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***Public Broadcasting Faces Crucial Year in Congress
Hearings begin Feb. 25***

As head of the Carnegie Corporation, an influential foundation with the goal of furthering learning, Common Cause founder John Gardner in 1967 assisted in the birth of public broadcasting. A Carnegie commission developed the idea of public broadcasting as an entity to “enable us not only to see and hear more vividly, but to understand more deeply.”

To promote and fund public broadcasting, the commission advocated the formation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a nonprofit body that was to be separate from government in order to better insulate public broadcasting from government intrusion into program content.

Public broadcasting has not entirely fulfilled the vision of its founders. But its scores of awards for quality programming and hard-hitting investigative journalism and the loyalty of its viewers attest to the fact that public broadcasting is an essential part of our democracy. Indeed, when polled late last year by RoperASW, a non-partisan research firm, Americans ranked PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service, the “most trusted institution” among national institutions that included Congress, the courts, the federal government, the commercial broadcast networks, newspapers, and cable TV. About four out of ten respondents said that the quality of life in their communities would suffer without public radio and television. And more Americans trust public television’s news and public affairs programs than they trust any other media outlet.

But nearly 40 years after it was founded, public broadcasting and the CPB face a crucial year in Congress. Through its recent appointments to the CPB board and its budget proposals, the Bush Administration has sent signals that it wants to limit the editorial independence of public broadcasting. Some Members of Congress, too, have criticized certain public broadcasting programs as biased and have called for more government oversight. This criticism makes public broadcasting all the more vulnerable in a year when the CPB faces congressional reauthorization. A reauthorization bill gives opponents of public broadcasting forums for their attacks and legislative avenues for making public broadcasting less about serving the public interest and more about avoiding controversy.

Derek Bok
Chairman

Chelle Pingree
President and CEO

Archibald Cox
Chairman Emeritus

John Gardner
Founding Chairman

“The editorial independence of public broadcasting must be saved,” said Common Cause President and CEO Chellie Pingree. “With media consolidation so pervasive, in some communities the only locally owned media outlet is the public television station and radio station. Public broadcasting remains our last, best hope of informing citizens about issues vital to our democracy as it does not depend on commercial revenues and ratings for its existence.

Public Broadcasting and the Federal Government

The visionaries who formed the first plans for public broadcasting in the late 1960s saw the need for radio and television programs that did not depend on ads for their revenues, and thus could be more free to present hard-hitting investigative journalism, to serve underserved audiences such as children, and to educate and uplift the American public. The role of the federal government in this vision was to provide public broadcasting with the resources it needed to sustain vibrant, diverse, noncommercial television and radio and to encourage experimentation and the lively exchange of ideas and opinions.

Through CPB, the federal government now provides public broadcasting with about 15 percent of its total revenues – about \$300 million to \$400 million annually. Most of these federal funds go directly to the more than 1,000 public television and radio stations across the country.

About \$30 million is reserved for supporting the programs that the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) acquires for public television stations. That programming either is produced by a major PBS station, such as WGBH in Boston, WQED in Pittsburgh, WNET in New York, or KQED in San Francisco; or is purchased from foreign sources such as the British Broadcasting Company, or independent producers.

Who is watching?

Public television reaches demographically diverse households not served by cable, and Americans are watching. According to PBS, 99 percent of all U.S. homes with a TV can get a public television station, compared to 82 percent of households that get the most widely available cable channel. What’s more, nearly 71 percent of American households with a TV watched public television in October 2002, according to PBS, with the average home tuning in for eight hours a month.

While the public television audience is often stereotyped as educated and affluent, PBS statistics paint a broader picture. About 29 percent of public television’s audience is college educated, while 29 percent has had four years of high school. Nearly 15 percent of the audience has had less than four years of high school education, while about 27 percent has had one to three years of college. More than 40 percent of public TV’s viewing audience lives in households where the primary breadwinner earns less than \$40,000 a year.

In The Eye of a Fire Storm

It is public broadcasting's national public affairs and news reporting that has drawn the most criticism over the years from both Republican and Democratic Administrations and Members of Congress. That members of both political parties have complained about public broadcasting's reporting is evidence that it is not afraid to speak truth to power. And public broadcasting's record for hard-hitting journalism has taken on both Democratic and Republican Administrations.

