

The Reality of



Spokane's public television station's role in educating and enlightening us

by Blythe Thimsen

Anyone who has spent a day surfing the channels knows how quickly the mindless content of reality television, which seems to permeate the airwaves nowadays, can leave you feeling empty and hungry for more. More what? More quality, depth, substance and thought provoking content, all of which record numbers of viewers are finding on PBS.

PBS is the independently operated non-profit organization and the most prominent provider of television programs to public television stations in the United States, and it is well known for its educational programming, including *Sesame Street*, *Frontline*, *NOVA* and *American Experience*.

At first glance, the term "educational programming," which is the backbone of public television, has a less glamorous ring to it than the splash and awe of mainstream television, but viewers seem to be growing weary of splash and awe, and are shifting their viewing habits. In the 2013-14 TV season, PBS, ranked fifth among all broadcast and cable networks in household ratings. Citing Nielsen stats, PBS finished behind only CBS, NBC, ABC and Fox.

The success of PBS is established not just at a national level, but in the trenches of the 161 licensees under which are 351 member stations, peppered across the country. (These were PBS's official numbers as of July 2015). Spokane's station, KSPS, has been broadcasting since 1967, and for over 45 years KSPS has contributed to the education, entertainment and enlightenment of viewers, bringing arts to televisions, and quality programming to screens, one quality show at a time.

REALITY TELEVISION

"Reality television? What is reality television?" asks Lynn Veltrie, operations manager at KSPS, with a chuckle, referring to the majority of shows on commercial and cable stations. "We're running a series called *The Civil War*. That was real! History is real. That to me is reality television. 'Reality television' is not reality. If you think that is reality, your concept of reality is skewed."

Nowadays, anything that is weird or odd gets a reality show, because they are incredibly cheap to produce. Need proof? Look no further than the listings of cable television stations. The Department of Health, Education and Wellness, in partnership with NASA, originally founded the Learning Channel, now known as TLC, in 1972. Look at the titles of current and recent TLC

shows – *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, *Long Island Medium* and *Jon & Kate Plus 8* – and it seems the "learning" got lost somewhere along the way. The same goes for The Discovery Channel, and The History Channel, both of whose original purpose was to showcase informational and documentary programs. Nowadays, shows like *Naked & Afraid*, *Airplane Repo*, *Amish Mafia*, *Swamp People*, *Ice Road Truckers* and *American Pickers* are dominating their airwaves.

In the 1980s there was movement to get rid of PBS, believing it had outlived its purpose. "The whole idea was that commercial guys would do what public television does," says Veltrie. "Well, we're 30 years past the 1980s and they're still not doing it. I don't believe anybody does a documentary as thoughtful as what public television does. When you see a Ken Burns piece, whether it is on the Roosevelts, the Civil War, WWII, Prohibition or baseball, he proves the fact you don't have to have all these bells and whistles, but if you have people you can put on camera who can tell a story, that is what makes those shows so fascinating to watch and what makes people appreciate history and our culture."

LOCAL TELEVISION

A 36 year-employee of KSPS, Veltrie is convinced of both the need and appetite for quality programming. "As people get older, and they have families, they are looking for something that is of substance, and I think public television still provides that," he says.

KSPS has always offered a different type of programming than commercial or cable stations; they seek to show something that will supplement people's viewing and provide alternative viewing options. When it comes to history, the arts and politics, KSPS can spend more time on those topics than other stations. While news stations are limited to telling a story in a one and a half minute segment, KSPS's team is able to go in-depth, researching, writing and producing local programming, hosting political debates and forums, and offering call-in health shows.

"There is this idea that, with people's short attention spans, you have to keep it short, whereas, we have the luxury to take a little more time, and be more complete about it," says Executive Producer Jim Zimmer, who works on many of KSPS's documentaries. "When you work on a documentary you get to start over on a new subject and learn a lot about something. It is a wide-open blank canvas. The job is fresh again."

Zimmer, who has been with the organization for 35 years, was

one of the talents behind *Born to Learn*, the documentary that was created in association with a KSPS campaign called *Kids Forward*.

“The goal was to look at early learning, not only in what it means for parents and caregivers and children, but we produced a story on the brain science of early learning, and about just what a child is learning and when,” says Zimmer. “We made the commitment to that campaign. We were able to get some small grants, we put our resources into it, and we worked on a documentary on the topic, and presented it at the end of July. This was an effort to reach out further to the folks who need this information and to bring these topics forward and have a discussion about them. Public policies and politics are involved in it, so we chose this as a public service that we can perform.”

