CONTROVERSY AND THE NEWSPAPER’S PUBLIC: 
THE CASE OF TONGUES UNTIED

By Patricia Aufderheide

Newspaper coverage of a controversy over public television stations’ carriage of the African American gay video poem Tongues Untied provides the material for analysis of how print journalists—ostensibly serving the public’s need to know about issues of public importance—address issues in which “the public” is itself a contested notion. Reviews, columns, and articles from newspapers nationwide are analyzed. Typically, the journalism acknowledged individual speech rights and abided by professional reporting conventions, but did not acknowledge that the very definition of the public and of public television’s obligations was in contest.

When public television programming becomes controversial, behind the immediate quarrels are deeper questions about public television’s mission and mandate. This question inevitably leads to what a public is or should be, who serves it, and how. A 1991 controversy over a self-revealing video essay by a gay African-American man raised all these issues, but newspaper coverage reflected them mostly through widely varying assumptions embedded in reporting and opinion writing. This article looks at a selection of newspaper articles throughout the United States during June and July of 1991 about the controversy to assess journalistic approaches to the social role of mass media.

Such an examination is significant in terms of widespread concern among newspaper professionals over newspapers’ unique place in public life. At a time of shrinking circulation, indifference especially among youthful readers, and often feeble attempts at consumer-centered journalism, editors and owners find they may need not merely to serve but in fact to articulate the public. They are also searching to provide more context to daily events, to make connections for readers besieged with information who may no longer perceive themselves as part of the newspaper’s public.

This crisis of the informational marketplace is also a crisis of the society. The very notion of a democratic public is challenged in the electronic age, in an age in which consumption rather than production defines the tenor of daily life, at a time when cultural and linguistic pluralism is a fact of life and a contested aspect of public policy.

The public, in the sense derived from the works of Jurgen Habermas and the ensuing literature, refers to a social entity distinct from the governmental, economic, and domestic spheres. It is the informally constituted community (virtual or face-to-face) defining its interests in common, often in

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resistance to or in an attempt to redirect or co-opt other ordering forces of society.

*The Public and Public Television*

Mass media inevitably play a role in shaping and directing this kind of public; indeed, the media's First Amendment claims rest on their social role as interlocutors for the public. Two decades of agenda-setting research have amply demonstrated the complex effects of the media upon attitudes and policy, and also the interplay between media and other powerful social forces. Furthermore, the media are themselves contested arenas in which publics struggle to define themselves and gain legitimacy in the eyes of more established publics.

Public television was created in its present form with heady expectations to serve as a voice for civil society – the great essayist E.B. White imagined it, among other things, as a Chautauqua, or meeting place to discuss public affairs. But since its inception, public television has always been ill-defined. Public broadcasting had been created as an ancillary service to commercial broadcasting, a small concession to the educational wing of anti-commercial forces. Public television was deliberately created with patchwork (and largely private) funding, as a weak association of local stations. The stations depend on the Public Broadcasting Service as their membership organization and a provider of basic programming. Public television's publicness has been molded variously in the interests of politicians, corporate donors, and the tastes of those viewers most likely to become members.

Over the years, public television's many bureaucracies have juggled different demands, constituencies, and pressures adroitly; it has not lacked a mission so much as it has had many, and it has pragmatically responded to pressures. With competition from cable and videocassette, and with the decline of the public service ethos in television internationally, public television has undergone a protracted crisis of mission.

**Tongues Untied and New Publics.** *Tongues Untied* was a program that challenged the service's raison d'être. A video poem about director Marlon Riggs' lifelong search for identity as a gay African-American, it featured sexually explicit poetry readings, "snap" choreography (a system of gestures with subcultural meaning), meditative use of still photographs, re-enactments, and symbolically charged images such as two men embracing. The program was unified by Riggs' voice-over, ending with a call for "black men loving black men," or self-acknowledgement.

The program was scheduled for the 1991 season of *P.O.V.*, a PBS documentary series that had been designed – one result of an ongoing debate between independent filmmakers and public television over their access to the service – as a place to showcase independent, often dissident viewpoints. Its creator had originally made it for himself and for African-American gay men, and had not tailored it for broadcast. The program included elements traditionally anathema for broadcast, such as sexually explicit slang and occasional nudity. But Weiss was committed to demonstrating the range of points of view in independent production; was looking for a way to give *P.O.V.* higher visibility; and knew he could both build on Riggs' earlier reputation as a serious African-American filmmaker (for the film on racist stereotyping, *Ethnic Notions*) and on the innovative style and quality of *Tongues Untied*.

