

Why Public Media?

AN ISSUE BRIEF

Democracy requires strong local, national and international newsgathering to inform the public and promote understanding of the world around us. As commercial journalism falters, with unprecedented layoffs and newsroom closures, public media can fill the gap and provide the hard-hitting, in-depth reporting and analysis Americans need to stay informed.

Public media isn't about one-way communication. At its best, it encourages debate, interaction and exchange. Public media can provide spaces for people to connect, share ideas and take action.

Public media offer the kind of educational and cultural programming that is in short supply on commercial media outlets. It also provides a safe harbor for children's educational programming. The online educational content and resources provided by public television have become top Internet destinations for children.

Eliminating funding for public broadcasting would jeopardize all of this fare.

Defending and Expanding Public Media

Surveys show that most Americans consider public broadcasting more trustworthy and informative than commercial media. For the ninth year in a row, the Roper Poll has found that Americans across all ideological and partisan lines trust the news programming of public broadcasting most. And a recent public opinion poll found that 69 percent of the public, including more than half of Republicans, oppose attempts to gut federal funding for public media.

As we work toward policy solutions that will strengthen and protect these entities, it is crucial that we also work to expand the definition of public media beyond NPR and PBS to include other forms of vital noncommercial media such as community radio, Low Power FM radio, public access TV, independent print publications, viewer-supported satellite TV and nonprofit Internet-based outlets.

A Worthwhile Investment

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting gets about \$445 million per year in federal funding — the vast majority of which goes to local public radio and TV stations. This money helps create:

Jobs: According to the CPB, its funds help support more than 21,000 American jobs, which contribute more than \$1 billion to the national economy.

Return on Investment: For every federal dollar invested in public broadcasting, local stations raise \$6 on their own, creating important economic activity as well as educational and cultural service.

The United States already has one of the lowest per capita levels of federal funding for public media — less than \$1.50 per person — in the developed world. In contrast, it cost \$700 billion to bail out the banks, and the per capita cost of that to taxpayers was roughly \$2,250. Eliminating the \$445 million investment in CPB would reduce the \$1.5 trillion federal budget deficit by less than 3 hundredths of one percent — but it would have a devastating impact on local communities nationwide.

In fact, a recent report requested by Congress on alternative funding strategies for public media found that there are no other funding options that can support public media at the level our nation and our communities need.

What's Happening Now?

Over the past year, a small but vocal group of lawmakers introduced six bills to defund NPR and PBS. In the end, thanks to an incredible wave of popular support from fans around the country, this funding was saved. However, some lawmakers refuse to listen to public sentiment and continue to raise defunding threats.

And over the past five years, states have cut tens of millions of dollars from the budgets of local public broadcasting stations.

Calling on Congress to defund NPR is nothing more than political opportunism by public figures who have built a career on such shenanigans. But these debates have a chilling effect on public broadcasting and free speech. Instead of being free to focus on reporting, producing and community building, public broadcasters are forced to convince Congress every year that they are worthy of the paltry funding they receive.

What Can My Member of Congress Do?

Public broadcasting is not “a luxury we can’t afford” but an essential service that reaches over 98 percent of American households with free services and educational programming. Cutting or eliminating federal funding for public broadcasting will have a severe negative impact on local services and economies in all 50 states.

Public broadcasting stations are some of the last locally controlled and operated media outlets in the country. Rural public broadcasting stations are particularly dependent on federal funding for the operation of their service. For many rural stations, federal funding represents more than 30–50 percent of their total revenue.

At a time when commercial broadcasters are doing less and less journalism, and newspapers around the country are closing shop, what Congress should be doing is figuring out how to raise more money to build a truly world-class public media system.



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