
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Public Television Distribution for Documentaries: A Roadmap Through the Maze

Lisa Bowers · Thursday, August 27th, 2015

The Public Television Maze

You've produced a documentary that people tell you is perfect for public television. You want as many people as possible to watch the program or series that has kept you up at night, dwindled your bank account, and been a labor of love for you can't remember how long. What do you do?

Many distribution outlets exist, from ACORN/BBC to international distributors like Global Eagle Entertainment to commercial broadcasters. And don't forget the new favorites in town – the Netflix's, Hulu's, and Vimeo's of the online viewing world, which have opened up a world of possibilities to filmmakers. However, a national television event on public television remains a great place to get potentially millions of eyeballs watching your program. It also offers a credibility, reach, and public trust that remains unique.

Many people refer to anything that airs on their local public television station as a "PBS program." But that's not really the case, although PBS is the mother lode of distributors of public television programming and refers to itself as "America's largest public media enterprise."

Public television has member stations but not all stations are members of PBS or other membership organizations like NETA. In fact, LA-based KCET, a charter member of PBS, is not a member and thus, does not receive many popular PBS shows. As Andrew Walworth, a veteran producer and [Grace Creek Media](#) President, shares, "the wonderful thing for producers about public television is that there is no single gatekeeper – there are all these points of entry, perhaps 50 to 100 program managers who will decide whether your program is broadcast-ready. It is the most democratic (small "d") of media institutions where independent producers can create news and public affairs programs." If you pitch your program to NatGeo or Discovery, there is one programming person that serves as a gatekeeper (and who is going to turn down most pitches).

The other advantage of public television for producers, according to Walworth, is that, in most instances, the producer owns all rights. This means that if you raise money and raise it properly, you realize the downstream revenues, which can allow you to build equity in your brand, something public television icons like Ken Burns and Bill Moyers have done quite profitably. Filmmakers producing for public television may also have complete control over editorial content. Commercial networks will often assign an executive producer who may not share your creative point of view.

Walworth states, “there is no excuse for someone with a good show to not get on public television ... they should be able to find a path to broadcast. . . .With the advent of digital multicasting, each public television station has an opportunity to better serve their audiences with a greater variety of programming, requiring more high-quality programs.” He admits that there is a downside to public media being membership-driven, however. It basically acts like a retail business so producers need to aggressively market their programs.

‘Super uber difficult’

Most independent filmmakers would agree with **Greg Reitman**, producer of *Rooted in Peace and Fuel*, who describes the process of distributing one’s film on public television as “super uber difficult.” But you have many choices in the public television space! (And Reitman does tout the “huge audience” commanded by public television distribution.) Many organizations besides PBS distribute programming to America’s 172 public television licensees (representing 364 transmitters and approximately 1,200 channels). Executive Program Services (EPS). American Public Television (APT). National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA). Westlink. Individual public television stations.

Max Duke, VP, Content & Community Partnerships, **WPBT2**, simplifies public television distribution by breaking it down into two parts. “First and foremost, we look at whether a film or documentary aligns with our mission to serve our community, which is the storytelling aspect,” Duke said. “After meeting that requirement, we focus on how close the film is to being ready for broadcast, which can encompass everything from production value to compliance with underwriting guidelines.” Duke encourages filmmakers to be familiar with the technical and underwriting requirements of PBS – this makes the life of programmers much easier (possibly increasing your program’s chances of acceptance).

Whether your distribution partner is a station or not, Duke, who is in charge of WPBT2’s presenting services, suggests that filmmakers first evaluate the specifics of the offer and then understand the actual distribution. Does it include new media rights? Spanish language rights? International distribution rights? Knowing the specifics will help you decide whether to make important tradeoffs.

Facilitating getting your program from point A to point B costs money. Some organizations will absorb distribution fees and others will not. For example, there is a cost associated with the closed captioning required by the FCC. If your distribution partner covers that cost, are you willing to offer a longer license period in return?

