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Public broadcasting: the problem is tilt, not bias

By [Trevor Burrus](#) 2:25 PM 03/21/2011

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Public broadcasting must be defunded, but not because of partisan bias. The recent Daily Caller video of NPR executives saying “appalling” things to undercover agents was yet another attempt to demonstrate NPR’s liberal bias. Trying to conclusively pin down the direction of NPR’s bias, however, misses the point. It is irrelevant which way public broadcasting “tilts.” What matters is that it tilts at all.

Seeing [politicians](#) and commentators whose views are neither objective nor balanced argue over whether public broadcasting is objective and balanced would be amusing if it were not so misguided. Like most people in American politics, they tend to see the national debate as a teeter-totter rather than a tilt-o-whirl, a single line with two competing ideas rather than a field of viewpoints. Even using the term “bias” implies this two-sided spectrum. The better term “tilt,” however, highlights that most ideas are rarely, if ever, given airtime on public broadcasting.

Public broadcasting is under the command to strive for balance in “programming of a controversial nature;” but it is impossible to even define the concept of “controversial programming” without tilting the debate in some way. *Cosmos* may seem uncontroversial to many, but recent polls show that 4 out of 10 Americans are creationists. There was no creationist rejoinder, however, offered against Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*, much less a Scientologist one. Occasionally other religions may get the opportunity to respond to ostensibly Christian programming, but they are unlikely to be Jains or Unitarians. Regardless of who is correct in this debate, under what theory of the proper role of government should 120 million Americans be forced to fund — even to a negligible degree — programming that they vehemently oppose?

Nevertheless, the debate over partisan bias goes back and forth, operating under the assumption that if public broadcasting’s bias can be accurately identified, then it can either finally be defunded or be remedied.

As long as government is [funding](#) media companies, the ideological tilt to public broadcasting cannot be remedied. Public broadcasting’s tilt is defined politically. The question is: who will control the tilt?

There is no theory about how public broadcasting’s programming should be constituted that does not display an ideological tilt. Unsurprisingly, public broadcasting tacitly operates under a politically safe theory: that the programming should reflect the relative strength of voices in American society. The marginalized voices, after all, cannot create a big enough [political](#) hubbub to attack this policy. It is a monstrous proposition, however, to say that already marginalized voices should continue to be marginalized by a state-sponsored institution — that the marginalized should support their own marginalization.

By turning programming choices into political issues, we have created the same inevitable conflicts that arise whenever losers must abide by the will of the majority. Everyone wants a piece of the “public’s” message. Everyone sees their version of the “tilt” as more objective than anyone else’s. The only variable is whether a group has sufficient political power to influence programming choices.

The resignation of former NPR CEO Vivian Schiller in the wake of the video controversy underscores the political nature of public broadcasting. NPR is now running damage control, hoping the ill winds will blow over. They fear losing their funding and will make major personnel decisions in order to keep it, all while downplaying the money’s significance to their “independence.” “It’s a complicated thing,” understates one of the executives in the video, “being both a news organization and having...the federal funding.”

This is not the behavior of “independent” media; it is the behavior of politically controlled media. The tilt of public broadcasting cannot be a non-political question.

This long and misguided conversation over bias in public broadcasting should end. Perhaps your favorite show, or mine, will go off the air. So be it. In a time of skyrocketing deficits, out-of-control government spending, and a voter base that is serious about these problems, if we do not ask hard questions about all government [programs](#) then we are unquestionably doomed to a future of endless spending and escalating debt. At least, however, we’ll have *Car Talk*.

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