Once scheduled, the film entered an ongoing debate within and
around public television over the service’s audience and public television’s relationship to the public. Riggs himself had articulated his perspective on the issues — public television as a place to showcase America’s cultural diversity — during the policy debate over the decade that resulted in creation of the Independent Television Service in 1989. Like every programming decision, the film was a statement about the function of the service on which it appeared. The film was directed in the first instance at a targeted audience of African-American gay men, also declaring themselves elsewhere as a new public. A wider audience would be challenged, by the positioning of this film on public television, to accept the existence of this group as a public. As Riggs later said in interview, “When people say the community standards won’t abide such a work, they’re reflecting their myth of what that community is about and not the tremendously diverse community as it exists...This issue is not just ‘Tongues Untied.’ It really is how society is grappling with difference.”

At the same time, conservatives were consolidating public relations gains in the “culture wars,” waged among other places around the National Endowment for the Arts. The program later became a flamboyant example in Congressional debate, when with urging from conservative think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Los Angeles-based Center for the Study of Popular Culture, conservative legislators conditioned funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Senator Jesse Helms professed shock at the film, which “blatantly promoted homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle.” For many conservatives, a common culture that preserved a framework for democratic decision-making was threatened by proliferating demands for recognition and autonomy from new “publics.”

Tongues Untied was instantly perceived as provocative, within and beyond public television. The Public Broadcasting Service provided a preview feed and a warning to member stations in the first week of June, in preparation for the June 18 series launch. Soon eighteen stations in the top fifty markets decided not to carry it. At the same time, conservative religious leader the Reverend Don Wildmon urged his constituency to tune in to “see for themselves how their tax dollars are being spent,” building on the fact that Tongues Untied had received some regional NEA funds. Press coverage was triggered by station rejection and by Wildmon’s concerns. Paul Lomartire’s widely syndicated Palm Beach Post article kicked off a flurry of coverage.

This survey of press coverage during the summer of 1991 analyzes 130 articles, selected through a national clipping service for staff members of P.O.V. The staff assembled these articles in three categories: Negative commentary and criticism (10); Positive commentary and criticism (51); and Reporting (69). The staff’s goal was to use newspaper clippings as an internal guide to public controversy and information, in order to help shape its own public relations response. The articles come mostly from daily newspapers, except for a few articles that staff regarded as influential upon mainstream journalists from trade magazines such as Electronic Media and Variety.

While not amenable to statistical analysis, the collection nonetheless provides a rough overview of positions and approaches taken by journalists to this story at the height of its topicality, when stations were still deciding if
they would run the program or not. Since it was designed as a working research aid, it was not assembled to bias the collection in favor of the program.

In the following analysis, each category of article is analyzed for assumptions about the role of public television, whom it serves, and who speaks for and about it. In opinion writing, reactions are sharply divided along a conservative-liberal axis, revealing profoundly differing notions of what public television (and beyond it, the public) is and ought to be. In reporting, there is a marked avoidance of both the larger question of public television's role and of sources who could challenge it.

**Negative Commentary.** Negative editorials, reviews, and commentary focused on whether taxpayers should support potentially offensive expression, using as a launching point the by-then well-worn issue of arts funding generally. Writers denounced contributions by the National Endowment for the Arts to both series and program, and portrayed public television itself as taxpayer-supported. These writers appeared not to know that public television as a whole only receives about 40 percent of its funds from all governmental entities combined, and that Congress had established the service, like the NEA, as a non-governmental agency.

Most were written from a conservative perspective, and followed the angle offered by Wildmon's organization. As an unsigned editorial in the Chattanooga News-Free Press put it, "The producer claims his film is an affirmation of black homosexual life. If that's what he wants, he is free to affirm - but no tax money should subsidize it or broadcast it into the homes of the American people." Conservative syndicated columnist James Kilpatrick endorsed this perspective (e.g. in the Allentown, Pennsylvania Daily): "The producer of 'Tongues Untied' has every right to make his film... But the producer has no right whatever to produce his film at public expense." Don Kowet, a critic for the Washington Times, wrote that "the issue isn't whether 'Tongues Untied' is Art but whether taxpayer-subsidized PBS should be piping it into people's homes." The journalists writing negative commentary typically assumed their readers would agree with them that homosexuality was and should be regarded as disgusting. The exception to the rule was a column by Courtland Milloy, an African-American columnist, in the Washington Post. He criticized Riggs for taking an important issue and then making a film that would alienate Milloy and people like him - African-American men who are, he said, homophobic.

Negative writers described clearly what they thought public television should not do - "trash societal values," as columnist Dick Williams said in the Atlanta Constitution.27 This wording presumes a consensus not evident at that time, given the raging "culture wars"; one might, however, infer behind the words themselves a desire to promote greater unity around conservative cultural values. They were silent on the issue of what public television should do, or even whether it should exist. The following year this came into debate among conservatives, when the Heritage Foundation called for the abolition of taxpayer funding for public television, under the rubric of privatizing it, and triggered Congressional debate (see footnote 18).

