

## **It's Not History, It's HBO**

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#### Politics, History, & HBO Documentary Films

While HBO's engagement with historical and political material may seem to have intensified lately, it's certainly nothing new. Over its nearly forty-year history, HBO has taken up controversial issues in programming that informs, entertains, and sometimes angers. In many ways, the historical and political material is often one in the same, utilizing history to make a political statement about the present. The cable network's broad thread of (liberal) political commitment is the result of two important factors: PBS's influence on cable television in the 1970s and HBO's ongoing attempt to cultivate (and market to) a particular type of audience – thereby increasing its cultural cache. Quite simply, it's long been about public service and profitability.

Just one example of HBO's commitment to this type of cultural programming has been its continual attention to the AIDS epidemic, beginning with informational videos in the 1980s like *AIDS: Everything You Need to Know But Were Afraid to Ask* and continuing through 2010's *The Lazarus Effect*. Over the course of many programs – from public service documentaries and after-school specials to biopics and epic dramas – HBO has drawn from modes of address cultivated by high-profile PBS documentary and low-budget activist video as well as the sentimental appeal of melodrama to both document and shape America's understanding the AIDS epidemic. We can also see how HBO has at times used its programming as a method of speaking to this audience as a politically-oriented public. The AIDS epidemic is just one of many social issues that HBO has taken up over the years, and a detailed exploration into the cable network's history with each issue is potentially very fruitful and long overdue. If our scholarship over the next few years is going to unravel HBO's complex relationship with history and politics, we certainly have a lot of ground to cover.

If we can agree that HBO has a long history of this type of programming, I'd like to focus on the basic question: "Why does HBO fund political material?" It seems that this answer is also two-fold. On one hand, HBO does it because it fits within the broad political ideology of select network executives and filmmakers. On the other hand this programming fits within the network's overall branding strategy. What is important for critics is that we acknowledge both of these reasons and explore the tensions between them.

As for the political ideology of the network execs and filmmakers, it's clear that a great deal of HBO's political/historical programming is often left leaning (if not progressive). It's with that in mind that we can't forget the two names that appear after nearly every one of HBO's documentaries: Sheila Nevins and Nancy Abraham, President and Senior Vice President of HBO Documentary Films. These two women have been responsible for HBO producing or acquiring almost all of the documentary work that appears on HBO. Their role cannot be discounted nor can their expressed politics. The same can be said for filmmakers like Spike Lee, Rory Kennedy, Alexandra Pelosi and many others.

Outside of politics we have to also look more broadly at the branding strategy of HBO from at least the early 1980s to now. As a network born in an era of public service television and increasing competition from other cable networks, HBO had to create content that set them apart. Controversy, sensationalism, and highbrow entertainment all have their place in HBO's aura of quality television. If we look closely at the forms HBO's political material has taken, we're sure to see that, while documentaries are the clearest example of HBO's political commitment, they

are certainly not the programs that draw in the bulk of HBO's subscribers or revenue. Many dramatic programs have also played a role in this broad commitment to liberal politics. Programs such as *The Laramie Project*, *The Girl in the Café*, *Recount*, and many others can all be seen as explicitly political statements while operating as pure entertainment for many subscribers. Even producing a film like *Kevorkian* is at least partially a political choice given the subject matter and the film's treatment of the character. A film like this is at the same time the result of political and economic choices as this sensational topic certainly fits within the reputation that HBO has developed.

As a concluding example, let's look at a less high-profile recent documentary. Why would HBO fund material like *The Fence*, a documentary about the U.S./Mexico border fence? (This is a project directed by frequent HBO collaborator, Rory Kennedy.) A controversial project like this that is just a little left of center will attract attention and enhance HBO's brand. At the same time, HBO executives have often stated that they produce and distribute some films just because if they don't do it, nobody else might either – something all too familiar to filmmakers who are seeing PBS budgets shrink to practically nothing. So while it's important for us to examine the explicitly political reasons behind some projects, the strategies at work in them, and perhaps even the effectiveness of the more didactic of the programs, it's also important to remember that these programs are still one small line on a ledger sheet for a subsidiary of a large media conglomerate whose main motivating factor is to increase the number of subscribers.