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PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS AND PUBLIC-PURPOSE PROGRAMMING:

Viewer reactions to PBS schedule changes that reduce access to independent documentary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research analyzes responses from the general public to the news that a series featuring independent filmmakers' documentaries, *Independent Lens*, had been dropped from PBS' core schedule. Viewers offer a range of responses, which share a common implication: there is currently untapped support, both financial and political, for public television, among viewers who feel themselves underserved by public television's lighter fare.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2012, an arcane scheduling controversy within public television became a public controversy over the purpose of public broadcasting. In response to revelations in a [Current magazine article](#) showing drastic fall-off in viewership for *Independent Lens* after a scheduling shift, filmmakers—many of whom regarded this series as a valuable possible outlet for their work—launched an [open letter to PBS](#) on the Kartemquin Films website.

The open letter argued not only that independent filmmakers' work deserved showcasing, but that *Independent Lens* and other public-purpose programming fulfilled a core function of a taxpayer-funded service: "Taxpayers support public broadcasting because democracy needs more than commercial media's business models can provide." The letter argued that the programming destined for local stations across the country fulfilled this mandate in a variety of ways:

These are the stations that are well-served by well-crafted, well-told stories about underrepresented topics, meeting needs of underserved audiences in innovative ways. These are the stations that benefit from community activities related to the strands, such as ITVS's [Community Cinema](#) and [LINCS](#) programs. These are the stations that benefit from *IL* and *POV*'s constant technological innovation and experiment in engagement. And these are the stations that need to cultivate younger and more diverse audiences, the kind that can be attracted by the innovative, diverse films in these series.

Within a day the site had garnered 65 signatures from major filmmakers, and by 24 hours after a New York Times article covered the controversy, another 300 had joined. This list included some widely-recognized and awarded filmmakers, including Joan Churchill, Marshall Curry, Tony Fontana, Alex Gibney, David Grubin, Mary Harron, Steve James, Barbara Kopple, Bill Moyers and Michael Winship, Michael Moore, DA Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, Laura Poitras, John Patrick Shanley, Chuck Workman, and Jessica Yu.

As well, some of the commentators were not filmmakers, but viewers, curators, and others in the orbit of public TV and independent filmmaking.

Under this scrutiny, PBS broke a 10-month stalemate in discussions over scheduling, agreeing to move both *Independent Lens* and the independent documentary series *POV*, which also had been

scheduled to move off the core schedule, back onto the core schedule. PBS did not, however, stipulate where both series would be located.

Another open letter to PBS written by Michael Winship and Bill Moyers within the week, reproduced on [Huffington Post](#), [Free Press](#), [Common Dreams](#), [Care2](#), and others, immediately drew many more responses, and another 700 sign-ons to the Kartemquin open letter. This letter called independent filmmakers the heirs of public TV's innovative founders, saying their works "have not only re-energized the motion picture industry but also have vastly expanded the realm of the documentary -- in both the scope of its storytelling and the size and diversity of its audience." It called sympathetically upon PBS to put independent work back into its mix of programming, to sustain its "delicate balancing act" that also involves getting higher ratings and mitigating political pressure.

The following week, the Independent Documentary Association, with its 2,000 members and 20,000 online newsletter subscribers, joined the movement. [Kartemquin Films formed a steering committee](#), including an [IDA](#) member, in order to showcase the question not only of scheduling such programs but the public purpose of public television. Steering committee members included major award-winners and demonstrated the diversity of the body of independents: Beth Bird (for IDA), Heather Courtney, Marshall Curry, Tim Horsburgh (for Kartemquin), Byron Hurt, Brad Lichtenstein, Steve Mendelsohn, Paco de Onis, Gordon Quinn, Julia Reichert, Bernardo Ruiz, Carlos Sandoval, Renee Tajima-Pena, Michael Winship, and Pamela Yates.

The body of interested makers and viewers continues to grow, as film festivals and other venues plan to host forums to discuss the issue of what kind of shows public TV should program.

One of the remarkable features of this incident has been the way in which non-filmmakers reached out to participate in a cause that clearly was launched as an issue for filmmakers. Indeed, the greatest number of responses from non-filmmakers about the issue came on the site of Kartemquin Films, the filmmaking organization that began it.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study focused on the responses of non-filmmakers on the various sites featuring the controversy. We wanted to know what was driving non-filmmakers to participate in the issue. We wanted specifically to know whether they were responding as consumers of the specific programming, as public television habitués with an expectation for public-purpose programming, as citizens with an investment in public broadcasting as a feature of democratic media, or all three.

These attitudes can affect approaches to a variety of challenges in public television. Public station managers need to decide which programs most effectively can command viewer loyalty and therefore contributions. They need to evaluate the risks of programming potentially challenging material—whether because it is less transparently entertaining or because it raises thorny issues in

the society—and balance them against potential gains. Public broadcasting executives, throughout the collection of entities involved in providing this service, need to explain its value to nonprofit and corporate donors, politicians, and the public.

Academics have long theorized that public-service broadcasting serves a unique function in an open society. They note that while media in complex, democratic societies perform a vital function of public communication, they do so in ways that follow and sometimes reinforce unequal power structures (Carey, 1989; Couldry, 2011; McChesney, 1993; Starr, 2004). Studies in numerous countries with public-service broadcasting have demonstrated “the democratic virtues of public over commercial media,” especially including high-quality journalism of the kind that holds the powerful to accountability (Benson & Powers, 2011). They have postulated that public-service broadcasting mimics the public sphere, as a kind of pseudo-public sphere, and argued that public-service broadcasting can model civil discourse and feed such discourse in the public sphere (Patricia Aufderheide, 2000; Chanan, 2000; Keane, 1991). Finally, some, including Aufderheide, have argued that in the emergent, user-centric media environment, public-service broadcasting has a unique opportunity to engage users as citizens and active members of their society (Pat Aufderheide & Clark, 2009).

At the same time, many analysts over the years have noted the failure of public broadcasters generally to articulate their public mission. This ambiguity can permit great flexibility for executives. It can also create controversy and generate new problems for executives who find their perquisites threatened both by commercial rivals and by politicians who no longer find them fulfilling a distinctive role (Patricia Aufderheide, 1994; Bullert, 1997; Rowland & Tracey, 1990). Further, U.S. public broadcasting is marked by a decentralized structure, which makes its challenges in addressing mission as well as strategic planning extremely difficult (Patricia Aufderheide & Clark, 2008; Engelman, 1996).

In defining the mission of public television, many have described two ways to see the audience: as consumers, and as citizens. The second is often treated as the broccoli of television, while the first is often described both by politicians and critics denigratingly as a para-commercial function. But as Meijer (Meijer, 2005) proposed, if broadcasters consider besides the first two a third category of “enjoyers,” and include the notion of impact rather than simply ratings, they are able to understand their viewers in their diversity and as potential enthusiasts for programming across the spectrum.

Public-service broadcasting internationally is under close scrutiny by policy-makers and politicians eager to find services to cut in a time of ever greater budget tensions (Hargrave & Shaw, 2009). There is a marked tendency to demand that public broadcasting demonstrate that it can perform functions unavailable in commercial media (Moe, 2010). In the U.S., public broadcasters foresee drastic cutbacks in the state and local funding they have received, as states and localities face further cutbacks in federal funding and co-funding. Although some of this cutback at the state level was related to the recession, alarmingly the recent increase in states’ tax revenue has commonly been accompanied by further cuts to public broadcasting (Stearns & Soha, 2011). Public-service broadcasters are understandably in search of revenue models to substitute for services that

historically have received substantial taxpayer dollars. Simultaneously, they look for ways to justify this service to taxpayers.

The controversy that erupted around PBS's scheduling choices can shed light on how viewers alerted to this controversy expressed their relationship to public television. Their expressions can in turn provide some insights to the kinds of support available to public-service-oriented public television programming in the current environment. They can also demonstrate public articulation of the value of public broadcasting for researchers concerned with public valuation of an embattled public service.

METHODS

Between April 3, 2012 and April 4, 2012 we harvested 892 comments from 8 sites listed as follows:

- Kartemquin.com (672 comments)
- The Huffington Post (114 comments)
- Documentary.com (48 comments)
- Billmoyers.com (20 comments)
- CommonDreams.org (20 comments)
- Care2.com (14 comments)
- New York Times- Mediadecoder Blog (3 comments)
- Indiewire.com (1 comment).

We selected only the comments that were not identified as filmmakers endorsing the open letter. In one case, the commenter self-identified both as a filmmaker and as a viewer, and we incorporated that comment.

