ad campaign when you sponsor a moderator in the vp debates that is so biased?”
- Alleged political bias in WAMC’s programming choices:
 - “I have been listening to National Public Radio for years now. For many years I enjoyed the balanced coverage provided by Minnesota Public Radio. Indeed, I was a long time member to support MPR. I now reside in the area covered by WAMC radio from Albany, NY.

I have been shocked with the biased nature of the programming broadcast by WAMC. The President and CEO (Alan Chartock) seems to feel that the station is his personal soapbox to promote his political point of view and attack people with views different from his. As the election continues, I have been surprised with both his and the stations willingness to overtly push their agenda.

I feel that public funding should be spent on PBS and NPR, but that funding should demand a balanced approach. Clearly the programming at WAMC does not meet this standard. Given this, I think it is inappropriate for CPB to continue its funding of WAMC unless significant changes can be made in their programming to provide a balanced approach to their local programming.”

Television

- PBS children’s programming:
 - “Your support for the PBS Kids shows are fantastic. I try to watch them everyday on KOPB Portland Oregon and PBS Kids Sprout. I like your web site. Do you want to know what KOPB stands for? It stands for Oreogn [sic] Public Broadcasting. Hope you're doing well.”
- *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*:
 - “I just listened to the segment on the *NewsHour* on September 22 with Gwen Ifill and a couple reporters discussing the state of the campaign, and

I HAVE to say – it was absolutely useless. There was no information in there. It was the bantering about just, I would say, clichés – one after the other – no information. It was a little bit cynical, it was a tad snarky, but mostly it was just uninformative. It was unimaginative; it was dumb. It was INCREDIBLY dumb. And I – I don't know – I expect more from NewsHour, and it was just extremely disappointing. It was just sad that we're in such a critical time in our country, so many things are happening, and a conversation can be – you know – predictable, only focusing on conventional inside-the-Beltway, 'gang of 500', 'this is what we talked about at the Press Club' kind of nonsense. It was just ridiculous, and I was very disappointed."

- "I was listening to the 6:00 news on Channel 13 [September 1 broadcast], and I was SHOCKED to hear BBC report on the situation in Gaza. They reported that what a terrible situation it was, how people can't get the things they need, how there's an Israeli blockade of the area preventing them from living normal lives. How DARE they say this, without one mention of the fact that as soon as Hamas took over, they said they were going to destroy Israel and they started sending rockets down – rockets that have killed many and injured many, crippled many people. Children are terrified of their rockets. Now there's a temporary ceasefire, but the Hamas is still trying to sneak in implements and weapons, and Israel has to go watch their borders. Without giving Israel's point of view, how could you allow this? I don't understand this. You have to tell BBC that they have to stop reporting on Israel if they're going to have lop-sided views. If I listened to that, and didn't know what was going on, I would think how terrible Israel is and how wonderful Hamas is! You have GOT to do something about it. And you have NO right to ask for funds from people, for donations, when you have one-sided anti-Israel, anti-Jewish views. Hamas is a terrorist organization, and for the BBC to report as if that poor Hamas was being discriminated against is an ABSOLUTE sin."
- "We have been "The NewsHour With Jim Lerher" [sic] watchers and PBS contributors for years. Most recently we have stopped contributing to PBS due to its increasingly bias news coverage. Today's announcement by MSNBC removing Keith Olbermann and Chris Matthews from political coverage prompted my wife and I to reach out to you with our concerns about your coverage of the Republican Convention. The analysis provided by Mark Shields and David Brooks is clearly opinionated and reflect their personal choices, in particular Mark Shields. Also, Gwen Ifill was excited and enamored of Obama and the Democratic Convention and seemed bored and indifferent during the Republican Convention. During the coverage we were compelled to change the channel to find objective commentary. My wife asked what actions we could take to ensure balanced coverage on this publically supported network. My response was to not donate to PBS, reach out to sponsors that we will not buy their

products or services, advise public funding agencies of lack of balance and advise PBS, Jim Lehrer [sic] and the NewsHour of our concerns. Another thought was to promote, on the internet, a grading system for TV news anchors, analyst, reporters and commentators for political bias and encourage a political bias grade disclosure as part of a broadcast. Reporters who slant reporting really miss the point. They are encouraging the folks like us, who normally do not reach out, to get involved. And now we are. Bottom-line: Suggest you fix the problem.”

