

Betting New(s) Ideas Will Pay Off at WNET

You have to wonder if WNET knew what it was getting into when it chose former NBC News President Neal Shapiro to head the venerable New York City PBS station.

Almost from the day he arrived in February 2007 as president and designated heir to CEO Bill Baker, Shapiro began to question long-held assumptions about production, promotion, scheduling and fundraising. He even dared to challenge the PBS penchant for narrating documentaries at the pace of a Gregorian chant.

But then Shapiro's opinions come with considerable credibility. His 25-year career in television news culminated with the top job at NBC News. During his watch, NBC remained top-rated in every daypart.

Among Shapiro's many accomplishments: orchestrating the seamless transition from Tom Brokaw to Brian Williams, earning 32 Emmys and three Peabody awards as executive producer of *Dateline NBC* as well as numerous other awards as broadcast producer of *PrimeTime Live* on ABC.

Early this year, Shapiro added the title of CEO and, as planned, officially succeeded Baker, the longtime chief of Thirteen, as WNET is branded on-air. Shapiro continues to make waves with staff changes and program innovations — determined to expand on public TV's aging audience, even as he builds on its well-earned reputation for quality.

In this interview with TVNewsday Contributing Editor Arthur Greenwald, Shapiro reflects on the distinctly different cultures and goals of commercial and public television — and their respective measures of success. He offers a candid appraisal of where PBS programs may fall short, and what steps are being taken to refresh and revitalize the schedule. And Shapiro shares a personal memory of his former colleague, the late Tim Russert.



An edited transcript:

You had a chance to get acclimated to WNET and PBS even before you took your present job. What strikes you as the greatest strengths and weaknesses of public television?

When you talk about strengths, I look firstly at the integrity of public television. It's not just about chasing a tenth of a rating point and I really like that. There's a real sense of mission. We do the best programs we can, programs that really touch people's hearts, lift their souls, make them think. We're an educational station, so we also connect to classrooms. We do things that the commercial networks aren't.

When you say you're "doing things the commercial networks aren't," you're not talking about competitive advantages.

No. I love television and I think there's room for all kinds of things. But when you're looking for arts and culture, you end up in public television. There are things that commercial networks don't believe have a lot of commercial value.

When you were thinking about taking this job, what was some of the best advice you received from colleagues in both commercial and in public television?

I must say everybody I spoke to said I should do it because they all thought it was a good match to my skill set and the things I value. The thing is,

I had never raised money before. I had defended my budgets on every show I've been on, but I never had to go out and raise money. People said that would not be difficult. And I learned that when you say, "Here's a really important project, something I really believe in, and I'd like you to invest in it," that people are really excited about that opportunity.

A lot of PBS programs have been running for a long time, in some cases for decades. When former PBS President Pat Mitchell first tried to move *Masterpiece Theatre* to a new night, it caused an angry reaction from stations. How can PBS attract new and younger viewers when so much of the schedule is sacrosanct?

While a lot of the schedule is taken up by PBS shows, not all of it is and there's plenty of room for stations to do interesting local programs, that can help people connect with their community. For example, when PBS did their the big Ken Burns epic on the war, we did three separate hours about New Yorkers going to war (*New York War Stories*.) Millions of people saw those and we got a tremendous reaction from the viewers.

Another thing, we can change [long-running] shows and still be true to their values. For years, we had *Cinema Thirteen* with two classic movies shown back to back. But there's only so many times you can ask the audience to watch *The Best Years Of Our Lives*. So, we changed it to

something which still works with our traditional audience, but also reaches out to independent film lovers. We renamed it *Reel 13* and followed that first classic movie with a five-to-ten minute short by a local filmmaker. In fact, we put three choices online and let the audience pick the film that gets shown on the air. The filmmakers are thrilled because a single Saturday night showing on Thirteen reaches more viewers than if you rented the Film Forum downtown and sold out each of its theaters for six months.

What about freshening the PBS lineup itself?

We're looking at all our national shows such as *Great Performances* and *Nature* and seeing what little tweaks we can make to make them a little more innovative. Fred Kaufman, who is the executive producer of *Nature*, is updating episodes during the summer and he's asking the audience to vote online about which shows they want updated.

So we're breaking down that wall. TV is no longer just a one-way instrument. That's something all stations can do, especially PBS stations.

You also made some news last year after the Virginia Tech shootings. You went directly to viewers to fund a news analysis special, which by PBS standards is a fast turnaround. Is that a strategy that you can repeat?

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I hope so. I'd like to keep asking the audience for its views and sometimes for its support. We continue to raise money for that project and we hope to get that on the air soon. Part of our new philosophy is to give the audience examples of what we're asking them to support.

What resources would it take for you to produce specials that respond more quickly to major news events on an ongoing basis?

Certainly it would take a little bit more money and more staff. That's one of the things I'm trying to develop as we go forward.

It's almost become a cliché for critics of public television to claim that it duplicates science, history and other programs already on cable networks. Is there any validity to that argument and how do you refute it?

