

August 23, 1993

Dear Brian,

I had the pleasure of viewing your program today with Patrick Buchanan and Christopher Hitchens.

I greatly appreciated the broader and intellectually richer spectrum of opinion ranging from conservative (right) to socialist (left).

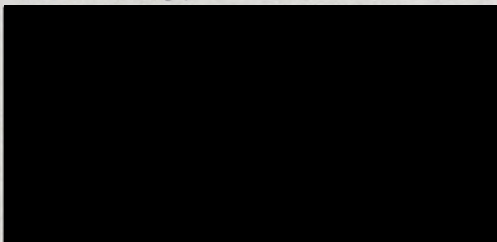
I enjoyed hearing discourse that went beyond the usual, predictable parameters of center liberal to right conservative.

As you know, progressive activists, labor activists and left scholars, writers and academics are seldom included in discussions about the events of the day.

Our country is poorer because of this exclusion.

Thank you for having the courage to allow a socialist writer to appear on your show. I hope you have not been taken too much to task for it.

Sincerely,



Eugene, OR 97405

COMMENTARY

Study disproves public TV liberal bias theory

By JEFF COHEN and NORMAN SOLOMON

SOME POLITICIANS love to denounce public television as a bastion of anti-establishment bias. But a new study of public TV, to be released in late August, shows the absurdity — and inaccuracy — of much of the standard political rhetoric.

Last year, Senate Republican leader Robert Dole attacked what he called public TV's "unrelenting liberal cheerleading." He charged that "broadcasting apologists are hiding behind Big Bird, Mr. Rogers and 'Masterpiece Theatre,' laying down their quality smoke screen while they shovel out funding for gay and lesbian shows."

Other conservative senators targeted specific documentaries. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., criticized "Maria's Story," which favorably depicted a Salvadoran peasant who joined the guerrilla movement. Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., crusaded against "Tongues Untied," a film exploring the lives of African-American gay males — a minority within a minority.

To hear these senators tell it, public TV regularly "shovels out" programming for and about gays, guerrillas and rabble-rousers.

Are the claims true? Not according to the new study — the first ever to take a serious look at the full schedule aired on PBS stations across the country. It scrutinized the evening lineup for six randomly selected weeks spanning the first half of 1992.

The study focused on who gets to speak — in studio or on tape — on public affairs shows, analyzing 1,644 sources or "experts" appearing on 114 separate programs.

How many of the 1,644 sources were gay or lesbian advocates? Zero.

How many were leftist guerrillas? Zero.

Did progressive activists dominate public television? Hardly. Representatives of racial or ethnic groups accounted for a mere 1.6 percent of total sources. Labor union representatives were 0.9 percent of the total, environmental advocates 0.6 percent and feminist spokespersons 0.2 percent.

Certainly a network accused by Sen. Dole of "unrelenting liberal cheerleading" must feature more Democrats than Republicans? Wrong again. During the period studied, both major parties were well-represented, but Republican sources outnumbered Democrats 53 percent to 43 percent. The rest were mostly Perot backers.

So who dominates the public affairs programs on PBS? Mainly we hear from government officials (23 percent of all sources), corporate representatives (19 percent), journalists from generally mainstream publications (12 percent) and academics from establishment or conservative institutions (6 percent).

Given this data, how did the vocal Senate critics of public television get it so wrong? The problem is that they responded more like censors than scholars, seizing upon particular programs that offended them.

For example, instead of recognizing that plenty of conservative foreign policy analysts regularly appear on PBS shows to balance the one documentary sympathetic to a Salvadoran guerrilla, Sen. McCain teed off on that one documentary.

The academics who conducted the public TV study — sociologist David Croteau, Vassar College professor William Hoynes and Fulbright scholar Kevin Carragee — didn't make the error of "anecdotalism." Analyzing the national evening lineup as a whole, they found that public affairs documentaries make up only 8 percent of the schedule — and that these occasional programs, so pilloried on Capitol Hill, "are not characterized by a consistent liberal bias."

Documentaries comprise about one-third of the public affairs lineup — which is made up mostly of news, business and political talk shows. These daily and weekly programs — which include "The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour," "Nightly Business Report," "Wall Street Week," "Adam Smith's Moneyworld," Bill Buckley's "Firing Line," John McLaughlin's two shows and "Washington Week In Review" — run the spectrum from establishment center to the right.

Perhaps more important than the right-left spectrum is the top-down spectrum. The powerful voices of corporate and political elites are booming on public TV, while citizen activists are barely audible — just like in commercial broadcasting. In this regard, public TV has failed miserably in fulfilling its original mandate to "provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard."

The new public TV study is endorsed by Ralph Nader and an array of consumer, civil rights and public interest groups (including FAIR, the media watch group with which we are associated).

Ironically, the study is set for release the day before a Corporation for Public Broadcasting hearing on public TV bias in South Carolina. CPB's probe — which has the feel of a kangaroo court — was instigated by conservative senators wanting to expose "liberal bias."

The CPB board members — all of whom were appointed by Ronald Reagan or George Bush — will receive a copy of the new study. So will public TV programmers across the country.

But there's another group that should take the time to read it: senators who presume to judge a whole TV network based on a few documentaries they dislike.

Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon of San Francisco write a syndicated column specializing in media criticism.

EUGENE, OR
97405



C-SPAN
400 N. CAPITOL ST.
NW SUITE 650
WASHINGTON, DC
20001

ATTN: BRIAN LAMB