Each of the primary distribution options in the world of public television offers different benefits; an overview of each follows. A Resources section at the end of this post contains website links and contact information for the distributors described below.

American Public Television

American Public Television (APT) is the public television system’s 2nd largest distributor of programming for broadcast and possibly the most successful in achieving carriage (outside of PBS’ National Program Service). Its members comprise almost every public television station in the country.

APT offers 3 services:

(1) **Exchange**: 150 titles (series and one-off specials) annually, with approximately 7,000 hours of how-to, lifestyle, children's and travel series, music performances, and documentaries (particularly historical, science, social issue, and education) that are acquired and distributed without a license fee.

(2) **Syndication**: Approximately 100 titles per year acquired from domestic and international productions (drama, comedy, documentary and major studio film packages) sold for a license fee. These are carefully selected by APT and usually have star value. They include many of public television's highest rated programs, including *Doc Martin* and *Midsomer Murders*.

(3) **Premium Service**: Specials used for public television fundraising (pledge), with a focus on music and self-help. There are usually 10 to 12 Premium Service programs, acquired or partially commissioned, released each year. They generally include familiar faces, ranging from Frank Sinatra to Paul McCartney, and emerging talent like Lindsey Stirling and the 2 *Cellos* stars Luka Sulic and Stjepan Hauser, or health experts like Dr. Robert Lustig (*Sweet Revenge-Turning the Tables on Processed Food*).

APT also distributes 2 national multicast channels of content culled from PBS, NETA, and APT inventory: (1) **Create® TV**, a lifestyle channel with a reach of 78%+ US TV HH's (44 million annual viewers), and (2) **WORLD**, a channel featuring news and public affairs and social issues programming, with a reach of 64%+ US TV HH's (35 million annual viewers). Both skew younger than the audiences viewing primary public television channels nationwide.

APT Exchange programs are usually funded by underwriting. Popular APT series include *Globe Trekker*, *America's Test Kitchen*, and *Live from the Artists Den*. There is no hard feed or national airdate, with the exception of news programs such as *Nightly Business Report* and *NHK's Newslines*, which most stations carry as fed.

In 2014, approximately 50% of the documentaries distributed by APT were series and 50% were one-offs. APT is always looking for content of interest to both public television's core older audience and growing younger audience (which is growing primarily due to APT's lifestyle content and its acquisition of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, or *MST3K*). APT also makes a strong effort to distribute diverse programming.

APT's online **Producers Exchange** provides information for producers interested in submitting programs to APT Exchange. A pitch should include previous work; funding information; ancillary products; additional platforms that are planned, i.e., website, apps, mobile; any exclusive rights; and the presenter, if in place. APT tries to secure online rights to reach younger audiences; this is especially true for music programs. According to Chris Funkhouser, Vice President, Exchange Programming & Multicast Services at APT, all submissions – whether sent via snail mail or online – are reviewed. Chris advises allowing 6 to 8 weeks for screening and review. Of the programs that are submitted, probably 50% or more are accepted for distribution.

A major distinction of APT Exchange is its requirement that producers have presenting services. 80% of its clients employ a presenting station; the other 20% use APT's presentation services. On the domestic side, E&O insurance is required.

A fairly large percentage of APT programs are station-produced. Regardless, APT recommends hiring a station relations professional or company; hiring one could mean the difference between 50% and 80% carriage. The station relations professionals who know the station programmers are

trusted and will most often get their calls returned! A good station relations firm can encourage certain types of scheduling and can track airdates and times.

Executive Program Services

Founded by two PBS veterans, [Executive Program Services, Inc.](#) (EPS) offers new programs 3 times per year, every September, January, and May. While public television licensees who are not PBS members can use the majority of EPS programs for free, the 3 program offers include both acquisitions (whose rights stations must pay for) and programs/series that are free to stations.

EPS is the only public TV distributor that includes the station relations function with its distribution services. It further distinguishes itself by offering both production and advertising services. EPS fees vary depending on program and service specifics.

