

# PBS Joins the MSM's Syria-Russia Bias

Mainstream U.S. media systematically excludes points of view on world affairs that deviate from Official Washington's "group think." With no lessons learned from the Iraq-WMD debacle, the MSM only lets on establishment or right-wing pundits with conformist points of view on crises with Syria and Russia, notes Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

*PBS Newshour* is considered high-quality journalism by many North Americans. But is it? A test case is their report on Nov. 24 when a Russian jet was shot down and one pilot killed as he descended by parachute. This was a significant international event and the situation is still dangerous. The conflict in Syria could get even worse. PBS Newshour presented a discussion/analysis of the event with two guests: Nicholas Burns and Angela Stent. The PBS Newshour host was Judy Woodruff.

This critique applies to that one *PBS Newshour* broadcast but the essential points are true for much of what you see on the program (and across the mainstream U.S. news media). Assumptions and bias regarding the Syrian conflict are pervasive and persistent. So, how can U.S. foreign policy change (or even show some nuance) if the public is continually fed biased and false information from one point of view? Here are specific points:



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**–PBS Newshour selected two analysts with essentially the same viewpoint, representing the U.S. government and military/security establishment:**

Nicholas Burns is a former U.S. Ambassador to NATO. In early 2003 he urged the "unity" of NATO as some NATO allies expressed doubts about the U.S. the invasion of Iraq. In 2006, he urged punishing sanctions on Iran. In 2011, Burn wrote, "President Obama was surely right to commit the United States, however reluctantly, to the NATO campaign [to overthrow Libyan President Gaddafi]." Burns has a track record supporting Western aggression against other countries. He evidently has learned nothing from the resulting chaos, devastation and

death.

Angela Stent is associated with conservative think tanks and a former State Department and National Intelligence Officer. She is also author of the 2015 book *"The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."* Written in non-academic prose, the book explores what she considers four efforts by the U.S. to reset or start new relations with Russia following the Cold War.

Unfortunately the bias of the author is apparent and inconvenient history is not mentioned. For example, the Project for a New American Century and aggressive U.S. foreign policy under its influence have been "disappeared." She presents a biased history which ignores or whitewashes examples of U.S. collusion and support of violent coups – from Venezuela to Honduras to Ukraine and Libya.

**–The analysts make false or exaggerated claims:** Burns said the Russians "did violate Turkish air space" but he offers no evidence and it now appears the Russian jet was shot down over Syrian air space. Both Burns and Stent claim the Russians violated Turkish air space "several" times or "repeatedly." Woodruff refers to them as "invasions." Contrary to the allegations, the only confirmed Russian violation of Turkish air space was on Sept. 3 in bad weather at the beginning of Russia's anti-terrorist bombing campaign inside Syria.

**–The analysts failed to include relevant information,** such as: Air space violations occur frequently and Turkey is a major offender. The normal practice is to usher an intruding plane out of the air space, not shoot it down.

**–The analysts are hypocritical about air space violations.** Burns claims that Russia's alleged 17-second violation of Turkish air space "is clearly illegal under international law." Yet the analysts say nothing about the frequent, much longer and intentional violations of Syrian air space by American jets and bombers that have NOT been authorized by the Syrian government.

**–The program fails to consider Putin's comments that the action was "a stab in the back, carried out by the accomplices of terrorists."** Why wasn't this comment discussed? A Columbia University researcher lists proof of Turkish collaboration with ISIS here. Another lengthy list is here. American Lebanese journalist Serena Shim documented Turkey's pivotal role in this video. She was killed the day after publicly expressing fear of the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT). Why did the guests not mention any of this?

**–The analysts also ignore Turkey's economic support of ISIS.** For example, Bilal Erdogan, the son of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has been implicated in purchasing ISIS oil from Syria, mixing it with Iraqi Kurdish oil and shipping it abroad. Bilal Erdogan is co-owner of BMZ oil and chemicals shipping company

which has been buying additional ships. Burns talks about the importance of “history and context” but he leaves out essential facts and history about the conflict.

**–The analysts distort facts to support their biases.** Analyst Burns claims “The Russians have been bombing Syrian Turkmen, ethnic Turkmen villages.” Evidence indicates the Russians are not bombing random villages; they are bombing specific terrorist groups in the area. We know that terrorists are in the area because they have been raining missiles into Latakia city, killing 23 students and civilians on Nov. 10. We know the terrorists are there because they video recorded themselves. Other video shows the downing of the aircraft, the pilots descending, the “rebels” shooting at the parachutists, and then the captured dead Russian pilot. Article 42 of Geneva Convention says, “No person parachuting from a plane in distress shall be made the object of attack during his descent.” Why should Russia and Syria be criticized for attacking these terrorists? It has since emerged that the most vocal “rebel” leader in the video is a Turkish citizen.

