

FINAL WORD  BY BART HINKLE

Fighting *Reductio ad Sesame Street*

As a recovering newspaper editor and longtime public-radio listener, I've been dismayed by the attacks on public broadcasting that have come from the Trump administration, Elon Musk, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and like-minded others.

Trump deems National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System "very unfair ... very biased." To Musk, they are "state-affiliated media." Greene, in her typically understated way, calls them "radical leftwing echo chambers" pushing "un-American, anti-family, pro-crime fake news" in service of a "communist agenda." Kentucky Rep. James Comer calls NPR "propaganda." This, they argue, justifies yanking the federal dollars that support such broadcasting.

At a March hearing of the newly christened House Oversight Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency (DOGE), NPR president Katherine Maher defended the organization. "I do not believe we are politically biased," she said. "We are a non-biased organization." Whereupon everyone who has ever listened to NPR for more than 30 seconds broke into uncontrollable laughter.

As former NPR reporter Uri Berliner wrote in Bari Weiss's *Free Press* last year, NPR's left-wing bent shows up in what stories are selected for coverage, how the stories are covered, and the language its reporters use. The perfidy of Republicans, the destructive rapacity of corporate America, the cruelty Israel demonstrates by defending itself, the ubiquitous racism, sexism, and homophobia of contemporary society—these are the meat and potatoes that make up NPR's daily news

diet. To any fair-minded observer, this is undeniable.

It is also irrelevant. The problem is not that government funds subsidize *left-wing media*, but that they subsidize *media at all*.

Granted, some Republicans have made more useful critiques, noting for example that the circumstances surrounding the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 are nothing like the circumstances today. It may have been difficult for some people to access news and educational programming half a century ago, but it certainly is not anymore. In 2025, funding public broadcasting to ensure sufficient dissemination of information is a bit like funding horse feed to ensure sufficient transportation.

In reply, the defenders of public media roll out their own shopworn arguments. They point out that funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is a tiny sliver of the federal budget. Well, sure. But the federal government spends even less on executions. That is not a good argument for continuing to execute prisoners.

Defenders of public broadcasting note that it does many good things. "NPR's Tiny Desk Concerts feature both aspiring and established stars—and are a sensation with listeners young and old," according to, yes, NPR. Public broadcasting offers educational children's programming, provides severe-weather warnings, and so on. (And don't forget the swell tote bags!) But if we generalize the principle here—doing good things justifies government support—then this becomes a rationale for government funding of virtually anything. Granted, many supporters of public broadcasting would be perfectly fine with that.

When all else fails, supporters of public broadcasting fall back on the *reductio ad Sesame Street*. "The American people want to know, is Elmo now, or has he ever been, a member of the Communist Party of the United States?" said a sarcastic Rep. Robert Garcia during the March hearing. "My son grew up on *Sesame Street* and Mr. Rogers," said Rep. Doris Matsui. "All you have to do is say that." Oh, well never mind then.

And so the debate over the merits of public broadcasting content continues, without ever reaching the heart of the issue: The merits are beside the point. Imagine that we were discussing funding not for NPR's *All Things Considered*, but for a sermon by televangelist Joel Osteen. We wouldn't be debating the quality of the sermon, but the appropriateness of government funding for religion. Likewise, when the question turns to government censorship, the appropriate argument is not whether the expression being censored is good or bad, but whether government should be policing speech *at all*.

In *Federalist No. 84*, Alexander Hamilton argued against a Bill of Rights on the grounds that

They would contain various exceptions to powers not granted.... For why declare that things shall not be done which there is no power to do? Why, for instance, should it be said that the liberty of the press shall not be restrained, when no power is given by which restrictions may be imposed?

Today, instead of asking whether public broadcasting content is good enough to receive public funding, we should be asking why so many people think handing out money to the media is a legitimate government function in the first place.

On the overall question of whether to fund or not to fund, Republicans are right. But in their rightness, they bring to mind the lines from T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason."