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PBS OMBUDSMAN

by topic...

The Ombudsman Column

The "Hand of God," (Very) Late Edition

By Michael Getler

JANUARY 31, 2007

This started out as an Ombudsman's Mailbag, a collection of viewer comments on a fairly wide range of programs that had aired recently. There was little or no comment from me because there were no dominant or especially controversial themes that required further investigation. But one of the interesting things about this job is that once you start peeling the onion on what seem like routine viewer observations, you often learn new and surprising things.

This happened when I started asking a few questions about a group of e-mails I received about the 90-minute "Hand of God" documentary produced by Frontline that debuted nationally on the evening of Jan. 16. This was a very powerful, and personal, story of one boy and his family victimized many years ago in what has since been revealed as a much wider-ranging scandal of sexual molestation of youngsters within the Archdiocese of Boston. The Ombudsman's [Mailbag of Jan. 18](#) dealt with this program and the reaction of many viewers.

Then, in the aftermath of that column, other viewers wrote to complain that their local PBS station in the Rio Grande Valley area of Texas (KMBH) had not shown the documentary, and that a story by the Associated Press and a [local paper](#) had reported on the situation. What follows are four letters from viewers that lay out the range of concerns expressed.

Below the letters is my attempt to sort out what happened. What turned up, in looking into this, came as a surprise to me: a handful (three, according to PBS officials) of the 340-plus, PBS-affiliated stations around the country have ties with religious organizations. I didn't know that and my guess is that many PBS viewers, officials and affiliated-station employees around the country didn't know that.

First, the letters:

What "Hand of God"?

Regarding "Hand of God": Our local Brownsville PBS censored the entire airing of the show. Since when do we need anyone to "determine if any subject is fit for valley residents to watch"? So much for "public" broadcasting. As a retired librarian I find any type of censorship as totally disgusting. I thought we lived in a free country.

Donnie York, Harlingen, TX

The Frontline documentary, "Hand of God," caused a different kind of controversy here in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. It did not run. When people who had been watching advertisements for it asked the local station, KMBH, why, the first response was that the station manager, Father Pedro Briseno, had held it up so he could preview it. When that story made it to the local press, Briseno issued a statement that claimed the real reason was that PBS had distributed a Frontline schedule in late December listing another show which, subsequently, the local station had published. When Frontline changed its schedule, Briseno asserts, he held to the old schedule because it had already been distributed to members and to the press. My question is this: Did Frontline change its schedule as the good Father suggests? I'd appreciate a response as the credibility of the current station management is on the line.

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The ombudsman does not replace viewers' long-standing ability to [contact stations, producers](#) ; [PBS](#).

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Stan Raines, Brownsville, TX

An AP story out today cites a decision by "a public television station owned by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brownsville" (Texas) not to run Hand of God on Frontline. How many PBS stations in America are owned by the Roman Catholic Church? Or any church, for that matter? I suppose gifts I may make to PBS would be funneled down into the coffers of these churches? Yes? No?

Chuck Lutke, Austin, TX

Our local newspaper has informed us that KMBH is owned by the Catholic Church and rescheduled "Hand of God" at an hour where there would be minimal viewers. First, how is it possible for a church to own a PBS station? At best it would be conflict of interest and at least its views certainly would be slanted toward church doctrine. What can be done to rectify this situation? Neither the church nor any government entity should be allowed ownership of something called "Public."

Ned Sheats, Mission, TX

What's Going On?

Here's what I've been able to find out about the issues raised in the preceding four letters.

1) Yes, the Frontline producers say they did change the schedule late in the day. Because of production delays, a three-part series called "News Wars" that had been scheduled to be available for national broadcast in January was moved back to February. This forced the producers to move up programs into January, including "Hand of God," that had been scheduled for February. However, that change announcement, according to Frontline, was made to all programmers well in advance — on Dec. 1, 2006. The actual film was also delivered to stations on Jan. 11, five days ahead of the broadcast date and in plenty of time for pre-screening reviews by stations, according to Frontline. According to the "Standard Carriage Report" that PBS gets for its programs, 283 stations — about 83 percent of all PBS affiliates — managed to take the shift in stride and carried the program on Jan. 16, when it made its national debut.

