



A VOICE FROM LIBERTY

David Brancaccio '82 goes out of his way to make a point, hoping to discomfit those on the Right and on the Left.

BY WILLIAM HOLDER '75

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART

In late January we caught up with David Brancaccio '82 while he was in Liberty, Maine, shooting the opening segment of *Now*, the PBS show he hosts. Liberty is just off Route 3 as the two-lane highway heads east out of Augusta toward Belfast on the coast. Wesleyan photographer Bill Burkhart and I arrived in the late morning to find Liberty's commercial district, consisting of a handful of small wooden buildings that may not have changed appearance in 50 years, closed for the winter—literally. A sign on an antique tool store read, "Open March 1, 8 a.m."

The show's producer found a spot to shoot the opening segment on a bridge over a small river, with snow-covered fields and a smattering of modest houses dotting the surroundings. Brancaccio assented. The scene would complement his opening lines: "On the road this week in the state of Maine. Not the fancy Maine of Kennebunkport or Seal Harbor in the summer but the real Maine—the one with a lot of people who remain poor despite all their hard work."

The story was about Maine's controversial program to provide government-supported health insurance to people who otherwise would most likely have no insurance. It addressed one of Brancaccio's favorite themes: how ordinary people try to cope with economic and social dislocation, such as a health care system that cannot provide insurance coverage for more than 40 million Americans. He doesn't hesitate to take on issues that evoke deep divisions. As a result, his show itself is the target of controversy.

Brancaccio succeeded Bill Moyers as anchor of *Now* in late 2004, after having established a reputation as the popular host of Public Radio's Marketplace program. Moyers and his wife, producer Judith Moyers, had been impressed by Brancaccio's story-telling talent and by his ability to connect with listeners.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Brancaccio said that his approach to *Now* is similar to the style he developed at *Marketplace*. "We covered issues from a human perspective, a populist version of business coverage. We were almost like anthropologists, on the outside looking into this alien culture that is business. We did it that way because while a third of our audience was made up of business professionals, two-thirds was not."

The opportunity to work with Bill Moyers (the two served as co-anchors for more than a year) induced Brancaccio to move with his wife and three children from Los Angeles to a New Jersey suburb of Manhattan. The same opportunity presented a challenge. For several decades Moyers had

been a prominent presence on public television; he had served as deputy director of the Peace Corps and worked in Lyndon Johnson's White House. He used his stature to speak with authority on issues he cared about. Brancaccio could not do the same; nor did he want to.

"Bill had standing to take a lot of strands and pull it all together. I don't go quite that far. We have 1.5 to 2.0 million viewers Friday nights, people who are critical thinkers. We invite them to reach their own conclusions. I think that's a good place for journalism to be."

Though Brancaccio strongly denies that he's anything other than impartial, he may have inherited some of Moyers' enemies, as the *Times* piece suggested. Not long after he became anchor, reports surfaced that the chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting had ordered a content analysis of *Now* because conservative critics had charged that the show was hostile to the Bush administration.

The effort generated a backlash. Newspaper reports cited leaked internal e-mails attempting to demonstrate that the chairman had acted improperly in ordering the audit. At the request of several Democratic congressmen, an Inspector-General review was undertaken.

"We're absolutely convinced that we're using the regular standards of mainstream journalism to cover our stories," Brancaccio says. "The funny part is that you don't need a content analysis to figure out what we do on the air. There were examples in that content analysis where, in a particular week, the show was evenly divided between a liberal and a conservative voice, and yet the conservative voice is not mentioned."

"The charge against us is that we're doing liberal advocacy journalism. I think they are confusing 'liberal' with speaking truth to power."

Although raw data from the content analysis was published online, no final report ever emerged.

Brancaccio has thought a lot about the journalistic responsibility to be balanced, to give opposing views a fair hearing. His conclusion: it's not always right. A year ago *Now* aired a story about global warming in which he shed this journalistic convention, contending that balance can be artificial, a disservice to viewers, when the vast preponderance of evidence and credibility lies with one side. With a mischievous smile, he notes that not long after the show President Bush spoke to the G8 and acknowledged that the existence of global warming is no longer under serious debate.

The line between presenting facts and gathering facts into a point of view, however, is not always clear. In

February, *Now* aired an update to the global warming story in which Brancaccio said, "At last count, there were close to a thousand scientific studies supporting the case for global warming, but that science has run headlong into the politics of denial. In August, President Bush signed a sweeping energy bill. It's chock full of tax breaks and subsidies to coal, oil and gas companies—the very industries that contribute most to global warming."

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The new ombudsman for PBS, Michael Getler, criticized this piece during an interview with Brancaccio on *Now*. Getler said he didn't quarrel with the facts, but he complained about the tone and said, "I think people are sensitive to that now. They are distracted by anything that suggests that there's an agenda or if they sense any bias, perceived or real."

In a subsequent ombudsman column published on

the PBS Web site, Getler noted that not only had *Now*'s coverage of global warming generated letters pro and con from viewers, but his criticism of Brancaccio had done the same. Did the piece have a tone that undermined the facts, at least for some viewers, he asks, or "...would attempts at some balance on an issue that doesn't have a great deal of balance to offer, in fact, undermine the larger truth that the program is trying to get at?"

Brancaccio has less time on air to get

at the truth than Moyers did. For budgetary reasons, the show was cut from an hour to 30 minutes. He also lost the expensive studio set that Moyers had used and is more frequently found on the road. His hectic travel schedule has at least one upside: he finds that interviews conducted on location and in person tend to be more powerful and more memorable.

