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'NewsHour' On PBS To Get Makeover

By ELIZABETH JENSEN

"The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer," public broadcasting's nightly newscast, is getting a makeover, designed to bring it more fully into the digital era, give it a livelier look and nudge it, however slowly, toward the day when its longtime anchor decides to retire.

Mr. Lehrer, who will turn 75 next Tuesday, isn't stepping down. But in September the program will be retitled "PBS NewsHour" and return to a two-anchor format, which it had until 1995, when Robert MacNeil left.

Linda Winslow, the executive producer of "NewsHour," said the changes will be made for a simple reason: "What we were trying to accomplish was a more engaging program."

In the fall Mr. Lehrer will be joined by one of three co-anchors drawn from the show's current team: Gwen Ifill, Judy Woodruff or Jeffrey Brown. The co-anchor will vary, and when Mr. Lehrer, who remains the executive editor, is off, two of them will anchor.

"This is not a succession plan in disguise," Ms. Winslow said.

"NewsHour" is also searching for a correspondent to read the day's news summary, now read by Mr. Lehrer, and anchor daily Webcasts from the newsroom in an effort to knit the program's online and broadcast presence. "NewsHour" will merge its online and broadcast news desks, make its reports more easily distributable on digital platforms and send the correspondents Margaret Warner and Ray Suarez into the field more often.

Some of the changes resulted from research the program commissioned in 2008 to see how viewers felt about it, "NewsHour" executives said. The

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The 'NewsHour' on PBS Will Make Changes to Bring It Into Digital Era

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changes will be unveiled to public television stations on Tuesday at PBS's annual Showcase meeting in Baltimore.

They are part of a broader effort to re-evaluate public broadcasting's news and public affairs programs. The goal is to have them take a more coordinated, collaborative approach, by featuring "Frontline" reports on the "NewsHour," say, or possibly creating a single Web site with content from several programs. Joint ventures with public radio are also being discussed.

"Public broadcasting's culture is very independent and individualistic," said John Boland, PBS's chief content officer, who announced the initiative internally in April in an e-mail message. He wrote: "We can hang together or hang separately. While our highly decentralized structure may make perfect sense to us, it is incomprehensible to our audiences and is contributing to fragmentation." The initiative is being led by Tom Bettag, the former executive producer of ABC's "Night-

line."

"We have not only an opportunity but a responsibility to take a look at what we're doing here," Mr. Lehrer said, citing the "revolution" convulsing journalism as news organizations grapple with declining revenues and consumers' changing news habits. "Newspapers are thinning, and television has its own crisis," he said. "I became a fanatic about the idea that those of us who are in the business of serious journalism, we have to do more."

Having two anchors will "shake things up a little bit," Mr. Lehrer said. He said he was feeling so invigorated after an aortic valve replacement that he had no

ONLINE: 'THE NEWSHOUR'

Previous coverage of the show and a link to video reports: nytimes.com/television

retirement timetable.

The changes are also an acknowledgment that while some still view the program "start to finish," Ms. Winslow said, "many, many people simply don't have the time to watch a one-hour broadcast of anything anymore."

"Each piece has to be individual and watchable" in many forms, she added.

In 2008 "NewsHour" had about 1.2 million television viewers on

average. That number, while far below the more than 8 million viewers that top-rated "NBC Nightly News With Brian Williams" currently draws on average each weeknight, has held steady in recent years and doesn't take into account the show's radio rebroadcasts and international distribution.

Unusually, Ms. Winslow said, there is almost no crossover between the program's viewers and those who use its Web site, which has about 500,000 unique visitors weekly. The new Web and broadcast correspondent will attempt to bridge that gap. Ms. Winslow said she was looking for someone who was both new-media savvy and "a credentialed journalist."

The reorganization of the news staffs should make it possible to do more with the same budget and not lay off employees, Ms.

Winslow said, noting that the cost of field reports, which previously kept correspondents tied to the studio, had dropped as digital technology improved.

Unlike many news organizations, "NewsHour" has not to have laid off staff recently. Still, it has had financial challenges since last year, when salaries and hiring were frozen and 401(k) contributions suspended, as corporate underwriting lagged. The picture is much the same this year. Currently the program gets more than \$10 million annually in funding from PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, about \$8 million from foundations and \$6 million from corporations. In April, Intel joined Chevron as a major sponsor.

Mr. Lehrer has been on "NewsHour" and its predecessor, "The MacNeil/Lehrer Report," since 1975. Including the years when Mr. MacNeil anchored solo, this will be the program's fifth incarnation. Since 1981 it has been owned by MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, of which Liberty Media Corporation bought a two-thirds stake in 1994.



The "NewsHour" team: Jim Lehrer, center, with (from left) Ray Suarez, Margaret Warner, Judy Woodruff, Gwen Ifill and Jeffrey Brown.