

The flap over public broadcasting

By David Horowitz, Chairman
Committee on Media Integrity

The current controversy over the funding of public broadcasting has been widely misrepresented as a censorship issue. In fact, it is not about censorship at all, but about accountability, fairness and respect for the law.

It would be hard to imagine a publicly funded institution more secretive in its operations and more hidden from public scrutiny than the billion dollar public broadcasting industry. This fall the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), which produces *SESAME STREET*, went hat in hand to the National Endowment for the Humanities to request an \$800,000 grant for a program called "Sesame Street Discovers America." The unasked question is why.

The scholars and organizations who normally seek taxpayer help through the NEH, do so because they don't have the resources to realize their projects otherwise. But CTW is a \$100 million business (\$1 billion worldwide). According to tax statements filed with the IRS, it has an investment portfolio worth \$51 million, or more than twice its annual expenditure on program production. CTW president William Whaley receives a salary in excess of \$650,000, and he has plenty of colleagues in the six figure range. When Sesame Street received its first public funding, its founders pledged that they would be different from commercial television producers who exploited their captive little audiences. **They** would not try to sell products to the kids. Today "Sesame Street Stores" blanket the nation's malls with their expensive muppet dolls and paraphernalia, and are a lucrative and growing business.

Why then the continued governmental charity? Why the continuing appeals for tax-deductible pledge monies to public television audiences who lack the economic data that would allow them to assess whether there is indeed a "need" for their contributions? Is there a possibility of false representation—of consumer fraud—in these promotions? Is Congress doing its job in overseeing its creation? These are questions that need to be answered, and they are at the heart of the current debate.

An equally important issue is whether public television has been operating "above the law." The "law" in question is the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. This Act requires that a balance be struck in publicly funded programs dealing with issues of a current affairs nature. This is only reasonable in a democracy like ours and it is puzzling why so many liberal Congressmen and commentators, including the New York Times, should fail to appreciate the importance of this issue.

A part of the present concern about public broadcasting was provoked by PBS's announcement of a clearly partisan programming schedule for the coming presidential election year (only two election year series have been scheduled, one by liberal Democrat William Greider and the other by liberal Democrat Bill Moyers); by National Public Radio's partisan treatment of the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas; and by the \$30 million which Congress proposes to give to the Independent Television and Video Service (ITVS), an organization of leftwing film producers who have funded programs to show that "people of color" are an "endangered species," and to celebrate a racist, anti-Semite named Dhoruba Bin Wahad, among many similar projects.

No taxpayer monies have been slated for any fund for the production of centrist or conservative current affairs programs.

The lack of scrutiny of the public broadcasting system and its

ability to operate in violation of its own charter are easily explained by the fact that this billion dollar network is also a powerful political lobby. There are five million members of the 600 plus public radio and television stations. Moreover, the signals transmitted by these stations reach virtually every household in the United States. The potential for abuse is large, as the following example will show.

Prior to the current Congressional debate, a personal "hold" was in effect on the appropriations bill for public broadcasting. Such holds are a normal feature of the Senate process and merely delay the passage of bills. Since the current appropriation is for 1994-96, such a delay would have little impact on the actual functioning of public stations. Yet, in an extraordinary round-the-clock marathon, one California station whipped its audience into a frenzy of apprehension by raising the false specter of the possible end of public broadcasting, while spreading the equally false impression that there was a uniquely secret Senate cabal against the system. (In fact, all holds are secret.)

The goal of the station was to panic its listeners to 1) besiege Congressmen with threats and appeals to promote the passage of the bill, and 2) send their dollars of support to the station. While on air, the station harassed every single member of the Senate in an attempt to ferret out who was and was not on the "hold." This was a witch-hunt, pure and simple, with ominous implications for the legislative process as far as public broadcasting is concerned.

And yet, it is just that process that needs to be activated if the present inequities of the system are to be addressed. As the chairman of a committee concerned with public broadcasting, I raised the issue of PBS's slanted election schedule at the official PBS Press Tour in Los Angeles last month. Addressing John Grant, the PBS vice president in charge of election year programming, I referred to the fact previously mentioned that PBS plans two multi-part, multi-hour series on the state of the nation by Moyers and Greider with no programs to balance them from the Republican and/or conservative side. Grant simply dismissed this concern by suggesting that PBS's selection of William F. Buckley, as one of seven commentators on the planned joint coverage (with NBC) of the party conventions, provided a meaningful balance.

When our organization raised the issues of the NPR Hill-Thomas coverage and the ITVS boondoggle with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, CPB President Donald Ledwig informed us that the Corporation has no authority in these matters (and thus over the integrity of its own system), and that we should refer our concerns to the government.

Technically this may be true. Over the years, the Democratic majorities on the Congressional oversight committees have systematically eroded the authority of CPB over the money it disburses, curtailing its ability to manage the integrity of the public broadcasting system as its original legislation clearly intended it to do. And this is precisely why the current Congressional debate is so important.

That Democratic Congressmen want to make public television and public radio a partisan media system for the Democratic Party will come as no surprise. That public interest liberals and public minded members of the Fourth Estate, like the New York Times, would go along with the hijacking of a public institution for partisan purposes is.