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Research Paper

Big Bird versus the Government

In this year’s presidential election, the candidates covered all of the issues, and even some of the nonissues. Perhaps a most popular issue in the media, was exposed by Mitt Romney, Republican candidate, got the press and the country talking about Sesame Street, or rather, whether or not the government should be funding Public Broadcasting Station and National Public Radio. While that question may never be truly answered, it is possible to investigate the elements of both sides. Looking at what PBS and NPR do for our communities, the alternate options besides PBS and NPR for our children, the amount of the budget is spent on it, and whether or not they would survive without government funding can help us uncover the answer.  
 But exactly what is PBS and what does the company aim to achieve? PBS strives to offer Americans the opportunity to explore new ideas and new worlds through television and online content. Often, their documentaries are excellently rated and shown in classrooms throughout the country. While many automatically picture Sesame Street when they think of the Public Broadcasting Station, that is only a fraction of what the PBS station achieves on a daily basis. According to their website, PBS has a broad array of programs that have been consistently honored by the industry’s most coveted awards and recognitions. They not only receive national praise, but thousands of letters from children and teachers all across not only the United States, but the world, thanking them for their unswerving commitment to education. However, it is difficult for the general public to find the facts when searching for information about PBS and the government. Even when you are able to find the facts, it is not without an intense amount of searching and weeding out false information, which may be difficult to impossible for uneducated citizens to attain. Every website and search engine is flooded with information on potential leaders of our country who “must hate education” for wanting to cut this out of our growing budget, and even more about the leaders who simply don’t understand the value of an education.

The company began during the 1960’s, when public programming was essential to our nation’s education, and possibly survival. PBS is a relic of the 1960s and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, which in retrospect was not so great and has served to subsidize a broken society (Thomas). In the 1960’s, media as a whole, including television and radio, were a completely different situation than the media culture which inhabits our country today. In fact, at that time, there were only three broadcasting networks. Today, there are more than fifty major broadcasting networks in our country which harbor hundreds of channels. By this simple ratio, it is clear that we are in an opposite situation in our society today.

And yes, our circumstances may be poles apart from then, but many would argue, including PBS, that PBS still has some of the most quality programs on television, even counting the literal thousands of television shows in our cable networks. But the core of the issue has absolutely nothing to do with the quality of the programming on PBS, because the truth is, they have always excelled at educational, entertaining, excellent programming, including their latest hit, “Downton Abbey”. The issue is whether or not the federal government should be subsidizing this quality programming, or if PBS should stand on its own like all other major networks do in the twenty first century. Carl Thomas of Fox News, likens PBS to a typewriter; saying it needs to be put in its proper place, a museum, if too few watch the network to sustain the company without government funding.

But before digging deeper into the issue, it is important to understand the numbers. According to Brad Plumer of the Washington Post; only about 0.014% of the budget is spent on funding for PBS and NPR. That may possible raise the question, “why does it matter?” but Plumer responds with a simple, yet convincing statement; irresponsible spending, is spending that needs to be cut, regardless of how big or small the percentage is. Plumer also explains that while it is only a small fraction of the federal budget, in the year of 2012 alone, the government allotted nearly 450 million dollars to PBS and NPR. It is completely reasonable, and even understandable, to insist that in order to truly make an impact on our federal budget; we will need to make bigger and better changes, which will impact exactly how we will do so. But that doesn’t change the fact that irresponsible is spending that MUST BE CUT, and if 450 million dollars is being sent to NPR and PBS that could be sent to a more meaningful part of our countries spending, we need to redirect that portion of our funds. It’s no secret that the government is a multi-trillion dollar industry, but by taking baby steps and making the small cuts of unnecessary spending, we will ultimately make a difference in the long run on our countries excessive budget.

It is worth mentioning that the government does not **directly** fund PBS or NPR. Congress funds the Corporation on Public Broadcasting, which in turn takes the money and divvies it up among organizations they believe it best suits, and also where they believe that the money will be best used (Plumer). In fact, PBS only receives 15 percent of its funding from the government, and NPR lagging far behind at 2 percent, both of these would almost certainly survive the hit of removing government funding (Plumer). Knowing that these stations would survive the small hit to their companies, and our country would have extra money in our pockets, makes the decision appear like a done deal to most politicians. However, the financial hit would be noticeable, and without the government aiding these organizations with funding, many believe the interest in them would be lost, or at least greatly diminished. Perhaps at the heart of the truly larger issue with cutting this spending, is our government also funds around 581 other local channels and radio stations, which with the cut in spending, would likely be completely shattered (Thomas). This fact is essentially why so many choose not to back the decision to rid our countries funding of PBS and NPR, even though they know that Big Bird will most likely always infiltrate our children’s television channels. So the true question is should we be spending hard earned tax payers’ money to a billion dollar industry that will be there regardless? According to the popular vote of the American People, posted on CNN in late October 2012, we should.