**–Burns conflates a sectarian extremist fringe with an entire religious branch.** When he refers to “Sunni” groups he actually means the Wahabi/Takfiri opposition such as Jabhat al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham, ISIS, etc. Most Sunni Muslims in the world oppose the bastardization of their religious faith by the fanatic Wahabi element. Characterizing the jihadis as being “Sunni groups” is comparable to identifying the Ku Klux Klan as representing the “Christian group.” It’s additionally false and misleading because the majority of Syrian Army soldiers are Sunni.

**–The analysts ignore the fact that Syria has been the victim of severe violations of international law for over four years.** Turkey, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France and the United Kingdom have been training armed opposition groups and supplying them with weapons, logistics and salaries with the goal of violently overthrowing the Syrian government. As confirmed by the International Court at The Hague in their ruling filed by Nicaragua against the United States, this is in breach of international law.

**–The analysts convey the confusion and contradiction of Western policy toward Syria.** Stent says, “We disagree with the Russians on the fate of Assad and we disagree on who the enemy is.” In short: Stent and Burns think the West should be able to dictate who can be President of Syria; they also think Russia should refrain from bombing any group except ISIS. They want Russia to refrain from bombing Nusra/Al Qaeda, Ahrar al Sham and other terrorist groups. It is a duplicitous strategy.

The Russian position is much more logical. They have been clear from the start:

They are there to oppose sectarian terrorists threatening the Syrian people and state. ISIS is one of these groups but there are many others. What is common among them is sectarianism and reliance on outside funding. One group consists of Uighurs of Chinese nationality. They are part of the "Army of Conquest" that made a big advance in northern Syria in spring 2015.

The idea that these sectarian terrorist groups should be allowed to roam free is illogical if your goal is to overcome terrorism. There are tens of thousands of sectarian fighters who are not in ISIS. Some of these groups threaten major population areas including Latakia and government-controlled sections of Aleppo. Other groups control border zones which allow for inflow of more weapons and jihadis. It is logical that the Russian Air Force and Syrian Army would prioritize attacks on these groups near major population centers and controlling border zones.

Regarding the "fate of Assad," the Russians believe the Syrian Presidency should be determined by Syrians not foreigners. They have indicated they would accept internationally supervised elections. That policy is in keeping with international law. The policy of the West trying to dictate who can or cannot be President of Syria is a violation of the United Nations Charter and International Law.

**–Stent engages in amateur psychology instead of policy analysis.** She speculates that Russia is intervening in the Syrian conflict because "they want the U.S. to come to them, they want to be the leader. ... There is some reckless behavior obviously." It's a silly analysis that ignores serious issues such as the U.S. policy of "regime change," the historic links between Syria and Russia, and the credible belief that the attack on Syria is a step toward attacking Iran.

**–Analyst Burns concludes with call for war via "No Fly Zone."** He says, "If the Russians don't restrain the Syrian government from firing barrel bombs into civilian neighborhoods the U.S. ought to consider a No Flight (sic) Zone with Turkey and other countries to shut down the Syrian Air Force. That's what Secretary [Hillary] Clinton has been advocating and I think she's right. ... The way to save civilians and reduce the number of refugees is to shut down air traffic in the northern part of Syria. That's an idea that the administration has to consider now given these events."

Thus Ambassador Burns goes from criticizing Russia for an alleged 17-second intrusion into Turkish air space to calling for Turkey, the United States and other countries to take over northern Syrian air space. It's a call for more war masquerading as a call for peace.

We can see where his call would lead by looking at consequences of the "No Fly

Zone” in Libya. This “humanitarian” effort became a cover for “regime change” that has resulted in vastly more conflict, deaths, displaced persons and refugees. Since the NATO-driven “regime change” in Libya, terrorism has exploded across Libya and into neighboring countries.

Does Burns really want to take the U.S. into a potential war with Syria and Russia by trying to take over northern Syria? What is wrong with following international law and letting the Syrian people determine their leader?

With Russian air support the Syrian Army is advancing on nearly all fronts. Is that what Turkey and other enemies of Syria are really concerned about?

