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College-agers rediscover (and like!) PTV

By Jerry M. Landay

Some of Generation X's best and brightest recently had a consciousness-raising encounter with network and public television. The results suggest, to me at least, that it's vital for PBS leaders and planners to think about what these college teens think—and the opportunity they represent.

PBS lost them after *Sesame Street*. I discovered them in the "Issues in Television" class I teach to undergraduate Chancellor's Honors students at the University of Illinois.

I gave them a critical viewing assignment that reconnected these nearly-twenty-somethings with public television. Their experience was something akin to their first kiss: delight and surprise, relief that their elders had misrepresented the dangers of indulging, and confusion and concern about the experience.

In the reports and discussion that followed, the students described their PBS-viewing experience as a rediscovery. A number said they'd previously avoided deep immersion in public TV because of what they'd heard from parents and peers—namely, that PBS was "notoriously boring." Not true, they found. They acknowledged they liked quality television. For instance, many of them found *Age-You Being Served* genuinely funny, and *MacNeil/Lehrer* enriching and informative.

One typical student comment: "Being a chronic channel-surfer and a rather indiscriminate television viewer, I have not watched PBS too often. However, after a good night of viewing, I intend to watch more."

But why, they wondered, couldn't some of the product be targeted to *them*? Their perception—after critically viewing on-air fund drives—was that their generation is ignored because, putting it bluntly, it has no money. They were put off by the begathons they watched, which seemed tasteless and out of character with the lofty aims of the service. As they saw it, the loss of viewers scared away by these drives, is a grievous bill to pay for the pledged funds.

Their critiques project a sense of confusion about PBS's identity. Is it about serving the public interest or about finding ways to raise cash? If it truly serves American cultural needs and tastes, as it claims, then why is so much of it British? And why is it, a number wondered, that PBS pays so little attention to advertising and promoting its wares that "we have little idea of what's on?"

I urged the 19 honors students to bring their full consciousness to the experience as they logged and critiqued programs, ads and promotional spots during four-and-a-half hours of commercial network television. Several weeks later, I asked them to watch public television and do the same.

They reported that the evening marathon of commercial network-watching left them "tired" and "exhausted," and their brains "fried" by a "bombardment" of more than 130 commercial spots and program promos. They all said they'd never before been aware of all the blows to the head they'd had to absorb.

When they subsequently were exposed to public TV, virtually all described it as an act of deliverance. "Perhaps the one thing that it added to my viewing pleasure," one student said, "was the knowledge that PBS would be a commercial-free evening. It's amazing what a difference that makes!" Another commented similarly: "I did not have to put up a shield in order to protect myself against the advertisers."

One student expressed surprise that American public television "is a completely different system than the networks or cable television. . . . The PBS shows were less professional and less stylized than network programming, but their material and the manner in which it was presented was much more gratifying for the viewer." ("Less professional," we later determined in discussion, meant fewer glitzy visual effects.)

One wrote that in his first perusal of a public TV program guide, he was amazed at the diversity: "I discovered that the station . . . aired rock concerts, magic shows, documentaries," in addition to children's shows. "It is hard to find such diversity on any other station . . . It is similar to a full slate of cable stations

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combined into one."

The students gave specific praise to the depth of content they found on PBS programs:

■ the informed talk and the issue focus of *MacNeil/Lehrer*, *The McLaughlin Group*, *Wall Street Week*, *Washington Week in Review*, and *WTTW's Chicago Tonight*. In a typical comment, a student said: "This style of journalism allowed viewers to formulate their own opinions. . . . The networks should take a close look at these shows and think about changing their news formats. . . . It would raise the level of journalism in newscasts and transform [them] from being amusement to informational and thought-provoking."

■ *Novel's* "Ice-Man" and the *American Masters* profile of George Lucas "went beyond the average behind-the-scenes program."

■ The honest, unpretentious formats were popular because they presented "music more in-depth than any other station would do. The Peter, Paul & Mary special for children, for instance, allowed the [musicians] freedom to be creative and to try new things. . . . The concert had not been engineered to produce a visually stunning moment each and every possible moment. Rather, it was allowed to stand alone as a concert, and the entertain the way a concert should—through the strength of the music alone."

