

*Tales of the City:
A Saga of Politics vs.
Programming at PBS*

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Abstract

Tales of the City, a 1994 miniseries based upon Armistead Maupin's fictional portrayal of life in 1970s San Francisco was one of the most popular, yet controversial, programs aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) during the 1990s. *Tales* frank depiction of homosexual and heterosexual liaisons, drug use, and graphic language made it an ideological lightning rod for various conservative groups within the United States. However, conservative opposition was countered with equally passionate support from other groups who applauded the series for its nonjudgmental treatment of homosexual and other nontraditional lifestyles. This paper examines the social and political milieu of the United States during the period the miniseries aired, the broadcast history of the miniseries, and the various repercussions for PBS caused by its association with the production. Using the *Tales of the City* controversy as a basis for discussion, the final section of the paper explores broader questions namely, what types of PBS programming should be subsidized by taxpayer dollars and, additionally, what role—if any—Congress and other federal and state government entities should play in PBS programming decisions.

Key Terms: Armistead Maupin; *Tales of the City* (television miniseries); Public Broadcasting Service (PBS); homosexuality

Introduction

Tales of the City, the 1994 miniseries based upon Armistead Maupin's fictional portrayal of life in 1970s San Francisco, was one of the most popular, yet controversial, programs aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)¹ during the 1990s. *Tales* frank depiction of homosexual and heterosexual liaisons, drug use, and graphic language—issues that many US commercial broadcasters shied away from at the time—made it an ideological lightning rod for various conservative groups within the United States. However, conservative opposition was countered with equally passionate support from other groups who applauded the series for its nonjudgmental treatment of homosexual and other nontraditional lifestyles.

Repercussions from PBS's association with the production and airing of the series ranged from threatened state and federal governmental funding cuts for public broadcasting, to official condemnation by state legislatures, and more. The controversy also likely influenced PBS's subsequent decision to forgo subsidizing a *Tales* sequel or to finance and/or air potentially controversial programs in the years following the dispute. In a broader context, the *Tales of the City* debate raised fundamental questions regarding what types of PBS programming should be underwritten by taxpayer dollars and, additionally, what role—if any—Congress and other federal and state government entities should play in PBS programming decisions. This is especially true in instances where segments of the viewing audience may find program content to be obscene or otherwise offensive while other viewers may deem the same content as appropriate and socially beneficial. Last but not least, the *Tales* controversy represents a unique microcosm of several of the most contentious issues that confronted North American society in the late twentieth century.

The paper begins with an overview of the U.S. political milieu during the early-to-mid 1990s—a period marked by the ascendancy of conservative legislators to leadership positions in both houses of Congress. Given these circumstances, it is also important to briefly discuss the longstanding conservative animosity toward public broadcasting. This is followed by a broadcast history of *Tales of the City* and the controversy that surrounded it. The section

specifically addresses the following questions: 1) What aspects of *Tales of the City* did various groups (conservative and liberal) oppose or support? 2) What ideological arguments did these groups offer for/against the series? 3) What methods were utilized by the various groups to voice their opposition/support for the series? 4) How extensive was the support/opposition to *Tales* in the United States? The paper concludes with an examination of the short and long-term consequences arising from PBS's association with the series.

The American Political Milieu of the Early 1990s

Although 1994 marked PBS's Silver Anniversary, the prevailing political climate towards public broadcasting was anything but celebratory. Instead, public broadcasting spent its twenty-fifth year embroiled in what the *Boston Globe's* Frederic Biddle described as a "cultural war being waged on many fronts," (Biddle, 1994, September 25) with Congress representing one major front in the conflict. Without delay, the conservative-led Republican Party, now in control of both houses of Congress, began implementing the *Contract with America*, a blueprint for changing or eliminating a number of existing federal government programs and services.

One of the Contract's basic tenets—abolition of federal funding for public broadcasting—signified a persistent desire of many conservatives, who, as J. R. Bennett noted, viewed public broadcasting as "inimical to U.S. traditions and to what they believe U.S. citizens hold dear" (1997, p. 178). House Speaker Newt Gingrich, echoing this sentiment, asserted that Americans were "involuntarily" taxed for biased television.²

The Conservative Critique of Public Broadcasting

Scholarly examinations (e.g., Bennett 1997; Chuh 1995) of the economic and ideological arguments, as well as the motivations of both conservative and liberal groups involved in the ongoing public broadcasting funding debate indicate that conservatives have consistently viewed PBS as "elitist" and a showcase for documentary and public affairs programming with a decidedly left-wing bias³. In addition, Conservatives regard PBS programming depicting casual drug use, homosexual relationships and other related "anti-family" topics as a threat to family values and

thus, decry the "immorality" of being forced to help fund programming that is contrary to their beliefs and moral standards.

