

## US Public Broadcasting: A Bulwark against Disinformation?

Patricia Aufderheide<sup>1</sup>

Can US public broadcasting provide a unique bulwark against disinformation? There are ample reasons to look to the service at a time when commercial journalism's business model has eroded, and disinformation from US and other governments as well as from commercial sources abounds. The structure of public broadcasting both limits its ability to serve as a counter to disinformation, and, in some ways, also protects it against attacks.

### DISINFORMATION AND MAINSTREAM MEDIA

As Yochai Benkler's chapter in this book demonstrates, the ecology of mainstream media remains remarkably robust under pressure. The emotion-soaked, belief-driven ecology of the right-wing media dominated by Breitbart and Fox appeals to a minority of people. But in mainstream media, where fact-based claims matter to users, fact-checking, critiquing of rival news sources, and corrections are routine. Two-thirds of media users use and circulate this information. That journalistic work is the raw material that fuels democratic process.

Nonetheless, fact-based journalism is under stress. The digital advertising captured by Google and Facebook has impaired the business model of commercial journalism. The always-on feature of the digital environment creates pressures to produce more without providing resources to fuel production.<sup>2</sup> "News deserts" have sprouted across the USA as a result. One in five newspapers has shut down since 2004, and half of US counties have only one local newspaper, often a small weekly.<sup>3</sup> The

failure of the marketplace to meet information needs has led some to call for state subsidy,<sup>4</sup> and others to call for an increase in donor-driven and foundation-funded journalism, with some government support.<sup>5</sup>

Those for whom fact-based journalism and democratic process are threats have seized upon the weaknesses in the news environment. Among the forces taking advantage are longstanding ideological actors, with various motivations. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston's introductory chapter demonstrates the long-range investment in ideological control, and the capacity to play the long game, by social actors inspired by the pro-market arguments of Friedrich Hayek and committed to sabotaging regulation of capitalism. In her chapter, Nancy MacLean provides a terrifying view of the deep investment of "the Koch network" of disinformation, which works toward a radical libertarian agenda through 150 think tanks and other ideological organizations (as detailed in Jane Mayer's *Dark Money*); through political organizations, especially the Republican party (as Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez have demonstrated); and through academia, as UnKoch My Campus has shown. Orchestrated information campaigns have sabotaged tobacco regulation, healthcare plans, and environmental legislation. Naomi Oreskes, in her chapter, reminds us of longstanding corporate expertise in distorting public opinion for self-interest.

What is new in this pattern is the creation of the ideal vehicles for the spread of disinformation memes, in social media. The economic imperatives of surveillance capitalism<sup>6</sup> mesh perfectly with disinformation campaigns, as well as with deep endemic biases of the culture.<sup>7</sup> Disinformation experts, such as those in the Russian Internet Research Agency,<sup>8</sup> can design campaigns, and trust that Facebook's algorithms and advertising staff will help them find their targets. The Russian strategy of sowing distrust by polluting the informational environment,<sup>9</sup> or the Trumpian approach of disparaging the legitimacy of mainstream news outlets, or corporate efforts to fend off fossil fuel regulation can all benefit from Facebook's advertising affordances; Reddit's nearly unmanaged social spaces; and Twitter's lack of consistent moderation.<sup>10</sup>

In this environment, as Bennett and Livingston argue, the crisis is not fundamentally one of disinformation, but of the core functioning of democracy. Nonetheless, any structural change to political process will require both knowledge and informed action; any mobilization requires media. So, it pays to look to the capacities of traditional media within the fact-based news ecology. It is within this ecology that the discourse of democracy can be conducted, and shared facts established. Such media,

Benkler's analysis shows, can and do provide important resistance to the polluting influence of social media-charged disinformation. They are the cultural breeding ground for the resistance and reenvisioning of political systems for a functioning democracy.

#### THE VALUE OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING

In the fact-based media ecology, public broadcasting in the USA is a key resource. The majority of Americans say they get their news from television, and a quarter of them say they get their news from radio. Broadcasting, with its ancillaries on the Web, in social media, and in podcasting, continues to be a powerful force. Broadcasting interacts with social media dynamically, as people share links from mainstream or right-wing broadcast news.<sup>11</sup> Public broadcasting is a public investment of billions of dollars in noncommercial information and the cultural expression for a broad American public. It is grounded in an ideological frame of public service, in direct opposition to Hayekian arguments. Often overlooked for more commercial, advertiser-driven outlets, it remains remarkably healthy and a source of daily, reliable local and national news.

US audiences recognize that. Public broadcasting includes entities that get the highest trust ratings in US polls: NPR and PBS. PBS, as the website [valuepbs.org](http://valuepbs.org) is proud to announce to potential underwriters, has been the most trusted public institution for fourteen years. For some of the most skeptical news consumers, public radio is increasingly important. In 2018, 94 percent of Americans found public radio news trustworthy. In addition, millennials and gen-Xers tended to find public radio more trustworthy than the general population.<sup>12</sup> The trust ratings demonstrate, interestingly, that even many of those in the orbit of Fox, Breitbart and Reddit trust NPR and PBS.

