
MEMORANDUM

TO: BILL WILSON, PRESIDENT
FROM: NATHAN PAUL MEHRENS, GENERAL COUNSEL
SUBJECT: WHY PUBLIC BROADCASTING STATIONS SHOULD RUN OUR
AD FREE OF COST
DATE: MARCH 16, 2011
CC: DON TODD, DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

You asked me to review the controversy surrounding the practice of public broadcasting stations running ads calling for action on pending appropriations legislation, action to protect the funding of National Public Radio (NPR) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Given their advocacy on one side of the debate it is necessary that equal time be given to opposing viewpoints.

As you know, we have produced an ad for the public broadcasting stations to run. The message, reduce the national deficit by cutting the funding for public broadcasting. Based on the analysis contained in this memo, the ad should be run by public broadcasting stations at no cost to us.

Currently, WETA a public station which broadcasts in the Washington, D.C. area, has a video clip posted on their website called "Let Congress Know How You Feel," encouraging viewers to contact their congressmen to express their opinion about eliminating federal funding for public broadcasting.¹ The video has intense background music as a somber narrator speaks of eliminating federal funding for programs kids love - cue smiling, laughing kids. The WETA website has additional information including the telephone numbers for both the Senate & House Appropriations Committees, and Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, and West Virginia Representatives.

Similarly, KBIA public radio at the University of Missouri has also run ads on their radio station and website urging listeners to "tell Congress funding for

¹ See video at: <http://www.weta.org/support/federalfunding> (accessed March 16, 2011).

KBIA and other public broadcasting is important to you.” Mike Dunn, the general manager at KBIA claims that the message cost practically nothing – taking only about ten minutes to make and about ten minutes to post on the website. As for the radio ad read on air, the announcers would have been reading some sort of ad anyway. He remarks, “It has taken up a little bit of time. We put it out on the air. We put it out on our website, but there was no tangible cost.”² He also maintains that it that the station’s ad is appropriate because it doesn’t tell people what side of the spending battle to support.

Much like WETA’s video and many others put out by public broadcasting stations across the nation,³ we would also like to offer an ad. We too would like to encourage people to contact Congress and simply remind them that the U.S. faces a \$1.6 trillion deficit this year alone. We would also like to point out that such a cut of federal funding represents only a small fraction of public broadcasting’s budget. Based Mr. Dunn’s reasoning, since we have already done all the production work, it will cost little or nothing to public broadcasters to air our ad.

After all, the purpose of public broadcasting is to promote ideas and perspectives that are ignored or underrepresented in the commercial media. The Carnegie Commission Report, responsible for the founding of public broadcasting in 1967 said it would “serve as a forum for controversy and debate” and “provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard.”⁴ Furthermore, the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 requires that the CPB operate with a “strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs or series of programs of a controversial nature.”⁵

² Seth McLaughlin and Stephen Dinan, *NPR, PBS Campaigns to Keep Federal Funds Called Unlawful*, THE WASHINGTON TIMES, March 7, 2011, available online at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/mar/7/npr-pbs-campaigns-to-keep-federal-funds-called-unl/?page=1> (accessed on March 16, 2011).

³ As another example see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5OneBzmres&feature=relmfu> (accessed March 16, 2011).

⁴ Media Advisory, *How to Save Ourselves From the ‘Save PBS’ Routine, Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting*, February 18, 2011, available online at <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4252> (accessed on March 16, 2011).

⁵Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, as amended, 47 U.S.C. 396, available online at: <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/text.html> (accessed March 16, 2011).

What could be more diverse and balanced than for public broadcasting to recognize the arguments for cutting federal funding? Shouldn't public stations be presenting these arguments alongside those that say that taxpayers should keep funding CPB? Certainly there are positive arguments for public broadcasting to cut ties with the federal government and go out on its own. Even some of the executives of NPR have stated that NPR would do fine without taxpayer funding. As such even in the absence of taxpayer funding these stations will not disappear.

In a similar vein, see the following arguments that Mary Kate Cary makes for the continued funding of NPR:

1. The fall 2010 ratings show that NPR listenership hit an all-time high in the top 50 U.S. markets; fall was the fourth record-setting quarter in a row for NPR.
2. Approximately 27 million people listen to NPR every week, and about 93 percent of the U.S. population can hear at least one station that carries NPR programming.
3. NPR reaches more people than the total circulation of the top 67 national newspapers.
4. Over 22 million NPR-produced podcasts get downloaded monthly, and the downloaders have an average age of 33 and make \$75,000 a year; 4 out of 5 of them are college grads.
5. In addition, 70 percent of NPR listeners vote.
6. I've been told by NPR executives – after I expressed surprise that so many of my conservative friends tell me they listen to NPR – that their audience is one-third liberal, one-third independent, and one-third conservative.⁶

This argument actually favors removing government funding. If these stations are popular, they will survive on private donations and sponsorships alone. Again, only a small fraction of public broadcasting funding comes from taxpayers. Since their "listenership" has been setting record numbers lately, it is

⁶ Mary Kate Cary, What Congress Needs to Know About Funding NPR and PBS, U.S. News, March 14, 2011, available online at <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/mary-kate-cary/2011/03/14/what-congress-needs-to-know-about-funding-npr-and-pbs> (accessed March 16, 2011).

more than likely that public broadcasting will do just fine once they cut ties with the government. This is a message that the public needs to hear.

In the spirit of balanced debate, we demand that public broadcasting stations run our ad alongside theirs and let the American people decide. We've already done the production work.

Now is the time for public broadcasting to show objectivity and balance and run our ad without cost.