David Horowitz (1995), one of the leading conservative critics of public broadcasting, describes it as "one of the last El Dorados of the Great Society" (p. 3) that has served as a refuge for radicals who actively supported various left-wing causes over the years. Horowitz cites documentaries aired by PBS as a primary tool for conveying radical views to the American public. Moreover, Horowitz contends that PBS's sustained "radical posture" in an increasingly conservative nation alienated the American public from a service originally created to serve their needs.

Tales of the City Broadcast History

Tales of the City first appeared in 1976 as a daily column written by Armistead Maupin for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Maupin, a South Carolina native who once worked at a South Carolina television station managed by Republican Senator Jesse Helms, later moved to San Francisco and worked as a *Chronicle* reporter. Maupin subsequently revised the columns into book form and published the first book, *Tales of the City*, in 1978. The book eventually sold over three million copies and was translated into ten languages ("Showtime Spotlight").

Both the book and later television adaptation of *Tales of the City* revolve around the lives of Mary Anne Singleton and her neighbors at 28 Barbary Lane, a San Francisco rooming house. Mary Anne is portrayed as somewhat of an innocent who moves from middle-of-the-road America (i.e., Cleveland) to San Francisco, a world she soon discovers where sexual and other inhibitions seem virtually non-existent.

Anna Madrigal, landlady and surrogate "mother" to the 28 Barbary Lane residents, welcomes her new tenants by taping a marijuana joint to their door. As a matter of fact, she even tends to a whole garden of *weeds*, each with its own name, in her backyard. Near the end of the series it is also divulged that Mrs. Madrigal is actually transsexual. Nevertheless, Mrs. Madrigal's transexuality merely represents one of an eclectic mix of heterosexual and homosexual

characters "who took their sexuality matter-of-factly" ("Making of Tales"). This sexual open-mindedness, in combination with uncritical depictions of drug use were faithful renditions of Maupin's original stories. Nonetheless, these same qualities would later spur some of the most severe condemnations of the series.

Over a period of fifteen years, a number of production companies optioned *Tales of the City*; nevertheless, their efforts failed to progress any further owing to fears about the story's unconventional content.⁴ American media executives informed Maupin that the gay and lesbian characters had to be eliminated or "watered down," for according to Maupin, "... Hollywood is incapable of portraying sex or drugs or homosexuals except in the most lurid way." Maupin adds, Hollywood fears "narrow-minded fundamentalists who don't want to see homosexuals depicted as average human beings" (Maupin qtd. in Tyler, 1993). Refusing to abide with the executives' demands, Maupin remained steadfast that gay characters were to be an integral part of a filmed version of the story.

Finally in 1990, Working Title, a British independent company and its Los Angeles-based partner, Propaganda Films, along with Britain's Channel Four, came across *Tales*. Working Title vowed to be faithful to Maupin's original work. However, at the time, the company arguably failed to fully appreciate that their promise of artistic fidelity would likely preclude them from securing an American co-financier for the project. After failing to find a co-financier, Channel Four decided to pick up *Tales* entire production cost of \$7 million.

During the spring of 1993, filming of the series began in Los Angeles. with exterior shots filmed in San Francisco. The sixty member cast included mostly then largely unknown American actors mixed with a myriad of famous and once-famous celebrities in cameo and walk-on roles.⁵ *Tales* filming was already underway when *American Playhouse* along with KQED, San Francisco's PBS station, acquired U.S. broadcast rights for the series. *American Playhouse* paid approximately \$1 million (Carmody, 1994; Everhart Bedford, 1994; "More Tales") for the rights. PBS contributed about \$150,000 while KQED contributed an undisclosed amount (Biddle, 1994

April 14; Duggan 1994) toward the \$1 million total.

In September 1993, approximately four months prior to its U.S. debut, *Tales* aired on Great Britain's Channel Four and ran for six weeks. A September 22, 1993 *Guardian* article praised the series, while a September 27, 1993 London *Independent* article noted American reluctance to produce *Tales*, stating "The major networks screamed, hitched up their petticoats, and headed for the hills" (Lyttle, 1993). Nevertheless, the sexual and other content that caused so much consternation for American entertainment executives was viewed by British audiences without controversy ("Right Wing Blamed for PBS Cancellation," 1994).