The U.S. has been invading or surreptitiously overthrowing governments around the globe for the past 65 years. This U.S. aggression has usually ended badly, especially for the target country but also for the U.S. economy and population. Why do these wars keep happening? To some extent it is media failure to expose what’s going on and encourage serious debate.

The *PBS Newshour* program on Nov. 24 is an example of why the U.S. public is so confused about Syria. *PBS Newshour* could have presented one of the analysts, Burns or Stent, along with an analyst with a different viewpoint who could have challenged the biased perspective. For instance, it could have been someone from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity like Ray McGovern or someone representing Russia or Syria, perhaps the Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations.

Instead we had another propaganda presentation, biased and misleading. *PBS Newshour* is failing the public. If you agree, consider letting the PBS ombudsman know. His email and phone contact is at [www.pbs.org/ombudsman/home/](http://www.pbs.org/ombudsman/home/)

**Rick Sterling is a writer and organizer with Syria Solidarity Movement, Task Force on the Americas and Mt Diablo Peace & Justice Center.**

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## How PBS Lost the Public

America’s PBS has long since compromised its journalistic integrity to deflect political and financial pressure from the Right. But assaults on public broadcasting in Greece and other countries are provoking outrage and resistance from the public, reports Danny Schechter.

By Danny Schechter

It's hard for me to feel sorry about the travails of the PBS "News Hour" where bland has been beautiful for years and an obsessive loyalty to mechanistic balance, always tilting right, has been in command for decades.

The news on PBS survived all these many years because of lavish funding from major corporate sponsors who felt comfortable with its stuffy and unthreatening approach.



In the years when the initials PBS were jokingly known as the "Petroleum Broadcasting System" because of all the backing from oil giants, the then "McNeil-Lehrer Report" went from a half-hour to an hour. At that time, the New Yorker magazine ran a cartoon of a loyal listener asking, "wasn't it always an hour?" a comment on its frequently ponderous presentation.

The latest news about the "News Hour" in the New York Times, the program's favorite journalistic source which it always sought to emulate, was not good for the PBS fixture:

"WASHINGTON, The 'PBS NewsHour,' the signature nightly newscast on public television, is planning its first significant round of layoffs in nearly two decades.

"Because of declines in support from corporate sponsors, the show's producer, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, will close the two offices it has outside of the Washington area, in Denver and San Francisco, and lay off most of the employees there. The company, which is based in Arlington, Va. will also eliminate several of what it calls 'noncritical production positions' at its main office."

The Times reported, "the production company was facing a shortfall of up to \$7 million, a quarter of its \$28 million overall budget."

Actually, MacNeil/Lehrer Productions was privatized long ago when it was bought by rightwing cable mogul John Malone, once known as the "Darth Vader" of the industry. Lehrer and McNeil were beneficiaries of the deal, cashing in on public television for private ends.

When the "PBS NewsHour" takes a deep hit, you know other broadcasters will feel more pain as is the case in Greece where the whole public broadcasting system is being phased out thanks to the draconian austerity policies imposed on the country after it couldn't pay the money it owes to U.S.-based hedge funds.

Reuters reports: "Greece's government faced an internal revolt and public outrage on Wednesday over the sudden closure of state broadcaster ERT, hours after the humiliation of seeing its bourse downgraded to emerging market status.

"The public broadcaster was yanked off air just hours after the shutdown was announced in what the government said was a temporary measure to staunch an 'incredible waste' of taxpayers' money prior to its relaunch as a slimmed-down station.

"Labor unions called a 24-hour national work stoppage for Thursday and journalists went on an open-ended strike, forcing a news blackout on privately owned television and newspapers.

"The strike will only end when the government takes back this coup d'etat which gags information,' the ESIEA union said.

"Some ERT journalists occupied the broadcaster's building in defiance of government orders and broadcasted over the Internet, showing somber newscasters deploring the shutdown and replaying images of thousands gathered outside to protest.

"ERT's reporters from as far away as Australia appeared on air to describe the outrage of local Greek communities. "It is our only link with our homeland,' said Odysseas Mandeakis, president of the Greek community in Zambia."

It is doubtful that unions, employees and viewers would take similar action to save a PBS that has long served an upscale elite audience and is "public" in name only.

After years of battling for more fairness and courage on PBS, media activists, documentary-makers and people's groups set up alternatives like Link TV, Free Speech TV and Democracy Now. I started my TV career in public broadcasting in Boston as a news reporter. When the public-broadcasting station WGBH came under pressure from commercial broadcasters for competing with them, it killed its 10 o'clock news show.

