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Political Science 328

**Loss of Public Programming, Beginning of Private Propaganda**

These are trying times. The slow ascension from our financial crisis coupled with our fierce economic rivalry with nations like China, Japan, the European Union and the ever present threat of global terrorism have ensured that the United States faces several serious challenges that it must overcome to continue our way of life. Our acknowledgement of these various obstacles has promoted many members of the U.S. government and people to search for any solutions that could ease our anxieties about these serious challenges. However, this anxiety has led to a sense of paranoia and hysteria where U.S. lawmakers and citizens alike are attacking any institutions or ideals that they believe are harmful to our way of life. They act in such haste that they do not first check and ensure that the target of their paranoia is actually a threat to the U.S.’ freedoms and existence. One example of this paranoia induced witch hunt is the debate in Congress which addresses the issue of continuing support for programs such as National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS).

As a citizen of the U.S. for the past twenty years I grew up watching PBS and once I grew old enough I began to listen to NPR with my father. These two individual programs contributed to my growth into a responsible and well-informed adult. PBS taught me essential social etiquette by demonstrating how to properly organize and clarify any information I was exposed to at school, home and from social media mediums like books and television. Learning how to organize and express my responses to information I had received helped increase my capacity to think critically and make informed decisions about problems that would occur in my adult life. Developing critical thinking and analysis skills was a core curriculum in my early schooling and PBS reinforced these lessons when I was outside of the classroom.

Additionally, NPR taught me the importance of being an informed citizen in the U.S. and encouraged me to think critically about events outside of my daily life that are discussed in news media. This gradual push to critically analyze events that may not have affected me directly was an important step in the process of teaching an uniformed adult to be a responsible citizen who did not value personal interests above issues that affected the nation. If government funding for these programs is replaced with private funding then individuals all over the U.S. will lose the chance to learn these critical social skills and instead they will receive private propaganda which serves the interests of whoever is paying for the broadcast. This scenario is far more dangerous to our ability to enjoy and protect our liberties than most people may ever realize.

Origins of NPR and PBS

In order to fully understand the importance of this debate it is imperative to first examine the basic history and goals of both NPR and PBS. This will allow us to better understand how and why these institutions first came into being and how people’s expectations of these programs have changed over time. NPR began back in 1971 as a single program alternative to mainstream commercial broadcasting. PBS began in a similar fashion as NPR, but had the goal of educating America’s youth with the vital social etiquette that would help future generations grow into responsible adults. After its debut, NPR became widely acclaimed and achieved legitimacy among its listeners as an authoritative and respectable medium for which news could be distributed to the people.

Bruce Porter, details the massive growth that NPR has undergone in a Colombia Journalism Review when he wrote, “Today, NPR broadcasts seven days a week, morning and night, calls on highly proficient correspondents stationed around the nation and the globe, spends $14 million a year on news, and has the technical capacity to leap on virtually any story it chooses.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This statement clearly shows how much NPR has grown since it first came into existence back in 1971. Over the course of forty years NPR has transformed from a news media alternative on the peripheral of society to a well organized and professional broadcast with credibility and honest journalism at its core.

According to Porter, as many as three and a half million people are regular listeners to NPR. That is greater than the amount of people who read the New York Times or watch Meet the Press.[[2]](#footnote-2) When NPR began it was an experiment that hoped to reshape the way that the media could interact with the public. Before the spread of the internet, NPR was the form of media that nearly everyone could listen to, whether a person was in their car, their home or in public. It is due to this nearly universal capability to tune into the radio anywhere that helped NPR experience this unprecedented growth. The massive expansion and transformation that NPR has experienced in the last few decades is what convinced many policy makers in Congress to call for an end to government funding to NPR.

NPR’s Dedication to Critical and Honest Journalism

The rise of mass media on the internet, the current debt crisis and NPR’s expansion has convinced many that NPR is no longer an exception in the media and if they wish to continue broadcasting then they must find support from independent individuals rather than the government. For myself and many others, NPR has been a trustworthy media source that has avidly attempted to avoid portraying their news stories with bias. If it is taken over by a private individual or group then there is a strong possibility that the quality news reporting that once characterized NPR will be replaced by shameless propaganda that suits the interests of the individual(s) that will soon be funding this program.