Tales U.S. premiere on PBS during January 10-12, 1994, came approximately four months after its British debut. However, unlike the amiable British reception, *Tales* U.S. debut ignited, in Maupin's words, "an uproar of biblical proportions" (Maupin, 1998). Hoping to avert possible problems, PBS officials, producers and stars of the series met with reporters five days before its scheduled PBS air date. At the meeting, PBS officials announced an original unedited version and a second "cut version" of *Tales* would be offered to member stations. The "cut version" would *pixilate* (i.e., intentionally blur) nudity as well as delete profanity and other strong language. PBS also provided member stations with viewer advisories⁶ and detailed lists of scenes and dialogue that viewers could find offensive (Boone, 1994). Actress Olympia Dukakis (Anna Madrigel) voiced her support of offering an edited option stating, "I think the decision is understandable and it takes into consideration the very sensitive issue of what is acceptable in various parts of the country. It involves public funds, and PBS needs to be sensitive to those issues" (Dukakis qtd. in Zurawik, 1994, January 6).

Public Reaction to the Airing of *Tales* on PBS

The public broadcasting newspaper *Current* reported individual PBS stations received a "wave of negative calls" before *Tales* aired, while calls praising the series were received once it began. According to the paper, eight stations who shared their caller data with *American Playhouse*, reported positive response rates ranging from 49 % at KCPT, Kansas City to 90 % at

WNET, New York, while Chattanooga's WTCL and Oklahoma ETV received largely negative feedback. It was also noted that callers opposed to the series primarily cited the "non-negative portrayal of homosexuals" as their primary criticism (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31).

Meanwhile, critical reaction to *Tales* was overwhelmingly positive with the series variously praised for its authenticity, characterizations and faithfulness to Maupin's original book. *New York Times* critic John O'Connor opined, "With the six-hour Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, public television is doing exactly what it should be doing. ... PBS is broadcasting a first-rate mini-series that commercial television wouldn't touch on a dare" (O'Connor, 1994).

Many viewers appeared to share the critics' enthusiasm for *Tales*, since it garnered the highest Nielsen overnights for a PBS drama series since PBS began charting Nielsen overnights in all Nielsen metered markets for its programs in 1989 (PBS spokesman Forbes qtd. in DeCaro 1994; Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31). Overall, approximately four million American homes tuned in to *Tales* (Staten, 1994), nearly doubling PBS's normal prime time audience (Michaelson, 1994). Ratings for the series were especially strong in northern and western markets with KQED San Francisco recording the highest ratings, a 14.0/21 average (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31).

Although *Tales* earned critical acclaim and generated excellent ratings (in terms of public television), letters to the editor that appeared during this time in assorted U.S. newspapers revealed significantly divergent views about the series among various segments of American society. For example, a March 3, 1994 letter printed in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* "Letters in My Opinion" section praised it as "... a visionary and brave portrayal of an important period of history ..." (Rands, 1994). On the other hand, in a January 13, 1994 *Washington Times* Metropolitan Voices letter, a reader expressed his vehement opposition to *Tales*, writing:

I had a temper tantrum just before I threw up in disgust, disappointment, shock and frustration in seeing that my tax dollars were paying for filth and trash. They had the

nerve to tell me so at the end of the program -- yes, viewers like me." "What was positive or artistic about the film of the lifestyles depicted? What was the lesson, the point, plot or purpose--other than to give homosexuals another foothold in contributing to more downfall of our fast-crumbling society? In future episodes, will we receive the lesson of life that the homosexual lifestyle only brings disease, AIDS and death? Sorrow to families? (Colie, 1994, p. C2).

The American Family Association

Arguably the most organized and vocal opposition to *Tales* came from the Tupelo, Mississippi-based American Family Association (AFA), founded in 1977 by the Reverend Donald Wildmon, who also serves as Executive Director. During the 1990s, the AFA boasted 560 local groups although the association's strongest support was reportedly in the South and Midwest. The AFA's stated mission is to foster "the biblical ethic of decency in American society with a primary emphasis on television and other media. The group urges viewers to write letters to networks and sponsors, protesting shows that promote violence, immorality, profanity and vulgarity and encourage the airing of programs that are clean, constructive, wholesome and family oriented" (*Encyclopedia of Associations*, 1999).

Throughout its history, the AFA has initiated numerous boycotts and other campaigns against corporate sponsors of television shows and others whom they believe promote promiscuity, violence, coarse language, or anti-Christian bigotry.⁷ In 1990, the AFA waged a highly publicized crusade against an exhibit by Andres Serrano that featured a work comprised of a 13-inch crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. The exhibit, partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA),⁸ was used by the AFA as evidence to Congress that the NEA squandered taxpayer dollars on sacrilege and sexual perversion disguised as "art".

The AFA incorporates a wide array of public relations strategies in their campaigns, including: a) mailing letters and reproductions of protested works to all members of Congress, b) encouraging AFA members to send preprinted postcards and letters to Congressmen and

advertisers, as well as c) publicly threatening boycotts of advertisers and others. In addition, the AFA features articles on current campaigns in their monthly newsletter, the A.F.A. *Journal* which is mailed free-of-charge to ministers throughout the United States (Selcraig, 1990).