International studies demonstrate a virtuous circle between public broadcasting news, audience trust, and public democratic participation. A cross-national study found that in terms of civic participation and levels of trust, public media perform better than commercial media, and furthermore, encourage the raising of media standards more generally.<sup>13</sup> A recent Knight Foundation study provides a succinct summary of the conclusions of recent academic research:

Research shows that people exposed to news on public television are better-informed than those exposed to news on private TV. They are likelier to vote, and have more realistic perceptions of their societies, especially on issues related to

crime and immigration. They are less likely to express negative attitudes toward immigrants. Countries with strong public broadcasters have higher levels of social trust, and the people who live in them are less likely to hold extremist political views.<sup>14</sup>

Public broadcasting is pervasive and ubiquitous. Public broadcasters' signals reach more than 98 percent of the American public, more than commercial broadcasting does. Stations are in every Designated Market Area (DMA) in the country, with physical plants and public presence.<sup>15</sup> This blanket penetration, with an hour-long, award-winning daily national news program and daily documentaries on PBS and four hours of daily national news on NPR, contrasts sharply with the news deserts of today's local newspapers. Virtually every one of the people in "news desert" counties that don't have more than a local newspaper, can get both television and radio news from a public broadcasting station (although this is usually national, and not necessarily local news).

According to Arbitron figures, the two most listened-to radio news programs in the country are NPR's "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition." Their reach puts them in the same ballpark as Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh. Audiences in the Trump era demonstrate appetite for news, as well. *PBS NewsHour's* weekly audience grew 17 percent in 2017, for instance; NPR's audience, already ten times the size, grew 9 percent in the same period.<sup>16</sup>

Public broadcasting is local. At the base of the public broadcasting system are locally chartered radio and TV stations, each autonomous from the other and from any national system. Local public radio usually produces some local content (more than public TV), and both public radio and TV stations are responsive to their board of directors and, often, a community board as well. The fact that the largest single source of funding for public broadcasting is user donations strengthens the motivation to maintain trust and relevance with its users.<sup>17</sup> Licenses are usually held by local institutions such as community organizations, schools or local universities.

Public broadcasting operates with a taxpayer subsidy, without being directly affected by government agendas. Thus, relative stability is built into the system. While triennial appropriations force broadcasters to justify their funding every three years and funding is not guaranteed, the funding has stayed stable or increased since 1967. The federal dollars that go to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are insulated from governmental interference in part by the fact that CPB is a private, non-governmental organization. While only about 15 percent of public

broadcasting's budget is accounted for with federal tax dollars, that funding is crucial in supporting station infrastructure. It enables core operations (electricity bills, station equipment) rather than dictating the activities of stations.<sup>18</sup>

Because public broadcasting is not solely dependent on advertising, and is noncommercial, it has fiscal resilience. At a time when many commercial journalism operations suffer from the loss of advertising and subscriptions, public broadcasting benefits from a more complex funding model combining subsidy, donations, foundation and corporate contributions, and endowments. While solvency is never guaranteed, multiple funding streams – including advertising revenue from for-profit ancillaries and broadcasting such as podcasting – provide some financial flexibility. They also create multiple stakeholders, each of which can subtly affect programming choices. But diversity creates some protection from such influence.

Public broadcasting also has structural resilience, ironically because of its highly decentralized nature. The welter of local stations is served by a plethora of services. While PBS and NPR, both nonprofit programming services for stations, are best known, they have a variety of competitors. Most public TV programming is produced by independent companies. Several large stations are also production centers. There is not only competition, but collaboration, to achieve basic goals. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the nonprofit entity that disburses the federal funding that makes up perhaps 15 percent of the total budget, has regularly invested in collaboration among stations, both regionally and thematically. During the 2008 financial crisis, CPB funded *Facing the Mortgage Crisis* project, which generated both local and national programs on radio and TV, as well as community activities.<sup>19</sup> Addressing news deserts in 2010, CPB funded regional initiatives to produce local news on TV and radio,<sup>20</sup> which have evolved and continue to produce local news. NPR has developed a reporting collaborative in conjunction with local stations, the NPR Political Reporting Partnership.<sup>21</sup> The Center for Investigative Reporting routinely collaborates with public broadcasting stations to showcase its findings, as do other nonprofit investigative operations. The California Reporting Project coordinates the analysis of newly released police records among dozens of public and commercial media partners, including newspapers, radio, and television outlets.<sup>22</sup> In 2017, CPB Vice President Kathy Merritt pointedly invoked the concept of public service and the function of reliable news, when she commented,

Collaboration is a force multiplier; together stations can do more and innovate faster to provide the local journalism that is part of the bedrock of public media's valued service to our country . . . We've seen the importance of our investments in collaboration when, for example, stations in the Texas Station Collaborative were better prepared to serve their communities throughout the devastation of Hurricane Harvey.<sup>23</sup>

Public broadcasting is innovative. It was the first broadcasting entity to use satellite technology, and it has been in the forefront of the digital transformation. NPR has overcome the profoundly local orientation of stations to permit the development of NPR ONE, an app that consolidates and remixes NPR news programming, and showcases podcasts from within and beyond public broadcasting. As of 2018, NPR is the top podcaster in the world, and, according to *Hot Pod's* Nick Quah, sets trends in monetizing as well as distributing podcasts.<sup>24</sup>

PBS Digital Studios uses YouTube as a platform for online informational video series, pitched at younger and more diverse audiences. American Public Media (a smaller rival to NPR) created the Public Insight Network ([www.publicinsightnetwork.org/about/](http://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/about/)) in 2003, in order to make use of the expertise of its listener base, and it has since become a collaborative project throughout public broadcasting. The Localore project (at [localore.net](http://localore.net)), funded by CPB, features experiments in interactive media, each lodged at a station. They range from stories about the North Dakota oil boom to an interactive documentary about Chinese takeouts around the USA, to various projects that engage users in proposing questions for local public media journalists to investigate. One of those projects evolved into the nonprofit service Hearken, which provides deep engagement services for stations.

