

Seven Days Goes Dark

By Jim Pasero

Stephanie Fowler, the host of Oregon Public Broadcasting's "Seven Days," has an out-of-step attitude these days on moderating a current events or public affairs show.

"I like to have an ear for what is *not* said. The space between the sentences leads you deeper to a person. Because what's not there is just as important as what is there, and that's true in layout, in news stories, at news conferences; absences are just as important. I listen for different levels of discourse. I tune out the loudest, and attune my ear to other tones." What modern day TV moderator talks like this?

Maybe Stephanie Fowler talks like this because she is determined that "Seven Days" be a public affairs show and not a current events show like its cable counterparts. And maybe it's because Fowler also is a successful family counselor--that's an unusual second occupation for a television journalist.

Chris Matthews, the host of MSNBC's "Hardball," who is frequently lampooned on NBC's "Saturday Night Live" (SNL) for his shouting, doesn't talk like Fowler (Fowler describes Matthews as too pugilistic). FOX News star Bill O'Reilly, who once anchored Portland's KATU News in the early 1980s, doesn't talk like Fowler (Fowler on O'Reilly: "It's all about Bill. I'm the exact opposite in every way). And KXL's Lars Larson, who on Labor Day launched his new national radio show on Westwood One radio network doesn't talk like Fowler (Larson is one of only three guests on "Seven Days" in its seven year history not invited back. "He had his own agenda and took the conversation way off course to get there," says Fowler).

Matthews, O'Reilly, and Larson, all successful, all male, all stars, and all talk show hosts comfortable with the large ego it takes to get a show to that level, and all three not worried in the least about the absences of what's not said, the tones, and the quieter levels of discourse, the meaning behind the words. But that's not Stephanie Fowler's style at all. She is not a big fan of the star system.

"I'm uncomfortable making myself the subject," says Fowler, "I'm not a performer, never was a good television anchor. I don't have a great TV voice, don't have the look. What I am is a purveyor and analyst of information." But it's not that she can't do it, says Fowler. "I'm perfectly capable of being mean and sarcastic, but I try to keep it in check."

For nine years as the host of Oregon's only public affairs program, Stephanie Fowler has delivered an understated but quietly powerful political discussion show. And she's done it for not a lot of money. Says Jack Galmiche, OPB's Chief Operating Officer, "it costs around \$200,000, maybe a little less than that, to produce." "Seven Days," "Oregon Art Beat" and "Oregon Field Guide" are OPB's only local shows; the rest of the programming is national. All three shows are popular and have considerable audiences. "Oregon Art Beat" and "Oregon Field Guide" have local corporate underwriters. "Seven

Days” does not. And now that the legislature is cutting the ten percent of OPB’s budget that it annually contributes, Oregon’s only public affairs show is about to go dark.

Says Galmiche about the show’s future, “We are going to take the show on a hiatus in September. We’ve had difficulties getting funding from the state, and with no outside funding, no corporate underwriter...” Does Galmiche want to keep the show if he could find the funding? “Absolutely, it’s a top public affairs show and our viewers have real value.” Fowler admits herself that she has “no idea of the status of the show.”

Seven Days Producer Pete Springer comments, “I don’t think Seven Days is going to come back. OPB is planning to do a public affairs radio show in its place that will start in November.”

As word leaks out that “Seven Days” may be cancelled, the response to save the show hasn’t yet amounted to an outcry, or uprising.

Stephanie Fower has heard it all before--that the show is... boring. One Portland journalist who happens to be a regular participant says about the show, “You know what they call it down in the legislature? “Seven Viewers.”

Ouch. And it’s not exactly a ringing endorsement when OPB’s Galmiche responds to whether “Seven Days” is fast moving enough by saying, “No, I wouldn’t say it’s *too* boring.”

More than a decade ago, in response to a shrinking national audience for serious television news, a national magazine ran the headline “Is ‘MacNeil-Lehrer’ Too Good for Us?” A headline like that all by itself might be a show’s death, reminding readers of H.L. Mencken’s advice that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public.

In the “go-go 1990s” serious public affairs shows were not considered chic, hip or fashionable with TV programmers. The ’90s was the decade that saw KATU’s popular “Town Hall” disappear from weekly viewing. Against this growing cynical chicness of a disengaged public, Stephanie Fowler has been swimming upstream. Comments Fowler, “I’m amazed at how unhip I am. I try to have some sense about what’s going on in popular culture, but my tolerance is diminishing.”

But consider for a second that Oregon and America in ’03 are very different places than in the boom decade of the ’90s. In the new, more serious decade, and with more serious threats, does the public’s attention come back to public affairs shows?