KSPS kicked off the campaign with a national documentary on the economics of early learning and supplemented that with local follow up program, talking with leaders from Olympia and other experts in the field of early childhood development. The goal was to take the information and talk about it on a regional level and learn how it impacts our city and citizens. “It was our effort to bring something to the community and the audience that wasn’t there, and to do it in a meaningful and well informed way,” says Zimmer. “We strive to produce things that are local in interest and regional in interest, but also live up to the expectation of our viewers, in the quality.”

With political season in full swing, Zimmer also is heavily involved in the station’s election coverage. KSPS will air two evenings of debates in mid-October. They’ve carved out those two hours to cover the local city races covering the bigger ballot issues. “We’re the only ones, really, doing political debates,” says Zimmer. “We don’t have the obligation for local evening news—which is a tremendous undertaking—by the other stations, so we try to carve out time to give people something that they won’t find elsewhere.” Other than these forums, the only chance voters have to see a candidate on television is in an ad, but ads are carefully crafted messages the candidates want to deliver. “There aren’t too many opportunities for these people to debate on television – we usually are the only one – and in one hour they [voters] will get the information they need to make an informed decision, and not have to wait to read the election brochure, which again, are statements the candidates create themselves. So at least here there are Q&As and cross examinations.”

While viewers can cast informed votes this election, thanks to

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the program, one area where they have already let their voice be heard is in their demand for access to programming outside of the traditional viewing format.

“The big issue right now is that television is changing rapidly,” says Veltrie. “We are all seeing it, those of us who are broadcasters; we are becoming the dinosaurs of the industry.” Over the-top-content (OTT) delivery vehicles, like Netflix, YouTube and Hulu, are the viewing formats to which Millennials are heading, which is very different from scheduled programming. “Right now when you think about television, you have to schedule your time to watch *Downton Abbey*, but young kids, they don’t want to be tied down to a schedule. They want to be able to watch content when they want – content on demand. That is what we are seeing. Fifty percent of the audience now is watching content on OTT services, like Netflix. So there is a real conscious effort on the part of

broadcasters to provide this, because we can see the writing on the wall: How long will broadcast television remain? There are those who are saying it is not going to go away anytime soon, but you can see the erosion happening. The hope is that as these young kids get into their 30s and 40s, they won’t forget that the broadcasters are still out there.”

There are plenty of young viewers, whose attention they want to capture, within the KSPS service area, which covers some 10,000 miles. According to KSPS, the station is seen “in about two million households in parts of Washington, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and beyond. Viewers

in Spokane, Calgary, Edmonton, Coeur d’Alene, Moses Lake, Wenatchee, Red Deer, the Kootenay Rockies of BC, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Kalispell, Missoula and dozens of other communities support KSPS with their memberships.”

Those annual memberships to KSPS are the lifeblood which helps keep KSPS on the air. Memberships are \$48 per year, and provide supporters with *Prevue*, a bi-monthly program guide with behind the scenes information, and a complete program guide. “People give less than that, people give more than that, but that is really what keeps us going from year to year; that is our bread and butter,” says Director of Development Dawn Bayman, of memberships. “If everyone who watched public television, supported us at the basic membership level, we would never have to do another pledge drive. It is only about one in ten people who watch the station actually support it though.”

According to KSPS’s 2014 Annual Report, expenses for

programming and production were \$2,941,460, which took a large chunk of the \$3,420,874 raised through memberships and contributions. The burden of additional expenses is the reason for the well-known pledge drive broadcasts, during which appeals for funds are issued. “There are four major drives a year, sanctioned by PBS, as well as occasional additional pledge days or weekends, determined by the station,” says Bayman. KSPS recently wrapped up a nine-day drive with a goal \$143,000.

Thankfully, KSPS has strong viewer support, which does more than just keep the lights on and shows on the screen; the local support also plays a role in the national opinion of KSPS and is noted by those outside the community. Since 2013, KSPS has been under the leadership of General Manager Gary Stokes, who joined KSPS in 2011 as Executive Director of the Friends of KSPS. Stokes just watched his station land its second go around as a host city for *Antiques Roadshow*, the most watched regularly scheduled program on PBS, and a huge fan-favorite. The show taped three episodes in Spokane in early June, all of which will air during the 2016 season. According to Stokes, the commitment of the station is one of the reasons *Antiques Roadshow* came back to Spokane so soon. “To come back within eight years says a lot,” he says of *Roadshow*’s return to Spokane. “When we get so many volunteers and people who come out for the show, it reflects well on *Antique Roadshow*, but it also reflects well on KSPS.”



KSPS viewers wait in line at the taping of *Antiques Roadshow*, in Spokane in June of 2015.

Just as antique-bearing hopefuls travelled from all over the region for the chance to be on the popular show, so too do the viewers of KSPS come from all over the region. With viewers in four states in the U.S. and two provinces in Canada, there is not just a wide geographical area that is covered, but also a wide variety of interests to cover with the programming.

