



The Mailbag: Are We Having Fun Yet? Plus Bibi and Pando

By Michael Getler

March 27, 2014

I was away last week and what follows is a catch-up mailbag on a few things that a few viewers said they did not like.

First, some background. The first group of letters posted below refers, not kindly, to a five-minute segment at the end of the March 10 edition of the PBS NewsHour. It was introduced this way by NewsHour co-anchor Gwen Ifill: "We want to end with a little humor tonight. A little, albeit, public television humor. PBS Digital Studios has launched a new web series, 'Everything But the News,' that manages to find some fun in what we do here every night. Its creator, Steve Goldbloom, laughed at us all the time when he worked here not long ago. Now, we laugh with him. A reminder, this is a joke. Plus, we're kind of in on it, as you'll see. Here's the first episode."

The series, in which actual NewsHour anchors appear, is a satirical, 10-part, online-only affair on PBS.org that "pokes fun at the conventions of news shows like the PBS NewsHour," as the *Columbia Journalism Review* put it in an upbeat review. It is, as CJR reported, "the first original comedy series produced by PBS Digital Studios, the two-year-old online content arm of the public broadcaster." The online SF Weekly in San Francisco also liked it. The folks who wrote to me, clearly TV-watchers, did not like it. In fairness, this series is *not* meant for television. It was only shown on the NewsHour as an example of something new that is online at PBS.org. So the critical letters may not mean much. On the other hand, they could be cautionary.

Bibi on the Boat

The second batch of letters refers to a one-hour program titled "Israel: The Royal Tour" which aired on March 6 on about 40 (of some 350) PBS-member stations. The program was described in a press release as providing "an up-close-and-personal journey with a very special guide: the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu." The letters below about this one are pretty strong.

But, as in many things that land in my mailbox, this is complicated. Most importantly, this film was not distributed by PBS. It was distributed by the National Educational Telecommunications

Association (NETA), another major distributor of films for public broadcasters. All PBS member stations are independent and can air whatever they choose and it looks like about 40 of them did so, according to NETA.

The film is produced and hosted by Peter Greenberg, the travel editor of CBS News, and is part of a series that, according to the press release, previously included tours of Jordan, New Zealand, Jamaica, Peru and Mexico by leaders in those countries. NETA says the only one of those it distributed was the one on Israel.

But people who see programs on their local PBS stations think they are watching PBS programs, and who can blame them? Would you notice if that little PBS icon occasionally at the bottom of the screen was missing? But there is, in many cases, that link that is one-step removed from PBS ownership. In this case, the program was produced "in association with" PBS-member station WILW21 on Long Island, N.Y., for member station WNET, which is the flagship media provider in New York and the parent company of Channel Thirteen and the Long Island station.

WLIW was also the distributor, with satellite access provided through NETA, for the 2011 program on Mexico featuring former President Felipe Calderon.

As for the letters on this program posted farther down in this column, a spokesperson at WNET had this to say in response: "As a public television station, we possess no ideology, other than to offer a wide variety of thought-provoking programs which we hope will enlighten, educate and entertain our diverse audience. Please know that viewer feedback is vital to the station and your comments have been shared with the producers of this series for their information."

More from Pando

Finally, there is a letter about the NewsHour and its content arm, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, and MLP's relationship with its longtime majority financial backer, Liberty Media; a relationship that is now in the processing of ending. I received more, shorter letters on this subject but the one posted is the most comprehensive. The letter is based on a second online article about the program by David Sirota on PandoDaily. I wrote about the earlier article by Sirota and its impact and aftermath last month.

Here are the letters.

Can't Take 'a Joke'?

Your so-called fun feature at the end of the March 10th NewsHour was a total waste. Could not make sense, not funny, and a terrible waste of time when there are many real issues. Also, many want to cut your funding; this just feeds that mentality.

Fred Sales, Groveland, SC

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Whoever - singly or as a group - came up with the imbecilic, stupid, distracting idea to air the "comic" segment on the 3/10/2014 program should immediately be fired. PBS needs to announce their names and apologize profusely for having allowed such an embarrassment.

Roslyn Parker, Ashland, OR

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Your NEWSHOUR has a reputation of presenting timely and interesting news in a professional manner. PLEASE cancel "Everything But The News." I saw it Monday, March 10th, and it 1) took time away from other important news items 2) failed in its attempt to be funny. Such unprofessional videos can easily be found on the internet. 3) made me question the integrity of PBS and its future programming.