The AFA's methods have not been without controversy. For years, various artists have accused the AFA of misrepresenting their works in AFA promotional materials. In one instance, New York artist David Wojnarowicz sued the AFA for distributing pamphlets to Congress, clergy and the media for showing Wojnarowicz's work out of context. In Wojnarowicz's estimation, the AFA pamphlet turned his art into a "*banal pornography*" (Selcraig, 1990). The courts later barred the AFA from further distribution of the pamphlet.

Homosexuality is a central moral concern for the AFA. In an AFA publication *Homosexuality in America: Exposing the Myths* (1994), the author Richard G. Howe admitted he was not unbiased on the issue of homosexuality, stating:

I am convinced that homosexuality is morally wrong and is personally and socially destructive. If it is true that homosexuality has the destructive effects on the individual and society that many believe, then it behooves us to know our enemy and forestall any further advance of homosexuality by understanding what it is, what the homosexual community is up to, and how to answer their arguments in the open marketplace of ideas.

The AFA's Tales/PBS Campaign

In late March 1994, the AFA sent a twelve-minute bootleg tape of *Tales*' excerpts to members of the U.S. Congress. The tape highlighted scenes involving same sex kissing, nudity, profanity, and marijuana smoking. At the same time, the AFA also mailed an *Action Page* titled "Your Tax Dollars Used to Air Pornographic, Profane, Homosexual TV Series" ("Right Wing Blamed for PBS Cancellation," 1994), urging supporters to help 'shut down' PBS. Moreover, the page asserted that PBS should be renamed "the Homosexual Pride Tax-Funded TV Network" (Carman, 1994, April 19). In addition, AFA's newsletter featured pictures from the series that a *More Tales* executive producer described as "... grainy black-and-whites of scenes like two men

in bed or two women together. They managed to make the show look like some '60s porn movie. They made it look dirty" (Brennan, 1998). Owing to the AFA's national mail campaign, members of Congress would ultimately receive over 100,000 postcards from their constituents decrying the series and PBS alike (*Congressional Record*, 1995).

However, the American Family Association was not alone its criticism of *Tales of the City*. The Media Research Center, another conservative entity, designated *Tales* as one of the shows it termed 'most guilty of pushing a liberal agenda' (Keller, 1994). In a similar vein, during the CPB's January 12, 1994 balance hearing for interest groups, Robert Knight of the Family Research Council referred to *Tales* as a 'slick piece of gay propaganda that presents 1970s gay life in San Francisco as superior to marriage and family, with few apparent consequences from promiscuous sex of [sic] illicit drugs' (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31).

Knight continued his denunciation of *Tales* in the Council's *Insight* publication, *Public Broadcasting Let's Free Big Bird*, wherein he described the miniseries as:

... full of gratuitous nudity, crudity, lewdness and foul language. Traditional families are lampooned through stereotypical caricatures of stupid fathers and meddling mothers. The only person dying from an incurable disease is a heterosexual businessman who winds up cheating on his wife with a transsexual (p. 4).

A Survey of Individual Station Decisions Regarding the Airing of *Tales of the City*

Table 1 shows individual PBS stations' decisions regarding the airing of *Tales of the City* based upon newspaper accounts detailing the controversy. Although a comprehensive survey of PBS stations would be needed to obtain a precise accounting of station decisions, the available information suggests that more stations opted to air the unedited version of *Tales*, rather than airing the edited version or no version at all. All stations in the New England and Middle Atlantic regions aired the original version, while stations that opted not to air either version were in the southern region. In addition, stations that aired the edited version were located in the Midwest, south or west; likewise, reported negative repercussions from airing *Tales* came predominantly

from selected southern and western states.

Overall, airing decisions and backlash from the series appear to parallel inherent regional variations in culture and religion in the United States. As a result, stations electing the edited or "no version" options tended to include states often identified as more conservative in character (e.g., southern states). The following section will briefly examine the negative backlash to *Tales* in four states: Georgia, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Arizona.

Georgia

In Georgia, *Tales* garnered a 2.8 rating for Georgia PTV which according to then GPTV executive director, Richard Ottinger was "... damn big for PTV, particularly in the South" (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31). However, Georgia's legislators response to the series was decidedly negative. John Knox, then-candidate for Georgia's Republican gubernatorial nomination, held a press conference in capitol rotunda demanding GPTV "stop running X-rated movies". Legislative actions taken against GPTV for airing *Tales* included threatened withdrawal of funding for local public television stations, cancellation of a production facility, and ostracism of Ottinger in a Georgia House appropriations hearing (Foskett, 1994).

In another highly publicized Georgia incident, Lieutenant Governor Pierre Howard wrote a letter to Ottinger asking him to pull the series because of its depiction of explicit sex, nudity, profanity and prolific use of illegal drugs (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31). However, both Knox and Howard admitted that their assessments were based entirely upon newspaper reviews since neither viewed the series (Smith III, 1994).