Then as an independent producer at Globalvision, we were never able to get PBS to distribute our two pioneering weekly series, "South Africa Now," and "Rights & Wrongs: Human Rights Television." They were offended by its "organizing principle." PBS turned "Rights & Wrongs" down even though it was hosted by

public television's then most respected correspondent, Charlayne Hunter-Gault.

TV critic Marvin Kitman asked, "Does that mean that if it was balanced for torture and against torture, they would carry it? In Norway, Sweden and on the BBC, they think the show is apolitical. Here they consider it ultra-leftist."

The destruction of Greek Public Television can easily lead to an assault on other public broadcasters by governments that have terribly mismanaged their economies and are now looking for scapegoats. In Greece, the problem has been compounded by the fact that the IMF that was supposed to save the Greek economy now admits it made major mistakes and caused some of the economic misery the country is facing.

And so, a media outlet that has been covering the crisis has now become central to it as broadcasters Europe-wide and viewers in Greece express solidarity.

If ERT goes down without a fight today, others will follow tomorrow.

Anastasia Zigou, a member of Strike Struggle, a group formed by ERT journalists said:

"Many of us haven't slept for 48 hours, but we won't give in. We are sustained by the huge response we've had from citizens, not only here but at local radio stations all over the country.

"There have been people in tears at local radio stations in border regions in Crete, in Samos, in Thrace. In those areas, ERT was the only Greek language radio you could hear, and the signals of other TV stations are weak too.

"Without ERT they feel cut off from the metropolis. But it's much more than that, more than the firing of 2,600 workers. The sudden, undemocratic closure of a public broadcaster was a kind of coup. This isn't a private station that someone can just decide to close. This doesn't happen in democratic countries."

She added this appeal: "We need solidarity from around the world, not just from fellow journalists and unions but from ordinary citizens. This matters to everyone."

**News Dissector Danny Schechter edts [mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org) and blogs at [News Dissector.net](http://NewsDissector.net). Comments to [dissector@mediachannel.org](mailto:dissector@mediachannel.org)**

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# Will Big Bird Reject Attack Ads?

A federal appeals court has extended the *Citizens United* “logic” into the realm of public television, opening the door to cluttering up those stations with campaign attack ads like the rest of TV, an ominous development to Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

A couple of weeks ago, we wrote about how the media giants who own your local commercial television and radio stations have been striking like startled rattlesnakes at an FCC proposal that would shed a light on who’s buying our elections.

The proposed new rule would make it easier to find out who’s bankrolling political attack ads by posting the information online. The stations already have the data and are required by law to make it public to anyone who asks.

But you can get only it by going to the station and asking for the actual paper documents what’s known as “the public file.” Stations don’t want to put it online because – you guessed it – that would make it too easy for you to find out who’s putting up the cash for all those ads polluting your hometown airwaves.

If approved, the new rule would require the ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox affiliates in the top 50 markets to make their files on political advertising available online immediately. Other stations would have a two-year grace period.

In the meantime, the mighty giants of broadcasting have been fighting back. A number of senators serving the industry have spoken up against the proposal and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) led by their top lobbyist and president, the frozen food millionaire and former Oregon Republican Senator Gordon Smith have been meeting with commissioners urging them to scuttle the proposal or at least water it down until it means nothing.

As Jeffrey Rosen of *The New Republic* magazine wrote, “The arguments against transparency offered by the networks show that, having experienced the windfall of advertising dollars that *Citizens United* unleashed, they have little interest in meeting their legal and ethical responsibility to serve the public interest.”

The FCC is scheduled to vote on their proposal on April 27, and on Monday its chairman, Julius Genachowski, walked into the lion’s den the really nice one in Las Vegas and addressed the NAB’s annual convention.

He noted that, "Using rhetoric that one writer described as 'teeth-gnashing' and 'fire-breathing,' some in the broadcast industry have elected to position themselves against technology, against transparency, and against journalism."

He added, "The argument against moving the public file online is that required broadcaster disclosures shouldn't be too public. But in a world where everything is going digital, why have a special exemption for broadcasters' political disclosure obligation?"

Whatever the result on the 27th, those negative attack ads already are cluttering the airwaves like so much unsolicited junk mail and it's only going to get much, much worse as the super PACs, political parties, the moguls and tycoons, many acting in secrecy, lavish perhaps as much as \$3 billion on local stations between now and November.

But now there's something new in the mix, especially appalling to anyone who truly cares about public broadcasting. On April 12, by a vote of 2-1 two of three judges on the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals found in favor of KMTP, a small public station in San Francisco, and struck down the federal ban against political and issue advertising on public TV and radio.

