

JIM LEHRER AND *THE NEWSHOUR*

The article describes the history of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, the flagship news program of American public television (PBS) – as well as the present-day controversies over it. *The NewsHour* started in 1975 as a supplement to the news shows of commercial networks; the program's formula was then changed in 1983, making it the only hour-long, comprehensive review of domestic and foreign issues on US national television. Lehrer's show, known for its deep insight into discussed subjects and a slow-paced, careful style of reporting, has been hailed by the majority of commentators and viewers as a paragon of quality journalism in the US television market since its debut on the air. Nonetheless, *The NewsHour* has received its share of criticism over the years. According to the program's detractors, not only does it pander to popular tastes but it is also biased in favor of conservative and corporate positions.

On Friday, September 26th, 2008, millions of Americans watching the main political event of the day were greeted by the Texas-accented voice of an elderly man: "Good evening, from the Ford Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. I'm Jim Lehrer of *The NewsHour* on PBS and I welcome you to the first of the 2008 presidential debates between the Republican nominee, Senator John McCain of Arizona, and the Democratic nominee, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois." It was not the first time the gray-haired anchorman had uttered similar words – in fact, it was the eleventh presidential debate he had hosted during his long career. Lehrer, nicknamed the "Dean of Moderators" (Gewertz, 2006), has made his name as a balanced and honest journalist thanks to the years he has spent at the helm of *The NewsHour* – the flagship news program of US public television. But does *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* really provide the American public with such an unbiased and fair coverage of current issues as its fans would like to think? Let's take a look at Lehrer and his show.

The Early Days

James Charles Lehrer was born May 19th, 1934, in Wichita, Kansas (*About Us/Jim Lehrer* 2008) to a family of German ancestry (Stewart 1999: 142). In 1948 his parents moved to Texas, where young Jim graduated from high school and first developed an interest in writing (he worked as an editor of school newspapers). Lehrer went on to study at Victoria College and the highly rated Missouri School of Journalism from which he received his B.J. in 1956. After serving three years in the Marine Corps, he started to work for Dallas newspapers (among other things, he reported on JFK's assassination), eventually making his way to the position of city editor of the Dallas Times-Herald in 1968 (*About Us/Jim Lehrer* 2008). A year later, he accepted an offer to become director of news at KERA-TV, a local educational station (Stewart 1999: 144). Lehrer's involve-

ment in public television's news programming soon led him to Washington, and it was there that he met Robert MacNeil.

Robert "Robin" MacNeil, born January 19th, 1931, was in many respects different from Lehrer. A Canadian, MacNeil had vast experience in reporting international affairs – he had worked as a foreign correspondent for Reuters, a journalist for American TV networks and a documentary producer for the British Broadcasting Corporation (Stewart 1999: 145) – and was said to be a fiery, crusading reporter of issues he considered important, very critical to the Vietnam war and the Nixon administration (Jarvik 1998: 97). In fact, it was Richard Nixon who brought the two together – in 1973, Lehrer and MacNeil teamed up to provide continuous live coverage of the Senate Watergate hearings, broadcast on PBS (*About Us/Jim Lehrer* 2008). Their reports aroused great public interest and made the young journalists recognized media figures. Moreover, the success of the coverage of President Nixon's fall meant good news for American public television; as Jim Lehrer said: "The Watergate broadcasts were a terrific hit with the audience and the stations and established once and for all that real public affairs programming had a permanent place on public broadcasting" (Jarvik 1998: 112). And soon, with Nixon (who believed that the Public Broadcasting Service had liberal agenda and sought to cripple its funding, starting in 1971 (Engelman 1996: 168)) gone, all was set for a new current affairs program of the US public network.

