

He Discovered Oprah

Bill Baker's extraordinary decade at Westinghouse

By Mort Silverstein



Bill Baker (left) with Mort Silverstein

Photo: WNET

The Winter 2008 issue of Television Quarterly featured the first half of a two-part interview of Bill Baker on the occasion of his “retirement” from his position—held for more than 20 years—as president and CEO of the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, licensee of Thirteen/WNET and WLIW New York. He focused on public television’s constant struggle to survive in a climate of fiscal want.

In the following conversation with Morton Silverstein, senior writer/producer of Steve Scheuer’s public-television series Television in America, Baker shifts his focus, in part, to his extraordinary 10-year career at Westinghouse Broadcasting, where, among other achievements, he introduced

Oprah Winfrey as a talk-show host. Highlights of the interview follow. An interview with his successor at the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Neal Shapiro, appears on page 41 of this issue.--Ed

Mort Silverstein: When I interviewed Tom Brokaw recently, *Television Quarterly* titled the conversation “Why Tom Brokaw Quit.” Well, he didn’t actually quit NBC News, he told me he just felt he wanted to see more of his family and have a little breathing room, be more selective about the specials he was doing and not have the daily evening news grind. So is this a decision you, Bill Baker, reached entirely by yourself?

Bill Baker: You know, I think at 65, at 20 years of doing the same job, there's a completeness about that, that says, okay, I don't want to start repeating myself. So it's time that I should look to do some other thing. So it just felt like the right time, and I feel definitely it is, and my family has been very supporting, and pushing me to make this decision. So I'm excited about what the future might hold, and also frightened, because for a career of almost 50 years in the TV and radio business, I've always had a job, and I've always been working. Now I'm kind of in a never-never land, where I have a bunch of part-time jobs. And that just may be the most exciting moment there is in my career, where I'm able to do some things that I haven't been able to do in a long time, like produce television shows; like, you know, look at the big view of things in this media business. And this media business is going through some incredible turmoil. And I'm very concerned about it, because as the pressures come down on the media business in commercial and public television, there is a concern that all of these industries might lose their way. And there is still nothing more important in America, nothing more powerful in America than the media; and I want to make sure that media continues to have pressure and focus on it to do the right thing, and to go for the highest motivations. So that's what I think I might be able to provide.

MS: Can you share some of the blueprints with us?

BB: I've got a couple of big projects in mind. You may recall that I had produced two movies that were in the art and religion mode. One was *The Face of Jesus*, and the other was *Picturing Mary*. And I'm picturing now working with Cambridge University

School of Divinity, to do a big program on the Abrahamic religions; to look at those faiths—which represent half of all the people in the world—and that have been quarreling for thousands of years; to look at what is common about them, and there are so many things that are common, and similar.

MS: If we may, a flashback: before Bill Baker became Bill Baker. Even before the Westinghouse years, in which you were president of a network and chairman of Group W Satellite Communications. Can you tell us how and why you aspired to work in television? Who were your mentors, if you will? Parents, teachers, friends? Or was it a sudden epiphany, as you watched this relatively new box of wires and light, as Edward Murrow once described it?

BB: I don't know. It was not an epiphany. It's something that has been in my genes from the beginning. When I was 13 years old, I remember talking into the back of a vacuum cleaner, pretending it was a microphone. So I knew I'm one of those rare people who knew from the very earliest age that this is something I wanted to do. It was my dream. And I had a bunch of heroes back then; some of whom I later found out had feet of clay, like General Sarnoff, like Arthur Godfrey, but they were still heroes. I had some other heroes that turned out not to have feet of clay, like Frank Stanton and Donald McGannon.

I knew that I wanted to be in the TV and radio business. I started by hanging out at radio stations in Cleveland, where I grew up. I got my first job as an engineer at a classical radio station in Cleveland, Ohio at the age of 16; and have had a job in the business, full- or part-time ever since.

So then I started producing radio shows. I was on the air, doing radio

interviews, doing a teenage radio show, (when I was a teenager) on a radio station in Cleveland. And I interviewed a lot of famous people back then, everybody from the Beatles to Bob Hope. And then I started a national radio talk show where I was the producer. It became very successful. Then television started a morning show that became the highest-rated morning show in America. It was called *The Morning Exchange*, and it was on for 25 years.