- “We gave up on PBS years ago because of its political bias, but last night [September 11, 2008] I decided to watch the forum on community service. I was reminded once more how terribly whinny, ill-informed (e.g. about the military) Judy Woodruff is. She lives in a 1970s bubble. I found watching the whole thing unbearable. The rest of the family did not even try, preferring the internet [sic].”
- “I am writing to express our gratitude to Jim Lehrer, PBS and to all of the folks who were responsible at PBS and CPB for the PBS TV coverage of the two conventions. What took place in media and journalism at these conventions proved beyond any doubt the continued need for the existence of PBS and the gaping hole that PBS seeks to fill in terms of meaningful ‘communication’ in the public arena in 2008.

We watched your coverage each night of both conventions. There was really no other meaningful choice. There was so much to applaud. These aspects of your coverage stand out in our mind: PBS (Brooks and Shields) provided the only real ‘critical’ comments during the convention and yet remaining [sic] balanced. Brooks was one of the very few, if no the only, commentators to even approach a critique of Obama or of Romney. PBS did not pander to either the Democratic or Republican partisans while remaining respectful as ‘guests’ at the convention.

We continue to be impressed by Judy Woodruff, both as a fill in for Lehrer and as a reporter. She is one of the very few TV reporters who can ask a pointed and yet NON-leading and open ended question so that the viewer does truly get the answer of the respondent and not the questioner. It is obvious that she has worked very hard to keep herself out of the ‘question’ and seeks to inform and not to shape the response. In watching Ms. Woodruff, it is impossible not to compare her with other notable women in TV news who can not [sic] command the respect that she so powerfully conveys on camera. Bravo for PBS for seeing this power and putting her front and center. That she can play an ‘interview’ role as she did at the convention is a further plus for her being a team player.

Finally, as to David Brooks. I do not agree with Mr. Brooks on many matters. But he is one of the very few people on television that I truly ask

the question: 'What does David Brooks think?' In short, his judgment is something of value. In 97% of the individuals otherwise on television, we know that this is not the case. Mark Shields also provides a humane and sometimes moving counterpoint. It is so important that Mr. Brooks and Mr. Shields also demonstrate a healthy respect for one another's view even when in passionate disagreement.

In a time when complaints about *'the media'* are rampant and often on point, this letter is a small thank you to everyone connected with CPB and PBS for the invaluable and essential contributions that they have made and are making to our country."

- Inclusion of BBC News on American public television:
 - "I laud your increase in international coverage with the debut of world focus, but please not at the expense of BBC news. With globalization and our uncertain position in the world it is more important than ever that we hear the opinions of other countries. Would like to see a rebirth of the program that covered the world press." [sic]
- *Nightly Business Report*:
 - "I'm steamed. Tonight (9/18/08) John McCain was presented seeking about the U.S. plan to create an entity to support the shakey financial markets as though HE had invented the idea. I seem to remember Barney Frank outlining this very same plan LAST night on the News Hour. How dare they use this to McCain's political advantage!! And is this program supposed to enlighten us average folks? What is short selling? Upticking? These and many other insider terms are tossed about freely without the slightest attempt at clarification for the general public. I would put Nightly Business Report on at about 6 AM." [sic]
- KCET's *Bracing for a Quake: A Survival Guide*:
 - "It is excellent! I am the president of The Community Civic Association of Laguna Woods Village [CA].... We have 12,736 homes in our village with over 18,000 seniors. We have a great Disaster Preparedness Task Force and a Disaster Plan, but this show talks to what the individual can do to be safe."
- *Sesame Street*:
 - "After growing up on Sesame Street and loving all the characters now that I have a daughter of my own I am sad to say I will have to turn off Sesame Street for good. I don't think that it is Sesame Street's responsibility to teach my child Spanish, I don't know why they took on this task but this is

why the show will be banned in my house. I am perfectly happy with diversity but the fact is all they show are characters that represent American descent and Hispanic descent, if they want to show diversity they should cover all the grounds. And including Spanish in TV shows is just insulting. Hispanic people can watch TV in Spanish with no English but I can't watch TV in English with no Spanish? The reason I am telling you all this is because not only is Sesame Street banned so are all their sponsors as long as this behavior continues. I hope more people will follow and show what the true majority is. Thank You!"