2) In a [press release](#) issued after unfavorable publicity in local newspapers, KMBH General Manager, Monsignor Pedro Briseno, said that the mix-up was "because Frontline producers changed their minds after we had our programming logs for January closed and sent to the network and to the publisher of our programming guide." Briseno said the cut-off for the guide must be "at the latest twenty days in advance to the beginning of the month. In the case of Frontline for January 16, we included the title of the program that was provided to us at least 26 days earlier (by December 20, 2006)." This conflicts with the Frontline producers' claim of notifying stations by Dec. 1.

3) Briseno also points out that KMBH did, indeed, broadcast "Hand of God" on Channel 60-DT38 "later that same night, at 1AM, during our overnight PBS service." So it was shown, but you cannot blame any viewer for thinking the station had decided not to show it, or for not knowing that a major documentary was going to be aired between 1 and 2:30 a.m.

4) As for the religious linkage, a PBS spokeswoman says that "KMBH is licensed to the RGV Educational Broadcasting, Inc., a 501(c)(3), which is managed by the local Catholic diocese. In order to qualify for an annual Community Service Grant from CPB (the Corporation for Public Broadcasting), all stations must meet certain noncommercial, nonsectarian criteria. In the PBS system, there are only three CSG-qualified stations that have ties with religious organizations: KMBH/Harlingen, mentioned above. KBYU/Provo is licensed to Brigham Young University, an educational institution affiliated with the Mormon Church. Also, WLAE/New Orleans has strong ties to the local Catholic diocese, but is not owned or operated by it." In looking further into this, officials at the Provo and New Orleans stations, neither of which carried the "Hand of God" program, said that they subscribe to a more limited set of PBS programs and not the full national program service.

Some Thoughts

In the Associated Press story about the controversy, which Msgr. Briseno takes issue with on several points, a spokeswoman for the Diocese of Brownsville (Texas) says that although the Catholic Church owns the station (KMBH) it does not influence programming decisions. Let's assume that is a good faith statement. But the viewers whose letters are printed above raise important points in my view, and the details that have since surfaced remain troubling and unconvincing, especially the decision by the station to air that program at 1 o'clock in the morning. There do seem to be broader church-state issues here as well, albeit only linked in a fairly specific way to one station in this current matter, that are worthy of a further look by PBS or CPB.

What follows now are some other letters based on the earlier column about "Hand of God," plus letters on several other subjects.

More about that "Hand of God"

Thank you for showing the Hand of God. I disagree with those who felt that the documentary was biased. I felt that it revealed the sad truth astonishingly well, as well as the irony regarding the parents losing their own parish church. I think this documentary should be shown time and again. Living in NM and working with kids, I still see parents with a "head in the sand approach" when it comes to any discussion about sex.

Albuquerque, NM

I read some of the comments against Hand of God, so my negative feedback will be brief. How would you feel if your entire family was publicly ridiculed for the crime of one of its members? As a member of the Catholic Church, that is how I felt while watching this hateful program.

Bill Bilchik, Berea, OH

I just scanned a couple of the responses to the PBS airing of the sexual abuse by Boston priests and the charge of anti-Catholicism. Their responses are indicative of the control the Catholic Church (and all religions) hold on their subjects, the individual ignorance and denial that exists. I was a single mother who raised my children in Arlington, Virginia, in the '60s and '70s. My son was sexually abused by a priest from St. Charles — and I am sure he was only one of many. The priest was scout leader of the church troop (isn't that a riot — and very much in keeping with their MOs). When I learned of the abuse from my son many months after the incidents, I was finally — after several deliberate attempts by another priest and a monsignor to prevent me from doing so — able to contact the office of the bishop of Richmond and the priest was gone within a month.