We then did a qualitative analysis of the nature of the comment, and grouped the comments into categories. In a few cases, viewers made more than one point in one comment. In those cases, we isolated the different points and counted the single comment in several categories. Our analysis was designed to identify the range of concerns about the move from viewers and potential viewers of public television.

DISCUSSION

Among the 892 comments, we found 593 comments from the viewer's perspective, which included some kind of explanation for the commenter's response to the position of the open letter.

There were no comments in favor of the PBS decision to move the series off the core schedule, which one could expect under moderation. All comments were comments of alarm and concern about the fate either of the series and its programming, of PBS and public TV, or both.

We then grouped the 593 comments into 7 categories, with 7 commenters being represented in two categories:

- I did/would watch but I can't find it: 42 comments;
- I find such programming meaningful: 299 comments;
- This programming is core to public mission: 109 comments;
- Public TV's mission includes using public money to present material that commercial TV cannot afford to: 44 comments;
- The attempt to move these programs appears to be evidence of caving to corporate or political pressure: 34 comments;
- These programs are good for public TV's future: 24 comments;
- Lack of such programming discourages me from supporting PBS: 41 comments;

Unredacted examples and excerpts of the comments are below.

I did/would watch but I can't find it

Some people wrote their comments as concerned consumers, people who valued programming that they now found frustrating of access:

Although I do enjoy POV and Independent Lens, both shows are usually broadcast at 11pm here which means that they are not convenient for me to watch.

'POV' and 'Independent Lens' must remain on PBS as well and be given stable time slots. I watch 10 hours of PBS a week (yes, I'm a member) and I have actually forgotten the last time I was able to find either of them. I have no doubt that if NOVA's Brian Greene programs on 'The Fabric of the Cosmos' can draw such a high number of head-scratchers (myself included; the 'holographic principle' wha?!), a properly advertised Independent Lens or POV can do it as well. And this means a steady time slot! Give me 'MI-5' and give me 'Frontline,' yes, but there must be room for 'POV' and 'Independent Lens.'

I wondered what happened to Independent Lens! I haven't caught it all season when usually I don't miss an episode. Now I know where it went.

Public Television is just that, "Public", supported by viewers. I support public television and radio, and want my Independent Lens to stay where it is, not in a time slot that may cause it to be dropped.

We do not even have these programs where I live except for occasionally. They are both favorites that I record and watch at my leisure. I have noticed the funding cuts have really affected by local PBS station and it is upsetting to me.

I am a life-long PBS enthusiast. I look for information and I look for creativity. The creativity piece invariably comes from independent filmmakers. They make compelling documentaries that cannot be found anywhere else. I have learned so much from POV,

Independent Lens and Frontline over the years, and watching them is a time I look forward to. I currently feel left adrift by the difficulty in finding these programs. I wholeheartedly back a move to reschedule these programs back to the most watched time periods. They are at the heart of what PBS is.

Because PBS broadcasts these programs so late at night, I have no choice but to record and watch later. But this is a high-class solution to a problem that PBS insists on creating in the first place: broadcast these essential documentaries and independent films at more reasonable hours. And it is a solution that does not work for everyone. Many elder folks who rely on PBS for entertainment and education are left behind due to such mistaken policies. Correct them.

So Independent Lens moved to Sunday at 11:00? No wonder I missed it. Sorry channel 13 but I read that the 40 something demographic has tuned out. Not surprising. With two little kids, an exahausting weekend behind me, and the prospect of an early wakening Monday morning I am one 46 year old no longer likely to watch. Please return this excellent documentary series (and POV too) to reasonable time slots in prime time.

I find programs like POV, Independent Lens, Frontline and Need to Know, to be invaluable sources of real journalism that is hard to find elsewhere. I also would like such programs to air at a more reasonable time of evening as I am unable to stay up late on weeknights, as I'm sure are other viewers.

I find such programming meaningful

Some viewers wrote in as concerned viewers who might or might not be watching at the moment but who would like to see more such programming in their media diet, because they found them deeply satisfying, pleasurable, and even inspiring; because they felt they helped people understand each other better; and because they thought other people would also like the programming:

Independent Lens has been an inspiration to me and others I know in regards to the production of "meaningful" film, which has educational, social, and intellectual value. Films that raise awareness in the minds of the general public to events, issues, and artistic reason. Such programs spark a desire in young film makers, to become socially, politically, and ethically conscious of the world around them and to provoke contemplation of these ideas in the viewer.