Public radio and public TV have different profiles. Public TV has much less news than public radio, partly because of right-wing and corporate attacks but also because production costs of TV are far higher than radio, especially for news and public affairs. Only a few PBS public affairs programs, such as the news shows *PBS NewsHour* and public affairs series *FRONTLINE*, are routinely carried by stations. Radio, on the other hand, built a presence and a brand in local communities around the country by anchoring listenership in morning and evening news feeds from NPR. Its morning news show, *Morning Edition*, usually marks the highest point of pledging during pledge drives. Relatively low-cost local talk shows generate listener engagement.

While public TV and public radio have dramatically different profiles, they share some common user demographics. Both services tend, using

traditional ratings services, to skew somewhat older, better educated, and whiter than the general population. They both celebrate this when promoting the service to underwriters, arguing that they reach decision-makers. Public TV skews female, while radio tends toward male. However, both services also appear to reach diverse populations, particularly among more educated parts of the population. Within the college-educated bracket, public radio's diversity almost matches national demographics.<sup>25</sup> And using local research rather than commercial ratings services, the research service TRAC found that public TV stations actually drew about half their audiences, more or less depending on the market, from traditionally "underserved" populations.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Public broadcasting's public mission centrally distinguishes it from other media. But most of that mission comes from the values and norms of the system, not from the law. Those values and norms derive from a clear ideological founding argument that American society needs reliable public information and cultural institutions, not only because the market will not provide them but because they are fundamentally not market services. This is in direct opposition to the neoliberal and radical libertarian ideologies fueling the current attack on democracy, as described by Bennett and Livingston, McLean and Oreskes. While the institution has been attacked by these forces, the core logic of its founding rhetoric can still be seen in both word and action. This logic echoes well with the arguments in Victor Pickard's contribution to this volume.

Public broadcasting in its current state was created in 1967, after a slow buildup. At its origins, with the Federal Communication Commission's decision to reserve spectrum for use by noncommercial radio stations in 1938, the notion of the public was associated primarily with the growth of new businesses serving general audiences. The fact that such a narrow definition of the public interest prevailed can be directly associated with the pro-business public relations and lobbying efforts also described by Oreskes. The crumb eventually given to noncommercial interests in increments starting in 1938 was reservation of FM spectrum (at the time inaccessible on consumers' radios). The justification was market failure.<sup>27</sup>

Public television's creation was justified by educational use. This took a strong step beyond market failure, toward the notion of public service. Truman FCC appointee Frieda Hennock – a New York city lawyer and Russian Jewish immigrant with a narrative of bootstrapped success – arrived

with a politically liberal agenda to create reserved channels. “Educational television” became a trading point in a larger negotiation, highly conditioned by broadcasters’ commercial concerns, at the FCC.<sup>28</sup>

The creation of today’s public TV took place in a time of wide debate about the texture of civil society in a post-war world. There are parallels with today, in fact. The so-called “Hutchins Commission” in 1947 – formally The Commission on Freedom of the Press – had set the tone. It found that freedom in danger because of:

the economic structure of the press, in part the consequence of the industrial organization of modern society, and in part the result of the failure of the directors of the press to recognize the press needs of a modern nation and to estimate and accept the responsibilities which those needs impose upon them.<sup>29</sup>

It found, in line with Progressive thinking,<sup>30</sup> that the public needed access to a truthful, contextualized accounting of the day’s events, which accounted for representative groups in society, as well as articulation of core social values, and a forum for comment and criticism.<sup>31</sup> The Hutchins Commission’s logic was thus grounded in the logic of the “informed citizen,” the role of the Deweyan public, and the importance of the relationship between information and democracy.<sup>32</sup> The notion that mass media had become as much a threat as a promise for a free society also drove a movement toward more active content regulation at the FCC. In 1946, the FCC issued guidelines (known as the “Blue Book”) on public service obligations of licensees, which included limiting advertising “excesses,” paying attention to local issues and offering public affairs programming, in order to mitigate the perceived negative consequences of commercial business models. Pro-business forces and broadcasters fought back with the same kind of anti-Communist rhetoric that had infused their lobbying for the 1934 Communications Act. While the Blue Book provisions were never enacted into law, for decades after, FCC public interest requirements for license renewal included some of its expectations, such as localism, community ascertainment (measures which ascertain the informational needs and wishes of community organizations and voices), and public informational programming. In addition, the National Association of Broadcasters preemptively adopted some of its terms in its best practices documents.<sup>33</sup>

The notion that an informed citizenry leads to a strong democracy has been perceptively critiqued as a myth.<sup>34</sup> However, as Dave Karpf argues, it is a “load-bearing” myth. Because people believe it, it has its own capacity to establish expectations and norms. This appears to be true in the case of



public broadcasting, where the notion has driven a sense of mission over the years, in spite of the fact that the law does not require it to do so.