And PBS firmly agrees with the majority vote. Paula Kerger, CEO of PBS, claims that her network is America’s “biggest classroom” and that the only two stations in the entire country that even compete on the same level with the educational programming PBS offers children are Disney JR and Nick JR. And, she further pushes, if you are in a family suffering from poverty and you can’t afford cable that leaves the only option being PBS. In an interview with CNN, she also cited a national survey that claimed only 27 percent of the American population was in favor of riding government funding for public television. While she agreed that Big Bird will most likely remain on television long after the government decides to cut funding, she says these cuts put rural communities at risk of losing the programs altogether, which is where they are needed the most.  
 “So that is actually what is at risk if, in fact, we are defunded because they money is going to stations around the country,” said Kerger, who adds, “Whether you have books in your home or computer or not, almost everyone has a television set,” implying that Sesame Street is how many rural children receive preschool quality education in their own homes, even when their families are unable to afford cable television.

Her suggestions and comments are not completely perverse, and they are in fact, predictable. The New York Times focused on a simple track record of The Learning Channel (TLC). The network that once contained several learning programs was privatized in 1980 and now contains shows such as “Toddlers and Tiaras” and “My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding” which actually might be the polar opposite of an educational program for preschool aged children, or any aged peoples for that matter. The worry is that when PBS becomes privatized it will turn to programs that are not educational in order to receive funding from private sectors, which are far less likely to support educationally based programs, as they are exceedingly less popular in our country, especially if our government is no longer backing them. In urban areas where they can thrive on local businesses and stations, this may not be such an issue, but in rural areas they may suffer considerably (Plumer). The National Review disagrees, claiming that while that may have once been true when there were only a few general network stations, now anyone with a few thousand dollars and an internet connection can create a program thousands will be drawn too, which is also true. The counter to that is the likelihood of that program being not only educational, but appropriate for pre-school aged children AND drawing enough popularity to sustain itself for a vast period of time in our modern society is highly unlikely.

But let’s put the spending into a perspective even those uneducated in finance or even this issue can understand. Elizabeth Flock, from Washington Whispers, posted an article that eventually was published in one of her many books. This article was written in response to the comment Republican Candidate Mitt Romney made about cutting “Big Bird Spending.” She puts this into laymen’s terms by simply describing some other figures out of the government’s budget. She points out that the defense budget was $676 billion dollars last year. Granted, there is a large difference between financing the safety of our country and which television shows our people will watch, but she goes further. She continues to describe the budget for Afghanistan and Iraq in 2012, which is substantially less than the defense budget, but still far more than the PBS and NPR budget. The counter for this statement, is that the defense of our people is invaluable, and it is incredibly possible to put a price on public television. Many commenters insulted the core of this statement by saying the two are not even in the same ballpark, let alone belong in the same sentence. The United States funds hundreds of budgets, from huge too miniscule, and each of them affects our debt and the taxes we impose on the American people.

The one dense argument she does make, is her comment that Amtrak receives nearly 1.4 billion in federal funding each year, and exactly 1.3 million in federal capital grants and operating subsidies in 2012. This is actually a clear argument. Public transportation, paid for by our government, versus public media, also paid for by our government. She points out that these two are “achingly similar” and that although the American people do not lent these two with each other, that they are actually one in the same. Both are instances of public operations that COULD potentially be funded privately, and therefore make extreme cuts to the federal budget. And yet,   
 “You don’t see anyone trying to take away our train system,” Elizabeth jokes to US News. Also, in her article, she cites a tweet from Neil deGrasse Tyson, that received over 45,000 retweets, which reads:

“Cutting PBS support (0.012% of budget) to help balance the Federal budget is like deleting text files to make room on your 500Gig hard drive”

But the trouble is, these comments, while humorous, seem to be missing the point. What hits home to the American people as well as Politian’s is that irresponsible spending is STILL irresponsible spending, regardless of the percentage or dollar amount on it. Our national budget is a fund that contains trillions of dollars, but that absolutely does not mean that the millions do not add up. In two years, at 450 million dollars, we have nearly hit one billion, which would be thought of as a considerable cut to our budget. In 20 years, and we have funded PBS and NPR for far longer than that, and it is expected we will continue to fund it for years to come; we have hit eighteen billion dollars of “barely any money”. The question here is NOT whether the spending is “meaningful” or “important” because the truth is, when it comes to a country in such debt that we are, we cannot afford to rack up billions of dollars on things that we ignore simply because we feel 450 million dollars is not a meaningful cut. A cut is a cut, and if you take a look at our numbers, cuts are what we need.

