



Public Television: Politics and the Battle over Documentary Film (Communications, Media, & Culture)

By B.J. Bullert



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- Rank: #4884421 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Rutgers University Press
- Published on: 1997-12-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: .62" h x 6.05" w x 9.11" l, .93 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 270 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

B.J. Bullert's preface to *Public Television* illustrates her point with damning clarity. Just as she thought everything was in place--an award-winning documentary filmmaker on board, two years of research, a \$100,000 grant--PBS began to flex its censorship muscles on the timely (and already approved) documentary *God and Money*. This was to be a one-hour program about the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter that indicted the government for its inhumane and shortsighted economic policies. It actually did get aired (and on the very day the bishops released their letter); however, Bullert's frustrating experience with PBS planted the seed for this book: an investigation of the complicated interplay of public television's needs and interests and their impact on independent documentary film.

Getting inside the minds of PBS programmers was one of Bullert's goals, and to do this, she immersed herself in their culture. She uncovers a system devoted to keeping its power elite in place, one vested in a certain, safe way of presenting views and controversies that in no way might threaten its corporate-funding sources. This may seem an obvious conclusion, but Bullert combines scholarly precision with on-site investigative reporting to dramatize how programmers made editorial decisions. *Public Television* carefully reconstructs a few key disputes between the programmers and the independents.

The first chapter includes a political history of public television, beginning with President Johnson's 1967 signing of the Public Broadcasting Act, which, alas, failed to specify a long-term funding strategy. Federal cuts to public broadcasting in the Reagan years foreshadowed a call for total defunding in 1981. Alas, programmers "stood at the gateway as traffic cops of perspectives" in an era enormously hungry for diverse programming.

Chapter 2 examines two of the major PBS outlets for independent social-issues documentaries: *Frontline* and *P.O.V.*. The chapter that follows highlights the controversies fueled by particular works: *Dark Circle*, a documentary on the far-reaching impact of nuclear-weapons testing; *Days of Rage*, which presents the Palestinian view on the Intifada; and *Tongues Untied*, showing the life of a black gay man. Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* and Steve Talbot's *The Heartbreak of America* present two in-depth critiques of General Motors. One whole chapter "not only chronicles these ... but also contrasts the films with Ken Burns's PBS series, which have GM as their sole corporate sponsor and which serve to enhance the auto corporation's public image." The concluding chapter discusses the larger ramifications--to the viewing public and society--of these controversies.

This exposé will give us smug viewers of PBS a jolt. We've indeed been fed a carefully controlled diet of controversial views and "news." Herself a scholar, Bullert gives a list of existing scholarship as well as key terms and concepts. *Public Television* is illustrated with frames taken from the films discussed, and it includes an exhaustive bibliography that will keep students of television and the communications industry in general at no loss for further sources. --*Hollis Giammatteo*

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