Our mistake in public television is we haven't done a good enough job yet of telling the audience why we're different. You need to dive deep into projects to really understand them. It's a simplistic view just to say, "They do history and science and therefore we shouldn't do it." Hyundai makes cars and Rolls Royce makes cars, but they're very different. The quality of the research and resources that go into our show *American Masters* is incredibly different from a cursory view of someone's life slapped together in a one-hour profile on a cable channel. If you want a show where great filmmakers have spent years of production, which may be rich in clips and excerpts of work which cost money to clear, that's what public television does.

Can you demonstrate the added depth of an *American Masters* biography by supplying extra content to viewers by using new media?

Absolutely. We're looking at alternative media both to make the viewing experience richer and deeper and also as a way in which the audience can interact with us. For example *Wide Angle* begins this week. We brought in [former CNN anchor] Aaron Brown as the host. He'll be online after the show to talk to the audience about where we're shooting now and asking what they would like to know. Their answers will be transmitted to the filmmakers and journalists who are covering the stories in the field. And you never know, a viewer question may spark a great new thought or even a whole new direction.

There is a perception among a number of public stations that too much of the PBS schedule is dominated by the eastern producing stations—WNET in New York, WGBH in Boston and, to some extent, WETA in Washington. Would PBS programming be more diverse if it came from a wider variety of stations?

Good programming is good programming and all of us try to come up with the best shows that

we can. I encourage anybody else who wants to get into that game to go ahead and do it. I do think that there are a lot of great producers who happen to live in New York and Boston and who bring a lot of great ideas to us. But I think good programs can come from anywhere.

As an award-winning producer, do you agree that PBS programs share a predictable pace and style of narration and do you think that look and feel could benefit from some shaking up?

Part of the reason we hired Aaron Brown to work on *Wide Angle* is to give it a different feel so it wasn't just an omniscient narrator, but a working journalist. Sometimes he'll be out in the field; sometimes he'll be here. I think he's a distinctive voice. As for changing things, WGBH deserves a lot of credit for adding different hosts on *Masterpiece Theatre*. They had Gillian Anderson and then Alan Cumming to shake up the format a little bit. And they [programmed] sort of a Jane Austin marathon and I thought that was great. It's wrong for anybody to think that programs should stay exactly as they are. All things should change. The secret is to hang on to the qualities that make them great and we're not going to lose that.

Do you think that there's any value in literally making the visuals and audio move faster on PBS documentaries?

We're going to try some different ways of telling stories because, as good as things are, you can always find a new breakthrough. When we followed Ken Burns' *The War with New York War Stories*, we did it with user-generated content. Instead of finding and interviewing all the characters then writing the narrative, I did a promo that said, "If you were a New Yorker during the war, whether you were here or fought overseas, record an interview or write us a letter and we'll use that to make a documentary."

We got 250 interviews and 2,000 letters and we molded them into a show. It doesn't feel like anything else you saw. It lacked that omniscient narrator. The interviews were not all beautifully lit and the sound wasn't perfect, but it had such an incredible authenticity as soldiers described how they remember the horrors of war to this day. Are we going to try more things like that? Absolutely.

You've also been exploring some creative partnerships.

Yes, for example, we recently partnered with ABC News when the New York Philharmonic went to North Korea. I thought it was a win-win for everybody. ABC News wanted access and they thought it would be helpful to be able to tell the Korean authorities that the concert would be on [American] national television. Of course, there was no way the ABC television network

was going to put the New York Philharmonic in North Korea on television, but we can because, guess what, of the 500 channels, we care about classical music. That was an amazing musical event. And it wasn't just a concert. It was also an historic breakthrough and it was powerful emotionally. We also benefited from some of their reporting. I thought it worked for both organizations, but the big winner was the viewer.

At NBC, you were working with an actual top-down structure where the network tells the stations what they are going to run. That's not the case with PBS, which is just a program service. Do you think if public television were managed that way, you would have a larger audience or any other advantages?

When I was at NBC, I saw the advantages of a top-down network, but I also saw the disadvantages. Local stations often felt like their voices weren't being heard. On the other hand, I think there clearly are times when acting like a network benefits everybody. The fact that we now have common carriage for the national schedule is very smart and it makes all of PBS more powerful.

What would you most like people to understand about what you're trying to accomplish at Thirteen?

Everybody knows the challenges facing public television. It's a tough economy. We're viewer supported and we face a world of 500 channels. In this onslaught of information, brand names are going to mean even more as a way to fight through the clutter and the PBS brand nationally, and the local station brands — in our case Thirteen — is going to mean quite a lot.

Finally, if you were still president of NBC News, you'd be dealing with the loss of Tim Russert, who was not only the moderator of *Meet the Press*, but also chief political correspondent and Washington bureau chief. What would you take into consideration when filling those various positions?

I have such personal affection for Tim Russert. He truly was a great man on camera and behind the scenes. But years ago, when we were doing up to four or five nights of *Dateline* per week, Tim said to me, "You need to leave time for your kids." And I said, "Yeah I know that, but the network needs me to do this, they have a hole. ..." And he said, "Let me tell you something, Neal. Anybody can be replaced. No matter how good you are, they can always find somebody else."

Sadly, I never thought we'd have to say that about Tim Russert, but he was probably right. There are other worthy people out there. But no matter who gets that job, I think they'll admit that following Tim Russert is a very difficult thing.