Public broadcasting in its current form was created within Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society agenda, which openly embraced the notion that societies were more than markets and governments should actively intervene to improve social health. The civil rights movement and liberal funders, including the Carnegie Fund and the Ford Foundation, also fortified this perspective. Bill Moyers, a Baptist pastor who became a White House aide, argued for a bill that would provide some government funds to public broadcasters. The notion was developed over a series of public and private meetings by a blue-ribbon committee, colloquially known as the Carnegie Commission.<sup>35</sup> Its report was designed to be more politically palatable than the Ford Foundation's earlier support for a more openly liberal service.<sup>36</sup>

The Carnegie Commission envisioned a system funded through an endowment financed by taxes on television sets. It was to have an apolitical board of directors and to serve as a national source and resource, with creatively diverse and opinion-rich programming (and possibly even with free interconnection between stations through phone lines). Public broadcasting was imagined as an autonomous, citizen-responsive source of information, playing several roles in convening public life. As E. B. White famously wrote:

TV should be providing the visual counterpart of the literary essay, should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills. It should be our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's, and our Camelot. It should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle.<sup>37</sup>

The Carnegie Commission had imagined a service that would be "a platform for the unheard," a "forum for debate and controversy" and "the clearest expression of American diversity."<sup>38</sup> Thus, the founding logic of public broadcasting clearly linked diversity, representation, cultural expression, and reliable information in service of democratically engaged public life.

This ideological framing has persisted and has been used in battles over resources throughout the years. A 1977 Carnegie Commission report on public broadcasting, "A Public Trust," inveighed against rank commercialism, upheld the notion of media serving an open society, and boldly italicized one of its conclusions: "*We believe the public broadcasting has*

*the responsibility to use these most powerful communications media as tools to enhance citizenship and public service.*"<sup>39</sup>

The report had the bad timing to be released at the end of the Carter Administration, which itself was populated with free-market, small-government officials profoundly committed to neoliberal ideology, just as the Reagan tide was sweeping in. So, no structural reforms were made. But the framing has persisted throughout public broadcasting. It was highly influential in one of the lasting changes to CPB structure over the years, brought about by documentary filmmakers.

Documentary filmmakers, looking for outlets for their point-of-view work, argued over a decade to Congress that public broadcasting had an obligation to serve the public diverse perspectives from throughout the USA, not just the coasts. They explicitly made the connection between media diversity and democracy, and they portrayed themselves as stand-ins for the general public in their regions. In 1988, Congress created a dedicated line of funding within the CPB authorization, for a coproduction fund for independent filmmakers, the Independent Television Service (ITVS). Independent filmmakers have continued to be an outsized voice in public television, repeatedly affecting both funding and programming choices, because of their ability both to organize and to invoke public values both to Congress and to public TV officials.<sup>40</sup>

Private foundations including the Knight, MacArthur, and Ford Foundations have also subscribed to the "informed citizen" notion of public broadcasting enriching democracy, as a justification for funding. The then-president of the Ford Foundation, Susan Beresford justified a five-year, \$50 million Ford Foundation initiative<sup>41</sup> supporting public broadcasting in these terms: "An informed citizenry is vital to good governance and community life and these grants challenge media innovators to enrich our education and knowledge. The grantees will help us understand the news we receive from various sources, and contribute to the public dialogue that is essential in a healthy democracy."<sup>42</sup> In announcing Public Square, a news initiative funded by the Knight Foundation in 2005, then-PBS president Pat Mitchell also invoked the informed citizen trope: "Public Square will deliver on public television's mission to strengthen civic participation in communities and provide a trusted source of news, information and varied perspectives in order to better inform and engage citizens."<sup>43</sup>

This framing can also be found on the CPB website, where, in 2016, it announced that "Digital, Diversity, and Dialogue are the framework for

public media's service to America" and that it was founded "to champion the principles of diversity and excellence of programming, responsiveness to local communities, and service to all." In 2019, the Trump-era CPB, in a more toned-down language, still invoked the same values: "CPB strives to support diverse programs and services that inform, educate, enlighten and enrich the public . . . CPB's core values of collaboration, innovation, engagement, and diversity, help to inform our program investments system-wide."

