



Legacy of 'giant of broadcast journalism' continues

By NAT HENTOFF | Posted: Wednesday, April 20, 2011 9:00 am

Although Fred Friendly, who died in 1998, has remained very well known in the world of radio, television and First Amendment studies, he also briefly became a movie marquee name when George Clooney played him in the 2005 feature film, "Good Night, and Good Luck" (2005), which paid tribute to the CBS documentaries by Friendly and Edward R. Murrow that set the standard for how television can create an informed citizenry reminding the government that We The People are in charge.

After such achievements as helping to close the demagogic career of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, Fred Friendly was remembered by Bill Moyers (1998): "The last giant of broadcast journalism has left us a towering legacy of achievement and courage."

His legacy continues despite the inexplicable and irresponsible decision of the Public Broadcasting System to no longer run on its core prime time programming the ongoing, penetrating "Fred Friendly Seminars" produced by his wife, Ruth Friendly, and Richard Kilberg. They share Fred Friendly's indomitable determination to tell the citizenry how we can remain a free - and not inert - people.

As Kilberg said: "We are not broadcast in prime time so we have to work harder to convince the stations to put our programs on their schedule. Since they are on at many different times and days in over 85-90 percent of the country, there can, however, be no national promotion, and the degree and frequency of funding are affected."

But nonetheless, the "Fred Friendly Seminars" keep on being stimulatingly and often disturbingly informative: the 2007 "Ethics in America" six-part series including "Three Farewells - Medicine and the End of Life," and in 2009, "Minds on the Edge: Facing Mental Illness." The latter, because of the startling shootings of a member of Congress and others in Tucson - was so particularly and educationally powerful.

The panelists on this probing of our broken mental-health system included Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and Elyn Saks of the University of Southern California Law School. Author of "Refusing Care: Forced Treatment and the Rights of the Mentally Ill," she was a 2009 recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant."

But her much greater impact on those of us watching that program is that she has lived with chronic schizophrenia for more than 30 years. Five years ago, Saks also published her memoir of acute psychosis, "The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness."

Not your customary expert on broadcast or cable television.

The response to that program, say Ruth Friendly and Richard Kilberg, "has been enormous. Our many partners plus our very active website, our Facebook page and other social networking helped to get the word out." As part of a grant, "We have given out thousands of the DVDs."

Fred Friendly would be very proud but not surprised at their tenacity.

This is how you can gain access to nearly all "Fred Friendly Seminars" - past, present and those now being planned. Start with: www.fredfriendly.org. Clearly marked on the home page is the "Program Index," including a line of letters of the alphabet, A to Z, on which you can click the name of the programs you want. The program Index is for either streaming or DVD purchase for all available programs. If you have difficulties, call (212) 854-8995 or (212) 854-8967.

An auxiliary source for free online streaming is learner.org (the Annenberg site), where you can access the series: "The Constitution, That Delicate Balance," "Ethics in America" and "Ethics in America II."

Among the many programs you can find on fredfriendly.org are the eight segments of "HIV/AIDS in Black America." Also available, and for many of us, especially important as Obamacare keeps growing, is: "Before I Die: Medical Care and Personal Choices."

In addition, as surveys and conversations at our places of work underline our deepening distrust of the press, there is: "Disconnected: Politics, the Press and the Public."

Among more to come that fulfill Fred Friendly's job description of these seminars - "not to make up anybody's mind, but to open minds and to make the agony of the decision-making so intense you can escape only by thinking" - Ruth Friendly and Richard Kilberg

report there will be, "more of a multimedia platform to carry the Friendly legacy into the digital future. Projects like "Minds on the Edge" are using social media, user-generated content and Web-only content extensions to amplify the extraordinary power of a Fred Friendly Seminar. We intend to innovate as technology offers new ways to deepen understanding and promote conversation."

I also very much hope that, as happened with "The Constitution, That Delicate Balance," there will be urgency - and sources of finding - to get the Civics Seminars into the schools. Not only colleges and universities. I have found again and again telling stories of why we have the Bill of Rights and what it takes to keep them alive - from fifth-grade classes to middle and high schools - that young people, long deprived of civic classes, become aroused on entering smack into their history of this nation. I expect some of them will text and Twitter these discoveries.

The Fred Friendly Seminars embody Edward R. Murrow's insistence that "This instrument (television) can teach, it can illuminate; and yes, it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends."

Murrow up, PBS! Put the "Fred Friendly Seminars" back in prime time.

As Judge Learned Hand, who should have been on the Supreme Court, said: "Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it." But Fred Friendly showed how to keep Liberty alive.

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