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Mary Ann Lee

TV News and Views

PBS Coverage of Ray Angers Viewers

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO has performed such a fine, restrained job this week in covering the House Assassination Committee hearings on WKNO-FM, 91, it was a shock yesterday to see how PBS covered the first day of James Earl Ray's appearance before the committee. Washington public TV station WETA produced the coverage for PBS, shown here on Channel 10.

Not only WKNO but this columnist received complaints from viewers, who were angry at the lack of balance and restraint in the public television commentary. Paul Duke, moderator of "Washington Week in Review," played host to Hayes Gory of *Time Magazine* and a man named George McMillan who wrote a book about Ray and was billed as the nation's foremost authority on Ray. Their comments were relatively brief, which is the best thing to be said of them.

In the afternoon, Gory was replaced by Haynes Johnson of *The Washington Post*, but McMillan was still on hand when the committee resumed its coverage after a luncheon break. Since the committee reluctantly agreed to permit Ray to stop testifying for the day after his attorney, Mark Lane, said Ray had not slept in 48 hours and had spent the previous night in a jail cell with the lights left on, the comments were also cut short.

The Memphis Public Library lists McMillan as the author of only one book and since PBS (in this case, station WETA) provided no other information about his career, it isn't clear what the writer has done with the rest of his life. In a phone interview, the news director of WETA, Linda Winslow, was unable to provide any information about McMillan's background.

She could say only that he was said to be the person who knows most about James Earl Ray. Ms. Winslow said there will be a rotating panel of commentators during the daily coverage this week, but could offer no names.

What had angered local viewers was the tone of the comments. Even before the hearings got under way, it was apparent that the commentators expected nothing to come out of the testimony. Although the hearings are not a trial, the commentary was so overwhelmingly close-minded that it had a startling effect. It was as if reporters who were about to cover a trial were forecasting the verdict before the testimony had begun.

McMillan stated his opinions as facts. Ray, he said, was "arrogant" during the testimony, an opinion angry viewers found at odds with their own view of things. He also said Ray was "paranoid schizophrenic," quickly adding that he was certain psychiatrists would say that, though he hadn't the qualifications to say

that himself. Nonetheless, he had said it and, like his other assertions, the remark went unexamined, unquestioned.

Again playing arm chair psychologist, he said that Raoul, the man Ray claims to have been in Memphis to meet at the time of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, not only does not exist but that he is "a figment of Ray's imagination . . . his alter ego." It's a theory and the writer offered no proof. In fact, he made no attempt to back up the statement. It could be true — who knows? The fact is that Ray has not been able to prove his claim that Raoul exists and the writer made no attempt to prove his claim that Raoul does not exist and moderator Paul Duke made no effort to extract any proof.

Similar comments were made throughout and what was stunning about it was that public television routinely bends over backwards to offer proponents of opposing views. It was a relief to see "The MacNeil/Lehrer Report" last night where theories were examined and questioned in the normal public television fashion.

Robert MacNeil and the show's reporter Charlayne Hunter-Galt questioned *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Horrack and the Rev. Jesse Jackson. Horrack acted as a reporter, not a theorist with an ax to grind. Jackson, too, approached the subject as a man who hopes the hearings will turn up something new or concrete, but willing to wait to make his final judgments about the testimony until it has been given.

To see people discussing the testimony, instead of old opinions, looking for something new, rather than assuming it's impossible to find it, was particularly refreshing after the PBS commentary earlier in the day, which had been an exercise in ridicule. Even Ray's nervousness was described as an indication of his guilt. It doesn't take an especially fair or open-minded person to think that there are other possible explanations for his nervousness. To suggest that it means guilt or innocence would be — and was — going rather far.

Last night MacNeil broached the subject to Horrack, who pointed out that Ray had spent much of his life in solitary confinement and had had little sleep. He could have added that testifying before a congressional committee might make many people nervous.

Horrack said that Ray has not proved Raoul's existence and suggested that Ray might be covering up for someone, possibly even family members. Nonetheless, he made no assertions that this was the case, just a possibility. "The MacNeil/Lehrer Report" had an impersonal tone more in keeping with public television's position than the daytime commentary, which Paul Duke permitted to get unprofessional at best and, at worst, downright silly.

There is a possibility that tomorrow's "MacNeil/Lehrer Report" will originate from Memphis this week. If the city's labor troubles are solved before tomorrow, however, there would be little likelihood of it.



Duke