MS: How did your introduction of Oprah Winfrey come about at Westinghouse?

BB: From Cleveland, I wound up kind of Peter Principle-ing myself from being a very successful talk-show producer to the program director of WEWS, to the assistant to the general manager. And then I went to Baltimore to become general manager of WJW. I always wanted to work for Westinghouse; it was one of my “heroic” companies-- a company that I always thought was the best in the business; that and CBS.

And so when I was in Baltimore, there was a young woman who had just been fired from the weekend news job, as anchor, called Oprah Winfrey. And I wanted to start a local talk show in Baltimore, because I had been a successful talk-show producer and I knew the power of that form. So I went to Oprah, and suggested that, because I got to know her, and liked her very much, and felt that there was something very human about her that, you know, she kind of wore her heart on her sleeve. And decided that I would ask her to host this program. But she didn't want to do that. She said that she was a news person. I remember her crying, and saying, “I'm a news person, I don't want to go into the talk-show business.” And

I said, “This is a business I know very well.” And I said, “You're a natural for this business; and I'm telling you, if you succeed in it, which I think you will, you'll have more influence on America than you would being any kind of a news person.” So we persuaded her to do it. And within six months, she was the number-one program in Baltimore.

MS: And today she's an industry...

BB: Yeah, she's an industry. Certainly a brand.

MS: What other shows at Westinghouse were you proudest of?

BB: I think the greatest contribution that I was part of was a program that comes back to me in the form of people, year after year, and that's *PM Magazine*. While I didn't create *PM Magazine*, I was the president of the company, and got *PM Magazine* going nationwide; got it into national distribution. And at one point—I think almost a decade—it was the number-one program in syndication in prime-time access in America; but it was also the program that had the biggest footprint as far as number of people working on a show, maybe in the history of television. We had 2,000 people, with all of our affiliated stations across the country, all working on the same show. And those 2,000 people learned so much about television, and got so good at it, and created so many new art forms that many of the *PM Magazine* fraternity and sorority have wound up being some of the leaders in television and cable that we have today. So that was a great enterprise, and something that makes me very proud to have stood on the shoulders of all of those people, and including the people that helped originally create *PM Magazine*.

MS: So Westinghouse was productive, it was creative...

BB: The real reason that it was so wonderful, I think, were the values established by former Westinghouse CEO, Donald McGannon, who took the pledge of being a broadcaster and serving the public interest very seriously; and his successor, Chairman and Chief Executive, Dan Richie, who was equally sincere and who believed in ethics and values like no other executive I've ever met. And that combination of leadership made that a truly great luminary company.

MS: Now take us from Westinghouse to public television.

BB: That's a sweet story, because you had asked about heroes. And one of my heroes was Frank Stanton. As a matter of fact, the reason I got my Ph.D.—besides wanting to have a career in case the TV and radio business failed me—was I wanted to be the next Dr. Frank Stanton. Well, it turned out I was never that good. But I worked at it. And Frank Stanton called me, while I was at Westinghouse, and said, "Bill, I want to talk to you about the most important job in television." And I thought, wow, Frank wants me to succeed him at CBS. So we had breakfast at the Harvard Club. And Frank said that he was chairman of the search committee for New York's public-television station, Channel 13, and he wanted me to be president of the station. And I said I was shocked. You know, for one thing, I was expecting a different job. Second, I was kind of a young, very successful commercial broadcaster; I had been president of Westinghouse Television for 10 years, a pretty hot guy, I thought, and in my early forties. And, with a lot of elbow room. And the thought of going into public television kind of shocked me.

And I said, "Frank, that's quite an honor, that you'd think of that, and it's

quite an honor to be asked to do this job. But what about earning money? What about this career that I already have?" And he said, "Bill, you know, I really would like you to think about it."

And I said that I wasn't interested in the job. There were other things that I thought I should be doing. So I thanked him, and went home, and I told my wife, who's now a psychiatric nurse-practitioner, and has always been my mentor; my wife of now 40 years; then, I guess, of 20 years. And she said that that job—the job at Channel Thirteen—was the job for me, that that's what I should do, and money wasn't relevant and using this business to do good was what I should be doing.