Programming ideas

Television

- Requests for a more in-depth and long-term investigation into the U.S. economy:
 - “I’d like CPB, *FRONTLINE*, or somebody to review from August 2007 to the current date – track the records of our great financial leaders, and see the confidence men that they are: talking a good game, the economy is fine – not recognizing the terrible risks that these banks were taking with essentially the American taxpayers’ money. They didn’t see it, because they kept downplaying it, because they are confidence men. So please go back to August 2007 and track the statements made by Bernanke – even before that, go to Greenspan – and Paulsen, the people who were supposedly in the know downplaying the overhang of debt that these institutions leverage and leveraged and leveraged for the asset classes that there really isn’t any demand for because there’s such an interconnectedness on a global scale among relatively few wealthy people that they are simply pushing the prices up....I wish you’d look at that so that you’d get a sense of the politicians and how they are all in cahoots trying to downplay.”
 - “There’s a woefully inadequate coverage of the economics of the Bush Administration in 2008, and I really wish you would get with the so-called private media to do more analysis of the Bush Administration’s record on the national economy.”
- Request that public broadcasters take a more active role when reporting on the economy and Congressional bailout plans:
 - “This is for all broadcasters: we are against the Democratic bailout on economic problems. Only Democrats are to blame, no one else! Especially those Democrats in Congress – Barney Frank, Chris Dodd, Charles Schumer, and especially Barack Obama! They have taken money

and pushed the housing chaos to where it is. We don't want a bailout. We don't want socialism in America! They need to be stopped!"

- Inquiry of interest in amateur etymologist's films on ants and termites for educational use on PBS
- Request for more frequent broadcasting of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in the Los Angeles area:
 - "Mister Rogers was a wonderful part of my childhood. I feel he needs to be a part of every growing child's life. I can not think of any other single individual that I would share with or bring into a child's life. Mister Rogers is by far one of the best influences a human soul can possible meet and learn from. No matter what age, we can all learn from and enjoy Mister Rogers. He is the first brick on the walkway to a life of love and happiness. Please, whoever reads this.....I know this is probably a business/ratings decision, but even if only one person a day watches Mister Rogers, it will be better than 10,000 people watching any of your other programming, possibly even Sesame Street (and Sesame Street made a big enough influence on my life that I worked at Sesame Place in Oxford Valley,PA.) The only (1 of at least 4) local PBS stations(about 10 total channels) here in Pasadena, CA that showed Mister Rogers at all was KCET....now they only show it once a week on Sundays. There should be at least one station in areas as large as the Los Angeles market that shows Mister Rogers at least once a day. Even if these were not public stations, I would never condone forcing anything on anyone. I would encourage the main Public Broadcasting Service office to encourage at least one local station in each area of the country to provide Mister Rogers on a daily basis. I am currently 30 years old and still look forward to watching Mister Rodgers in the morning.....but he may also be better suited for a early evening time slot when parents and children can watch him together. He creates a feeling of Peace, Love and Happiness....and even it that feeling only lasts the half an hour that Mister Rogers is on, then it is a good day." [sic]

Radio

- Request for NPR to consult new and different experts on the economy:
 - "people who analyze the economic situation from a position of non-establishment, which is to say the people who don't agree with our capital system, its competitive environment, in which people ARE at war with each other because they perpetuate false images of scarcity."
- Request for NPR to provide more background in economics and finance for the benefit of listeners:

- “The American people need an education in the history of capitalism, vis-à-vis the three great religious traditions that play a temporary role in the present structuring of the world, in a feedback loop, if you will. What is the nature of money? What is the nature of the relationship between lender and borrower, between a seller and a buyer, in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions? How have those relationships played out over time?...The fundamental cause of this crisis is NOT the freezing up of credit, but rather: the meaning of life. What is the purpose of our – and each one of us has to make this decision – our life, and the decisions that each one of us makes, we abdicate and then we collect around others...We need to assign responsibility to those on Wall Street, according to my understanding of my religious tradition of Judaism. The investors, the brokers on Wall Street are uncaring, indifferent, depraved! They operate with a jungle mentality of ‘me first!’...Your listeners need a crash course in the history of money. We hear that we need to make our money work harder for us, but that’s the problem – our money doesn’t work hard. People need to work harder, to be more productive.”

Statement to the Board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting

"Project Champion's Incomplete Objectivity and Balance Review"

(Also for inclusion in the 2008 "Open to the Public" report to Congress)

CAMERA - Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America

September 23, 2008

Chairman Boskin, Members of the Board:

Four years ago CAMERA submitted a statement titled "Oversight Failure: The Case of National Public Radio" to the Corporation for Public Broadcast board. This was done as part of CPB's annual "Open to the Public" forum.

CAMERA pointed out that although CPB shared "all substantive comments it receives with the public broadcasting system for review and response" and conducted other activity related to perceptions of objectivity and balance in public broadcasting, the corporation did not consider the substance of specific complaints. In short, CAMERA noted that CPB had no mechanism for actually monitoring and upholding the legal requirement of "strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature," a requirement in place since public broadcasting's establishment in 1967.