EPS is the only distributor that sells acquisitions to stations. Acquisition programs tend to be British drama (particularly mysteries), wildlife/nature films (including a long-running EPS-produced series called *Wild!*), history docs (including 3 seasons of *The History Project*, which includes films from disparate international sources), and history series like *Inventions That Shook The World*. Acquisition distributors or producers receive the lion's share of the station purchase price, with EPS typically keeping 25%. EPS also distributes a fair number of pledge shows: between March 2015 and March 2016, it distributed 8 pledge shows.

Because of its smaller size and the dedicated involvement of its founders, the inquiry and submission process at EPS is fairly straightforward. The first step is to contact either founder, called by one producer "public television gurus": Dick Hanratty is located on the West Coast and Alan Foster is located on the East Coast.

NETA

[NETA \(National Educational Telecommunications Association\)](#) serves every public television station in the country and educational entities in all 50 states. Since 1967, its mission has been to "connect public television people and ideas, by providing quality programming, educational resources, professional development, management support, and national representation."

There is no limit to the number of programs NETA can take each year. If 50 shows are submitted and 49 are superb and comply with PBS editorial guidelines, NETA can take all 49. Producers pay a nominal handling fee for a satellite uplink. NETA accepts all drive formats.

Emmy Award winning [Jamie McDonald](#) says, "NETA was my saving grace; they are very helpful to independent producers like myself."

Bob Petts, Program Development Manager at NETA, has decades of experience in the public television system. Petts recommends the following to hopeful producers:

1. Never spend money that you cannot afford to lose (he's spoken to producers who have spent their children's college fund on producing a program).
2. Title your program so a person has an idea of what they are going to be watching – remember that viewers are quickly scrolling through a 200 channel interactive guide to decide what to watch.

Westlink

Although it is less well known, [Westlink Satellite Operations](#) has been offering national satellite access at “reasonable” uplink rates to public television stations and independent producers for years. Owned by the Pacific Mountain Network, it is a service provided by New Mexico PBS (KNME-TV). Westlink is not a membership service. While its primary customers are member stations, it services independent producers, commercial clients like MTV and Fox News, and global customers like IHT World as well. One of its largest clients is *Democracy Now*, for which they uplink 3 hours per day. It is one of the few distribution services that handles its own satellite uplink.

Westlink will turn a program down if it is not well done or if it does not meet funding rules. For independent producers, they serve as a sort of gatekeeper, making sure programs follow the “Red Book” rules. For example, sponsors cannot influence program material.

They have a slight preference for customers who are public television stations because once a station has given a program its blessing, there is more certainty that it is ready for air. They also prefer to work with a producer who has multiple programs rather than just one.

Westlink provides transcoding services for all formats (tape, disk, file), uplinks data, and handles all of the electronic paperwork, such as inputting programs in BroadView and ProTrack and posting program offers in PBS Connect. Producers must make sure that all rights have been cleared, especially for music programs, which require E&O insurance.

Uplink fees are “not exorbitant” and are by the hour, with one-off’s costing more. Westlink does not do promotion, i.e., buying an ad in *Current*, and does not provide station relations services.

PBS

There is a perception that [PBS](#) is the most difficult network on which to get public television distribution. But Marie Nelson, VP, News & Public Affairs at PBS, states that they are “open for business and always on the hunt” for great programming. She feels there is plenty of room in the public television space to present “cutting-edge” productions.

PBS distributes programs through its “National Program Service” (NPS) and through PBS Plus, which provides 600 hours per year of supplementary programming to members. NPS airs programs on the National Primetime schedule; it includes continuing series like *Antiques Roadshow*, *NOVA*, *Nature*, and *American Experience*, and “anthology series” like *Masterpiece*. Programs on PBS Plus do not get common carriage (the same “feed,” or airdate and airtime) throughout the country. “PBS PLUS series and specials range from ‘how-to’ and self-help programs such as *This Old House*, *Hometime*, and *Everyday Food* to topical news and information programs like *Charlie Rose* and *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. PBS PLUS also looks for content that embraces cultural diversity, i.e., heritage documentaries and holiday celebration programs. Half-hour lifestyle series in the cooking, home improvement, and technology genres are also a content priority.” (Source: Pbs.org)

PBS does not require a presenting station. However, it may help to have a presenting station on board.