The authors' lack of a vision for public television and for public arts funding may be seen as related to concerns about expanding the public. When James Kilpatrick called for John Froehmeyer, then chairman of the NEA, to reject "grants for garbage," flatly denying that Tongues Untied had "substantial artistic and cultural significance" or reflected "the culture of a minority" (two of NEA's mandates), he explained that the film "reflects an
aspect of black culture that countless black families would repudiate altogether." He thus squarely rejected the claim of the film that its subjects were legitimate new members of the public.

Positve Commentary. Opinion articles defending the program were more numerous in this collection (and probably in reality) than negative articles. Perhaps this reflects a liberal tendency on arts staffs of newspapers. In any case, the articles usually assumed a clearer mandate for public television than exists in the 1967 act establishing public television as we know it today, which defined it merely as "noncommercial" (although public television has a long tradition of educational and children's programming to back up claims to public service).-supportive authors anchored their case with terms such as "educate," "provoke thought," and "enlighten." Provocation was equated with education, for many, including the Baltimore Sun TV critic, David Zurawik, who praised P.O.V. because "It's stirring things up and making people think." Commentators such as Joanne Ostrow of the Denver Post praised stations, P.O.V., and the producer for risk-taking. An editorial in the Springfield, Massachusetts Union News criticized "self-appointed censors," arguing that Americans can exercise their right not to watch if they want.

Public television "ought to be strange or unsettling, taking us to unfamiliar worlds, confronting us with new ideas, giving us extraordinary characters," argued Marc Gunther, a critic for the Detroit Free Press. In Lafayette, Louisiana, the Sunday Advertiser's entertainment editor, Drummond Domangue, hailed the movie for being "educational, enlightening, and it moves the audience to think - supposedly the primary purpose behind PBS."-Ed Seigel in the Boston Globe saw public television as a free speech forum in service to the promises of the First Amendment. He began his review by announcing, "If this were a rational world, we would be talking today about rounding up all the station managers who banned 'Tongues Untied' and stripping them of their right to run a public television station... 'Tongues Untied' fulfills one of the basic missions of public television - giving access to those shut out of commercial television and advancing the democratic ideal of a pluralistic society."

Diversity in itself was a primary value for some. For instance, Ruth Butler's lead in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Press featured the argument that "it is just this kind of program that reflects the mission of public television: to reflect the diversity [in] society." In the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, another reviewer praised the film for fulfilling "the mandate of the 'P.O.V.' series: It gives voice - and loud voice, at that - to a point of view that is rarely if ever heard on television." Some noted the clash between a supposed mandate and the need for viewer support. Matt Roush in USA Today said, "One of PBS's mandates is to provide platforms for alternative voices otherwise unheard, and PBS has stood by this film since P.O.V. acquired it. But individual stations, suffering economic downturns and reliant on membership support, will only go so far."

Censorship was not distinguished, in some of the positive coverage, from run-of-the-mill gatekeeping and editorial choice. For instance, in the Arizona Republic, TV columnist Greg Joseph wrote, "Viewers have the right to pick what they want to watch and refuse what they don't. This is called freedom, and a show like P.O.V., like it or not, is one of its best examples." For some, this was explicitly a political fight. Ron Miller in the San Jose Mercury News saw the controversy "as part of an obvious renewal of
the conservatives’ push to decimate and destroy PBS on grounds it’s way too
cavalier about the way it uses public money to espouse liberal causes.”

Reviewers and columnists who favored the program often did so in
spite of the fact that they did not like it. They favored it because it fit with their
idea of what public television should do. Controversy was associated with
enlightenment. Diversity and departing from cliche were good. The authors
often noted that public television was limited by its finances.

These journalists, working from a liberal worldview, had a sanguine
and simple view of controversy as a tool of democracy. They welcomed the
notion of Riggs self-defining himself as a public presence. They did not
typically respond directly to negative criticisms, except to disparage
Wildmon’s organization. They did not merely disagree with negative critics’
judgment; they differed fundamentally on how they thought of the public.
Supportive authors typically also dismissed the gatekeeping role of pro-
grammers (which they share, of course, with journalists), portraying it as
censorship.

Reporting. Reporting led from two news hooks: Outcry, particularly
led by Wildmon, against government funding for such programming, and
the fluctuating number of PBS stations that refused to carry it. The featured
sources were P.O.V. spokespeople, Marlon Riggs, and station managers, who
provided a range of reasons for their actions.