The Courage to Be Boring

The idea was simple: to take one story each night and concentrate on it, in depth, as a supplement to the commercial networks' evening news – the first broadcast of *The Robert MacNeil Report*, which aired on October 20, 1975, as a production of New York's WNET, was focused on the Big Apple's fiscal problems. At first, Robert MacNeil, who got an initial budget of \$1.4 million for the show (Jarvik 1998: 114, 115), was the host, while Jim Lehrer appeared as the *Report's* Washington correspondent. Within a couple of months, the program – now with a new name: *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report* – was put into national distribution by the PBS network.

The MacNeil/Lehrer Report was scheduled immediately after other stations' news broadcasts; the producers assumed viewers had already seen the network coverage and were offering some depth (Jarvik 1998: 96). According to Lehrer, "The best aspect of that format was our commitment to one story for thirty minutes. The downside was our lack of flexibility. It sometimes got very ponderous. As MacNeil has always said, 'It takes a lot of courage to be boring'" (Stewart 1999: 147). This early single-issue formula, subsequently copied several times by competing commercial broadcasters, had been inspired by the British current affairs series *Panorama* (Jarvik 1998: 97).

From the very beginning, the program has been constantly praised (by both the general public and other journalists) for its deep insight into the discussed subjects and its slow-paced, careful presentation. One of its viewers, author David Halberstam, said: "All I need is for someone, anyone, every few weeks to tell me what I need to know about Angola and then leave me alone until something important has changed and I need to know again" (Jarvik 1998: 97).

Two more dates are important in the history of the PBS's flagship current affairs program. In 1983, the show was extended to a full hour, with its formula changed.

Instead of only one issue, the journalists of the *Report* (now renamed *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*) began to focus on several problems. The transformation was not a smooth one: “That was from hell. We went from thirty minutes on a Friday to an hour the next Monday, from a *supplement* [to network news] to a *replacement*. We made a lot of mistakes, ...bad calls... it was a terrible agony,” says Lehrer (Stewart 1999: 147). Still, the trademark of the program – the thoughtful deliberation on each presented issue – remained the same.

Of course, this change of format meant some new challenges for the show. No longer could it be a mere add-on for the news programs of the US commercial networks. Lehrer and MacNeil had to compete, from day one, with such household names as Tom Brokaw (NBC), Peter Jennings (ABC) and Dan Rather (CBS), as well as the newly-founded CNN. As the rival news programs offered more human interest stories, featured flashy presentations and lasted only 30 minutes, the struggle was not going to be easy. Nonetheless, it soon became apparent that *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* did find its niche on the market and that the audience still appreciated the show.

In 1995, another major change happened. After 20 years as an anchorman, Robert MacNeil decided to retire and concentrate on other projects. During a meeting of public broadcasters, he said: “I thank you for letting me work in a place where I didn’t have to check my ideals at the door” (Witherspoon & Kovitz 2000: 70). The show, renamed one more time, has since been anchored by Jim Lehrer alone.

The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

Today, *The NewsHour* is still one of the leading evening news broadcasts of the nation. According to ratings, almost 3 million Americans watch Jim Lehrer’s program every weekday and more than 8 million tune in to *The NewsHour* at least once a week. AC-Nielsen¹ estimates that approximately 98% of all US television households receive the program; it is also carried daily in many distant parts of the world by satellite broadcasting systems (*About Us/History* 2008).

The program is produced by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions (in cooperation with PBS affiliates) in Washington D.C. and San Francisco (since 1997). At 6 p.m. every weeknight, the broadcast is sent by satellite to over 300 PBS network stations all over the country. Although PBS recommends a 7 to 8 p.m. time slot for *The NewsHour*, its schedule is set independently by individual stations; many of them repeat the program during the next 24 hours. There is also a website, *The Online NewsHour* (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/>), featuring free of charge archives of Jim Lehrer’s show broadcasts in streaming media as well as transcripts of individual materials.