POV and Independent Lens are amazing please recognize the value these programs contribute to our culture and to PBS.

It is not that I am part of the documentary community that I wish you to reconsider your decision to reschedule these 2 very important programs, it is also because I am and have been for a long time an avid fan of these programs. They are important and extraordinary programs. Please do not try and fix what is not broken.

Please keep these invaluable strands available to national audiences hungry for the important content they provide.

Docs are more important than ever - this is no time to confuse your audience by challenging them to FIND them on your broadcast!

In an ever fragmenting world, these series are one of the only national showcases for documentary we have. Moving them to Thursday will destroy that showcase and the audience that has been so long in the making. What is the role and purpose of public media other than to support programming like this that has become "an institution" for socially-conscious viewers, citizens, educators.

As a viewer, I treasure the information from documentaries and investigations found on PBS. They are an important source of learning about complex and contemporary issues. I used to live in a rural state where sources of information were few, and programs like these were my source of diverse perspectives. I urge you to make these available at times when a larger audience tunes in.

P.O.V. and Independent Lens are indispensable as sources of insight and inspirations for this aspiring artist. No where else do you see the free spirit of people dedicated to the pursuit of their passions as you do in these programs. I highly encourage PBS to revisit their decision to move these programs to the back-burner and promote what has been, at least to this regular viewer, an encouraging source for information.

Instead of dismissing documentary films, PBS should be embracing them by broadcasting them nationally and at a time-slot with the largest potential for growth. Just look at HBO's Monday night documentary film schedule for validation that this kind of programming is what the public wants. Put the "public" back in focus, PBS, and celebrate the great documentary work that is being produced.

As a person on a fixed income, I cannot afford to go and see the many documentaries that come each year. But thanks to both POV and Independent Lens I have been able to not only see good films but educate myself about many important issues facing people and the Nation. Because I know I am not the only person in my situation I ask PBS to put these shows back on Tuesdays.

I grew up watching POV (I'm now 25) and would hate to see its strong effect diminished in any way. The many documentaries of which I've had the pleasure of viewing through the series have inspired me to advocate social justice and to be a more understanding and tolerant person. Something as simple as a time slot change could have a tremendous effect, I urge you to rethink this and hope to be able to see these series on the air, in a primetime slot, for many many years to come.

I, for one, would trade a dozen repeats of tired Doo-Wop revivals and dated travelogues for a fresh, current point of view on a subject of substance.

Some of these people also went far beyond the open letter's call for action, which was for filmmakers to sign on, to call for a viewer's movement to support this programming:

Each of us must reach out to families, friends, and acquaintances; to people in our communities who know and value the programs which are available only on public television. PBS needs to hear from them, in the thousands, and tens of thousands -- and more. Spread the word! Start the campaign!

PBS's decision affects all supporters of documentary films, not only filmmakers, but foundations, politicians, broadcasters and our audiences. We must rally them in common cause. For more is needed than our "electronic voices" to stop this effort to eliminate these two venues that contribute to the life blood of democracy.

This programming is core to public mission

Some viewers grounded their concern about the change in programming schedule in their belief that such programming is core to public TV's mission. Most emphasized particularly its function in informing, educating and engaging a democratic public, but a few also mentioned public TV's role in showcasing the arts:

The constant for measuring the effectiveness of our media is how the press furthers and protects the goals and values stated in the preamble to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

They MUST be part of national programming so that diverse, independent voices can be amplified and public media can make good on its commitment and responsibility to improve the lives of people all over this country.

Transparency begets Independent Documentaries. Independent Documentaries beget low-cost Access to Me and You. Low-cost Access begets The Truth. The Truth can be hidden when monied interests call the shots on Access. Move POV and all other Transparent Commentary back to their previous time slots. Otherwise, My Trust in PBS moves to a mistrust in their hypocrisy.

It's imperative that we maintain our focus on creating a positive future for us all. Media and independent films are a vital part of keeping the flame of hope alive; sustaining a new vision, and inspiring us to be conscious creators of a more just, equitable and sustainable world.

You're going to hurt your mission by hiding the most powerful content on your schedule. The mentality that supports 'series' storytelling as opposed to single topic docs is what turned the history channel into a joke. Sure they're pulling better numbers but look at what they had to become to do it.

