

# A Big-Three Network Veteran Shakes Up at PBS Stronghold

By JOANNE KAUFMAN  
NEW YORK

Before the spring of 2007 when Neal Shapiro became president of WNET.org, the parent company of New York's Thirteen/WNET and WLIW 21, two of the most watched public television stations in the country, he dutifully sent in his annual contributions and politely admired public TV's "noble mission."

"I always thought there were things you could find on public television that you couldn't find other places. But I always thought it should have been a bigger player in New York than it was," said Mr. Shapiro, a pretty big player himself -- he was president of NBC News from 2001 to 2005 and was named CEO of WNET.org in February. "When I first met with the board, I said: 'As great as everything you do is, I think it could be greater.'"

Mr. Shapiro, 50, who looks precisely like what he is -- a slightly aging boy wonder -- doesn't have much of a view of the city from his sixth-floor office on Manhattan's far West Side. But his view -- and vision -- of the city as it relates to public broadcasting is grand indeed. "Look at all the things New York is," he said. "It's the center of the financial world. It's the center of the publishing world. It's the center of journalism. There's no place else with the number of fantastic museums, no place else that has such a rich concentration of drama in all its forms. It's a city, to coin a phrase, that never sleeps, and I think the station should capture more of that excitement."

Accordingly, last year, as an accompaniment to Ken Burns's World War II documentary "The War," Mr. Shapiro, a former executive producer of NBC's "Dateline," commissioned two local versions, "New York War Stories," which was knit together from viewer-submitted videos, and "New York Goes to War." "These shows were wildly successful," he said. This past January he revamped the Saturday night lineup, which for years had been a double-feature of classic movies. Now called "Reel 13," the lineup consists of an old flick, a viewer-submitted short subject, and a recent independent movie. The big payoff? An uptick of viewers in the

demographic sweet spot: the 18-49 age group. Then in March he started "Sunday/Arts," a weekly three-hour assemblage of performances, interviews and local cultural news, with himself as host. "I may be one of the few TV executives going around saying 'let's do more arts and culture.'"

Perhaps most notably, last week Mr. Shapiro launched "Worldfocus," a half-hour nightly broadcast of international news and analysis for American audiences. "This is important," he said, "because if you watch commercial network news you'll find that there's less and less international news. On cable they're keeping track of the running story of the day. Some public-television stations carry the BBC News. Fine organization, but they're the British Broadcasting Company and they assemble the news from a British point of view."

As Mr. Shapiro would be the first to tell you, public television moves at a more stately pace than the commercial networks. Proposals must be developed and refined, money collected from foundations and individuals, and space found on the national schedule -- a process that can take up to three years.

Mr. Shapiro is as nice as can be during an interview. Still, one suspects that such geniality flies out the window when he's given some version of "that just can't be done." So he was told after the Virginia Tech massacre as he pushed for WNET to produce -- pronto -- a documentary on mental illness in teenagers. His response: a direct appeal to viewers to send money if they were interested in such a program. So far, more than \$180,000 has been raised in seed money. "A Cry for Help: A Genera-

tion at Risk?" is in production.

"Neal's bringing to Thirteen in particular and public television in general a new sense of energy and innovation," said James Tisch, WNET.org's board president. "He's bringing the sense that a lot can be done with a little money and that a lot can be done by not doing it the way it's always been done."

Others are more measured. "Neal is doing bold things, but he doesn't always see the consequences. He approached PBS all fired up about Virginia Tech, and the feeling there was that his proposal was very sensation-

alistic," said a former PBS staff member, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He wanted it on the air fast, but it still hasn't been on the air." And, in fact, Mr. Shapiro is still spending money on the project.

As for "Worldfocus," "with staff and getting the show up, it's costing \$10 million a year in unraised money, which means

it's a big risk," noted the same former PBS staffer. And because the program isn't on the PBS prime-time schedule, member stations can take it or leave it, which makes fund raising a trickier business. A spokesman for WNET says the \$10 million figure is inflated.

To hear Mr. Shapiro tell it, his biggest adjustment in the move from commercial to public television is being on camera both as the "Sunday/Arts" host -- a gig he's about to hand off to more experienced broadcasters -- and as pitchman-in-chief during pledge week. "My wife is in television," he said, referring to Juju Chang, an ABC News correspondent and the mother of the couple's three young sons. "Sometimes I'll come home

and she'll say: 'Drop your voice to a lower register and slow down. I think you're rushing a little bit at the top.'"

Mr. Shapiro grew up in Albany, where his father, the vice president of a textile mill, and his mother, a state employee -- both news junkies -- insisted on silence from their two children during "The Huntley-Brinkley Report." WMHT was the local public television station, and "I remember my folks watching David Susskind, and I used to watch a lot of the kid stuff like 'Electric Company.' And I do remember watching a play called 'Steambath,'" he said, referring to an adaptation of Bruce Jay Friedman's off-Broadway work. "I think there was a nude scene."

Mr. Shapiro hopes there will be similarly memorable offerings on his watch -- for example, "Blueprint America," a package he's spearheading about the country's aging infrastructure. Rolled out last week on "NOW," the yearlong initiative will take form in interviews, documentaries and a special series on "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer."

"It would never happen" on the three commercial networks, Mr. Shapiro said. "It's happening here because people at public broadcasting think it's an important topic."

"Some people said to me: 'You are not going to be able to change a thing. Public television is the way it is. You're an outsider. Just forget it,'" he continued. "But I look at all the things we've done in less than a year and I'm pretty happy."

The recent meltdown on Wall Street is cause for some worry; public television, after all, runs on the support of viewers like you. "Are we going to watch what we're doing and be even more efficient?" Mr. Shapiro said. "Yes."

But any such fund-raising concerns are outweighed by Mr. Shapiro's belief that he's ever so much smarter than before he took the job, what with all that public television he's watching. Further, "I'm relieved that I no longer have to keep track of Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan," he said. "I'm not saying someone shouldn't. A lot of Americans are interested. But I'm delighted now that I don't have to."

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