A January 21, 1994 *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* editorial criticized Lt. Gov. Howard's efforts to block *Tales* and also commented that the "hypocrisy" of a Senate resolution against the series "would be exceeded only by its foolishness." Nonetheless, the Georgia Senate subsequently passed a nonbinding resolution directing Georgia PTV to 'cease airing it and never air it again'.

Oklahoma

The Oklahoma state legislature officially condemned *Tales* despite the fact that Oklahoma ETV aired the edited version. During a press conference prior to the condemnation, a Republican legislator announced he was showing "the most sensational scenes" to "legislators all over the capital" in order to rally support against the series. Among other things, he also vowed to ask members of Congress to bar the CPB and NEA from funding films that 'contain obscene material or things Americans would object to (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31).

Tennessee

WTCI Chattanooga, Tennessee reported the most threatening response to *Tales*. Following a report in the January 12, 1994 *Chattanooga Times* of WTCI's decision to air an edited version of the program, the station received hundreds of negative phone calls. One caller threatened to 'bomb the building' and 'hunt down anybody who works at the stations' in a call received one hour prior to its scheduled airing. The prompted the station to pull the show. WTCI alternatively hosted a private screening for viewers who wanted to see the series although it later had to respond to censorship charges for not publicly airing program (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31).

Arizona

In Arizona T.C. Bundy, Executive Director of Americans for Decency,⁹ held a news conference denouncing *Tales*. The conference featured a 15-minute tape excerpt of the program highlighting the nude scenes and 162 words spoken in the series that he considered profane.

Tales' Second PBS Airing

Tales was scheduled to be re aired in mid-1994. Prior to the scheduled re airing date, PBS sent a letter to affiliates acknowledging the series "created consternation". The letter also stated that some viewers and station managers complained "the treatment of illegal drug use in the series with no apparent concern for the consequences television" and moreover, that the series was "damaging in their markets, to fundraising efforts and to esteem for public television as an

educational institution." However, the reporter covering the story observed that the PBS letter appeared highly selective in its discussion of the complaints since it focused solely upon drug use while failing to mention homosexuality. The author surmised that PBS did not want to "come right out and say that candid depiction of gay life offends some viewers" (Boone, 1994).

In July 1994, PBS fed *Tales of the City* reruns to all member stations. However, in an unprecedented move, PBS provided a simultaneous alternative feed of the 1992 six-part *Legacy* series to stations who did not want to air *Tales*. Although reactions to the second airing seemed muted as compared with its original appearance, the controversy over the series was still very much alive.

The Sequel: More Tales & More Controversy

Buoyed by the success of *Tales*, Channel 4 began plans for a sequel to the original series. The sequel's projected production cost was \$8 million of which Channel 4 asked PBS to contribute 25% or approximately \$2.5 million (DeCaro, 1994). According to the producers, PBS initially appeared willing to contribute the requested amount (Everhart Bedford, 1994, April 25). However, in early April 1995, PBS abruptly denied the requested \$2 million dollars to help fund the proposed sequel. Publicly, PBS declared their decision was based upon three basic factors: (a) funding, (b) programming priorities, and (c) an aversion to sequels¹⁰. According to PBS spokesman Harry Forbes, 'When programming took stock of the whole picture, \$2 million seemed too much to put into something we'd already done' and moreover, that it was unfair to cast PBS in the role of villain for canceling "a sequel that was never promised" (Forbes qtd. in DeCaro, 1994). Commenting on the PBS decision, a Channel 4 executive stated "'I suspect it's a combination of commerce and cowardice'" (Kaye, 1994). The proposed sequel was dealt a subsequent blow when PBS cut *American Playhouse*'s budget from \$6.6 million in 1994 to \$2.2 million in 1995, while allotting no funding for 1996. However, PBS spokeswoman Karen Doyne remarked that the decision not to fund the *Tales* sequel was independent from the *American Playhouse* decision (Carman, 1994, April 19).

Armistead Maupin, People for the American Way, and *New York Times* critic Frank Rich among others, asserted that, in reality, PBS had bowed to censorship pressure from conservative political elements. According to Maupin "The only thing I can deduce is that someone very high up [at PBS] saw the scripts' and nixed the project" (Maupin qtd. in Carmody, 1994). In a letter sent to the People for the American Way and others, Maupin asserted, "I have no doubt whatsoever that this sudden decision was made in response to homophobic protests from the religious right".