#### ASSAULTS ON THE VISION

The vision of a public broadcasting service to support public life was attacked from the start, by both political opponents and corporate interests. Commercial broadcasters originally were deeply suspicious of tax-subsidized, potential rivals, although they eventually found public broadcasting useful as an excuse to lighten their own public service loads. Congressional conservatives were deeply suspicious of the proposed bill, even though it had, thanks to careful politicking by Johnson's staff, support from the military as well as from some business interests. Conservatives strove to curb the editorial independence that a national, financially independent media service would have. They were particularly concerned that the vision for public television had been supported by the Ford Foundation, to many the exemplar of liberal, "Eastern Establishment" thinking.<sup>44</sup>

The arguments of the conservatives are evident in the dissenting comments included in the Act's legislative language, written by the few hold-outs unhappy even with the watered-down bill:

It will be the highbrow answer to mundane commercialism. . . . It will be a force for social good (as Mr. [Fred] Friendly and his fellow enthusiasts see the social good). It will bite at the broad problems of national policy and make timid men (such as Presidents, Governors and legislators) cringe. It could, and in the opinion of some witnesses, should and will crusade. We know that we are not alone in feeling some misgivings about creating a mechanism for the kind of broadcasting which might result from ambitions such as these.<sup>45</sup>

To accommodate commercial and political interests, public broadcasting was structured to limit its financial and political autonomy and national reach. CPB's budget now came through triennial appropriations rather than an endowment. CPB's funding was only a small fraction of what stations would need, so they would have to engage the marketplace.

CPB's nearly sole function was to give out federal funds to noncommercial stations, not to plan or program. In fact, it was banned from interconnection i.e., from creating a network. (Stations went on to create and use independent programming and distribution organizations, such as PBS and NPR, and CPB ended up providing some funds to some of them.) CPB's board were political appointees. The only requirement for a noncommercial license was to be affiliated with a noncommercial entity. (Today, more than 40 percent of noncommercial licenses are held by religious stations, mostly Protestant; and they are not part of public broadcasting.)<sup>46</sup>

Even this seemed too much to Richard Nixon. Only two years into public TV's existence, he discovered that a Ford Foundation-backed TV documentary on financial redlining targeted one of the bankers that had backed his campaign. His young lawyer, Antonin Scalia, warned him that public broadcasting was a "long-term problem" because it could become a BBC-like entity. Reagan attempted to defund all of public broadcasting. While he lost, his attack alerted all executives to the peril of public affairs, particularly in television. Television caught the attention of politicians the way public radio did not, at that point. It created a general sense of caution among television programmers.<sup>47</sup>

With Reagan's presidency, a direct attack on the notion of publicness itself began. It was justified by a neoconservative substituting of competition and consumer interest for social concepts. This was seen in the bold pronouncements of FCC Commissioner James Fowler, who famously noted that the public interest is merely what the consumer is interested in.<sup>48</sup>

The political attacks from the right on public broadcasting have opportunistically and consistently seized upon this logic, and on claims of imbalance in coverage. In the 1970s, the right-wing focus was on TV, but with the Reagan election, right-wing organizations also turned to public radio. Right-wing groups in the 1980s derisively described NPR as "Radio Managua," thereby implying a communist agenda.<sup>49</sup> The Heritage Foundation published a report accusing NPR of liberal bias and catering to the Democrats in Congress, and calling for defunding. Right-wing media watchdog Accuracy in Media focused similar criticism on "All Things Considered," calling NPR a "taxpayer-funded monument to 1970s radicalism" and "an easy mark for Soviet disinformation operations."<sup>50</sup> *The New Republic* repeated the accusations, focusing on foreign affairs in Central America. In the 1990s, the media criticism journal *COMINT*, edited by Peter Collier and David Horowitz, focused exclusively on public broadcasting.<sup>51</sup>

The punditry's debates matched the policies of the Reagan Administration; Reagan tried to defund public broadcasting and then vetoed two bills until more commercializing measures were inserted. CPB stopped giving money directly to NPR and gave the same funds to individual stations, which could choose whether or not to purchase the news packages from NPR. State Department "public diplomacy" officials were charged with hounding reporters and outlets that provided news coverage unfavorable to the administration especially those officials, like Otto Reich, who focused on Latin America. They targeted NPR news. This documented targeting was part of a wider attempt by the Reagan Administration to have greater control over all aspects of Central American policy.<sup>52</sup>

The attacks, coming at a time when NPR had suffered financial setbacks, engendered caution. When an "All Things Considered" news segment by Charles Castaldi about a *contra* massacre in socialist Nicaragua (the *contras* were supported by the Reagan administration) violated expectations by running minute after minute of people sobbing at a funeral, it created a furor in Washington, DC about "balance." NPR editors bowed to pressure and hosted State official Otto Reich, who was in charge of Latin American public diplomacy, to rebut the piece. Commercial news networks ABC and CBS, however, used the same footage without doing so. "We call you guys Radio Moscow on the Potomac," Reich reportedly said off-air. Castaldi's reports stopped.<sup>53</sup> Castaldi's producer, Gary Covino, noted two years later that news editor Robert Seigel's "handling of the story sent a message, spoken and unspoken, that this was not the kind of stuff NPR should be doing in this part of the world . . . And many people picked it up really quickly and began censoring themselves."<sup>54</sup>

Legislators have also joined in, over the years. Senator Robert Dole was particularly focused on radio, and created a clause in 1992 legislation requiring "strict adherence to objectivity and balance," in order to limit "left-wing ideology."<sup>55</sup> In hearings for public broadcasting's triennial budget approval, other congressional representatives have disproportionately targeted independent films, which are often made by or about underrepresented voices. More recently, in 2017, Representative Andy Harris, a member of the right-wing of the Republican Party from Maryland, (R-MD) accused public TV of bias, holding up three independent documentaries, all of which featured African American women.<sup>56</sup> His highly strategic attempt to defund the film's coproducer, Independent Television Service, through the insertion of arcane appropriations language, was narrowly avoided.

