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MEDIA ADVISORY

TAVIS SMILEY RESPONDS TO CANCELLATION OF "SMILEY & WEST" IN OPEN LETTER TO CHICAGO PUBLIC RADIO, WBEZ

CHICAGO, IL (October 15, 2012) - Tavis Smiley, public radio and television broadcaster, emailed the following letter Monday to Torey Malatia, President and CEO of Chicago Public Media, regarding the recent cancellation of *Smiley & West* from Public Radio International (PRI) by WBEZ. In the letter Smiley rejects the claim that his public radio work has become "far less inclusive," as Malatia has suggested.

"I am as 'inclusive' as I have ever been because I am as curious as I have ever been. I reject and resent the very suggestion by you in letters to listeners that I do not demonstrate a willingness to 'respect and hear opposing views,'" writes Smiley.

Smiley's entire letter is included below and can also be read at: www.smileyandwest.com.

Dear Mr. Malatia,

In my 20 years of being a broadcaster, this letter represents the very first time I have felt compelled to write a personal note to the head of a local station.

I was content to simply move on beyond a cancellation decision I vehemently disagreed with, because I respect the public media model that stations know best. That is until I was made privy to the content of your written response to listeners who have been expressing disappointment about the cancellation of *Smiley & West* on Chicago's WBEZ 91.5 FM. I must say that the spin found in your letter is beneath you, the station you work for, and moreover the people you serve. Say nothing of the fact that to my knowledge, at no point did you or your staff ever attempt to communicate to me any of the impressions you so freely shared in your letter to listeners.

The disregard and disrespect for my work one reads in your letter to listeners is too extreme to adequately address in this email; but when you suggest that I have become "far less inclusive" in my work, you advance a lie. A big lie. I'm about to celebrate 10 years on PBS and 12 years on public radio. As an African American in the still-too-lacking-in-diversity world of public media, one does not survive in these environs --- much less thrive --- if one's interview style is remotely akin to the intellectual bullying

of Bill O'Reilly. To compare my work to his in your letter to listeners is to defame me in the worst way. I take pride in being the first African American in the history of PBS and NPR to simultaneously host his own signature weekday public television and radio shows, opening the doors for other persons of color to now host or co-host award-winning programs over public media.

Furthermore, I have two public radio programs as you well know. One that I continue to host solo, the other co-hosted with Cornel West. These two programs, deliberately and unapologetically, could not be any more different in content and style. NOTHING has changed about the format of my solo show which has NONE of my opinion expressed as a part of the production. You no longer carry that program either, which again, is absent of my personal opinion and continues to feature guests almost weekly who express differing opinions on the issues of the day. Additionally, nightly on my PBS program I provide a national platform to a variety of guests, including an entire week this past summer featuring exclusively conservative voices. I am as "inclusive" as I have ever been because I am as curious as I have ever been. I reject and resent the very suggestion by you in letters to listeners that I do not demonstrate a willingness to "respect and hear opposing views."

IF *Smiley & West* has experienced any erosion in listenership, it might have something to do with being heard over WBEZ on Sundays at 12Noon when most Black Chicagoans are in worship service. To so blatantly disregard an obviously critical mass of listeners in the scheduling of this program suggests one and or two things: that you don't get it or that you don't care. A premier station in a world class city should not be still struggling with how to truly represent the voices of ALL fellow citizens in the most multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-ethnic Chicago ever. That's a leadership deficiency. One could argue that it is easier for an African American to be president of the United States than it is to host a primetime radio program on Chicago Public Radio. It seems that WBEZ thinks that just because WVON exists, that it is somehow exempt from being "inclusive." Respectfully, Mr. Malatia, it takes brass for you to accuse me of being less than "inclusive." Your job is to program a station that is "reflective of a complex society of varied and uneven life experiences, backgrounds, races, cultures and economic circumstances." Is this the best that WBEZ can do? How does cancelling *Smiley & West* advance that mission?

When *Smiley & West* was rolled out two years ago at the annual PRPD convention, Dr. West and I made it abundantly clear that we were trying something a bit different for some public radio stations. A program that would feature our opinions, but a program that would also have built into every show a segment called "Take 'Em to Task," where everyday people all across America could call in to do just that --- disagree with us over the airwaves. It has turned out to be one of the most popular parts of the program, giving listeners a say, whether their disagreement with us is cosmetic or monumental. In addition, we heavily promote in each show our "Speak Out Network" where the conversation continues seven days a week on-line, and listeners can at anytime register or post their feedback. Indeed they do. *Smiley & West* couldn't be more democratic.

Finally, since each of my radio shows is produced by a different team of professionals, I find it curious that you would suggest to listeners in your letter that my programs were "showing signs of significant declines in production effectiveness and focus." It's hard to imagine that all of my producers and engineers suddenly just lost their way. That particular statement in your letter to listeners hurt most. I do not abide insults to my hard-working and dedicated staff. I would never insult the fine team at Chicago Public Radio in that way. Besides, have you paid any attention to our most eclectic guest roster? High caliber guests keep appearing on my programs week in and week out.

I have only a First Amendment right to free speech, not to a radio program that WBEZ is mandated to broadcast. You're entitled to your opinions of that program and your executive decisions concerning it, but you're not entitled to your own set of facts. Particularly when those "facts" are demeaning, derogatory and dead wrong.

I appreciate the opportunity to have been heard over Chicago Public Radio all these years. Even as other stations around the country continue to add *Smiley & West* (including stations in Chicago we are in talks with even now), I regret that you chose to deny the listeners of WBEZ an opportunity to hear something a little different ONE HOUR a week. To make room for yet another repeat of a program about cars that isn't even in production any longer. Is that what we need right now as fellow citizens prepare to decide who is best to lead a nation where our democracy is being threatened by poverty, where schools are failing our children, where crime is out of control?

At some point, those who steward public media have to stop insulting those who support public media.

All best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tavis Smiley". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Tavis Smiley

P.S. Since I do not know how far and wide your letter to listeners has spread, I feel compelled to release this particular letter publicly, so that those who have read your letter and heard the station's position via various Chicago media outlets can now hear the other side of the story.

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