When asked whether Reverend Wildmon's campaign triggered the decision, Maupin replied, "I'd never give him credit for that much power. It was just symptomatic of the lunatic fringe throughout the country" (Maupin qtd. in Carmody, 1994). PBS officials also denied that Wildmon's campaign affected their decision. Nonetheless, Reverend Wildmon characterized the decision as 'the second-best news I could possibly have; canceling the original series a couple of months ago would have been better'. Moreover, Wildmon wouldn't claim direct credit but instead stated "... if credit is going to be given, I'll wear it with a mark of pride" (Wildmon qtd. in Carmody, 1994).¹¹

The Debate Over Whether PBS Acquiesced to Conservative Demands

Animosity over the PBS decision soon erupted into a personal battle between Maupin and PBS president Ervin Duggan. Maupin accused Duggan of being "... either a bigot or a coward, and the choice isn't really anything anybody would settle for" (Maupin qtd. in Biddle, 1994, April 14). In a letter to the Association of American Publishers, Ervin Duggan responded to Maupin's charges, asserting 'PBS will continue to make its business and editorial decisions independently and without the slightest regard to pressure, whether it be from would-be censors or from disappointed authors with hyperactive fax machines" (Duggan qtd. in Biddle, 1994, September 25).

On April 11, 1994, PBS faxed a letter to member stations defending their decision not to fund the *Tales* sequel. The letter also included "suggested responses" for affiliates if asked by the press to comment on the situation (Biddle, 1994, April 14). The letter stressed that PBS's decision

was based upon funding (i.e., the first *Tales* required little public television funding while the sequel would have required a much larger contribution) and that unlike commercial television "where a ratings success immediately spawns sequels and spin-offs" (Carmen, "PBS Scared Off"), PBS must keep an eye toward our mission of variety and diversity in a universe of limited air time and financial resources" (Boone, 1994).

In a April 17, 1994, *New York Times* column, Frank Rich declared *Tales* was exploited by the religious right for political ends. Rich asked whether Duggan was 'acting as a censor to appease the fundamentalism and homophobia of family values kooks' or whether it was a "dumb programming decision by a television novice?" He also declared PBS explanations for not funding the sequel in their talking points were "bogus" and theorized that Duggan's election as PBS president and the AFA campaign were the real reasons for the PBS decision. Moreover, Rich pointed out that the National Association of Evangelicals backed Duggan's earlier FCC appointment. In conclusion, Rich lamented that the millions of viewers who pledged money to support *Tales* and similar drama had "reason to feel betrayed" ("Public TV Ducks Out").

On April 28, 1994, Duggan responded to Rich's accusations in a letter to the editor of the *Times* wherein he detailed the financial aspects of the decision and further asserted, "sequels often fail to match the quality of the original, and open any programmer to the danger of formulaic repetition". Duggan also confirmed that the National Association of Evangelicals had supported his nomination to the FCC while denying membership in any evangelical denomination (p. A 22).

Other television critics also expressed disdain for PBS's funding refusal and of Duggan as well. In an April 12, 1994 *San Francisco Chronicle* article, John Carman declared "PBS pullout from a *Tales of the City* sequel is either a case of rank stupidity or cringing cowardice." From Carman's standpoint:

The likeliest explanation is that PBS didn't want to expose its stations to any further public scrapes over a program that PBS knew would be good television, but would make some viewers uncomfortable and that Duggan either ordered or consented to the decision. That's

cowardice, right at the top of a system that was created in part to provide the sort of provocative and broad-minded programming that the commercial networks wouldn't touch.

During a July 1994 news conference at PBS's 25th convention, Duggan was repeatedly asked whether PBS bowed to conservative pressure by not funding a *Tales* sequel. Duggan termed the decision "collegial", although he did not disclose his role. He also suggested that a documentary addressing homosexuality may be better than addressing the issue via dramatic fare while also reiterating the sequel would cost PBS 10 times more than the original (Carman, 1994, August 1).

Duggan also said PBS received 2000 letters asking to reconsider its decision but referred to them as a part of a 'coercion' campaign instigated by Maupin. 'It seems to me that when we exercise our free editorial choice,' Duggan said, 'we need to be concerned about coercion whether it comes from disgruntled authors and those whom they rally, or whether it comes from the religious right'. Responding to Duggan's comments, Maupin reportedly responded: 'Those are angry PBS viewers who enjoyed the show and want more. PBS isn't spitting in the face of a disappointed author. They're spitting in the face of a disappointed public' (Maupin qtd. in Carman, 1994, August 1).