- In 1970, public TV broadcast a documentary, "Banks and the Poor," which charged that major financial institutions avoided making loans in poor neighborhoods often predominantly occupied by minorities, a practice called redlining. The program concluded by listing the names of all Members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, with investments in banks or serving as directors of banks. The Nixon Administration found the documentary "clearly inappropriate for a government-supported organization." Nixon vetoed a bill reauthorizing CPB, and a CPB board dominated by Nixon appointees slashed federal funding for public affairs programs.
- In 1980, President Jimmy Carter's State Department tried to block the broadcast of "Death of a Princess," a dramatization of a true story about the 1977 execution of a Saudi Princess who had an affair with a commoner.
- During the Reagan years, a Reagan appointee to the CPB board recommended that all federal funding of the award-winning documentary, *Frontline*, be cut. The Reagan Administration stressed that public broadcasting should seek more private support and proposed no money for public broadcasting in its first federal budget, ultimately convincing Congress to cut what it had already appropriated for public broadcasting by about 20 percent.
- In 1992, the last time that CPB was reauthorized, public broadcasting's "bias" again was considered by Congress. Then Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-KS) accused public broadcasting of exhibiting an "increasing lack of balance and ... unrelenting liberal cheerleading." A Democratic Congress broadened CPB's mission to specifically include oversight of balance in national public broadcasting programming, although that amendment stopped short of giving CPB any authority to intervene to guarantee "balance" in specific programs. The reauthorization also gave program critics such as David Horowitz the leverage to pressure public broadcasting to air programs sympathetic to conservative causes.
- When he became House Speaker in 1995, Representative Newt Gingrich (R-GA) attacked public television for being "a sandbox for the rich" whose elitist fare should not be supported by tax dollars.
- During the 1990s, *Frontline* alone produced at least five documentaries that presented highly critical views of then President Bill Clinton and/or members of his Administration.

The Bush Administration and Public Broadcasting

The Bush Administration has not publicly criticized bias on public broadcasting. But the White House has made two questionable appointments to the CPB board, and its pending budget proposal would further limit PBS' independence from government interference.

- Late last year, the White House filled two vacancies on the CPB board with big donors whose backgrounds or stated positions jeopardize CPB's role of protecting public broadcasting from government interference. During her confirmation hearing, Cheryl Halpern agreed with a critique of *Now with Bill Moyers* offered by Senator Trent Lott (R-MS). Lott charged that the program lacked balance and that Moyers was biased. Halpern indicated that she would welcome granting CPB the authority to punish and address examples of bias on specific public broadcasting programs. Halpern and her family members have given more than \$324,000 to Republican federal candidates and national political parties since 1989.
- Bush's other appointee, Gay Hart Gaines, has not been formally confirmed by the Senate, but received a recess appointment, good until 2005. In the 1990s, Gaines chaired then-Representative Gingrich's GOPAC and traveled around the country raising money for the political organization, dedicated to giving Republicans control of the House. House Speaker Gingrich proposed eliminating all federal funds for public broadcasting. Gaines and her family have given nearly \$492,000 to Republican candidates and parties at the national level.
- The Bush Administration also is proposing to Congress that it give CPB its funds on a year to year basis, rather than committing resources to public broadcasting two years in advance. Year-to-year appropriations would make public broadcasting even more vulnerable to political influence.

Congress and Public Broadcasting

Congress will consider the editorial independence of public broadcasting in two different legislative forums. On Feb. 25, the House Commerce Committee's Labor-Health and Human Services subcommittee chaired by Representative Ralph Regula (R-OH) will consider public broadcasting's budget proposal for the 2006 Fiscal Year. For nearly 30 years, public broadcasting has been given advance funding, with Congress agreeing to its appropriations for two years, rather than one. Advance funding has been one way to insulate public broadcasting for government intervention since public broadcasting would not be coming each year with hat in hand to Congress.

But the Bush Administration has proposed funding public broadcasting on a year-to-year basis. And Chairman Regula has asked why public broadcasting deserves advanced funding, when other critical national priorities, such as the National Institutes of Health and education programs were funded annually. Regula also has criticized NPR for biased reporting on the Iraq conflict, and other issues.

The subcommittee could vote to cut federal funding for public broadcasting, and/or also agree to funding public broadcasting on a year-to-year rather than a two-year basis. “Either or both of these decisions could affect the quality of the public television and radio,” Pingree said. “More importantly Congress would be sending a message that in-depth journalism is not welcome in this Congress and this White House.”

In March, the focus on public broadcasting switches to the Senate. Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain (R-AZ) is expected to convene a hearing sometime this month to consider reauthorization of CPB. While according to published reports, Senator McCain intends that his committee approve a reauthorization bill that largely retains the authority CPB now has, his committee includes strong critics of public broadcasting, such as Senator Lott. During the Halpern nomination hearing, Senator McCain, too, indicated some willingness to give the CPB more authority to directly intervene in programming decisions.

“A reauthorization bill that gives CPB more authority to intervene in broadcast decisions would chill investigative reporting on NPR and PBS,” Pingree said. “Who will speak truth to power if our most independent broadcast source is stifled or intimidated?”

With a media environment that has become increasingly dominated by a handful of giant corporations focused more on the bottom line than in serving the public interest, public television has never been more necessary.

Common Cause is committed to preserving the vitality and independence of public broadcasting. We will advocate for continued funding of the CPB, for the appointment of independent CPB members who do not bring a biased agenda to the board, and for the continuation of hard-hitting unbiased investigative news and other programming on public television.

“We need the *Frontlines*, the documentaries that explore Administration malfeasance no matter which party is in office,” Pingree said. “We need local and state public affairs reporting that helps viewers and listeners become citizens. In short, we need independent, well-funded public broadcasting.”