I've always listened to her advice. She was the one, actually, who had picked Oprah Winfrey earlier; she made that suggestion. And so I went back to Frank. And I said, "Frank, I've rethought this, and if you still want me, I'll take the job; but I'll only do it for a couple years, and then go back to making money." And that was 20 years ago.

Because once you get a job like this, if you take it seriously, which of course I did, you realize how important it is, and how hard it is. It becomes a religion. So you really can't leave it, it's very hard to leave it. And it's even been hard to leave it now, at a time when I should leave it. Because it becomes so much a part of your being.

MS: The economic struggles in public television, do they continue?

BB: The economic struggles are actually getting harder. It's getting harder and harder to find corporate underwriting, mostly because of the success of cable, and now the fragmentation of the media, so many more options that advertisers and underwriters have. The second is that

if you really want to do a good job in public television, you're going to say things that might upset people, and therefore, it's hard to find any underwriters that would underwrite something like that. And also, the general downturn in advertising, and the economy in America.

So all those things are being broadly felt in the public-television business. One of the ways that we've addressed this is to become more efficient. And this institution, as the whole television industry, learned a lot of tricks of efficiency, particularly efficiency in production. So we're doing more with less. But you can't cut your way to success. And the kind of television we do requires a lot of content and a lot of research and a lot of scholarship. And none of those things are cheap. So I'm worried. And that's why I've embraced our board when they said, "Bill, we want you to stay on as president emeritus." Because one of the things I want to do is help find economic resources for this institution and public television in general. Like that Ray and Joan Kroc gift was for public radio. That was a gift that gave public radio stability and the opportunity to do new things.

Such a thing should happen for public television. I'm sure it will happen. I hope I'm one of those people that can help cause that to happen. Because now, more than ever, the media remains the most powerful force in America. And given the economics of the media, public television becomes, more and more, the only place they can do things that need to be done. But public television is so stressed economically that I'm worried that unless we get the economics, we will be an empty suit.

MS: I saw a *New York Times* headline recently: Federal Cuts in Funding

Threaten Public Television...

BB: Almost every year, we've had presidential cuts in this current administration; and the current cut is 58 percent. Now, we've been able to fight back. And by "we," I mean the people of America have fought back, and Congress and the Senate have restored us. We haven't grown, but we have been restored. Those of us in this public TV industry all worry that the public, as loyal as they are to us—and as loving as they are, and supportive as they are—may start thinking we're crying wolf. And there may be supporter fatigue, saying, gee, didn't I just write a letter last year? You know, why do I have to do it again this year? So we worry about that supporter fatigue. That hasn't happened yet, because, unfortunately, all of these threats are real. And the public seems to know that, so they've stood by us. But it gets tiring. It gets tiring for our supporters, and it gets tiring for those of us in this industry.

MS: You've done some rather innovative pledge drives—and I think of the Alaskan cruise with potential donors which picked up some of the economic slack, I would hope. Beyond your being the public face and connecting with the audience with that studio background as your signature image, what are some of the other innovative things, about which other stations have said, "Hey, that's a good idea, we ought to be doing that?"

BB: Well, I think there are a couple of things—and I don't know that I'd call them innovative—but I would say that there have been what we have done in the pledge drives here in New York that we're very proud of. One is, is that we try not to do what some public TV stations do, which is bait and switch, you know, pledge one kind of program,

and that we know will bring in money; and then have a main schedule of something else. So our programs that have been the most productive for us have been programs that are in our regular schedule, like the *NewsHour*, and Charlie Rose, and Bill Moyers; and the Now program, where we go on, and those programs, and ask for support around those programs. And we have, and explain the realities truthfully and

In a country half the size of the United States, the BBC gets from tax money about 9 billion dollars a year. Public television in the United States gets about 400 million a year.

openly to the audience, and have gotten phenomenal response.