And our presidential candidates this past year seemed to agree. They spend a considerable amount of time debating spending, and a possible previously unheard of amount of time discussing this issue specifically. In a response to the Mitt Romney and Barak Obama debate that essentially spun this issue into a country wide phenomenon, PBS made a public statement on their own website, [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org). This statement, written by CEO previously mentioned Paula Kerger, claimed that PBS was “very disappointed” that PBS became a political target in the debate. The statement also says that the federal investment in public broadcasting equals about one-hundreth of one percent of the federal budget. Elimination of funding, Kerger says, would have virtually no impact on the nation’s debt. Yet the loss to the American Public would be devastating.

Here, PBS sites what I think is the “keep the funding” sides best argument. They acknowledge that Big Bird will survive, as Sesame Street is a non-profit, non-partisan organization (who declined to comment on the issue, aside from thanking the public that we can all agree everyone loves Big Bird) and will likely thrive for years even if the PBS funding is taken away. But they reference the 91% of all US households that tune in to their local PBS station over the course of the year (PBS.ORG). They explain how PBS has nearly 360 member stations, and that local and rural stations would be unlikely to carry on if the federal cut passed. They explain that it is these families who need government support the most, and that they are the only ones who would be crippled by this cut.

It was truly a misstep by Governor Romney to call Big Bird out by name. Scholars all across the globe insist that had the Republican candidate gone about the conversation in a different way, the response would have been substantially different. The truth is, the government has cut NASA’s budget nearly $760 million in the last two years, and that is obviously an incredibly valuable place for our country’s money to go (Cepeda). This is especially true considering private vendors would most certainly take out their checkbooks to pay for Sesame Street at the very least, likely the entire station if the option was given.

Another argument to rid of PBS is the fact that people say it is left-leaning. While Harsha Nahata from the University of Michigan argues:  
 “Media overall isn’t slanted left or right (unless you’re talking about certain partisan news sources). It’s not slanted toward liberals or conservatives. Media is slanted toward sensationalism, toward getting the most eye-catching headlines and the highest ratings. Media is biased toward sound bites and oversimplified arguments, toward attracting and captivating a large viewership, at any cost. Often that cost is in-depth news analysis and factual accuracy.”

I however, disagree. The truth is, when it comes to politics and the media, there is always going to be some sort of a bias. Whether it comes from the station itself, the reporter, or the angle of the story the media is trying to display, the media is always going to lean towards a certain partisans side, it’s how they get private sectors to fund them, and it’s how they maintain a credible, reliable, audience. The media has to be biased, because the reporters are obviously going to have their own opinions, and it would be virtually impossible for a reporter writing for Fox news to put a democratic spin on things without backlash. The idea that the media is completely unbiased and only moves towards sensational stories is a myth. Yes, the media does move towards those stories, and yes, they specifically target that type of information, it is the angle that makes the news superficial. The bias is there, and it’s clear in the headlines of different news sources, ESPECIALLY during election time.

This argument is completely relevant when comparing PBS and the government. An argument to rid the government funding is that PBS is notoriously “left leaning”. While this particular case MAY be a widespread misconception, there is bias in media, and it is possible to find through simply reading the headlines, and can further be discovered by reading the stories themselves, and even listening to the interview questions asked by certain news networks. As recently discovered, the President previously has a list concocted of those reporters who come from networks that are known to be on “his side” of things, not so that he can avoid the tough questions, but so he can know when to prepare for one.

The bias in the media is obvious, and it is there. So the idea that the government could possibly be funding a station or even a whole network of stations does feed on to this conception that the government has control over the media. By simply cutting these programs from the budget, PBS would be free to lean left all it likes without concern from the general public, and, as already discussed before, it is incredibly likely that Big Bird will survive.]

Even after hours of research on the topic, I regret to admit that I myself have not completely taken a side. In summary to give lateral arguments, it is important to note key points from both sides. While PBS will likely survive on its own, it may turn to non-educational programming to sustain itself, and the rural areas will likely take a large hit in quality programming. However, we need to start making cuts somewhere, and the American people are going to have to start learning how to make adjustments if we are ever going to relieve our country of its debt. All and all, it was incredibly interesting to research this topic, and I am confident the American people will come to a general consensus.

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