Most defunding threats, though, appear calculated to sow distrust by portraying the services as elitist and liberal, since inevitably there is strong Congressional support for continued funding, given strong local support in each district for the services. Such threats are perennial. For instance, in the 1990s, Senator Jesse Helms, a deeply conservative North Carolina Republican who came to politics working for a white-supremacist Senate candidate and a Reagan enthusiast, reveled in finding public TV programming that could rile conservative constituencies. He was able to generate very effective publicity and to discourage stations from airing *Tongues Untied*, a video poem about gay black identity by Marlon Riggs.<sup>57</sup> Republican Representative Doug Lamborn has called for the defunding of public broadcasting in bills every year since 2007, on cultural grounds. Most recently, he argued that PBS “offended many conservative and religious taxpayers who do not want the children inculcated with liberal viewpoints on sensitive topics.”<sup>58</sup> Trump-era Republicans continued to threaten to end funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.<sup>59</sup>

Public broadcasters have also been caught in the crosshairs of more specific disinformation campaigns. A public TV program on Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative came to the attention of anti-Communists at the right-wing George Marshall Institute. They sent a letter to station managers threatening to invoke the Fairness Doctrine and demanding “balancing” perspectives. Most stations did not air the program, a fact the Marshall Institute widely promoted in fundraising.<sup>60</sup>

Right-wing organizations perennially mock public broadcasting as both an unnecessary government expenditure and too liberal. For decades, author Laurence Jarvik has been on right-wing talk TV and radio, decrying the “liberal agenda” of public TV.<sup>61</sup> The Family Research Council recently reiterated an old complaint – on the occasion of critiquing children’s cartoon *Arthur* for showing same-sex marriage – arguing that “for years, NPR and PBS have taken advantage of the airwaves to spout their radical agenda. And in the end, taxpayers are the ones that have been puppets – for the Left.”<sup>62</sup> Organizations such as The Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute can also be counted on to bash public broadcasting. Cato’s David Boaz, who went on to give Congressional testimony, told Fox News back in 2005 that public broadcasting needed defunding because of its liberal tilt and its “wealthy” audiences.<sup>63</sup> Heritage calls public broadcasting the tool of “the politically correct elite left.”<sup>64</sup>

Sometimes the attacks have come from inside within. In 2003, Kenneth Tomlinson, who had served as chair of the Broadcasting Board of

Governors, the US government's suite of public diplomacy operations including Voice of America, and was an old friend of Karl Rove, was appointed as one of the Republican members on the CPB board. He quickly became board chair, with an overt agenda to promote more conservative views on public broadcasting. Among other things, he hired Michael Pack, fellow neoconservative and a former journalist for the public diplomacy agency, USIA, to be vice president for TV programming. Pack proceeded to commission several conservative series. Tomlinson's behavior alarmed some board members, however, and a report from the investigator general for CPB in 2005 found that, among other things, he violated both federal law and CPB rules in fundraising for a news program hosted by the *Wall Street Journal*. He was forced to resign, and Pack left shortly thereafter.<sup>65</sup> But NPR, for one, has remained profoundly cautious about any departure from an administration's perspective on global affairs.

The right-wing attacks from inside do not stop. In 2013, Howard Husack, vice president for policy at the free-market Manhattan Institute, with funding from the Olin, Bradley and Sarah Scaife foundations among other right-wing funders, was appointed to the CPB board as a Republican representative. As his term was winding down, he proceeded to conduct a public campaign against, first, CPB's priorities and then federal funding for CPB. In 2017, he published an opinion piece in several venues, openly calling for defunding. "Public media now rarely offers anything that Americans can't get from for-profit media or that can't be supported privately," he asserted in one, invoking the market-failure argument. He also noted, "One area where public media does, increasingly, provide something the market doesn't is local news and public affairs programming." This, he argued strategically, was evidence local stations could survive without federal dollars, since local programming could raise local dollars.<sup>66</sup> The specious argument that local news justifies cutting CPB out of the federal budget became a staple of his op-eds. (There is no evidence that individual stations alone can afford to produce consistent, quality local news without collaboration.)<sup>67</sup> In one of several pieces in the *Wall Street Journal*, he also inveighed against independent documentaries produced by people of color and by ITVS as promoting "identity politics," and sowing division.<sup>68</sup> Other board members censured him, and declared their distrust; his term is now up.