Reporting thus demonstrated the limitations of the rituals and for-
mulas of objective, daily, event-based journalism and conventional sourcing
strategies. In this case, journalists sought out station managers as primary
sources. The station managers frequently exemplified pervasive confusion
over public television’s mandate, while slighting audience constituencies
most likely to be responsive to the programming. But journalists rarely
followed up on the contradictions within the sources’ comments.

The remarks in Paul Lomartire’s Palm Beach Post article, which had
led off the coverage, were typical. A station manager in Wichita, Kansas, said
it “would create just heat and not light. It flies in the face of community
values...” Others rejected it for being “confrontational” and “offensive.”
Those who carried it used a First Amendment argument – “we prefer to err
on the side of free speech.” Some managers described the bind they were in.
In the Columbus Dispatch, local WOSU general manager Dale Ouzts said,
“If you show (Tongues Untied), you’re a pornographer. Others say, ‘If you don’t run it, you’re a censor.’” For others, it was the risk
to membership contributions that loomed as their largest problem. And
some station managers used the same rhetoric that TV critics used, e.g.
Cincinnati station WCET senior vice president Jack Dominic in the Hollywood
Reporter: “one of our purposes is to provide a forum for a variety of different
points of view, whether we agree or disagree with them.” He went on, in the
New York Times, to say, “Choosing what people should watch – that’s not the
business we’re in.”

Of course, that is precisely the business WCET and other stations are
in, which is why their choices become controversial. But the contradic-
tion typically went unchallenged.

Rarely did the controversy provide a window into the structural
problems of public television, or indeed its structure at all. In two cases, mild
exceptions to the rule, the St. Petersburg Times and the South Bend, Indiana,
Tribune, the incident triggered an investigation into the role of community
boards.

Reporters often included information given by the public station

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about numbers of phone calls, pro and con, received about Tongues United. But there was no followup to interview callers or otherwise to determine what the “public” in public television meant to local viewers. Again the exception: The Boca Raton Sunday News profiled one angry letter writer who had launched a one-man campaign.

Reporters avoided interviewing the viewing constituencies directly affected – gay/lesbian rights organizations, local religious organizations, conservative or religious media watchdog groups. Another exception: In Seattle, where KCTS aired it, the television critic of the Post-Intelligencer published comments from ten people who prescreened it, some of whom were themselves African-American and/or gay. Their comments brought the issue out from the bureaucratic thicket and made clear that the contest was ultimately who the public is.

A Baptist minister said, “I’m not quite sure if that particular portrayal will be received by the public as it should, because black males already are so maligned . . . but it does speak to the needs of persons in our community who are crying for recognition and expressing their feelings.” An African-American banker who opposed showing it on television objected to the program because it was “degrading to African-American men and just represented a small segment of the population.” An African-American gay artist said watching it was “like Christmas...There is criticism in the black community that we should be seen and not heard.”

Reporting did not frame the issue as one about the definition and future of public television, even though it later became one in the Senate. It did not probe the poignant claims of station managers that they needed the subscriber money to ask why public television, if it is supposed to take risks, is also financially in a position not to be able to take them. It did not investigate whose First Amendment rights take priority when rights are in conflict.

News stories in newspapers, in short, treated the story largely as one of institutional malfeasance, rather than a struggle over who defines the public, and they isolated the institutions involved from their audiences. In this, a generation of professional practices and journalistic conventions abetted them, as did various and self-contradictory public television sources.

Conclusion

The issues underlying the Tongues United debate raised questions of who is a legitimate member of the public. Print journalists demonstrated various and often inchoate assumptions about the definition of the public and the appropriate sites to debate its definition. This is an issue that also directly affects newspapers, as they struggle to define their own changing role as shapers and servants of America’s changing publics.

It is not surprising that journalistic conventions lead to shallow treatment of the relationship between mass media and the public. But when print journalists fail to conduct that debate, they also fail to help readers – both as consumers and as members of the public – to understand the issues and to act upon them.

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NOTES


5. These issues have surfaced in questions over school reform, bilingualism, and multiculturalism, and have coalesced, often under academic aegis, as the “political correctness debate.” For an overview, see Patricia Aufderheide, ed., Beyond PC: Toward a Politics of Understanding (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 1992). For a focus on the field of communications, see “Symposium: Communication Scholarship and Political Correctness,” Journal of Communication 42 (Spring 1992): 56-149.


12. Patricia Aufderheide, “A Funny Thing Is Happening to TV’s Public

13. Distributed, like Riggs’ other work, by California Newsreel, 149 9th St., #420, San Francisco, CA 94103.


15. Aufderheide, “Public Television and the Public Sphere.”


30. Aufderheide, “Public Television and the Public Sphere.”


34. Marc Gunther, “Film about gay blacks deserves to be broadcast, Detroit Free Press, 15 July 1991, sec. E, p. 3.