New York, NY

A Royal Something

On Thursday March 6th, your local Southern California PBS station, PBSO CAL, ran "Israel - the Royal Tour." They listed this program as a "documentary." In fact it was a guided travel log featuring Benjamin Netanyahu as our "host." I am very curious to know why you chose to run this program. Why run this piece of Israeli propaganda and list it as a "documentary"? Do you think so little of your audience that you think we don't know what is going on in Israel? That we should be taken in by this fawning piece of puffery? This Life with BiBi travel log? I have been a PBS viewer for more than 40 years and have always had a great deal of respect for the NewsHour and much of what has been presented in the name of balance, truth and scientific fact. I looked on the expansion of this station as a great addition to responsible, intelligent television in Southern California. You have sorely disappointed me. There is much to be said about Israel and the problems it and the entire middle-eastern region. But unless we get the truth and not P.R. about these people and their problems, we will never be able to help resolve them. We will only make things worse. Your station and your organization are constantly asking for funds and promoting yourselves as a great information resource. Between this and your fad-driven fund raisers and the increasingly obvious corporate sponsorship, you are quickly blowing your chance at support from intelligent, concerned audiences.

Eric Johnson, San Pedro, CA

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I'm a member and will continue to be a member for now but some things that PBS does make me sick. Your coverage of Israel is generally abysmal. For example, you showed 7 (I think?) POV documentaries and 2 were anti-Israel. So, not only is Israel the very worst country in the world, but its evilness dwarfs all other evils in the world - disease, famine, you name it. Then, comes pledge week and the pandering begins. History of the Jews, with producers talking Yiddish. Bibi Netanyahu giving a tour of Israel. Maybe there are people in the audience who fall for it, but not everyone and not forever.

Basking Ridge, NJ

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How does PBS justify producing and airing a tourist board piece for the apartheid and racist government of Israel? Further how can Netanyahu be included, a foreign leader who actively interfered in the last US national election in an attempt to defeat President Obama? Netanyahu's government is continuously stealing more territory from its neighbor and this week was debating taking over Al Aqsa Mosque. How do we as a country, continue to show friendship and support to a country that ignores UN resolutions, spied on the US to obtain nuclear weapons (WMD), in fact has purposely attacked US armed forces in an attempt to drag us into a war. Where is a sympathetic program on Palestine or its people?

Ramsey, NH

(Ombudsman's Note: I assume the letter-writer is referring to the conviction in 1987 of an American intelligence analyst, Jonathan Pollard, for passing classified information to Israel, and the attack on the USS Liberty, a US Navy technical research ship during the Six-Day War in 1967 for which Israel apologized, claiming they thought it was an Egyptian ship, which was disputed by survivors.)

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I was shocked to see you air a special on Israel hosted by Benjamin Netanyahu who has turned Israel into an Apartheid State. <http://www.alternet.org/world/meet-bibi-netanyahus-refusenik-nephew-who-says-israel-apartheid-state>. Even his nephew, among so many other individuals and peace & reconciliation groups within Israel, recognizes this truth. Obviously, PBS is pandering to the extremist Zionists in S. FL by airing such a program. I am very disappointed in PBS.

To me, it would be the same as if you aired a special on German exceptionalism hosted by Adolph Hitler.

Marie Spike, Delray Beach, FL

Give Me Liberty or...

I am deeply disturbed by a recent report by David Sirota in Pando. I have been under the false impression that the NewsHour was a MacNeil/Lehrer production owned by them and PBS. To learn that John Malone, a wealthy conservative, is the majority stakeholder since 1994 is unacceptable. Did I miss the broadcast of this pertinent piece of information? How many member dollars did he receive annually? This is especially galling as the unrelenting fund-raising currently goes on. Now it appears that there is currently a move to change ownership to WETA. None of the details of the deal with Liberty Media or with the planned change to the Washington DC station have been disclosed. This is outrageous since in theory PBS is public and should not be hiding the particulars of the transactions. My trust in the NewsHour is seriously compromised. To say I am altogether more than disappointed in PBS is an understatement. I

have been a supporting member of Thirteen in New York for many years. I have also read that in conjunction with the NewsHour they were airing a series on pensions funded by the Arnold Foundation. John Arnold apparently was active in forming pension policy. Apparently, after this was revealed by Sirota, the station finally reconsidered its decision and returned the funding. Why anyone would entertain this idea to begin with is beyond me as it is a direct conflict of interest. I will be reconsidering my support based on whether PBS does the right thing. Don't make the mistake of stonewalling like many people and institutions the NewsHour itself reports on. Being honest and forthcoming may produce much short term fallout but will in the end ensure that the NewsHour will survive and hopefully thrive.

