



The PBS-NPR Debate's Unmentionable Dilemma

As House Republicans pushed to eliminate federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) this month, Democrats fought back with a vengeance. Barack Obama even upped the ante a whopping \$6 million, by asking \$451 million for CPB as part of his \$3.7 Trillion-Dollar Baby. This is the same historic 2012 budget that many lawmakers say is already trimmed to the bone (with a gross federal debt approaching \$14 trillion).



In response, NPR and PBS stations nationwide stepped up their rhetoric to listening and viewing audiences, going so far as to ask them to stop the Senate (and even Republicans in particular) and defend federal funding for public broadcasting. Some legislators and opponents predictably cried foul, insisting that CPB and/or its affiliates had violated laws that ban nonprofits and government-funded entities from lobbying.

Try telling that to leaders at the National Education Association, which for years has not only produced a highly politicized, and barely education-related, Legislative Agenda, but by advocating for every leftist cause imaginable. It also owns a big, apparently tax-exempt, office building in the heart of Washington, D.C.

Weekly Standard writer Philip Terzian has pointed out in his recent article that just because public broadcasting depends on federal funds does not mean that it cannot subsist without federal funds"; and [advocated breaking its welfare dependency](#). He also notes that If NPR and PBS were to go private, that would not only end the perpetual tension between taxpayer funds and public accountability, it would leave them exempt from political pressure and interference so they could air whatever they wanted.

All true. But Mr. Terzian's best point broaches an issue rarely discussed in public, although frequently in closed company: while it is theoretically possible that a certain number of stations in marginal markets would succumb, that might well be the cost (if it happens). The underlying issue here is a topic that other countries, such as France, once believed to be crucial. Like our own nation, France, too, wound up overwhelmed by what some disdainfully describe as the popular culture, despite a Ministry that worked for years, in their case, to avoid what one appointee once described as the horror of American radio and television.

Mr. Terzian opined that the kinds of radio and television he likes classic jazz and classical music, as well as documentaries on history, literature, and science were nearly nonexistent on the air, except on PBS and NPR, but that the market has demonstrated that no private broadcaster would [ever] fill the



Written by [Beverly K. Eakman](#) on March 14, 2011

vacuum.

He is not alone in his basic complaint, but it is far from clear that the market per se has demonstrated any such thing. If Mr. Terzian is correct in his view that the typical fare presented on commercial radio and television is predominantly or relentlessly lowbrow whereas the kind of elitist fare he likes is found only on PBS and NPR, then it might be because the market for lowbrow entertainment has been artificially subsidized.

Beginning in the 1950s (read about "[Payola](#)"), disc jockeys were lambasted for taking kickbacks from managers and other interested parties to play certain songs and music, to feature the works of particular entertainers, and, finally, to offer only reliable genres like soul, country, classical, or rock to the public. Stations were often bought and sold with that in mind. By the 1990s, many people were turned off by the nonstop howling and screeching of so-called popular music, not to mention noisy, crass commercials. They didn't want to set their alarms and wake up to such cacophony.

So, radios started being sold that had an accompanying audiocassette feature so one could awake to a favorite tape, commercial-free. As digital came along, Sirius and XM satellite providers provided listeners with the capability to access their favorite genre 24/7, even in their car. No more station-fade-out problems on the road or local jabber when traveling through an unfamiliar part of the country.

The only problem was that one didn't get any weather, traffic updates or news that way. That is probably the largest reason why local radio stations stayed in business. Even those who like popular culture listen to MP3 players and iPods; they are not necessarily listening to the radio the way Baby Boomers did. Talk shows, of course, are in a class of their own, and conservative hosts have to carve out their own niche instead of having it handed to them. Some do not listen to talk shows at all, of course, conservative or otherwise.

But the thorniest dilemma in Mr. Terzian's piece is the part about it being theoretically possible that a certain number of stations in marginal markets would succumb [without government subsidies]."

The problem is that not everyone can be a one-man Annie B. Casey Foundation or a Pew Charitable Trust. We live in a mobile society, and that means people transfer with their jobs lots of people. Dallas, Texas, for example, abolished its PBS stations a few years ago, which meant not only classical music disappeared, but financial TV shows such as "Wall Street Week," which caters to an audience a bit more sophisticated than the one that listens to Dr. Phil. As classical music stations dwindled to the point of no return, anyone wishing to listen to complex orchestral pieces was forced to purchase a CD player, CDs, subscribe to satellite and/or cable (a sizeable outlay in some cases), and change out the radios that once graced the nightstand.

So, when we talk about a market for music, are we willing to say that only the elite, the rich, could possibly be attracted to Harry Connick, Jr.? Or guitarist Chet Atkins? Or what is, perhaps, the greatest stage musical of all time, *Les Misérables*? Now that's a stretch.

Yet the musicians and musicals above were among the cream-of-the-crop features of PBS channels during last week's Pledge Drive, not the music of controversial political figures, regardless of their merits at other times of the year. So, it is obvious that PBS executives know what the public likes best and what kind of programming is apt to draw pledges. If they know, so do a lot of other media moguls, philanthropists, and heads of charitable organizations including conservative patriots.

In Tony-award-winning actress Patti LuPone's new autobiography, she describes how she and her fellow thespians lived for years out of suitcases, traveling all over the country to perform before throngs of



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enthusiastic audiences, some of them out-of-the-way locales. The stages ranged from relatively small, as in college towns, to medium-sized like the Dallas Theater Center, to larger venues the size of The Strathmore in Kensington, Maryland, or The National Theater in Washington, D.C., and, of course, the biggest of them all, Broadway in New York City. The point, however, is that there is no dearth of fans for sophisticated entertainers, even among those who cannot afford large donations. In fact, many an individual's one big splurge for the year might be for a chance to see, say, Andrea Bocelli, the blind Italian tenor from Tuscany whose incredible voice was first heard by many people on PBS. Bocelli then proceeded to pack sold-out houses the size of a football stadium around the country.

That kind of thing is going to change as young people and those living in outlying areas, long distances from major cities, hear nothing but boorish performances from the likes of Christina Aguilera and Eminem. Without a PBS around, they will never know whether they might have enjoyed operatic-crossover tenor Josh Grobin; or the dance phenomenon of Riverdance fame, Michael Flatley; or the Irish-Riverdance-spinoff female group, Celtic Woman all seen for the first time by most people on PBS.

Of course, our Ministry of Culture, as it were, is called the National Endowment for the Arts. But it, too, has surrendered to political correctness, proliferating the works of extremists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, the artist of gross-out homosexual works, and Annie Sprinkle, the talent-challenged goofball who urinates in public.

In the present political climate, where even children's programming is rife with leftist messages, junk science, and psychobabble, however subdued, it is probably a mistake to support CPB with taxpayer dollars. However, if the culture is ever to be turned around, conservative traditionalists need to step up to the plate and get on the boards of organizations that will present the kinds of high-culture programs that PBS does. The Left managed to get hold of the reins of the media, not by calling themselves The Marxist Entertainment Group. They simply got their act and funding partners together until they held a majority on most boards in journalistic circles, film, and television.

Monikers such as National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting carry no self-defining political terminologies. Conservatives, on the other hand, stupidly advertise themselves and, thus their intentions by labeling their networks, programs, and groups using religious and conservative titles right up front, so the Left doesn't have to do it for them.

The result is hundreds of channels and stations to choose from and, more often than not, nothing uplifting to hear or watch.

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