For decades there's been a rule against turning those airwaves over to ads for political campaigns and causes. Now the court has ruled that the free speech rights of political advertisers take precedence.

Imagine if you turned on your TV set someday soon and were greeted by "Sesame Street," brought to you by the letter C, for "creeping campaign cash corruption." Perhaps that's a bit of a stretch, but as the late William F. Buckley, Jr., used to say, the point survives the exaggeration.

If ever there was a camel's nose under the tent, this is it and we don't mean one of those humped creatures that show up on PBS's "Nature" or an episode about backpacking through Egypt on "Globe Trekker." The current public system was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1967.

"It will get part of its support from our government," Johnson said, "but it will be carefully guarded from Government or from party control. It will be free, and it will be independent – and it will belong to all of our people."

The Public Broadcasting Act uses the word "noncommercial" 16 times to describe what public television and radio should be. And it specifically says that, "No noncommercial educational broadcasting station may support or oppose any candidate for political office."

We've taken that seriously all these years, and most of us who have labored in

this vineyard still think public broadcasting should be a refuge from the braying distortions and outright lies that characterize politics today especially those endless, head splitting ads.

But in its majority decision the court wrote, “Neither logic nor evidence supports the notion that public issue and political advertisers are likely to encourage public broadcast stations to dilute the kind of noncommercial programming whose maintenance is the substantial interest that would support the advertising bans.”

Sorry, your honors: this is the same so-called “logic” that led the U.S. Supreme Court to issue its notorious *Citizens United* decision, the one that opened all spigots to flood the political landscape with cash and the airwaves with trash. “To be truthful” one former PBS board member said, “it scares me to death.” Us, too.

The court decision did uphold the ban on public broadcasting selling ad time for commercial goods and services, although, as corporations and others cover the cost of programming through what’s euphemistically referred to as “enhanced underwriting,” public TV already is close to the line of what differentiates it from commercial broadcasting.

And understandably, with our stations always in a financial pickle, frantically hanging on by their fingertips, it won’t be easy to turn down those quick bucks from super PACs and others. But hang in there, brothers and sisters in the faith: If ever there was a time for solidarity and spine, this is it.

Stations KPBS in San Diego and KSFR, public radio in Santa Fe, have said they won’t do it. If enough of you say no, this invasion might be repelled. And viewers, they need to know you’re behind them.

**Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship, senior writing fellow at Demos, is senior writer of the weekly public television program “Moyers & Company.” Comment at [www.billmoyers.com](http://www.billmoyers.com).**

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## PBS Undercuts Indie Documentaries

In recent years, PBS has grown more and more timid as financial and political pressures have mounted, explaining why two of its more controversial series presenting independent documentaries have gotten stuck in a time slot guaranteeing fewer viewers. PBS veterans Bill Moyers and Michael Winship object.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Neither of us is old enough to have been fooled by the Trojan Horse ([see Wikipedia](#)). But we each have been working in public television decades enough to remember the days when distribution was handled by physically transporting bulky 2-inch videotapes from station to station – “bicycled” was the word – and much of the broadcast day and night was devoted to blackboard lectures, string quartets and lessons in Japanese brush painting: The old educational television versions of reality TV.

Yet it also was a time of innovation and creativity. As the system evolved we saw bold experiments like *PBL – the Public Broadcasting Laboratory* and Al Perlmutter’s *The Great American Dream Machine*, each a predecessor to the commercial TV magazine shows *60 Minutes* and *20/20*.



The TV Lab, jointly run by David Loxton at WNET in New York and Fred Barzyk at WGBH in Boston, nurtured and encouraged the first generation of video artists, Nam June Paik, Bill Viola and William Wegman among others – and the early documentary work of such video pioneers as Jon Alpert and Keiko Tsuno of the Downtown Community Television Center, Alan and Susan Raymond, and the wild and woolly, guerrilla camera crews of TVTV.

The descendants of those pathfinders are the independent filmmakers whose works have not only re-energized the motion picture industry but also have vastly expanded the realm of the documentary – in both the scope of its storytelling and the size and diversity of its audience. Public television has faithfully provided an enormous national stage where nonfiction films can be seen by far more people than could ever buy tickets at the handful of movie houses willing to put documentaries up on their theater screens.