Joyce Gavin, Palisades, NY

The PBS NewsHour Responds

For more than 35 years, Robert MacNeil, Jim Lehrer, and MacNeil/Lehrer Productions (MLP) have produced the PBS NewsHour and its predecessors. The program, under their control, continues to be one of the most admired news programs on television, known for its fairness, journalistic excellence and in-depth reporting.

In 1994 MLP announced that Liberty Media agreed to take a majority partnership interest in MLP. In the public press release, the parties made clear that editorial control of the NewsHour would be held by Jim Lehrer and Robin MacNeil. The nature and structure of the original agreement has not changed and remains a private partnership. The ownership structure of MLP is publicly available on MLP's website, Liberty Media's website and the Wikipedia page for PBS NewsHour.

PBS NewsHour is operated on a break-even budget. Liberty Media takes no profit from the ongoing operation of the PBS NewsHour program. MacNeil/Lehrer Productions also produces other programming in addition to PBS NewsHour. Its projects include documentaries, civic engagement events and educational programs that have been distributed through public media as well as commercial networks.

Public broadcasting in the United States is a public-private partnership. The public television system is comprised of a wide array of organizations, from producers and local stations to distributors like PBS. Each entity is independently owned and operated.

Discussions between WETA and MLP regarding the contribution of the PBS NewsHour to WETA are ongoing.

My Thoughts

I would make a couple of observations.

First, I think the NewsHour statement above comes across as a careful, lawyerly answer that I'm sure is correct as far as it goes but makes no concession to the idea that public television should

have more of an obligation to transparency when it comes to the details of some of its dealings and relationships.

As for the letter from the viewer, it was no secret when Liberty Media bought a two-thirds ownership of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions in 1995. The Pando article refers to press releases at the time and the progressive media-watch group known as FAIR, which frequently finds fault with PBS and the NewsHour, issued a criticism of the deal in February 1995. On the other hand, the association with Liberty has not exactly been headlined by the NewsHour over the years and it is hard to find any reference to it unless you research MLP.

As a general rule, it is not a good idea to have a large, wealthy, politically-active organization—left or right-leaning—as the principle backer of a news-producing entity. NewsHour officials have said the original agreement made clear that "editorial control and management would always rest" with Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer, and the latest Pando article provides no evidence—and there is no evidence that I'm aware of—that Liberty Media has attempted to influence, or actually influenced, NewsHour coverage over the years.

Finally, I would say that while the initial article on Feb. 12 by Sirota—revealing a clear yet largely hidden conflict of interest involving sponsorship of an issue-oriented series called "Pension Peril"—was quite important and forced New York station WNET and PBS to act, this follow-up article of March 7 struck me as having a clear, politically-activist tone with loaded words and connections that could mislead.

Just for example, Sirota leads with a reference to the earlier "Pensions" story and writes that "the Corporation for Public Broadcasting issued a scathing report demanding immediate reform." Well, the CPB—the Corporation for Public Broadcasting that controls Congressional appropriations—has not issued any such report. The CPB's independent ombudsman wrote about a lack of transparency and said that without release of agreements it was impossible to really know the conditions between sponsor and station officials. I agree with that. There are other places in the article where no differentiation is made between the CPB and the ombudsman.

Indeed, the headline makes use of this, claiming: "After pledging transparency, PBS hides details of new deal with billionaire owner of NewsHour." Again, there was no pledge of transparency by PBS or the CPB, just a call, properly in my view, by the CPB ombudsman—who is independent and does not set CPB policy-- that agreements such as the one about the "Pensions" programs should not be confidential. The deal to end the relationship with Liberty Media is between Liberty, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and station WETA, all separate, independent entities. They may not be as forthcoming as Sirota would like but that is different from saying PBS is hiding this.

The story tends to disparage "two 20-year-old press releases" in which editorial independence is pledged but does not point out that a cited statement by "PBS's own president" declaring that the NewsHour "is ours and ours alone" was made 20 years ago. The headline also talks of the "billionaire owner of NewsHour." Technically, John Malone, the chairman of Liberty Media, owns two-thirds of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. He is described right away in the text as a

"politically active mogul...conservative billionaire" who owns a "for-profit colossus" and also sits on the board of the "right-wing CATO Institute."

I'm all for aggressive journalism that challenges important institutions, and Sirota does that. But I think those challenges are weakened if the reader whose mind is not already made up can detect an agenda.