Going from one hour of work guaranteed to be made by completely independent voices, carefully curated by POV and Independent Lens, to putting them into the free-for-all-of local programming on Thursday means that a local issue that deserves that time slot trumps projects which may have taken 5 years to make. These programs had built a consequential audience on Tuesday nights. One hour out of the 24/7 programming on PBS seems little enough to grant the organizations that independent filmmakers and our supporters have crafted carefully to represent original prose films on timely subjects.

Won't you reconsider your mandate to serve the public and give us all the right and opportunity to see non-fiction films that do not necessarily look like or sound like everything else on TV. PBS deserves to trust and value itself more highly than this.

With the diversity of opinions that are given voice in documentary films and with the dedication that POV and Independent Lens display in finding, supporting, and securing such films, it is a deep shame that PBS fails to show its corresponding support and instead relegates those two series to struggle on their own with regard to scheduling...I urge PBS to reconsider and reverse its decision. A greater man than any of us said that the cornerstone of democracy rests on the foundation of an educated electorate. Many shows on PBS amuse, entertain, and enlighten. The films on POV and Independent Lens do all of that and educate as well.

PBS is a coalition of stations, programmers, filmmakers and viewers. Respecting the need and the place for independent films on POV and Independent Lens is an important role for national PBS. Setting indies and local programming to compete for time on Thursday nights makes no sense for either party, and makes even less sense in light of need for an informed public. Public. You know, public as in the "P" in PBS.

Now more than ever our democracy needs a robust mixture of well articulated points of view. Especially on television the conversation is dominated by the culture of hysterical sound bites and twenty second media clips. This is happening at a time when there is a proliferation of high quality, fascinating long form documentaries. These films are produced but often do not reach their deserved audience, the American public. There must be a PROMINENT place on the public airwaves for these important films to be seen by millions of Americans.

The films brought to the public by POV and Independent Lens are an important contribution to keeping the public informed, and thus to the continually threatened democracy in this country. PBS knows better than any of us the effects that changing the schedule in this way will have on viewership and access, and I sincerely hope will reconsider this ill advised change. As a programmer for film festivals and exhibitions, I can vouch for the importance of proper positioning of programs, and the way in which valuable work can fail to reach people, because of the timing of the screenings.

PBS is too important a voice, a medium and a pioneer for independent film, i.e. independent thinking. Keep programming vital, essential and available to the general public.

I have been a viewer and supporter of Public Television for many years. Recently, I heard a comment that, because of the commercialization of PBS, the only true public television in America is C-SPAN. While C-SPAN is valuable, it does not serve the same purpose that is served by PBS. You will not see programs or series such as "The Power of Myth" or "The Elegant Universe" on C-SPAN. These programs were entertaining, certainly, but the pure, accessible educational content of these programs made them irreplaceable. Programs such as "Independent Lens", "P.O.V.", and "Frontline" offer the public information and content that will never be seen on commercial TV. Please support the reversal of the trend to "commercialize" PBS.

As George Seldes is quoted as saying, in "Tell the Truth and Run," "if people only KNEW about it, they'd DO something about it!!!" At this time, people have to know what's going on to take action and make critical change in our society. They shouldn't have to chase their information sources all over the place. Now they know where to find them. Let's keep it that way.

PBS, unlike all of entertainment, has never simply done what is popular. It has always done great art for arts sake. Please continue supporting documentary filmmakers and the essential work they do. They have so few outlets already. To lose the support of PBS would be devastating.

Public TV's mission includes using public money to present material that commercial TV cannot afford to

One variant on commentary that focused on public mission was targeted to the commenters' perceptions that public TV could and therefore should be freer from advertisers' agendas and narrow profit considerations than commercial media.:

Network television serves the advertiser, and always has. PBS has tried to serve the people.

I think public television serves a real purpose (when it's successful) in bringing to us programming that commercial television will not distribute because it won't turn a profit. Unfortunately so much of what I see on PBS these days could easily and should be broadcast on any of the commercial or cable stations.

In my opinion the real reason to have public television is that it can tell stories that are unpopular with advertisers, meaning that it can afford to be controversial.

Independent film gains importance as dominant media extends its control over broadcasting. Only PBS can guarantee a vibrant, independent film community in today's market. Some will always value quality over quantity. PBS should do all it can to encourage that quality. When

people have a chance to see it, they will know it. I, for one, will use my contributions to encourage quality. Why not have independent work on Tuesday AND Thursday?

Restore the shows to a more reasonable time so you are actually fulfilling your stated mission. It is really important in times like these that publicly funded airwaves are not filled with the pap of private corporate drivel and lies. PBS needs independents.

