



Will Romney end PBS, public radio funding?

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By Nat Hentoff

Leading Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney insistently pledges that he will end public funding for NPR and for PBS (the latter partially funds NPR). Other congressional Republicans agree with him.

For decades as a reporter, I have continually found vital information on public radio and television that at first was available nowhere else. A current example that may be of importance to many of you, particularly parents of schoolchildren:

An NPR story ("No, the School Nurse Is Not in," Jan. 3) reveals that, "More than half of American public schools don't have a full-time nurse, and the situation is getting worse as school systems further cut budgets. This year, 51 were laid off in Philadelphia's public schools, 20 in a Houston suburb, 15 in San Diego and dozens more in other school systems nationwide."

In my reporting on education, I have been in various cities where I see kids in crowded classrooms with evident hearing, vision and other problems. Sometimes, unnoticed by burdened teachers, these students, having no nurse to go to, remain silent.

Also, on such regular programs as NPR's "All Things Considered" and PBS' "Frontline," I get leads for further research on information suddenly new to me -- on such subjects I've reported on as our disappearing right to privacy and other Bush-Cheney-Obama raids on the Constitution.

What Mitt Romney and other Republicans eager to defund NPR and PBS don't apparently realize is emphasized by the very credible Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, who told NPR: "You probably have stations, particularly (in) more rural and smaller markets, that would cease to exist ... There will be a lot of collateral damage at the local level" ("Public Broadcasting Funds Caught in Budget Battle," 2/17/11).

In an attempt to demonstrate his concern for the kids who -- like my 5-year-old grandchild -- would terribly miss public television's children's programs, the slick Mitt Romney assures everyone:

"We're not going to kill Big Bird (on "Sesame Street"). But Big Bird is going to have advertisements. All right?" (Hollywoodreporter.com, Dec. 28)

It's not likely to be all right once "Sesame Street" is festooned with commercials. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., who has worked on resolutions to stop proposed spending cuts, reminds us that, "In the commercial market ... the stuff for kids is targeted to sell things to kids, not to educate them" (npr.org, 2/17/11).

If Mitt Romney and his defunding colleagues have their way and commercialize "Sesame Street," Big Bird and the other puppets are going to be cajoling their young audience to keep bugging their parents to buy what Big Bird is selling.

Fred Friendly, who was Edward R. Murrow's producer before becoming president of CBS News, used to tell me that the original purpose of television in these United States was to be a source of education. But, he added, it largely lost its purpose. Fred did his best to stay within its original purpose with the deeply educational reports and documentaries he

produced with Murrow.

These days, however, there is nothing on commercial television that equals the educational impact of the investigative Murrow-Friendly combination. Right now, the only informative series of any value that continually and probingly educates its audience is "Frontline" on PBS -- whose public funding Romney and his associates want to cut off.

Last year, a story in U.S. News and World Report ("Liberals Mobilize to Save PBS, NPR Funding," usnews.com, 2/11/11) reported on a warning from television station WOUB at Ohio University that indicated what we would be missing if the defunders then, as now, succeeded in their mission to kill the educational alternatives to commercial radio and television:

"The (public) money that would be lost helps to better educate viewers and listeners ... 'It helps us to deliver educational and commercial-free programming that expands children's minds, documentaries that open up new worlds to you, trusted news programs that keep you informed, and exposes you to the worlds of music, theater, dance and art as an adult.'"

Meanwhile, kids experience the joy of learning from the ever-enlivening Big Bird.

This same U.S. News report quotes the liberal website PoliticusUSA: "In an era of media consolidation, fewer national and foreign bureaus and mass newsroom layoffs, NPR is one of the only media outlets actually bringing listeners more reporting (actual reporting, not warped pontificating) from around the country and around the world."

Finally, an indication of how essential public radio and TV are locally around this nation comes from Rep. Earl Blumenauer: "Every month, more than 170 million Americans have their lives enriched by tuning in or logging online to public radio and television stations.

These local stations serve every major city and many small towns in America. In many rural areas, they are the only source of free and high-quality local, national and international news, children's shows, music and cultural programming" (blumenauer.house.gov, 1/21/11).

If Mitt Romney makes these cuts, he will create a dark hole in our lives that will defy James Madison's warning -- which becomes more contemporary every day: "A people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives ... a popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both."

Commercials won't tell us that our public schools no longer have nurses in our neighborhood.

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