Not until I saw a number of programs airing child sexual abuse and their short- and long-term effects did I realize the major reason for my son's lost life. And while I have harbored resentment and guilt toward the priest all these years, I learned only recently that in Virginia child molestation is a felony, and there is no statute of limitations and, thus, attempted to encourage my son to press charges against the priest. Not only did he refuse, I learned he had gone back to the Catholic Church — which he left over 30 years ago — to the very system that abused him. While he claims the priest's actions had no effect on his life, his life beginning at around age 10 (the abuse occurred at age 9-10) he slowly spiraled into alcohol, drugs, abuse, job insecurity, and a high school dropout. All my plans, hopes and dreams — down the drain! As well as his life! He is now in his 40's and nothing has changed.

I only wish I could find some comfort for myself and the guilt that I feel for not having done more at the time. But who would have believed me?! No one! The determination and courage that the two brothers showed in producing the documentary is only trumped by the courage that PBS showed in airing it. Of course there will be those who say it's anti-Catholic — they don't want to believe it, i.e., they aren't interested in the facts. They aren't ready or willing to acknowledge that what they were spoon fed is all

a bunch of hype. I found very little self-serving in the film — maybe because I identified with what was going on — and even cried. Thank you for airing it.

Rita Bruin, Garner, NC

Found "Hand of God" immensely moving and thought provoking. Those that criticize the anti-Catholic message should understand that the reason these molestations are so disturbing is that these priests were looked up to and revered by their victims. My opinion is that until priests are allowed to marry and live normal lives, these acts will probably continue. All over the world different Catholic communities are forced to face the fact that many of their priests have molested children; i.e. Ireland just recently in the news having to pay out millions in reparations to molested victims. I agree that promoting Bishop Law to the Vatican was a "slap in the fact" to those trying to reform the Catholic Church.

Trish Barnes, Lincoln, CA

I want to applaud you for your non-biased representation of not only your thoughts on the two current subjects (Hand of God and Jim Lehrer interview of the President), but also on the comments of the PBS viewers. I know this is the function of the ombudsman, but I applaud you for upholding your position with both insight and integrity. I just wish more viewers were aware of the PBS page!

Huntington Beach, CA

On that Honor Roll

Re the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer: I commend you and your staff for setting what I believe is the gold standard of journalism, and thank you for your efforts over the years. I'm sure the one of your toughest, but ultimately, I believe, wisest decisions was the one establishing the Honor Roll for service personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each time, when I see the break at the end of the program, I know you have more, and my heart sinks. On Monday there were twelve more, yesterday seventeen more. And in these last nearly four years, my heart breaks for the families, while my anger rises against those who so arrogantly and incompetently launched the Iraq disaster under false pretenses and have thrown our young people into it.

I know that journalistic integrity prevents you from expressing how you feel, and I commend your continual and respectful effort to honor our young men and women. But I believe you are missing an important element. Either displayed on the screen at the end of the honor roll, or announced by you, should be the current death toll, as well as the toll of those injured and maimed. You have not done so yet, although you have occasionally announced the tolls as part of ongoing coverage.

I believe it is your responsibility to keep the public informed on the true cost of this war, including the horrific toll of Iraqi dead as well. It may be that we can then pay them our best respects by bringing their fellows who are still alive and intact home, and work to prevent our military from ever being so misused again.

Ray Ribich, Glen Ellyn, IL

NOW; Warming Up to Laurie David, Not

I am watching the PBS program NOW, the interview with Ms. David. Allow me to say that I am a committed environmentalist. However, Ms. David's high-decibel shrill cant will convince no non-believer. She is clearly better behind a camera than speaking (howling?) in front of it. Ms. Carter calmer and more reasoned remarks are far more convincing and helpful to the cause of global warming. Unfortunately such misjudgments on your part serve no good cause.

New York City, NY