Our rendezvous with Brancaccio and his crew had been delayed for a few months. We had booked hotel rooms in Reading, Pa., to visit him when he was intending to cover a town hall meeting about Social Security reform. But Hurricane Katrina swept onto the Gulf Coast and Brancaccio is in the news business, after all, so he headed to Louisiana instead of Pennsylvania.

We declined his gracious invitation to join him down South after we discovered the near-impossibility of finding hotel rooms, a rental car, and perhaps even food. A couple of other opportunities fell through for logistical reasons, and then the invitation to join him in Maine arrived.

We gained some inkling of the controlled chaos that lies behind the planning for a weekly segment when my cell phone rang as I was falling asleep in the Holiday Inn of downtown Portland at about 10:45 p.m. Brancaccio, who had just landed at the Portland airport, was calling to say that our plans to meet next morning in Lewiston were yesterday's news. He and the crew would interview a state senator in Augusta at 9 a.m., then they would head to Liberty. A glance at the map told me that we needed an early start, at 5:30 a.m., to catch up with the crew.

Maine was having the kind of mild winter that left snowmobiles parked in garages, but standing at the side of a road in Liberty was still not pleasant. After about the tenth take of the opening segment, punctuated by numerous delays required to move equipment out of the way of the occasional car or pickup driver slowing to gawk, we started stamping our freezing toes on the ground. Brancaccio, who grew up in Waterville, Maine, wore only a scarf over his sports jacket but seemed to be immune to

the chill wind (or at least determined to present a brave Maine front). He also has the uncanny ability to listen to his opening lines on an iPod discreetly plugged into his ear while speaking to the camera, similar to simultaneous translation at the United Nations.

Today he was talking about Maine's Dirigo health care initiative, which rolls together many of the story elements that he desires: ordinary people buffeted by social change, a hot political controversy that is part of an ongoing national debate, and an innovative approach to a high-stakes problem. Enacted in 2003, the Maine law created DirigoChoice, which provides discounted health insurance coverage to Maine businesses with 50 or fewer employees as well as to self-employed individuals. Its intent is to ensure that everyone in Maine has access to health care by 2009.

The state paid \$53 million to launch it, but further funding is supposed to come from insurance companies, which, according to the state, will save money when consumers use the health care system more efficiently. Insurance companies disagree and detest the program. Conservative politicians vilify it as an expensive government boondoggle.

Brancaccio planned to give them their say on the program, but he also wanted to hear from people who are benefiting, as well as from the program's chief proponent, Gov. John Baldacci. While we were waiting at a local diner for lunch, the producer took a call on his cell. Gov. Baldacci's office was canceling all appointments, including the *Now* interview scheduled for the next day, due to a death. Brancaccio was scheduled to be in California the following week, but he absolutely had to get back to interview the governor. He groaned as he contemplated the complexity of his schedule.

After lunch we drove through a maze

of back roads to Warren, guided by the GPS system in the producer's car. Our destination was a modest home belonging to Joan Donahue, who runs a small business, Hummingbird Home Care, from her finished basement. Her dozen or so employees provide round-the-clock care to elderly people who can afford the high cost of having someone take responsibility for everything from handling medications to paying bills. Without DirigoChoice, Donahue said she could not offer health insurance to her employees, who earn less than \$20,000 a year from this work.

Donahue choked up when she spoke about how she and her husband had earlier survived on \$11,000 per year with a near-useless insurance policy that protected against only the worst medical catastrophes. She would not let her son

ride a snowmobile for fear that he would sustain an injury they could not afford. Knowing what it's like to be one of the invisible poor, she has no patience for well-heeled people with good employer-provided insurance who disdain the Maine program as a state handout. Brancaccio and the crew were dead silent. Their tension was palpable. Donahue had sliced right through whatever might have been routine about this interview. She was speaking straight from the heart. As darkness fell, we left Brancaccio and his crew still deep in conversation with Donahue.

He did return to Maine the following week to interview Gov. Baldacci, who gave the insurance industry a tongue-lashing for disputing figures that he says have been quan-



Cold work: Brancaccio shoots the opening segment to a show many times to get it just right.

tified independently. The issue is a hot one for the governor. Opposition to the program is intense; he could lose the next election.

The experts wrangle, but it's clear that Brancaccio's sympathies lie with Maine's working poor who are struggling to obtain affordable health care—people like John Henderson, a diabetic interviewed for the show who could never afford health insurance with the \$10 an hour he earns loading boxes at a warehouse. Brancaccio's sympathy for these individuals explains why he spent hours in the cold wind at Liberty to give his opening lines a visual punch.

Those who would accuse Brancaccio of having a liberal slant could find ammunition. He is pleased, for example, that after a *Now* segment on a Texas inmate awaiting ex-

ecution following a conviction based on evidence that has been seriously questioned, a Texas court granted the inmate a new trial. (He is quick to credit a journalism professor and her students who have been researching and publicizing the condemned man's case.) Yet Brancaccio gave a fair hearing, for example, to Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, removed from office for defying a federal judge's order to move a Ten Commandments monument. Conservative viewpoints are far from absent on his show.

"We have some viewers who wish that we were the Rush Limbaugh on the Left. I don't provide that service," he says. "When I was at *Marketplace*, we were on the air during the Clinton administration. We were doing some pretty edgy

stories. People in power, whoever they are, don't like investigative journalism."

Brancaccio freely admits that he likes to rile people, that he has a subversive streak against confirming people's biases. This trait serves him well on the air. It gives his interviews a bite.

Yet at heart he is a storyteller, and evocative stories move him.

"One of my hopes when I switched to television was to get out into the field," he says. "Those satellite interviews I did so often at *Marketplace* are as easily forgotten as last night's dinner. You never forget when you go into someone's home and have a moving conversation. I won't forget Joan Donahue. That was a most unusual encounter." **W**