The decisions of TV stations to preempt potentially controversial films (or to refuse to air specific shows while continuing to run the series) either for political or business reasons, may reflect the caution engendered by



such attacks. Certainly, both *POV* and *Independent Lens*, TV programs that have some of the highest rates of attracting younger and diverse viewers, also have some of the highest rates of preemption. After the 1980s right-wing attacks, at least one station dropped “All Things Considered.”<sup>69</sup>

Local sensibilities may also influence the marked changes in national news programming toward a more cautious, government accommodating perspective over the years. The sensibilities of local elites can easily be seen in the boards of directors of local stations, which depend on them to promote donations and win support, often from conservative legislators, during appropriations. For instance, all South Carolina public TV stations, as well as the Charlotte, NC, public station, refused to run *Uprising of '34* (1995). Its oral history of a textile strike there, which was brutally suppressed by textile owners, implicated still-prominent families,<sup>70</sup> and the scion of one headed the South Carolina public TV system. Southern stations generally refused to run *Spies of Mississippi*, about FBI involvement in civil rights protests in the South, and other stations refused to carry it in its scheduled prime-time slot.<sup>71</sup>

A starker example of the connections between disinformation funding and public TV programming can be seen in New York station WNET's campaign to move the two TV series featuring point-of-view documentaries, *Independent Lens* and *POV*, off their prime-time slot. Billionaire David Koch sat on the WNET board at the time when a film critical of the 1 percent aired on *Independent Lens*; Alex Gibney's *Park Avenue: Money, Power and the American Dream*. Koch's functionary complained to WNET's CEO Neal Shapiro, who offered him rebuttal time. But Koch rejected it, resigned from the board, and withdrew a donation.<sup>72</sup>

Shapiro and PBS programming executives subsequently agreed to move *Independent Lens* and *POV* to a day that stations typically don't use PBS's nightly prime-time programming and instead insert local or self-chosen programs – effectively moving *Independent Lens* and *POV* off the prime-time schedule. However, this move did not go unnoticed by documentary filmmakers, who coordinated a national protest campaign. It worked, although two years later WNET and PBS again tried to move the series. Again, documentary makers led protests that in turn led to the reinstatement of the programs.<sup>73</sup>

#### STILL HERE

Despite relentless right-wing attacks and disinformation campaigns, public broadcasters remain the most trusted media brands in the USA, and



listenership and viewership is distributed throughout the country. How can this be? Certainly, the ethos of public mission, in service to civic health and an informed citizenry, endures and provides a rhetorical umbrella under which the work proceeds. In addition, stations, program strands, and CPB are also veterans at applying under-the-radar coping strategies to deal with the various pressures upon them, as we will see below.

Radio and television have different challenges. Radio has more news and bigger audiences, but television has greater visibility among politicians, especially for independent work shown in anthology programs. While public radio does have independent producer work, such work has flourished more on podcasts than on air. There is no national anthology showcase on radio such as *Independent Lens* and *POV*, and radio producers are less well organized than documentary filmmakers. There are left-wing stations in the Pacifica network, with a daily news show *Democracy Now*, but the show accepts no government funding and is most widely available on the Internet. The five stations in the Pacifica network do not receive CPB grants.

News organizations in public broadcasting are ever vigilant on issues of objectivity and balance. *PBS NewsHour* has a complaints section. NPR has an ombudsman, and complaints fielded there are never-ending; from underwriting issues, to claims by interested parties of bias one way or another on every conflict (but especially that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), to questions of inaccurate reporting.

In addition, CPB, public broadcasting programming services and the stations have been weathering frontal attacks from the right since 1969. Station management is ever aware of the permanent reputational threat they face, and hires are made with this in mind. Stations already face a legal standard of “objectivity and balance,” of course, but they are well aware that even featuring a program, with, say, people of color, can be portrayed by the right as unbalanced. Station boards are tilted toward the locally prominent and well-off, as part of their challenge to raise the donor dollars to meet budgets. Station and programming service resistance to the programs that draw the greatest right-wing attention demonstrate, among other things, the general caution typifying programming decision-making.

The biggest influence of right-wing pressure on TV might be seen in the encouraging of caution, a caution which, in particular, discourages public TV from investing more in news and public affairs than it does. It is notable, however, that the news and public affairs available are so widely trusted that PBS surveys find that 70 percent of those who voted for Trump have trust in PBS. The biggest influence of right-wing pressure

on radio may be a combination of caution in airing potentially controversial material (the difference between Pacifica programming and NPR programming is useful here), as well as the demonstrated centrist and even at times pro-administration tilt to news coverage. Perhaps the great caution, the stress on journalistic standards, and the hewing to the familiar required to bulletproof the news on public broadcasting from the free-market ideologues has helped to generate across-the-spectrum confidence, at some cost both in range of perspectives and amount of news.

While public broadcasting has faced plenty of criticism from the left for blandness and catering to corporate and right-wing concerns,<sup>74</sup> and has often been at odds with independent creator communities, all its left-of-center critics face a common reality. They want the service to continue to exist. In the end, the left-of-center critics make the same arguments that the service itself does for its survival. They too argue for service to an informed citizenry and for civility. If they succeed too far in showing the distance between public broadcasting's programming and its claims, they give the right wing ammunition. Indeed, the moment that documentarians began to win in their fight for space on public TV came when they heretically went to Republican legislators with the argument that public TV did not deserve funding if it could not represent the voices of people from across the USA and especially from within the legislator's district; CPB was alarmed enough to start paying attention. But generally, for public broadcasting's leaders, a little left-of-center criticism just shows they are squarely in the center. At the height of Reagan-era attacks on public broadcasting news coverage, NPR editor Robert Seigel was able to say, "I've never been terribly concerned about left-wing magazines painting NPR as turning right. It's not something that ever hurt terribly."<sup>75</sup>

In addition, trust in public broadcasting is generated by far more than its news and public affairs coverage. Public TV benefits from its huge investment in children's programming and its ancillary services to schools and for caregivers, as well as its "safely splendid" (in Erik Barnouw's phrasing) programming of British drama and comedy. Public radio features a number of non-public-affairs programs noted for compelling storytelling (*This American Life*, 99% *Invisible*) and engaging personalities (Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, Peter Segal and other comedians on *Wait Wait... Don't Tell Me!*), as well as legacy figures like Garrison Keillor (*Prairie Home Companion*) and Tom and Ray Magliozzi (*Car Talk*). When people say they trust PBS and NPR, they are usually unaware of the complexity of public broadcasting's structure, and unmindful that some of the programming they most love may not come from either.

