

## With an Elephant in the Room, Public Broadcasting Feels Squeeze

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"And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed -- if all records told the same tale -- then the lie passed into history and became truth. 'Who controls the past' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: Who controls the present controls the past.'"

-- George Orwell, "1984"

Since the advent of the television era, no political figure has been more concerned about controlling the dissemination of his message than George W. Bush. His political advisers and media liaisons have established a White House propaganda machine of unprecedented sophistication and scope. He has been largely inaccessible to the mainstream media, and his aides take great pains to enforce message discipline upon not only their own officials and supporters, but independent journalists as well.

For example, the president and his aides have frequently spoken of "private accounts" as the solution to Social Security's long-term stability, but a poor showing in public opinion polls caused them to change their terminology. From that point on, the administration took great pains to chastise any journalist who used "private accounts" or "privatization" to describe the president's proposals (this was said to be unfair and biased against the president), even though the substance of the policy has not changed.

### Chilling the press

Other recent examples are the administration's production of phony "newscasts" designed to promote Bush administration policies, which the Government Accountability Office determined to be illegal, government-funded propaganda; several instances in which the administration has been secretly compensating political commentators to promote the president's agenda in broadcast and print; and a White House official's doctoring of government research reports on climate change to downplay the links between greenhouse-gas emissions and global warming.

These efforts to control the Fourth Estate are chilling and should outrage anyone who believes that an independent, free press is an essential element of a democratic society. But this propaganda machine has even greater ambitions. The White House and the congressional leadership have launched a full-fledged attack on one of our most treasured media institutions: public broadcasting.

In 2003 Bush appointed Kenneth Tomlinson, director of the Voice of America under President Reagan, to head the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the congressionally chartered caretaker of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). Soon after his appointment, Tomlinson determined that it was necessary to restore ideological "balance" to public broadcasting, and launched a series of broadsides against PBS, NPR and even the CPB itself.

Tomlinson has surrounded himself with conservative partisans, including a Bush White House communications official, with a scheme to change public broadcasting to suit their political agenda. Tomlinson replaced a non-partisan professional chief executive at CPB with Ken Ferree, the top media adviser to former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Michael Powell. Ferree was the chief architect of a failed effort to dismantle the FCC rules that prevent media concentration. This week, Tomlinson was successful in pushing through the appointment of Patricia Harrison, a former co-chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, to run CPB.

Conservatives on Capitol Hill and on the CPB's board targeted legendary broadcaster and popular PBS journalist Bill Moyers, demanding that he be "dealt with." In response, Tomlinson secretly hired an outside consultant last year to track the political leanings of the guests on "Now With Bill Moyers." Moyers resigned in December and funding for the news program was subsequently halved.

In contrast, the Wall Street Journal, which has frequently called for the elimination of government funding for public broadcasting, is now being sponsored and promoted by the CPB to espouse conservative, pro-business views via a new weekly program featuring the Journal's editors.

### Gutting the money

Now, in what was to be the coup de grace of the right-wing assault on public broadcasting, the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives sought to cut nearly half of CPB's funding for 2006, and the House majority leadership has declared its ultimate ambition to eliminate all federal funding in the years to come. The full House rebuffed these efforts with a bipartisan vote of 284-140 to restore \$100 million, but it's certain that attacks on CPB's funding by the right will continue.

In an era when corporate media outlets have increasingly become concentrated in the hands of a few broadcasting conglomerates, and broadcasters and cable are increasingly substituting celebrity trials and sensational reality programs for news and educational programs, public broadcasting represents the last remaining resource for independent, quality programming.

Public broadcasting is free from obligation to corporate sponsors, profit motives and -- until recently -- political agendas and pressure. To escape the endless hours of police drama and makeover shows, millions of Americans depend on public broadcasting for enriching cultural entertainment, educational programs and enlightening documentaries and news. We must not undermine this vital American resource by letting it wither on the vine or fall under the control of partisan ideologues.

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