



Examiner Editorial: Liberate public broadcasting: End government subsidies

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A nonprofit advocacy group supposedly dedicated to promoting "independent media ownership" has posted a letter attacking Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., and Rep. Doug Lamborn, R-Colo., for their efforts to end federal taxpayer funding of public broadcasting. According to Josh Stearns of the group Free Press, the \$445 million that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting gets each year is a "tiny federal investment" that "is vital to helping support programming that commercial media won't showcase and provides an important foundation for stations around the country to build on."

But a new Cato Institute report, due for release Monday, makes clear that Stearns is talking through his hat. Many Americans will be surprised to learn that public broadcasting thrived long before the federal government started subsidizing it. In fact, President Johnson only created the CPB in 1967 in order to exert more government control over this previously independent medium. The reason: Too much of the programming in his day was feared to be "radical."

In a new report titled "If You Love Something, Set It Free: A Case for Defunding Public Broadcasting," Trevor Burrus goes back to the beginning of noncommercial broadcasting, when Wisconsin Public Radio (which today has 32 stations throughout the state) debuted its first programs in 1922. In its first 45 years, public broadcasting was typically underwritten by foundations and other nonprofit entities. A subsidiary of the Ford Foundation, for example, created the National Educational Television and Radio Center in 1952. Burrus notes that "by

1954 the center was producing limited amounts of programming and distributing it to local affiliates via mail." Nine years later, it narrowed its focus solely to television.

At the peak of its involvement, the liberal Ford Foundation was shoveling nearly \$100 million a year into the organization, which had by then changed its name to National Educational Television. Burrus writes that "NET's private backing enabled it to take a strong stance against taxpayer financing. To NET, public interest broadcasting consisted of programming that challenged the establishment by showing citizens the true face of poverty, war, race relations, and other controversial topics." Burrus gives several examples of programs that were considered controversial in their day: "Who Invited U.S.?", "The Poor Pay More," "Black Like Me" and "Inside North Vietnam."

The edgy and independent nature of public broadcasting was blunted when the federal government started footing the bill. "As public funding increased," Burrus writes, "the need for political savvy increased. Eventually, NET's controversial programming helped contribute to its downfall. NET's perceived 'anti-administration' broadcasts helped spur the creation of CPB itself, which then supplanted NET, thanks largely to its government funding and its 'playing ball' with its government sponsors."

The true history of public broadcasting provides a model for how it can remain viable in the future. It also says quite a bit about today's defenders of CPB's government subsidies. They are so unaware of the medium's history that they can, with a straight face, argue that its dependency on government funding is what makes it independent.