Finally, the fact that public broadcasting is deeply dependent on listener and viewer donations, and that stations plead regularly on-air to donate, creates a relationship between the users and the providers of the programming that is uniquely intimate. The donating “members,” as they are called, can become helpful in times of political crisis, and, as shown, they inevitably invoke and reinforce the public-service mission.

#### NEW FRONTS IN DISINFORMATION?

Public broadcasting’s decentralized structure has shown capacity for resilience, but it can also be exploited by those with knowledge of its arcane structures, awareness of market imperatives for local executives, and good-enough looking and sounding programming. This has been demonstrated by generations of mediocre syndicated programming, content that also appears on commercial outlets, occupying daytime and late-night on public schedules – particularly for television – in many smaller markets. Suze Orman, for instance, was a longtime public TV staple, and *This Old House* can also be found on commercial broadcast, dish, and cable channels. A Sinclair-like news program would raise eyebrows, but a more subtle product, particularly one that appeals to the “fair and balanced” concern of a programmer always in the shadow of a legislator’s disapproval, may fare differently. After all, Tucker Carlson started out on public television (during the Tomlinson era). In addition, the religious noncommercial stations are potential conduits for disinformation agents crafting programs appealing to a religious constituency.

Certainly, ascendant right-wing and alt-right figures have shown interest in public media structures. Michael Pack, former head of the extreme-right Claremont Institute and earlier senior vice president of TV programming at CPB under Tomlinson, was appointed in 2020 to serve as the head of the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). The appointment had been stalled for two years, while Democrats in Congress pointed out Pack’s close friendship with Steve Bannon, the white-supremacist tint of the Claremont Institute, and financial improprieties he allegedly conducted while heading the Institute.

The USAGM, formerly the Broadcasting Board of Governors and now a single-executive position,<sup>76</sup> oversees US public-diplomacy media such as the Voice of America. The cluster of news operations the USAGM controls are oriented outside the USA, but are generally charged with providing fact-based, reliable news that exemplifies American freedom of speech, while also functioning as an instrument of public diplomacy. This has

always been a delicate act to perform, and the news agencies have had their scandals.<sup>77</sup> Recently, as a 2018 US House oversight report noted, one of the Agency's services, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, was found violating the Smith-Mundt Act, by targeting US citizens with social media posts without their request.<sup>78</sup> But the Voice of America in particular has won respect for its journalism.

Immediately upon arrival, Pack controversially (and possibly illegally) fired all heads of the various services who did not resign and initiated an aggressively politicized era for the agency.<sup>79</sup> This bold flipping of the agency's official premise made American international news services the handmaidens of extreme right-wing ideology – at least for the duration of Pack's term (the position, since 2017, is a presidential appointment). Furthermore, as someone who understands the arcane complexities of American public broadcasting, and whose role, as of 2016, is armed with the permission to reach back into the USA (so far, under the law, only at a citizen's request), Pack was also put in a position to directly challenge the traditions of domestic public broadcasting.

US public broadcasting, grounded in the ideological frame of an informed citizenry and the role of public media in democracy, can play an important continuing role in combatting disinformation, within the limitations it has adapted to already. It builds on a well-established reputation for trust, across partisan lines. It has survived unrelenting right-wing attacks, which use neoliberal and neoconservative rhetoric, since its origins. Time and again, public support, particularly at the station level, providing direct pressure on Congressional representatives, has made a difference. This is an interesting counter-example to the effects of some disinformation campaigns described by others in this volume. It is also a demonstration of David Koch's insight quoted in Nancy MacLean's chapter: these right-wing strategies really are unpopular when tested against the actual delivery of even partially government-supported services.

But public broadcasting perennially, and now more than ever, needs both public support and vigilance, particularly at a moment when disinformation experts are acutely aware of structural weaknesses in the US media system. Members of the public can start with use of, membership in, and constructive suggestions for their local stations. They can support taxpayer funding that currently occurs at the local, state and federal level, and vote for the legislators who defend public broadcasting. Support for and defense of public broadcasting has, and probably will continue to be, grounded in an ideological framework opposed to the neoliberal understanding of both

media and the role of the state. Listeners and viewers, as well as documentarians and other stakeholders in the public broadcasting ecology, have consistently invoked the value of a trusted public service, supported by taxpayers, through which the public can not only be better informed but can engage with others regarding the challenges of democracy. Not only does such a framework push back against erosion of public broadcasting's capacity, but it also holds public broadcasting to the public-service mission that has become an expectation over more than half a century of evolution.

## NOTES

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