In my long career here, our arts and culture program, very often ignored, is that the only serious arts and culture television in America is done by public TV, because you really can't make money doing it; it's very expensive programming to do; and it takes a very nuanced skill set, and a very big scale of operation that only we have. So we have done some of the biggest, and still do, the biggest performance programs in American television. And I'm proud to say that even programs like *The Three Tenors*, and some of those other really big artists—Andrea Bocelli, and some of our other really major shows have been productions of this station, or co-productions. *The Three Tenors*, we believe had the biggest audience in television's history, maybe a billion people. Not all of our cultural and arts programs and

opera (while critically acclaimed) may have gotten such ratings, but have yielded large support. So that's been a major part of what we do.

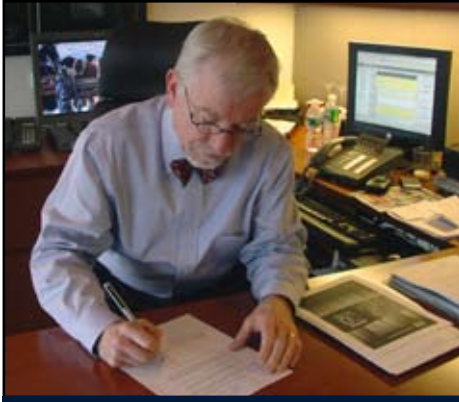
We don't tend to pledge around our children's programs, because we want to keep those as pure as possible. But there are some programs that this station has created, one that I'm especially proud of called *Cyberchase*—which is, by any measure, a hit kids' show, but yet is a show that teaches kids math. And I always thought, gee, if we could create a hit kids' show that teaches kids math, I'd instantly go to heaven, so I'm counting on that as my way around all of my sins.

Speaking of sins, this institution created, ten years ago, a program called *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*, which is the only serious program of its type on television in America. America is arguably one of the most religious countries in the Western world, and yet nobody had done any really serious programs on that subject. And that show is, week in and week out, the most commented-on program that we run.

So we pledge all those shows, except the kids' shows; and have done quite well. But pledge is not the answer. All of us feel we do too much pledge. All of us feel we would like to cut back on pledge. What is the answer to that? We don't have the answer, or we would be implementing it. But certainly, one of the answers is major giving; from big foundations, from wealthy individuals. It's probably our only realistic salvation.

MS: Well, that takes me back to the NET days, when the Ford Foundation said, here, we're in for at least 10 years

BB: The Ford Foundation and Fred Friendly basically helped start American public television. The government began public television, then known



Bill Baker at work

Photo: WNET

as educational television, but failed to fund it. So the Ford Foundation stepped up, and made it happen. Today, there's still some funding from the Ford Foundation, but nothing at the scale that they did before. The truth is, that there has been no entity that has come in to really replace that. And because some think of television—including public television; and maybe especially public television—as old media, the foundations and other entities say, “Well, let's go for something new.” The point is, old media is still the dominant media. And the new media is derivative of the old media. So we need an infusion, you know, if some big foundation suddenly said, we're gonna give you 500 million dollars; we're gonna give you a billion dollars; the good we could do; the leverage, the power, of that money could change America's culture; could change America's educational system, could change America's, could inspire America's values. So that's what I keep hoping for. And that's the vision I have.

As wonderful as our NewsHour is—arguably the best newscast in America—the BBC, really, the resources they have and the kind of news they can do is phenomenal. The BBC, in a country half the size of

the United States, they get, from tax money, about 9 billion dollars a year, 9 billion. Public television gets about 400 million in the United States, a much bigger country.

So, if we had those kinds of resources, and just think, too, America now needs, more than ever, independent journalism. Well, the stress on commercial journalism in this country is terrible. And much of America's electronic journalism is derivative of, and standing on the shoulders of, print journalism. Well, print journalism is in a state of rapid decline. And I'm worried that if print journalism starts to collapse—which it is—that the electronic media will collapse along with it.

So somebody has to do something about that, and that's in my sights; to at least wave the flag, and let America know that this is a great concern: we have to find a solution for the good of this country.

Morton Silverstein is an eight-time Emmy Award winning documentary filmmaker whose television career began with Nightbeat with Mike Wallace and continued at all the networks, with a position as Public Affairs Director for CBS flagship station WCBS-TV, which included writing and producing the award-winning Eye On series. At National Educational Television (1963-1972) he wrote and produced Banks and the Poor; What Harvest for the Reaper; The Poor Pay More, and Justice and The Poor, among many other investigative reports.