The format of the program has not changed much during the last decades. *The NewsHour* starts with a brief review of the headlines. Then, the most important issues are discussed in detail in several longer segments, running 10–15 minutes each. Those segments, presented in Jim Lehrer’s trademark unhurried manner, usually include reports from correspondents and discussions of commentators. Every Friday, two columnists provide an additional analysis of political and economic issues of the week. This part of the program, advertised as a “political conversation, not a shouting

¹ ACNielsen is a global market research group, best known for its “Nielsen ratings” of TV programs.

match,” normally features Mark Shields and David Brooks, though other experts are sometimes invited. Since 2003, a sad but moving section, the “Honor Call” was added to the *The NewsHour*: photographs of soldiers fallen in Iraq and Afghanistan are displayed in complete silence (Getler 2006b).

According to the information presented on *The Online NewsHour* website, “the Erdos and Morgan Opinion Leader survey ranks *The NewsHour* first among all television news programs as the most credible, most objective, most influential and most current news program on television” (*About Us/History* 2008). One could think that Jim Lehrer and his team, including such well-known journalists as Gwen Ifill, Ray Suarez and Judy Woodworth, to name a few, succeeded in the seemingly impossible task of creating a perfect news broadcast. But is it really so? Some say: not quite.

Stenographers to Power?

Taking into consideration the never-ending story of the Republican administrations’ epic struggles with the PBS and the often-heard argument that the US media outlets (especially the public ones) tend to be more liberal than conservative, it may be a bit unexpected or even ironic to find out that the most vocal critics of *The NewsHour* come from the left side of the American political scene. Right-leaning politicians and researchers seem to approve more of the way news is presented in Lehrer’s show. Even Kenneth Tomlinson, a former chairperson of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (he was appointed in 2003 by George W. Bush), whose numerous clumsy attempts (Farhi 2005) to make public TV’s programming more conservative sparked lots of controversy a few years ago, said during a Senate hearing: “Well, certainly in terms of the Jim Lehrer *NewsHour*, there is no balance problem. That is great journalism” (Rendall & Hollar 2006a).

In 2006, FAIR (which stands for “Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting”), a progressive independent media watch group which as early as 1995 lamented the acquisition of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions by the private media conglomerate Liberty Media (*MacNeil/Lehrer Sells Out* 1995), published a report accusing *The NewsHour* of “failing to provide either balance or diversity of perspectives – or a true public-minded alternative to its corporate competition” (Getler 2006a). Their six-month quantitative analysis examined the show’s list of guests and classified each one of them by occupation, nationality, gender, ethnicity and party affiliation. The results, which echoed those of a similar study from 1990 (Rendall & Hollar 2006b), showed that (among other things):

- Republicans outnumbered Democrats by 2-to-1.
- People of color made up only 15 percent of US sources.
- Male sources outnumbered women by more than 4-to-1.
- Sources advocating withdrawal from Iraq were outnumbered more than 5-to-1 by proponents of the Bush “stay the course” strategy.
- Public interest groups accounted for just 4 percent of total sources.

The methodology of FAIR’s research gave rise to controversy among media scholars and representatives of the PBS. Probably the most important point was raised by *The NewsHour* executive producer, Linda Winslow, who wrote in a rebuttal: “We try to book the most qualified guests we can for every segment; when they are people who work for the government, the military or corporate America, their sex, age, ethnicity

and political affiliation reflect decisions made by the people who hired (or voted for) them” (Getler 2006a). Nonetheless, the report did indicate some symptoms concerning the flagship news program of US public television that even the most ardent supporters of *The NewsHour* found worrying.

In response to the study, the PBS ombudsman Michael Getler wrote: “I thought the most important element of the FAIR critique was its point about the imbalance in views expressed about Iraq. (...) I share the sense that strong voices in opposition have not been heard nearly as often as those who support a ‘stay the course’ position or a slightly more moderate view.” Talking about the overall statistics of sources, he added: “My impression was that the NewsHour did a pretty good job of this [the choice of guests], but the numbers [of the FAIR report] seem to present a different picture and so they probably need to do better” (Getler 2006a).