As Gordon Quinn of the independent documentary company Kartemquin Films (*Hoop Dreams*) told Anthony Kaufman of the website [IndieWire](#), “In terms of having an audience in a democratic society, in terms of getting people talking about things, there’s nothing like a PBS broadcast. PBS is free, and it’s huge in getting into rural areas. That reach, all over the country, it’s a critically

important audience that's vastly underserved."

Two PBS series have provided outstanding showcases for the work of new and established documentarians and between them have 13 Oscar nominations and 54 Emmys to prove it. For years, *Independent Lens* and *POV* held a nationwide time slot as part of the PBS core schedule on Tuesday nights, with public TV stalwart *Frontline* as a worthy lead-in, funneling to the independent films just the kind of audience that enjoys and appreciates documentaries.

But this season, PBS chose to move *Independent Lens* and *POV* to a new time slot – 10 PM ET, on Thursday nights. This may not seem like such a big deal at first, until you know that on Thursday nights stations can broadcast any program they like in prime time, whether it's part of the PBS schedule or not. Many take the opportunity to offer viewers locally produced programs, British sitcoms or reruns of *Antiques Roadshow*. As a result, episodes of the independent documentary series can now be run anywhere local stations choose to fit them in (here in New York, WNET airs the films at 11 pm on Sundays) or maybe not at all.

*POV* does not begin the new season – its 25<sup>th</sup> – until June, but as [Dru Sefton first reported](#) in the public broadcasting trade publication *Current*, in the first few months since *Independent Lens* was shuffled into its new Thursday time slot last October, ratings plummeted 42 percent from the same period last season.

With programs scattered throughout the schedule in different cities, not only is it now more difficult for viewers to find them but coordinated national advertising and promotion campaigns are, at best, extremely difficult.

The team at PBS consists of dedicated people; all are our colleagues and many are our friends. They are constantly looking for ways to increase the audience that watches public television. But there is always a danger, in any organization, of only seeing the world from the top down, and then counting heads to measure whether something is good or not. [An open letter to PBS from Kartemquin Films](#) says it well:

"Public television is not just a popularity contest, or a ratings game. Taxpayers support public broadcasting because democracy needs more than commercial media's business models can provide. PBS' programming decision makes a statement about PBS' commitment to the mission of public broadcasting."

It goes on to note the mandate cited in the recently revised and reissued [Code of Editorial Integrity for Local Public Media Organizations](#): "Our purposes are to support a strong civil society, increase cultural access and knowledge, extend public education, and strengthen community life through electronic media

and related community activities.”

Most of both our careers have been in public television. Our affection and gratitude for it abideth, but we are not blind to the problems. Public broadcasting’s ever-tenuous funding places it in a perpetual dilemma and forces it into a delicate balancing act. PBS provides programming like *Independent Lens* and *POV* that may not garner the most viewers but helps fulfill its essential mission of public service, and, candidly, attracts grants from kindred spirits who believe in a robust mix of ideas and visions.

But to lure a wider audience, it also airs what our neighborhood diner calls “lighter fare”, whether entertaining, upscale imports like *Downton Abbey*, home-grown, how-to programs like *This Old House* or (during pledge drives) nostalgic reruns of folk musicians, pop crooners, and financial and spiritual gurus aimed at older viewers with, presumably, more disposable income.

Add to this the constant political pressures, especially from conservative politicians ever eager to cut off its funding (Mitt Romney says he wants to see commercials on “Sesame Street”), plus the self-censorship that all too often results, and you get a tendency toward orthodoxy and an aversion to controversy.

A PBS spokesperson told *The New York Times* that the service “is fully committed to independent films and the diversity of content they provide.” That can quickly be demonstrated by reversing a bad decision and returning to a national core time slot the independent documentaries created – often at real financial sacrifice – by the producers and filmmakers whose own passion is to reveal life honestly and to make plain, for all to see, the realities of inequality and injustice in America.

Along with its open letter to PBS, Kartemquin Films published a petition and asked for signatures from independent filmmakers and their supporters. We two are among the more than 300 who have signed it as of this writing. If you think the creativity and unique visions of life captured by independent producers, journalists and filmmakers deserve the best possible platform on public television, you can read and sign it yourself.

The effort has made a difference. Talks are ongoing and the *Times* reports that PBS now has “agreed to find a new home next season” for the two series. An announcement is expected to be made at the PBS annual meeting in May. That’s good news, but until the decision is made, it’s important to keep letting them know how you feel, write PBS or sign that petition.

**Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship is senior writer of the weekly public affairs program, *Moyers & Company*, airing on public television.**

Check local airtimes or comment at [www.BillMoyers.com](http://www.BillMoyers.com).

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