



Why does Public Broadcasting insist on dependency?

by Conn Carroll Senior Editorial Writer
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Free Press, [a nonprofit advocacy group supposedly dedicated to promoting a "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 taxpayer funding of Public Broadcasting. According to Free Press' Josh Stearns, 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 as a new Cato report due out next Monday details, not only did Public Broadcasting thrive long before the federal government started funding it, the whole reason President Lyndon Johnson created the CPB was to exert more government control over previously independent media.

In his new report titled, "If You Love Something, Set It Free: A Case for Defunding Public Broadcasting," Trevor Burrus writes:

Public broadcasting in America has never been divorced from government control and, realistically, it never will be. In fact, as will be discussed below, the CPB was created partially to enable government to better control the content of predecessor noncommercial stations that were thought to be broadcasting radical programming. From the beginning, the desire to control the content of broadcasts was evident. For example, although the Carnegie Commission report recommended a 12-person board, with six appointed by the president and six appointed by those appointees, President Johnson submitted a bill that had the president appointing every member of a 15-person CPB board. From the outset, public broadcasting was politicized.

Turns out, noncommercial broadcasting existed for decades before the federal government got involved:

In 1914 University of Wisconsin engineering professor Edward Bennett set up a personal wireless transmitter and applied to the Commerce Department for a license. Eight years later the station debuted its first news program. Today, Wisconsin Public Radio consists of 30 stations throughout the state.

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In 1952 the Fund for Adult Education, a subsidiary of the liberal Ford Foundation, created the National Educational Television and Radio Center. Although originally not involved in the production of programming, by 1954 the center was producing limited amounts of programming and distributing it to local affiliates via mail.

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By 1963 the privately funded National Educational Television and Radio Center began to focus completely on television, changing its name to National Educational Television (NET). The Ford Foundation invested large sums of money in educational television—at its peak nearly \$100 million a year—and the foundation moved strongly to dominate the noncommercial television market. 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.

But all that independence ended up once the federal government started footing the bill:

NET's controversial documentaries and hard-hitting exposes—like *Who Invited U.S.?*, *The Poor Pay More*, *Black Like Me*, and *Inside North Vietnam*—while raising the ire of many, did not create recriminations against public officials, organizational penance, or citizen backlash. As public funding increased, however, 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.

Burrus concludes:

Public broadcasting does not need to go away, it needs to be transformed back into the noncommercial model that thrived before widespread government funding. CPB, PBS, NPR, as well as local public broadcasting outlets such as Wisconsin Public Radio and Television, have the infrastructure and funding to become successful noncommercial, nonprofit broadcasters not tied to public funds.