Several newspaper articles covering the PBS convention noted an attitude change within PBS circles between the 1993 & 1994 conventions and attributed it to Duggan's accession to the PBS presidency. The articles indicated that the Independent Television Service (ITVS) and the Minority Consortia were especially vocal in their concerns that PBS was shying away from diverse programming. These "self-censorship" concerns seemed validated by the August 1994 PBS rejection of the Independent Television Service musical show, *Red, Hot & Cool: Stolen Moments*, designed to promote AIDS awareness in the African-American community.¹²

The Controversy in Retrospect

Based on an examination of the sequence of events in the *Tales* controversy, it appears that the AFA's campaign against the series played a major role in disseminating and amplifying the issues addressed by the program to decision makers and the public. The AFA, armed with "video bites", orchestrated a strategy directed at Congressmen and state legislators, while simultaneously rallying AFA members to exert pressure upon the same policymakers.

As mentioned earlier, *Tales of the City* included a laundry list of controversial elements including strong language, female nudity, homosexual characters/activities, transexuality, illicit drug use, and promiscuous sexuality. Realistically, all of the issues addressed by the program were (and still are) extremely politically and socially volatile, regardless of AFA or any other interest group involvement. These issues, which touch upon individual core beliefs and values, trigger passionate and oftentimes contentious debates within American society whenever they are broached.

It is impossible to speculate how much attention *Tales* would have received from legislators and others had the AFA campaign never occurred. However, *Tales* overall ratings suggest that the series enjoyed substantial support from PBS viewers as a whole. However, the vociferous opposition by various interest groups to *Tales* appears to somewhat overshadow the apparent acceptance of the series by a majority of PBS viewers who watched the show without protest.

Unfortunately, the true motivations behind the decisions made by various parties in the *Tales* controversy may be never known since rhetoric and reality rarely seemed to coincide, especially when sensitive issues such as homosexuality are discussed publicly. However, by examining the reported events surrounding the controversy, it can be argued that political expediency appeared to play a prominent role in all levels of the controversy. PBS, in a fight for its very survival during 1994/95, could have ill-afforded a second attack from conservative groups over *Tales*. To make matters worse, *Tales* airing also coincided with the commencement of new

state legislative sessions, several of which included public broadcasting on their agendas. Moreover, *Tales* uncritical portrayals of homosexuality and drug use made it an ideal "showpiece" to back conservative arguments of liberal bias and disregard for family values and morals in PBS programming. In the political atmosphere of the early 1990's, it was probably in PBS's best interest politically to favor conservative concerns over liberal ones since the balance of political power was largely in conservative hands.

The verbal and written exchanges between Armistead Maupin and his supporters and Ervin Duggan regarding "self-censorship" when viewed in light of the events and political pressures upon PBS as outlined above, also tend to support Maupin's contention that PBS practices "self-censorship". However, it is also important to point out that PBS did greenlight the original *Tales* undoubtedly with the knowledge that concerns about the program's controversial content had been discussed for at least fifteen years by American entertainment executives. Further research into PBS's original "greenlighting" process may provide more insights into how and why the programming philosophy at PBS appeared to change between 1990 and 1994.

One unexpected outcome of the *Tales* and other PBS programming controversies is that a number of programs originally developed for PBS end up airing on commercial TV instead. The PBS bureaucracy and the fact that individual stations are not compelled to broadcast PBS feeds (Biddle, 1994, September 25) have also been offered to explain the exodus. *Tales* sequel, *More Tales of the City* eventually was produced and aired by Viacom's pay cable network Showtime in 1998. It ran without any appreciable controversy and without any public broadcasting funding.

Conclusion

The *Tales* controversy symbolizes the inherent difficulties faced by PBS in attempting to fulfill a mandate to serve a broad and diverse society while not antagonizing governmental benefactors. Unquestionably, a significant number of PBS's constituency, the American public, believed the series was a courageous and worthy effort. However, it is equally true that other PBS constituents regarded it as an affront to their moral and religious beliefs. Richard Ottinger

aptly summarizes PBS's continuing "trying to please everyone" quandary writing, "We're trying to serve an entire population with as extreme a range of points of view from liberal to conservative as exists in the world ... Our constant job is trying to juggle." "If it was all very mundane and easy, it probably wouldn't be a very effective service" (Everhart Bedford, 1994, January 31).

Table 1. Selected PBS Station *Tales of the City* Airing Decisions by Region

	Aired Original Version	Aired Edited Version	Did Not Air Series	Other
New England				
Connecticut Public Television (WEDH-24)	X			
Vermont (ETV-33)	X			
Middle Atlantic				
Plattsburgh NY (WCRE-57)	X			
University Park, PA (WPSX-3)	X			
South Atlantic				
Washington, DC area (Channel 32)			X (Note: Station originally announced it would air unedited version but later changed its mind)	
Washington, DC area (WETA- 26)	X			
Miami, FL (WXEL-42)	X			
Orlando, FL (WMFE-24)		X		
Tampa, FL (WEDU-3)				Aired <i>Tales</i> , although version unknown
East South Central				
Tennessee PBS Affiliates Nashville, TN (WDCN) et al.			3 stations decided not to air series. WDCN stated it would not air series unless PBS did "some serious editing"	
West South Central				
Oklahoma ETV		X		
West North Central				
Kansas City (KCPT-19)				Aired <i>Tales</i> , although version unknown
Nebraska Educational Television (NETV)		X		
Mountain				
Tempe, AZ (KAET- 8)				Aired <i>Tales</i> , although version unknown
Denver, CO (KRMA- 6)		X		
California (KCET-28)	X			
San Francisco, CA (KQED-9)	X			
Total:	8 stations	4 stations	4 stations	3 stations