If you’re interested in submitting your property to PBS, the best resource is pbs.org/producing, at which filmmakers will find information on the submission process, funding, who may be identified

as an underwriter (similar to an “advertiser” in the commercial space), and the guidelines for on-air announcements promoting program-related goods and services.

The point of entry depends on the project. The names of the key members of the PBS programming team can be found at the PBS Producers portal. Earlier in the development process when funding options are being explored, it is recommended that filmmakers make a connection with the appropriate PBS contact to assess project viability and options. The site also offers [contact information for producers of ongoing series](#). Series producers sometimes pay licensing fees for programming, but not always.

While the PBS series producers are a natural first step for filmmakers in the submission process, it sometimes makes more sense to pitch a member station instead of PBS. However, Ms. Nelson states that “people who have fantastic stories that are well told and well-produced” should submit their productions to PBS. PBS viewers want exciting and innovative programs to watch – the door is open to producers who can make them happy.

Are there any other options?

The answer is yes. Other options include working with a presenting station, ITVS, POV, and self-distribution.

Individual Public Media Stations as Presenting Stations

Filmmakers can also approach individual public television stations (or public media stations, as they are now called, reflecting the importance of digital media) that are presenting stations and who have relationships with distributors. Every presenting station has a different process and parameters. Your program’s attractiveness may depend on its fit with the station mission.

The decision on whether or not to use a presenting station may be based on whether the content is of local relevance or if the station has a relationship with the producer. Presentation fees at a public television station can range from \$0 to \$75K. Major market stations with a dedicated presentations staff and an array of services will generally charge more. APT charges a base rate plus. The total fee depends on the type of program (is it new or continuing? Is it a one-off? If not, how many episodes? Is it pledgeable?) According to Funkhouser, some producers will choose a high-profile station for the cachet they offer.

Judy Barlow, VP Business Development and International Sales at APT, advises to be sure you know exactly what services you are receiving. For example, do the presentation fees include publicity and marketing? Station relations? Says Judy, “you get what you pay for.” The fees can be expensive, so make sure you are not paying for services that your program does not need.

The benefit of working with a presenting station is that they have cultivated strong station relationships over time. The fact that your program is typically offered for free may also increase carriage. Indeed, local market carriage is guaranteed. Because distribution is usually not a public television station’s primary revenue stream, they may also charge less for their services. However, a “non-station distributor” might have more marketing resources.

A station like [WPBT2](#), whose mission is to help filmmakers discover their voice and give them a voice on public television, is open to reviewing everything from a one-page concept to a finished film. About 10% of all submissions to WPBT2 actually get on air. A lot of people approach the

station with ideas but can't get funding, get distracted by life, or just don't have the energy to meet the requirements. However, completed works that are submitted have a fairly high success rate, with 50% achieving distribution on at least one hub of the cross-platform wheel (but not necessarily the broadcast hub). Duke says, "Errors & Omissions (E&O) insurance is such a critical item, there is twice as high a likelihood of getting on-air with that in place. Same for rights clearance records." If it aligns with a station's mission and meets necessary criteria, Duke says that it could be just a few months before your program is on-air.

ITVS

To compete for Independent Television Service (ITVS) funding, there are two primary avenues for filmmakers: (1) [Diversity Development Fund](#) (for projects in development by producers of color) and (2) [Open Call](#) (for projects in production/post production, appropriate for public television). According to Lisa Tawil, ITVS Director of Marketing, Publicity, and Creative Services, both the Diversity Development Fund and ITVS' Open Call are looking "to fund single, non-fiction programs of standard broadcast length that take creative risks, advance dialogue on important issues, and serve the needs of underrepresented and diverse audiences." Applicants looking for production funds will be required to submit a program description that includes a full treatment and work sample. ITVS offers many resources to optimize the chances for a filmmaker's success, including webinars about the application components. Filmmakers with completed films can submit their film for acquisition consideration to ITVS' PBS series, [Independent Lens \(IL\)](#).