Hasso Hering, editor of the *Albany Democrat Herald*, and a regular on “Seven Days,” isn’t so sure. Says Hering, “People are as distracted now as ever, and the state of the world has caused more people to turn off. They are more likely to retreat into their own lives. The threats now seem more unmanageable, more mysterious. They’re now stupid

things like Liberia and North Korea. Then, it was the Soviets and ICBMs and people after awhile got used to it.”

Is Hering right? Are people *more* disengaged than before the Nasdaq bubble burst and before September 11th? The question was put roughly to OPB’s Galmiche when asked about the size of the “Seven Days” audience.

“Your question about the ratings for the show got me thinking and I went back and looked at the numbers for “Seven Days.” I’m impressed,” says Galmiche, “and I want to take a new look at the show.”

What Galmiche found when he looked at “Seven Days” numbers is that between the show’s airing on Friday night (after “Washington Week in Review”), its repeat on Sunday afternoon, and its radio airing on Monday during “Oregon Considered” that the cumulative numbers for “Seven Days” for a week were “between 90,000 to 100,000.” That’s 100,000 Oregon college graduates, business leaders, civic leaders, activists and voters. “I was surprised by the numbers,” says Galmiche, “I am continually amazed what a bang for the buck we get out of “Seven Days,” especially because the cost of production is so low.”

Not a bad audience for a show with no corporate sponsor. So how has the understated, swimming-against-the-tide moderator, Stephanie Fowler, built such a quietly powerful and loyal audience over the last seven years?

Fowler answers by sticking to her life’s premise. “I’m just a middle-aged lady with some expertise in public affairs trying to help people understand what is going in this part of the world. It’s about the content.” Having “some expertise in public affairs” is a typical Fowler understatement. Fowler’s had a lot of firsts in her time.

“I was in the first female class at Princeton,” says Fowler. “And I was the first weekend sports anchor in Portland,” for KGW, although she adds that longtime sports anchor Doug LaMear wasn’t crazy about the idea and that her interest in sports diminished when “I discovered we didn’t have any major league sports teams.”

After doing feature reporting for KGW, which she didn’t enjoy, Fowler joined KOIN to cover the legislature. She says the change in assignments was like going from “junk food to steak.” A few years later, Fowler earned another first when the *Oregonian’s* editorial page editor Robert Landauer hired her as the first woman on the paper’s editorial page. Fowler took the duties, as usual, seriously.

“The status of being on the *Oregonian’s* editorial board was not important to me. I never felt anybody had to kiss my ring. What was important was to take a strong position, so people can come to a conclusion. An editorial writer needs to create a strong opinion, so that it creates sparks/tensions, so that people can react. Not to persuade, but to help people come to an opinion. I don’t like two-sided editorials. There’s an obligation to help people come to an opinion.”

After a number of years on the paper's editorial page, Fowler became the first woman to resign from the paper's editorial page. At the time, she was engaged to Oregon Senate President, soon-to-be Governor, John Kitzhaber (Fowler and Kitzhaber would later terminate their engagement and both eventually marry). Says Fowler about her departure, "I wasn't old enough to appreciate the stillness of the editorial page. In TV, everything was perpetual motion."

From the *Oregonian* editorial page Fowler moved to private consulting in the early '90s, or as she puts it, "I just toured the other side of journalism." She did media training, speechwriting, advertising, ballot measures, and public relations. "It was interesting work but I wanted to get back to my side of the fence."

In the mid '90s Fowler became the first ex-sports anchor, ex-TV political reporter, ex-editorial page writer to enroll for a masters degree in counseling at Lewis and Clark College. Today, Fowler is a licensed counselor in Northwest Portland. Is she any good? "They say I'm good," says Fowler.

It was during her studies at Lewis and Clark that OPB's Mike Sullivan approached her with the chance for an unusual career combination: family counselor and political moderator. "I told him I was shy about being in public ... that I was a harsh critic of myself and he said 'we want you for your background, your knowledge, your analytical skills.'" *Willamette Week's* Mark Zusman confirms Sullivan's judgement, "Stephanie is smart as a whip. If she ever takes sides in a debate, I want it to be on my side."

Since Mark Sullivan picked Stephanie Fowler seven years ago to moderate the show, she and executive producer Morgan Holm have built the quiet but powerful audience. Says *Oregonian* assistant editor Dave Reinhard about that audience. "I am amazed at the number of people that come up to me on the street and say they watch the show. Hasso Hering takes it further. "I get more comments about appearing on "Seven Days" than anything we do in the paper (*Albany Democrat-Herald*). All kinds of people talk to me about the show, whether I'm at Safeway or at the coast in Yachats."

There are a couple of reasons that the audience for "Seven Days" is as solid as it is, and they have to do with Stephanie Fowler's approach and growth as a moderator--a job that can look easy, but is deceptively difficult.