A prime example of NPR’s exemplary efforts to use the news media as a place to truthfully discuss both the merits and shortcomings of U.S. society can be seen when Bill Moyers, a veteran broadcast journalist and managing editor of Public Affairs Television documents the work of NPR reporter Daniel Zwerdling. This NPR journalist sought to report on the army’s failure to properly examine military personnel who have suffered from roadside explosions and grant them a Purple Heart for their valor in combat.[[3]](#footnote-3) Zwerdling extensively interviewed individuals who have suffered from these wounds, but have not received proper acknowledgement for their combat injuries because of misdiagnoses by military medical personnel. His in-depth analysis of this situation has shed light on the severity of this issue and has galvanized the army to re-evaluate the methods it employs when deciding if a soldier should receive a Purple Heart for injuries sustained in combat.

This single example of critical and dedicated reporting is only one of many such occasions among the reporters of NPR. Over the course of nearly forty years these journalists have taken up the task to provide the U.S. people with the factual information that is essential to becoming a well-informed U.S. citizen who in turn can make thoughtful choices in their own lives. Media broadcasts were meant to provide a public service that would educate and enrich the thinking capabilities of the people.

NPR remains true to this ideal, but many other forms of media on the radio, television and internet have lost their way. A large swath of news media is now controlled by large conglomerates that either auction off radio airtime to the highest bidders or follow their own private agendas and disregard the truth of a news story if it goes against its ideals. Bill Moyer claims that serious news or as the historian and journalist Richard Reeves stated, “The News we need to keep our freedom” is lost to nearly all forms of media save for programs like NPR and PBS.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Moyers sees this lose of proper critical journalism as a terrible turning point in the media’s view towards their obligation to provide the people with fact based and unbiased news coverage. The amount of profit and the political loyalty of journalists have now superseded the integrity that the media is supposed to possess in regards to their journalism policies. Moyer quotes the words of President John Kennedy when he spoke at Amherst College in 1963 concerning the role of artists in modern American society and he proclaimed, “The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state...In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Moyers believes that this statement by one of the U.S.’ most beloved presidents can be used to dictate the role that journalists have in regard to the public media. A journalist must combat the oppressive nature of conglomerates and best serve their country by placing integrity and the trust of their listeners over the private agendas and monetary concerns of these major conglomerates that seek to fully control the news.

Distrust of Authority in U.S. Society

The increasingly untrustworthy nature of journalists and major news conglomerates has exacerbated the already existent feeling of alienation that many U.S. citizens feel towards institutions in the government and from authoritative institutions outside of the government’s influence, such as the Catholic Church. Scandals have sullied the image of the U.S. government, big business owners, and church leaders during the last decade. Banking and financial industries within the U.S. government have lost the trust of the people because their corrupt business practices were one of the causes of the dramatic economic recession that hit the U.S. in 2007. Subsequently, the corruption that endangered the U.S. economy also led to the near collapse of the global economy in the years following the U.S. recession.

Churches and institutes of spiritual faith are often places where people will flock to in times of crisis. Sadly, organized religions have suffered a similar loss of trust among their congregations and the U.S. general public. This loss of respect and trust has occurred in the wake of several cases of pedophiliac actions taken by priests upon their followers and the subsequent cover up of these unforgivable actions by corrupt church officials. These terrible scandals have shaken the core of the U.S. people in regards of their trust towards the government and religious officials. These individuals are supposed to be acting in the people’s best interests, but recent events have many citizens questioning whether these institutes are capable of properly performing the actions the public trusts them to uphold.

NPR and Monetary Concerns

The ethical issues in this debate are important, but it is the monetary policies that have convinced many on Capitol Hill that NPR and PBS have limped along on government funding and tax payer dollars for long enough. They claim that the sheer amount of available news media on the radio, television, and online have rendered the initial reasons for providing government funding toward NPR and PBS as obsolete. The public can receive news from any number of different sources. So why should NPR and PBS receive special treatment over other equally available news media’s?[[6]](#footnote-6)

This logic has become even more prevalent during the last few years as the economic crisis has caused many across the U.S. to lose jobs and has further increased the U.S. government’s financial deficit. Law makers who wish to end government funding for programs like NPR and PBS claim that funding these stations is too expensive. Since the U.S. is still struggling with our financial crisis the desperate desire to cut all extra expenses that are not vital to U.S. interests or security has elevated this mass hysteria and paranoia among the U.S. people.