The attempt to move these programs appears to be evidence of caving to corporate or political pressure

Some commentators made remarks indicating their belief that PBS's schedule change had been motivated by bottom-line thinking or possibly a fear of political pressure. These remarks often also indicated a distrust of corporate media, and sometimes suggested that PBS by its decisions could be tainted with the same distrust:

This move toward self-censorship belies the terror abroad in the country and moves us all one step further to fearful uniformity."

Please show some backbone. This is more than about numbers.

In its decision to remove Independent Lens and POV from the national schedule, PBS has betrayed its founding principles and its raison d'etre.

You can't just slot something else into their time slot and think it will do as well or better. There was a well thought out synergy at work. Your choice looks either politically motivated (only a bit of a reach) or like the activity of a management system which doesn't know what else to do except move the pieces around the board and hope. Please, put these pieces back and focus on other areas.

I suspect that PBS intends to dismantle POV and Independent Lens by first reducing their audience, then using the reduced ratings as a rationale for eventually terminating the shows or relegating them into the backwaters of television. In this manner, PBS will accommodate those who are determined to stifle any presentation that contradicts or challenges the official version of American life.

PBS is supposed to be about Public education and entertainment. Not all decisions need to be "commercial". Especially on Public Television.

These programs are good for public TV's future

Some viewers addressed PBS with the argument that not only were the programs on such series good quality and good for mission, but they would be good for public TV's future, because they were both innovative and brought diversity to television, and also attracted new and diverse audiences, which the commenters believed public TV would need to survive:

They bring diversity and innovation to PBS in a way that no other programming does -- offering a glimmer of hope that PBS could become relevant to younger and culturally diverse audiences. Independent documentaries give voice to underserved and marginalized communities in ways that no other programming does.

This program is an asset to Public Television, in that it captures the mind of the younger viewers such as teenagers and young college students, folks in their 30s and 40s, and the "geriatric" set as well.

PBS' recent decision is clearly short-sighted and ignores viewer needs. Sadly, it is also in line with similar decisions public broadcasters in other countries have been making over the past several years. It's time to speak up against these ill-fated practices before it's too late.

I founded the graduate program in documentary film and video at Stanford University. Many of our graduates have had their works shown on Independent Lens and POV. These programs serve to bring freshness and diversity to the public broadcasting.

I am only a high school senior and do not have the expertise as others nor am I as qualified, but I have tremendous reverence for PBS and the opportunities it allows for independent filmmakers. As an aspiring documentarian, I dearly hope these programs are still running for generations to come. Please reverse your decision and give back to independent films the exposure they so much deserve.

Lack of such programming discourages me from supporting PBS

Some commenters were discouraged, bitter, or even cynical. They took the opportunity of commenting to express their disappointment with a programming schedule they are not motivated to support:

I have watched the decline of PBS with sadness. Here in the Washington area, the station's schedule is now filled with vapid and/or trivial stuff. Oh, and did I mention all the British imports? I think PBS should stand for "Primarily British Shows." I have contributed to my local station for over 20 years. I will not do so again.

I can remember when 'noncommercial' public television actually had no commercials. They've got them now. They come between programs, but they are in many cases the same commercials that are to be seen on regular TV.

I have seen it change from an actually-educational resource 24/7 (I mean, you could find the lives of poets at 3 a.m.!) to a vacuous, timid, worthless waste of time now featuring no less than LAWRENCE WELK re-runs, British nobility-tales, antique-roadshow greed-fests, and endless fund-raisers. "Support this extraordinary programming!" they say---Huh? Poor America---so utterly terrified that anybody is going to start thinking and PBS is leading the charge down the rabbit-hole, while shamelessly pitching for retirees' estates and savings. What a disgrace. My family used to donate all the time.

There are several PBS stations in the SF Bay Area. The biggest station, KQED, shows commercials and fills its pledge week with infomercials! For new age gurus and get-rich cheerleaders! How low can they go?! POV and Independent Lens are among the few bright spots. They should be highlighted, feted and pampered, not hidden away.