Notes

¹ PBS is a membership organization owned and operated by member stations. PBS supplies national programming to local public television stations but is prohibited by law from producing its own programs. During the early to mid-1990s, PBS programming decisions were made by a Chief Programming Executive of the National Program Service (NPS) with advice of the PBS National Program Service Advisory Committee.

²The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) distributes federal funds to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), National Public Radio (NPR), and local public broadcasting stations throughout the United States. CPB funding requests are made directly to Congress, who approves funding two years in advance (Biddle, 1994, September 25). Although federal funds allotted to CPB represent a minuscule amount of the total U.S. federal budget (e.g., 0.0003% in FY1996 budget) they are a significant source of CPB funding. The CPB provided almost 50% of NPS funding with individual PBS stations paying a fee to NPS to air programs (Chuh, 1995).

³Although the "liberal bias" argument is a mainstay of the conservative critique of public broadcasting, very few scholars have explored the topic in any detail. In an effort to help fill this scholarly void, Croteau, Hoynes, and Carragee (1996) attempted to verify whether a "left wing" bias truly existed in public television programming. In order to answer these questions, programs airing between 6 p.m. - midnight on PBS stations in ten geographically diverse metropolitan areas during one week out of the first six months of 1992 were surveyed. The programs were then categorized and analyzed with in-depth content analyses performed on public affairs programs. Overall, their study found the "liberal bias" view of PBS to be more of a myth rather than reality, at least in regard to public affairs programming. The study's authors also suggested that critics of public television based their "liberal bias" arguments on an extremely limited array of public television programs such as documentaries or series like *Tales of the City*, to the exclusion of the vast majority of public broadcasting programming of a much more moderate nature.

⁴Warner Brothers optioned *Tales* immediately after publication in 1978 and announced that the film would be released in 1980. Thereafter, HBO held the option for seven years.

⁵*Tales of the City's* main cast members included Olympia Dukakis (Anna Madrigal), Donald Moffatt (Edgar Halcyon), Chloe Webb (Mona Ramsey), Laura Linney (Mary Ann Singleton), Marcus D'Amico (Michael Tolliver), Billy Campbell (Jon Fielden), and Paul Gross (Brian Hawkins). In addition, Lance Loud from *An American Family*, Edie Adams, Karen Black, Paul Dooley, Michael Jeter, Sir Ian McKellen, Mary Kay Place, Rod Steiger, McLean Stevenson, Paul Bartel, Bob Mackie, and Armistead Maupin, among others, made cameo appearances.

⁶*Tales* viewer advisory stated, "Some material may not be suitable for everyone. Viewer discretion is advised. Leisure suits optional." (Shales; Zurawik, 1994, January 10).

⁷In 1978, AFA conducted its first threatened boycott of advertisers when it informed Sears that AFA would picket stores in 36 cities until it withdrew its sponsorship of *Three's Company*, *Charlie's Angels* and *All in the Family*. Other notable campaigns included actions against MCA-Universal for releasing *The Last Temptation of Christ* (depiction of Jesus having a sexual desire); Pepsi (connection with Madonna video where crosses were burned) and Waldenbooks (selling adult magazines).

⁸NEA funding helped support *American Playhouse*.

⁹Americans for Decency is anti-pornography group that also campaigns against civil rights for gays.

¹⁰ However, critics pointed out that contrary to PBS's stated position regarding not making sequels, not only was *Prime Suspect 3* scheduled to air on PBS in 1994, a successive series of *Rumpole*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Poirot*, *Inspector Morse* had aired on PBS as well.

¹¹In a September 1990 profile of Reverend Wildmon, his son Tim was quoted as stating "If he [Reverend Wildmon] watches television, it's probably the news, maybe a nature show on PBS" (Selcraig, 1990).

¹²From a letter obtained by the *Boston Globe*, PBS stated it rejected *Red, Hot & Cool* because it 'would not effectively hold audiences or draw sufficient viewership' (Biddle, 1994, September 25). Critics pointed out that the PBS rationale for not airing the program (i.e., lack of audience) ran contrary to their *Tales* stance whereby they essentially argued that unlike commercial television, audience share was not a primary concern for PBS.

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