Many U.S. citizens who are still gripped by the panic of this economic recession are quick to cling to any policies they believe will ease their financial troubles and improve the quality of their lives. The majority of citizens in the U.S. may not trust their political leaders, but their desperation has led to a dangerous precedent. Now law makers can target an institution and claim that it is a threat to the stabilization of the U.S. economy. In response, the people desperate for any chance at improving their economic hardships will follow their words without thinking critically about the situation.

If this precedent becomes commonplace in the U.S. political system then there will be no limit to what policy makers can attack as long as they claim that said institution is a threat to the U.S. economy or security. The desperation of the masses will override both their cynicism towards their politically leaders and their ability to make informed decisions. People lose their logical capabilities during times of crisis and desperation can cause people to follow irrational behavior. Ironically, critical thinking is a skill that both NPR and PBS encourage to their viewers during their broadcasts in hopes that they can educated individuals from a young age to maintain calm during difficult times and avoid the seductive nature of paranoia and fear.

These relentless attacks against both NPR and PBS due to the belief that cutting government support for these programs will help solve the economic crisis is not supported by the real monetary data for these organizations. As of 2012 the annual government budget for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting which has NPR, PBS and several other public media services under its administration was only $445 million dollars or 0.01% of the entire federal budget for a single year. In a recent CNN poll, the U.S. general public believed that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting received 5% of the U.S. federal budget every year. This would figure to an amount of $178 billion dollars a year.[[7]](#footnote-7) Author Victor Stehle argued that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting did not need anywhere near that much money to ensure that quality programs like PBS and NPR are kept funded. A small increase in annual government funding for the CPB is all that would be required and such a paltry sum of money will in no way have any effect on making the U.S. federal debt any larger.

In the face of this debate many like Mr. Stehle caution supporters of NPR and PBS to not endorse the idea of these programs running political advertisements in order to raise money to compensate for their loss of government funding. This type of endorsement would lead to corruption and shameless self-serving political propaganda being placed upon these beloved programs. Additionally, this propaganda will destroy the single most valuable asset the NPR and PBS have had since they were first founded: the trust of their viewers. Mr. Stehle argues that these endorsements would be a terrible betrayal of the viewers of these programs.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Public Trust in NPR and PBS, their Impact on Society

Despite the rising cynicism of the U.S. populace programs like NPR and PBS are still regarded as trustworthy and honest. A recent Harris Interactive poll showed that nearly 76% of Americans consider PBS to be trustworthy. However, a poll for Congressional approval showed that only 12% of the U.S. populace views the Congress as trustworthy.[[9]](#footnote-9) Trust in Congress is at an all-time low because the U.S. populace blames Congress for being unable to fix the economic crisis in the U.S. and to curb the rise of corruption among politicians, religious leaders, and business owners.

If government support for NPR and PBS is lost and private individuals begin to flood the news waves with personal propaganda the credibility of these programs will plummet. Additionally, the cynicism that the U.S. general public feels towards their political and religious leaders will become even more pronounced than it is currently. Both NPR and PBS are hardly a threat to our security and ending public funding for them will in no way fix the current economic deficit. NPR and PBS are quality programming that teaches their viewers to think critically and ask questions.

They provide important lessons to society and the Honorable Anna Eshoo, democratic representative of the 14th district of California proclaimed, “These stations provide an important public service to the local community, and people trust it, and enjoy it.”[[10]](#footnote-10) If public trust is completely lost then U.S. society will face a social crisis the likes of which we have not experienced for generations. It could lead to an unraveling of all the ideals that hold the American way of life together.

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1. Bruce Porter, *No more quilting bees for NPR (National Public Radio)*. (The Quill, 1990), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Porter, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bill Moyer and Michael Winship, *Smearing NPR.* (Amass, 2011), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Moyer and Winship, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Moyer and Winship, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Should the House Vote to Prohibit Federal Funding for National Public Radio? Pro*. (Congressional Digest, 2011), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vicent Stehle, *The Fight Over PBS Should Be to Broaden Its Scope, Not to Threaten It*. (Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2012), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stehle, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stehle, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Should the House Vote to Prohibit Federal Funding for National Public Radio? Con.* (Congressional Digest, 2011), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)