



**THE BLOG** 05/11/2010 08:03 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# What We “Need to Know” About PBS After Moyers



By Marty Kaplan

Ever since the right began crying “liberal media,” the challenge for the targets of those tantrums has been to figure out how to respond to the mewling. What PBS has done in the wake of Bill Moyers’ retirement is a case study in the futile effort of trying to appease the little brat.

If you think that PBS, NPR, and the *New York Times* — and maybe CBS, NBC and ABC — are liberal mouthpieces; if you think that what Sarah Palin calls the “lamestream media” is biased against conservatives; if you think that FOX News really is “fair and balanced” - well, there’s no way I can change your mind.

This dispute can’t be settled by evidence. Each side thinks it’s advocating accurate, honest and professional journalism. And each side thinks the other is using journalism as a front for waging the culture wars.

Two things are notable about this, and I wish PBS understood them.

One is that the center has been pulled way over to the right. The emergence of MSNBC as a countervailing force to FOX is fairly recent, and there’s still no leftward mass-media equivalent in print to the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. By attacking the middle ground that NPR and the establishment press attempt to occupy, the right has moved the goalposts.

The other is that there is no winning this fight. In Congress, nothing short of complete and total surrender by Democrats would cause Republicans to say that the other party is acting in a bipartisan fashion. Their definition of compromise is conversion. In the media wars, it’s the same. No matter how many conservative voices you put on the op-ed page or on the air, no matter how supinely you adopt the idiotic notion that every dispute has two equally plausible sides, liberal is what you’ll be called.

The program that’s replaced “Bill Moyer’s Journal” on PBS is a news magazine called *Need to Know*, hosted by Jon Meacham and Alison Stewart. If its first appearance is indicative of what’s to come, PBS’s response to the “liberal media” charge is to hope that being nice will stop people from calling them bad names.

The centerpiece of the program was a 13-minute piece about the national movement to enable anyone to carry a loaded handgun in public. It profiled Ed Levine, a regular-guy open-carry advocate in Virginia who posted on the Web site after the show aired that the crew who followed him for three days was "nice as can be and open minded." So much for "'normal PBS liberal' style," he wrote.

The bumper sticker on Ed's Hyundai says "GUNS Save Lives." When correspondent John Larsen says, "I think statistics would say that's not true," citing "the hundreds of surveys that have been done showing that the more guns are around, the more accidents that there are, the more people get shot, the more people get killed, the more people that take their own life," Ed's response is, "That's not true.... The people that are putting out those statistics are the people that want guns to go away."

"That's not true" versus "that's not true": what an opening to commit journalism! A perfect chance for PBS to put the studies on the table, establish or refute the claims of bias, and then let the cameras roll while either Ed changes his mind, or Ed changes ours.

No such luck. With Ed off camera, we hear this voiceover: "But in fact there are a number of studies showing that having a gun in the home increases the likelihood that someone in the home will be harmed. On the flip side, no one pays attention to countless dramatic examples where someone with a gun prevented a crime from happening."

Fabulous: "But in fact" versus "on the flip side." You decide for yourself, dear viewer.

When gun advocate Larry Pratt tells Larsen that 9/11 would have turned out differently had passengers been allowed to bring hidden weapons onto planes, Larsen commendably says, "I gotta tell you, that amazes me, and I suspect it amazes most people watching." He asks Pratt whether a gunfight at thirty thousand feet really would have been an improvement. Pratt replies, "That would have been an improvement on flying into an office building." Larsen's response: "Hmmm."

There it is, in one word. Hmmm. I guess it's meant to be our cue to appreciate how very swell it is, how journalistically responsible of PBS, to help us, in Meacham's words, "understand all sides of passionately held beliefs," and presumably to come to our own conclusions.

*Need to Know* positions itself as an antidote to the poisonous advocacy of cable news. What it succumbs to instead is the on-the-one-hand/on-the-other-hand pathology that makes mainstream news so impotent. For this we need public television?

Lloyd Blankfein is as passionate about Goldman Sachs as the Tea Partiers who revile the Troubled Assets Relief Program. Creationists are as passionate about Scripture as Darwinians are about the scientific method. It's not understanding that's missing; that's the refuge of a PBS so intimidated by its "liberal bias" antagonists that it's narrowed its niche to a morally vacuous empathy for all.

I want *Need to Know* to succeed: PBS needs to prove to foundations and viewers that it deserves the public's money. (Disclosure: its terrific executive producer once executive produced a radio show I

hosted.) But I think valuing “Hmmm” more than “Aha!” is too high a price to get Congress to keep kicking in its miserly 15% of public broadcasting’s budget.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.*

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**



**Marty Kaplan** 

*USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director*