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**It's Past Time to End Public Broadcasting Subsidies**

by

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The perennial debate regarding whether federal subsidies for public TV and radio should be continued is on the front-burner again. It's true – as the subsidy advocates never cease to remind us – that subsidies are just a tiny drop in the bucket of annual federal outlays. They are *only* about [\\$535 million annually](#) for both public television and radio.

This federal support is largely distributed to the quasi-public – or quasi-private if you prefer – Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which then channels the money to the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) to fund television programming and National Public Radio (NPR) to fund radio programming.

On past occasions, when public broadcasting's subsidies have been threatened, its defenders have deployed Sesame Street's Big Bird, Elmo, Ernie, and the Cookie Monster to save the federal largesse. The admittedly lovable Sesame Street characters have prevailed.

But there are two principal reasons it's past time to end the subsidies.

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First, whatever the perceived need to expand the range of television and radio programming choices available to the American public in the 1960s when the federal subsidies started in earnest, that justification has long since disappeared. In the '60s, viewers and listeners in most localities, even larger ones, had available only three national TV networks, a few independent TV stations, and perhaps a half dozen radio stations.

Since PBS commenced broadcasting in 1970, and NPR aired its first broadcast in 1971, we've witnessed the blossoming of cable and satellite TV, with each operator typically offering hundreds of different news, information, and entertainment channels. And satellite radio with over two hundred distinct channels. And the rise of the Internet, with a huge variety of online video and audio streaming choices, from YouTubeTV (now with the largest number of subscribers of any provider), Netflix, Amazon, Disney, Max, AppleTV, Hulu, Tubi, and hundreds more. And a gazillion podcasts to suit every conceivable taste and interest.

It's indisputable that the evolution of the media marketplace, driven in large part by dynamic technological change, has led to an era of media abundance – some wags might say overabundance. The claims by some that public broadcasters provide unique programming that private commercial media don't, say, for children, even if arguably true decades ago, ring hollow today.

The second reason federal subsidies should be ended is more fundamental as a matter of proper governance in a democracy composed of citizens with a wide diversity of political and policy perspectives – indeed, we're now often called a "50-50 nation." The idea of government-supported broadcasters presents a thorny problem because taxpayers are compelled to subsidize views with which they disagree, including with regard to some of the most controversial issues of the day.

At least for the past several decades, public TV and radio programming, overall, has had a pronounced leftist cast. This means a sizeable proportion of our nation's taxpayers with right-leaning perspectives are forced to subsidize views with which they regularly disagree. At a [March 26 congressional hearing](#), Katherine Maher, NPR's President and CEO, said she now regrets having called President Trump "[a deranged racist sociopath](#)" and asserting that America is "addicted to white supremacy." And she now claims the NPR editorial team acknowledges the failure to cover the [Hunter Biden laptop story was a "mistake."](#)

It would be easy to recite a long litany of left-leaning coverage – or failure to cover – as the case may be. But it should be enough that popular talk show host Bill Maher, certainly no right-winger, recently said of NPR, "[they're crazy far left.](#)" He declared "we're past the age" when both PBS and NPR should be defunded.

Advocates for continued funding will suggest that the answer to any demonstrable viewpoint bias should be revived efforts by public broadcasters to achieve more balance and objectivity. It is little known that the [Public Broadcasting Act of 1967](#) declares that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is authorized to funnel federal funds to PBS and NPR to facilitate the development of programs of high quality and diversity, "with strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all

programs or series of programs of a controversial nature." But the few lawsuits that have been filed seeking to enforce the "objectivity and balance" requirement have been dismissed on procedural grounds, mainly that the statute doesn't create a private right of action.

The Public Broadcasting Act's framers may have thought that the statute's "objectivity and balance" stricture, even if only hortatory, may have helped resolve the conundrum of government-funded speech by public broadcasters. But its inclusion, and non-enforceability, only serves to highlight the inherent problem with requiring taxpayers to support speech with which they disagree. In any event, if the "objectivity and balance" requirement were enforceable, then public broadcasters almost certainly would be subject to constant lawsuits challenging their programming choices. And just as certainly, serious First Amendment issues would be implicated.

Whatever justification existed for federal subsidies of "public" broadcasting at the time the Public Broadcasting Act was adopted in 1967, today, when listeners and viewers have an abundance of program choices to suit every age, taste, proclivity, and interest, Bill Maher is right to assert "we're past the age" to continue the subsidies.

And more fundamentally, Thomas Jefferson was right when, in 1770, he [declared](#): "To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical."

Subsidies for public broadcasting may be only a tiny drop in the federal budget bucket. But the principled reasons for ending the subsidies loom large.

\* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, MD. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *It's Past Time to End Public Broadcasting Subsidies* was published in *RealClearMarkets* on April 7, 2024.