CAMERA recommended that, "as a necessary step to carrying out such oversight, a unit be created within CPB, reporting directly to the president and the board. This unit would conduct substantive reviews of serious criticisms to ensure recipient compliance." Reviews would be based on traditional journalistic standards including accuracy, objectivity, balance, comprehensiveness, context, fairness, absence of conflicts of interest and prompt corrections. These criteria would accord with, for example, the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Associated Press' Statement of News Values and Principles.

CPB instead established two ombudsmen. Although these established a specific address for complaints regarding objectivity and balance violations, the ombudsmen were outside contractors whose work was solely advisory.

A year later, CPB's Inspector-General reported that objectivity and balance oversight was one of eight areas in which the corporation needed to improve. The I-G noted that CPB had NOT conducted its own objectivity and balance reviews of programming, let alone acted to correct imbalances. By implication, establishment of the ombudsmen had not solved the problem.

In response, the board launched Project Champion. Regarding objectivity and balance, Project Champion has sought advice on best practices from stakeholders including public broadcasting executives and

deans of journalism schools. It also has requested "white papers" on various aspects of objectivity and balance.

Some of what CPB has heard from these stakeholders misses the point. For example, Henry Becton, former president of WGBH Boston, told the board that objectivity and balance standards were difficult to apply and that journalists did not use the terms much anymore, preferring fairness over time.

But a rule of "fairness over time" does not necessarily comport with "strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature," and certainly not in the case of individual installments or limited-run series. And if coverage is not objective or balanced in the short run, at what point over time does it become fair? Giving equal time to Tokyo Rose and Franklin Roosevelt might have been described superficially as "fair," but it would not have qualified as objective or balanced. Likewise if you divided your current broadcast time equally between Al Jazeera and "The News Hour."

Oregon Public Broadcasting President Steve Bass, a member of a panel reviewing responses to CPB's white paper requests, was quoted by Communications Daily as saying that objectivity and balance is "an extremely difficult thing to sort through If there weren't federal funds involved in this we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

Of course not. The First Amendment's freedom of the press provision would prevent it, when it comes to private media. But public broadcasting, subsidized in part by public funds - that is, by taxes - comes under other legal standards, including the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 and the Telecommunications Act of 1992, with their objectivity and balance provisions.

That's why Mr. Bass' opinion that if Project Champion "raises the level of discourse" on the subject, it would be a good thing, also misses the point. The issue is not a discourse on objectivity and balance, but how CPB will, after 41 years of neglect, uphold the statutory requirement regarding objectivity and balance in programming by recipients of corporation funding.

Seen in that light, Project Champion's consultations so far can be considered only advisory, informational. They in no way relieve the corporation of its legal responsibility. Project Champion's ultimate stakeholders are the taxpaying public and members of Congress. They expect objectivity and balance, not a discourse.

It is sometimes said that objectivity and balance are difficult to monitor or uphold because they and other journalistic standards are subjective. Journalism may be described as a collection of subjective techniques aimed at producing an objective result. But that hardly means the endeavor is impossible by nature - we read, hear and see examples of good journalism daily.

Associated Press' Statement of News Values and Principles begins by asserting that AP staffers "have had the privilege of bringing truth to the world. They have gone to great lengths ... to ensure that the news was reported quickly, accurately and honestly." That means that Associated Press members "abhor inaccuracies, carelessness, bias or distortions."

These are not just words, they are standards, standards on which CPB should base its own objectivity and balance oversight. It may be said that journalists don't use the terms objectivity and balance much anymore, but no one believes we have transcended the empirical, objective search for facts, for truth when it comes, for example, to medicine, engineering, or accounting.

When dangers are immediately apparent, those who might otherwise argue that "every side has its own narrative," that "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter" will not insist that "one patient's illness is another's health." Lord Acton, who famously observed that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, was a historian who also asserted that "truth is the only merit that gives dignity and worth to history." To history, and to news reporting and public affairs programming, especially that subsidized in part by taxpayers.

In his book *A History of News*, Mitchell Stephens explained that balance results when truth is accurately presented. In finally enforcing the objectivity and balance standard, CPB will be upholding trust in the truthfulness of public broadcasting.

Thank you.

- Eric Rozenman

Washington Director

CAMERA - Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America

CAMERA is a Boston-based non-profit, educational organization with 55,000 members.

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