PBS needs to support and schedule programs like POV & Independent Lens. I used to watch PBS almost exclusively in the 90s. Then as the programming became less deep and less serious, I started watching it less. When I still could afford TV, I had switched to UCTV & FSTV, only watching American Experience and Frontline, POV, Independent Lens and a few gems like Extreme Oil that were scheduled in the middle of the night. I have watched a friend transformed from a balanced thinking person to a right wing person voting against his own best interest when the digital signal went in and he could no longer get OPB. He used to watch the News Hour faithfully. He was given the special digital box but could never get the OPB signal. He's retired and now faithfully watches FOX news which seems to be available everywhere.

In an ocean of commercialized, sensationalized, ad-driven, ratings-dependent media, Independent Lens & POV are one of the rare homes for Independent films and documentaries. They are also the main draw to PBS for many viewers. Why drop them into a less popular time-slot potentially risking loss of viewership?

Commercializing public broadcasting, which has been going on now for a number of years, is taking the strength out of this gift to our country. Not because one or two shows are viewed less. Because hearts change.

For most of its history PBS has given us a footprint of what a media outlet interested in a civil society should be. PBS represents 90% of what I watch. Nevertheless, I have noticed over the last 3-5 years, that the standards of the news and analysis programs have veered away from the in-depth coverage toward more of the the false equivalencies commonly seen on mainstream media. Please give us More penetrating programs such as Moyers & Company and Charle Rose...And do not do anything to jeopardize the prospectsof Independent Lens and other such quality material.

CONCLUSIONS

The range of comments is noteworthy, first, for the extensive and thoughtful commentary, demonstrating both reflection and an investment in the subject matter. This is particularly notable since the open letter was not addressed to viewers at all, but to filmmakers.

The comments are also notable for their non-partisan approach. The responses do not indicate partisan passion, but rather frequently invoke the need for fresh perspective, diversity of opinion, diversity of audiences, and views untrammelled by advertisers' or political agendas.

The comments are noteworthy as well for the tone of good faith in which many are written. Most are written to the implied interlocutor of PBS, and with the expectation that they will be heard. They present arguments that often are made sympathetic to what they perceive to be the real challenges of public television (balancing political and economic concerns with public-purpose mission, for example).

The comments also indicate an impressive degree of loyalty both to such programming and to public television. The viewers strongly identify both with individual programs they have enjoyed and with the general category of independent production, aligning it with public TV's mission.

There is a minority strand of cynicism and disillusionment in the comments. These comments are often cast in terms of a long viewer commitment to the service, with patience wearing out. Those comments sometimes overlap in tone with some viewers' perceptions that the programming shift was made under political or economic pressure. Viewers in this group do not see the programming shift as an aberration, but part of a disappointing and dismaying pattern. At the same time, even those discouraged by what they perceive to be the commercializing and political neutering of public television make their negative comments within a frame of high expectations for the service.

The comments are routinely couched in terms of a perception of public television as a potential resource for those who want to be active members of their society and thoughtful viewers in a noisy and unreliable media environment. Viewers invoke democracy, the constitution, the founders, the diversity of American experience, and the need for civil discourse. Trust is a critical value. They find this programming and programming like it on public television trustworthy; some indeed find it suspicious when it is moved or removed. They perceive public TV not as a haven to retreat to in a heartless media environment, but as a trusted tool for their daily lives, as a needed alternative to distrusted media at a time when citizens need to know about important issues.

These comments demonstrate a degree of thoughtfulness about the role of media, the role of public television, and the role of public television's viewers, that offers possibilities for PBS, local stations and other public TV entities. They suggest that there is a body of users of public TV that is being under-utilized at the moment, whether for fundraising, testimonial support, or—as some suggest—as engagement agents who can recruit more public TV supporters. Following Meijer (Meijer, 2005), they may be seen as viewers with an expectation for high-quality, innovative presentations, who follow this work not because they are diligently seeking out broccoli for their media diet but because they richly enjoy the material and find it connects with their lives. They value public television precisely for this material.

Such viewers are sometimes brought forward as examples during appropriation season in Congress. They however also appear to be a promising constituency that can both articulate a public-purpose agenda for the service that they value, but also actively support it if public TV both serves them with suitable programming and engages them in the challenge of building more support for such programming. Indeed, the unsolicited suggestions of some that they mobilize more viewer

support—something that was never mentioned in the open letter they endorsed—shows untapped capacity.

The arguments of some researchers that public television can function as a resource for public knowledge and action and simultaneously compelling television appears to be reflected in the experience and values of viewers who took the time to make reasoned appeals to a largely-trusted programming service that they perceive to play a distinctive and at-risk role in American media.

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