Films that are selected through an ITVS initiative receive a license fee. Programs funded by ITVS are offered to public television distributors, including PBS (which generally picks them for series/strands such as IL, POV, American Masters, and Frontline), APT, World Channel, and NETA.

POV

[POV](#), a production of American Documentary, Inc., is "television's longest-running showcase for independent non-fiction films. POV premieres 14 to 16 of the best, boldest and most innovative programs on PBS every year. POV films are known for their intimacy, their unforgettable storytelling and their timeliness, putting a human face on contemporary social issues." POV is a series broadcast on the national PBS schedule, airing on 97% of all PBS stations nationwide. Each program has a cumulative audience averaging 2.5 million. POV provides an annual Call for Entries to Filmmakers; the call for entries for the 2016 broadcast season is closed. One producer describes POV as a very competitive door to go through, closer to the cable experience or to getting something on Frontline or NOVA. To receive an announcement about the next call for entries, subscribe to [POV's newsletter](#).

Self-Distribution

Regarding self-distribution, a long-time PBS employee, Jennifer English (who currently heads national partnerships and station relations for [PBS KIDS](#)) does not recommend it. Approaching each public television station and pitching your program can be incredibly time-consuming – and frustrating – if you don't already have contacts at each station. Judy Barlow suggests that DIY distribution could cost more than what presentation fees would cost – distributors have significant efficiencies. If a filmmaker's objective is national distribution on public television and millions of eyeballs, using one of the distribution outlets above is highly recommended.

But you can get lucky. Emmy Award winning filmmaker [Jamie McDonald](#) states, “stations all need programming and are actively looking for finished shows. I found I could call up some of the smaller stations and just by having a good conversation with them they were like, ‘Sure, why not, I’ll run your show.’”

But it really depends on your objective. If it is to move merchandise, a pledge release on local stations may be the way to go. Mr. Reitman was able to move all of his merchandise through successful collaborations with 2 pledge programs on Southern California’s KOCE and KCET.

So... what are you waiting for?! Determine your objectives, write a plan, and start pitching! I look forward to hearing about your public television experience!

Next in this series: [What Happens after your Public Television Deal? Paying For your Film](#)

RESOURCES (some links in article, above)

(1) PBS:

- a. PBS Underwriting Guidelines: <http://www.pbs.org/producers/guidelines/index.html>
- b. Red Book: <http://www.pbs.org/producing/red-book/> (currently under revision)

(2) American Public Television (APT): www.aptonline.org

[APT Producer’s Toolkit](#): (some believe that these are the most stringent and/or detailed)

APT Services:

- a. APT Premium Service
- b. APT Syndication
- c. APT Exchange

(3) Executive Program Service (EPS)

Dick Hanratty
6164 Oceanside Place, NE
Bremerton, WA 98311
Phone: 360-373-4856

Alan Foster
635 Miriam Hill Drive
Rocky Mount, VA 24151
Phone: 540-483-4767

email: info@epstv.com

(4) NETA Home Page

Information on submitting your program can be found on NETA’s Producer Page:
<http://www.netaonline.org/ProgSvc.htm>

(5) Westlink

Primary Contact: Suzanne Kembel, skembel@newmexicopbs.org
(505) 277-4426

(6) ITVS Application Process and Requirements:

– Television Open Call

- Digital Open Call
- Diversity Development Fund

(7) POV: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/filmmakers/submit-your-film.php>

(8) CPB – <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/faq/operates.html> – important source of funding for the “public television system”

Top image from the Independent Lens film “Born to Fly”: STREB performing “Sky Walk,” as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Credit: Esy Casey.

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