Others were more blunt: “These findings (...) confirm a serious continuing problem: the tendency of mainstream American journalists to serve as ‘stenographers to power.’ It is obvious from the FAIR data (...) that the single biggest problem is journalists’ heavy over-reliance on official sources. (...) I urge producers, editors and reporters at *The NewsHour* to seriously rethink their routine daily practices regarding sources and the range of views found on their program,” wrote Michael Griffin, a media studies professor of Carleton College (Getler 2006a).

The argument concerning the show’s alleged bias has been mirrored in the writings of media professionals. David Barsamian, an award-winning left-wing journalist, suggests that “public radio and public television enjoy ‘liberal’ reputations, but if you come to the evidence without prejudice, you’ll overwhelmingly find that’s simply not the case (...) Radical voices are simply excluded from public discourse. They do not exist. They’re not on *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*” (Barsamian 2002: 15). Conservative writer Laurence Jarvik (usually very harsh towards PBS current affairs programming), while acknowledging the controversies and mutual accusations of bias surrounding the program, stated: “In form and content it [*The NewsHour*] has shown, for twenty years, just how public broadcasting can adapt to criticism with integrity and attempt to remain true to a mission of public service” (Jarvik 1998: 95).

Despite its widespread reputation of journalistic excellence, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* has also been criticized for pandering to popular tastes and submitting to established media patterns. American political scientists Matthew R. Kerbel, Sumaiya Apee and Marc Howard Ross compared ten story frames (themes) of PBS and ABC evening news coverage of the 1996 presidential campaign; the analysis revealed that “public and commercial stories were dominated by horse-race and strategy frames to the exclusion of frames that focus on the prospective and retrospective consequences of candidates’ actions and proposals” (Kerbel, Apee & Ross 2000: 8).

According to their study, serious consideration of the campaign issues was limited to only 18.7% of the primary and secondary story frames presented in ABC’s World News Tonight and 30.0% – in the case of the coverage provided by Jim Lehrer’s staff (the horse-race frames were given 63.8% and 51.1% respectively). The small difference in favor of *The NewsHour* seems even less significant if one takes into account the relative priority of issue frames. Whereas “ABC’s smaller complement of issue frames are more prominently featured within campaign stories (...), about half the issue frames on PBS were marginal in nature, appearing briefly in longer stories in a manner that subordinated them to other frames” (Kerbel, Apee & Ross 2000: 18). In fact, the coef-

ficient of overall correlation between the analyzed features of the two programs was fairly high (Spearman's $\rho = 0.82$).

While appreciating the fact that the PBS coverage did offer a more detailed approach to the course of the election, the researchers found the differences to be rather in the structure of the presentation than in the content. "Viewers are invited to experience the election as they were watching commercial television, as a political contest told by elite observers of the process rather than a battle of ideas involving politically viable candidates" (Kerbel, Apee & Ross 2000: 28).

A Civilized Voice in a Civilized Community

Whether or not the above-mentioned critical voices (as well as praise!) are fully justified, remains to be proven by future studies. Due to the very nature of its subject matter, media research (especially concerning political communication) has always been regarded as a somewhat "risky" field of study (Professor Richard J. Peltz of the University of Arkansas in Little Rock once told the author of this article: "Be warned that many a researcher has wrecked his ship on the shoals of trying to quantify bias!"). Therefore, any studies of this difficult but fascinating subject should always be conducted with utmost diligence and integrity, in a non-partisan manner.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps safe to say that the overwhelmingly positive opinions about *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* are a clear indication of its significance for the US public. Whatever its deficiencies are, the formula of the show turned out to be successful: for over thirty years the program has been the primary source of in-depth information about the world for millions of Americans. Laurence Jarvik wrote: "It is clear that with *The NewsHour*, Jim Lehrer continues to do what he had managed to accomplish with Robert MacNeil, provide what the Carnegie Commission Report of 1967 called upon PBS to provide: 'A civilized voice in a civilized community'" (Jarvik 1998: 119). Many would agree.

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