Jack Kane, general consultant to Kevin Mannix's near-miss gubernatorial campaign, acknowledges, "Yes, I watch 'Seven Days.' It's a pretty good show. I think that Stephanie has grown as a moderator. She's doing a better job than when she started. She's more of a centrist now than she is liberal."

Adds longtime senior political advisor to U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, Dan Lavey, (who calls "Seven Days" the show for the junkies of the political junkies) "She is better and more balanced. She'll ask a question from a conservative angle if others are not asking it, and

even if she doesn't necessarily agree with that position. Two years ago she wouldn't do that."

Conservative columnist Reinhard agrees with Kane and Lavey, "Fowler makes an effort to make the show balanced, but it's hard because of the way the media is in this state." When Reinhard says, "the way the media is in this state," he means *liberal*.

Fowler is aware of the problem and it's one of the reasons she's built trust as a moderator, especially with Oregon's business and civic leaders.

On a recent "Seven Days" episode that aired during this year's legislative session, the issue of media balance came up. Says Fowler, "This session there were print stories saying the Republicans had a budget plan, while the Dems had no plan, but they wanted more money. The press skated on it for a while, and the Dems got a free ride with the media for having no solutions. It was the exact same thing that the Democrats and the papers railed at the GOP for last session--because they refused to be specific. The media was saying it was more okay for the D's to do it than the R's. Well, it's not okay. If it's fair to attack the GOP in the '01 session it should be equally fair to criticize the Dems in '03. After we did the show, it seemed more evenhanded in the press. It's a small, subtle point."

Perhaps. But it's indicative of the kinds of things that matter to Fowler and how she moderates for "Seven Days."

Whether it's the media or whether it's the people who have migrated to Oregon in the last decade and a half, Oregon, and especially Multnomah County, have developed a liberal culture (and something of a national reputation) which these days some are calling more provincial than progressive. Fowler comments on what seems to many to be an Oregon disease.

"Oregon is the only place where I've met anyone who felt that friends and associates should be picked on party affiliation. I find it shocking. I've never experienced that before. Most people here are not like that, but even if a few people here say that... It amazes me. People's worthiness should not be judged by how liberal they are, what party they belong to. It's very important not to dismiss people because of their party; that is absurd and unintelligent."

Fowler brings these convictions to her role as moderator. "I have a sense of fairness. I don't affiliate with either party. I try on the show to make sure that we're not overweighed one way or another ... I would be horrified if 'Seven Days' was a mouthpiece for any one view."

Fowler is also "very aware of trying to maintain a statewide audience. I try very hard not to be Portland-centric. The last thing we want is for viewers to think it's just a bunch of people from Portland yakking about Portland. It's only two or three times a year that we do a Portland-only debate."

Does she have a favorite Oregon politician that she's covered? "Vic Atiyeh was one of the most underrated politicians in Oregon."

Fowler's sense of fairness has led to only three people in the show's seven-year history getting the "Seven Days" axe. One, as mentioned earlier, was KXL's Lars Larson. Another was a reporter from OPB, and the third was a reporter from North Portland's *Skanner*. All three were banned because in Fowler's words they weren't trying "to further the conversation."

The incident that got the reporter from the *Skanner* banned occurred in an exchange with Hasso Hering. "I think there were some punches thrown," laughs Fowler, implying it was a little too wild for her tastes.

"No," says Hering, "no punches. "What happened was, I was turning and I made a conversation gesture and I bumped her (the *Skanner* reporter) on the arm. I said, 'Oops.' The conversation had something to do with welfare."

Fireworks may not be Fowler's style, but she remains quietly tenacious about the value "Seven Days" brings to Oregon. "This show is important. I'm not saying it's great. I'm not saying it couldn't be improved, but if it's gone, there will be nothing left, it's the only public affairs show in Oregon. Whether or not I'm the host is not important...sure I like being the host, but that's not the issue. This little show is the only meeting place in the state for opposing and serious viewpoints."

And Fowler, like a lot of Oregonians, sees more need for a public affairs show now than in the previous decade.

"People are now more at sea about how to do it--how to operate government. What role government should play in people's lives. What solutions should come from government. And what solutions from the outside. And how do they interact. Where higher education is going. We don't know the answers. Lately we wallow around in the undertow. There are not clear figures emerging...yet."

"As long as Seven Days is there," says Executive Producer Morgan Holm, "people don't give it much thought, but when it disappears people will say, hey, what happened?"

For moderator Stephanie Fowler, a person who has made a career out of listening, of finding the meaning in the silences, in the absences of things not said, the absence of "Seven Days" from OPB's lineup next month would be a sour irony. And it would also leave a powerful audience wanting.

