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Retiring public TV

The federal government will spend over \$120 million on public television this year. Despite the proliferation of cable TV, the government still wants to have its own network. However, public television is elitist, original and unnecessary.

When public TV began in the 1960s, its backers promised it would be worlds above commercial TV. Yet public TV increasingly imitates what it claims to despise. In Washington, D.C. in a recent week, public TV stations showed an indoor tennis championship, German soccer, "I Spy," "The Cisco Kid," a "Doctor Who" video, the Beach Boys 20th Anniversary Special, and "Investment Primer with Louis Ruckeyser." This is not exactly highbrow stuff. Why should people be taxed to pay for shows they can see free on the vulgar channels? And why should the working poor be taxed to subsidize investment advice for the affluent?

Public television is playing both sides of the street, claiming that it is a public service, deserving of tax dollars, while also claiming to be for the elite. An *Advertising Age* ad for *Dial*, the magazine for public TV contributors, says public TV viewers are the "better half, better educated, higher income." The ad said *Dial* would reach "television's most selective audience" — "an across-the-board quality audience." Yet, despite such snobbery, public TV executives still go shaking their tin cup on Capitol Hill with a haughty self-righteousness.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's most recent annual report chimed, "Public television...stands almost alone in approaching its audiences as people, not a market." But, despite its presumptions, public TV is already commercial. Corporate contributions would nose-dive if stations did not announce sponsors and flash their logos. The only difference is that public TV's ads are less galling than commercial TV's. (Public TV took a rest from its soapbox in 1980 when it allowed cigarette and liquor producers to advertise on public TV, even though such ads are banned on commercial TV).

There are some good shows on public television, but they do not need to be paid for by the U.S. Treasury. Nine public TV stations recently ran limited commercials during an 18-month experiment. There was little protest from viewers, who preferred a few minutes of ads at the end of each show instead of more "begathons" where announcers strain to make viewers feel guilty enough to contribute money. Several station managers said that if they had to choose, they would rather run a few commercials than rely on federal handouts.

Public TV could easily become self-reliant with little or no damage to its sensitive viewers. Currently, several minutes of ads for upcoming programs run each hour. These could be replaced by commercial ads. What irritates most commercial TV viewers is the frequency and duration of ads, not the metaphysical principle of advertising. As long as the ads are few and far between, no harm will be done. And the stations could sell the time they use for "begathons" and make a mint.

Public TV would be better off with a free hand and no federal subsidy. Stations could experiment with formats and shows they can't use now, with 535 Congressmen looking over their shoulders. Ending federal subsidies would also curtail the danger of political bias or censorship a constant threat when government is paying for news and documentary programs.

Besides, with the rise of cable, there is less and less reason for a separate public television network. Special channels now exist for the elderly, children, blacks, hispanics, religion, performing arts, movies, sports, pornography, news, and public affairs. Why should people be taxed for what they can buy by choice elsewhere?



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