The responsibility of creating a diverse, interesting and well-viewed schedule falls on the shoulders of Programming Manager Cary Balzer. “There are a certain amount of hours that I need to fill with acquisitions,” he says. These hours are gaps in the national PBS schedule, where he is able to custom build content that will appeal to local viewers. “Content for that usually comes from the UK,” he says. “The vast majority of it comes from the BBC.”

“The trick is, how do you bring in a younger audience?” asks Veltrie, referring to a key ingredient in building an appealing schedule. “*Downton Abbey* has done great wonders

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for that because it has created a more diverse audience and has brought people back to public television. We saw erosion of our audience, but thanks to programs like *Downton Abbey* and *Poldark*—which has been fantastic; the numbers for *Poldark* were very good—the audience is returning. The fact of the matter is that the BBC has been huge for PBS, and that relationship is strong once again. PBS and the BBC have a firm commitment to work together going forward.”

Balzer selects the shows that fill out the schedule, and also deals with feedback from the viewers, both positive and negative “What I look at is our members, because they really do have a say in what we do on a daily basis,” he says of what influences his programming decisions for KSPS. “If there are programming suggestions or concerns, I will make every effort to try to resolve it.”

It can be a delicate balance at times, appealing to both the U.S. and the Canadian viewers, with relevant stories. “Because half of our donor base is Canadian, we’ve gone out of our way to find programs that will cater to our Canadian audience,” says Veltrie. “We’ve been in a good position to buy British comedies that they enjoy, but we’ve found viewers in the States enjoy them just as well.”

The station even tailors their schedule for the Canadian audience. There are various schedules from PBS: an East Coast, Mountain Time zone and West Coast schedule. “You’d think we’d be running the West Coast schedule, but we do the Mountain Time,” says Veltrie. “We air our prime time an hour earlier here in the States (7 p.m.); there it is an hour later, because they are Mountain Time (8 p.m.), which has worked out really well for us.”

The only downfall to having such a strong Canadian viewer base is the Canadian dollar. Fifty percent of KSPS viewers are Canadians, and when those viewers support the station – which they do – their money is accepted at par. With one Canadian dollar currently worth about 75 cents in U.S. currency, there is a substantial loss on the exchange. While the station may raise \$500,000 of support out of Canada, roughly 20 percent is lost in the currency exchange.

Despite that, KSPS remains a strong presence in Canada. “Nobody covers Canada like we do,” says Veltrie. “Idaho Public Television doesn’t go up into Canada like we do, and Montana Public Television doesn’t go into Canada like we do.”

THE HIGH PRICE OF FREE PUBLIC TELEVISION

Some public television stations across the country, which do

not have the community support enjoyed by KSPS, are facing a dire situation as they struggle to stay afloat. In March of 2016 the FCC will offer broadcasters the opportunity to auction off their frequencies. The goal is to try to clear bandwidth for interested companies, which want more bandwidth to supply all of the wireless devices that feast upon the bandwidths, so that customers can, among other things, watch Hulu, Netflix and other OTT services. “These are public airwaves and it is disgusting to me that they are being purchased by corporate entities,” says Veltrie. “It’s going to be interesting to see what public television stations decide.”

Selling their frequency is *not* something KSPS is considering, but some stations are left little choice. Depending on the market size and how much bandwidth is needed in that particular market, it could be more lucrative to sell and close up shop. “In LA, those frequencies are worth a lot of money,” says Veltrie, of a city that already lost its public television station, KCET, due

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to station overlap with several smaller public television stations. “We’re not even remotely considering it because we are still vital,” says Veltrie of KSPS, “but still, that carrot is being dangled out there for stations. It is not just PBS stations that are facing this, but commercial, all broadcasters.”

Even though KSPS is not at risk of having to sell their frequency, and is not even considering it, the impact of other public television stations selling their frequencies could have ripple effects that will be felt locally.

Every public television station pays dues to PBS, and the dues continue to go up every year because of costs. “This is where we are concerned about the whole auction coming up,” says Veltrie. Right now, there are 351 active public television stations that are paying dues to pay for program content with the help of viewers in each one of those communities. “If that pocket is diluted because a station decides to sell their frequency that is a big concern. If we went from 351 stations to, say, 300, now you are having to spread out the cost of that program content amongst 300 stations, making the PBS dues higher for every station that is left.”

The hope is that it doesn’t get to a point where public television stations are at risk for shuttering, whether through an auction or just calling it quits; rather, the hope is that communities all across the country have access to quality public television like there is Spokane, through KSPS. For that to happen though, viewers have to ask themselves how much value public television, and the quality, enlightening, educational programming it offers, brings to their lives. *That* is the reality we are facing. ■

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