However, performers James Taylor, Elton John and Peter, Paul & Mary were seen as "somewhat past their prime" and chosen for their appeal to the moneyed baby-boomer generation. Couldn't PBS do the same for some of the musical favorites of their generation?

"College students are left out," one complained. "PBS should promote more programming for a larger target audience that includes college students."

Yet this alienated bunch—bright, aware, interested and plugged into the world—is precisely the audience that PBS ought to be grooming for the good of their future and its own.

These honors students are among the most talented and highly motivated undergrads on the Illinois campus. Along with outstanding academic records, they brought from high school a penchant for clear thinking and writing.

They are typically unpretentious in the midwestern manner—activist and achievement-oriented. The class ranged in age from 18 to 21, their academic specializations spanning the sciences and humanities. They spend as many hours a week, on average—between 9 and 11 hours—reading and listening to the radio as watching TV.

They conform quite closely to the demographers' profile of Generation X: they view their economic prospects dimly and are therefore not as conservative as the boomers who immediately precede them. They are

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suspicious of authority, and they question the myths and assumptions of their elders. Several challenged the doctrine that the so-called "free market" knows best what Americans should watch. Rather than providing diversity, one wrote, "it's really the same product."

They are increasingly interested in news and current affairs. Educated though they were about the difficulties involved, several students urged public broadcasters to wage an aggressive campaign to create a news and public affairs unit at PBS, using the NPR news team as a cadre.

They virtually unanimously condemned the system's dependence on pledge drives. They labelled as "sad" and "pitiful" the irony that the "quality broadcasting . . . increasingly must rely on private charity." One enthusiastic convert to PBS complained that "it is pitiful that the system has to stoop to this level in order to stay in business." Others likened the enticements of merchandise to the Home Shopping Network.

But most saw the funding issue less as an albatross than a call to action and innovation. "This country needs public broadcasting," wrote one student, who concluded that "a better solution for financing quality programming must be found."

Proposing solutions was part of the course project—team-produced papers proposing a national electronic mass communications policy for the United States. In addition to the expected suggestions of a dedicated national user's tax on TV sets, and spectrum and cable channel fees, there were two fresh ideas.

One was a call for a generous income-tax credit as an inducement to underwriters. Another proposed the establishment of a Federal Project for Creative Television, funded by a consortium of CPB, the Department of Education and the national arts and humanities endowments. Modelled on the federal writers and theater projects of the New Deal's WPA, the television project would provide funding for high-quality, original programming for PBS, the best of which would be honored by National Program Awards.

A student concluded: "I think that PBS could provide a standard for entertainment as well as education and information. This is not only possible but imperative." If the task for overhauling traditional broadcast arrangements is tough now, this honors student wondered, "will it be any easier when a handful of profit-driven companies owns a 500-channel cable universe?" That sense of urgency was reflected in many of the students' reports.

To me, their signals were clear. If PBS wants to win the loyalty of Generation X, it must:

- give them programming that suits their tastes. The relationship should not end abruptly at *Sesame Street*. Air their musical favorites in concert. From time to time, talk about the issues that matter to them on *MacNeil/Lehrer*, and invite some of their peers to discuss them. Why leave it to MTV?
- promote PBS programs more effectively on the local level—in campus and high school newspapers, for instance—and on the radio stations they listen to. That need not be costly. Promote memberships and program guides at a price they can afford.
- find a way to recruit them to the cause of a stronger, more financially and creatively independent television service, which most said they want.

Were these students telling me what I wanted to hear? I doubt it. Their minds are open, but their thoughts and conclusions are their own. There was no doubt of that from the very first day of class. What is also clear is that public broadcasting very much needs to recruit Generation X.

One student policy paper concluded: "It is our hope that the 'new' PBS will be able to draw enough audience away from the commercial networks that they will be forced to improve the quality of their own programming, or perish [through the competitive] forces they regard as gospel."

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