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Public Broadcasting Critical to Democracy

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The following op-ed appeared in the Cincinnati Enquirer March 24, 2011.

It's popular to complain about media bias and to dismiss too quickly the public service they perform. However, a world without journalists and the news media would certainly be less democratic. And when left purely to market forces, news media tend to think of citizens as consumers and make decisions around what consumers want, rather than what the public needs.

As the world increases its connectedness through electronic media, we need our government to invest more in public broadcasting like PBS and NPR, and call on all media within the United States to do more public affairs programming. Not only should Congress do this, it has the power to do it.

The reason for government's role is simple: the transmission of television and radio over the electromagnetic spectrum, a scarce public resource, must serve the public good. This also means that, unlike newspapers, all television and radio services, regardless of ownership, can be subject to a higher degree of regulation, and do not receive the same degree of First Amendment protections as newspapers.

The news media do perform several functions that we tend to take for granted but are crucial to our democracy. These include providing a forum for the public to learn about candidates as they debate their qualifications, providing a variety of viewpoints so we can understand the world around us better, and acting as a watchdog, scrutinizing the behavior of public officials. Some may think publicly owned, government-subsidized media would become a tool of the state, a lapdog of the political elites. However, when the news media retain the power to decide what “the news” is, they retain freedom of expression and provide a better public service.

In fact, for Western democracies with public-ownership media models, as level of government-controlled broadcasting increases, so does the level of press freedom, according to Reporters without Borders. Moreover, in societies where public broadcasting reaches a significant portion of the population, those societies are more likely to have better informed and more engaged electorate.

Furthermore, having a purely private media model leads to less democracy, and to bad news. As the FCC relaxed regulations regarding media ownership, those with large holdings increased their share, thus decreasing the variety of voices in the "marketplace of ideas." When left to market forces, news media tend to focus on "soft news." Really, what is Charlie Sheen doing now? In addition, we get less foreign affairs news. What is worse is commercial and organizational interests - not political purposes - are driving what makes "the news."

All media, regardless of ownership, are stuck between fulfilling their watchdog function and becoming a lapdog. If the watchdog barks too loudly and too often, or if the lapdog gets too comfortable, claims of media bias resound. We need our government to invest more in public broadcasting, and call on all media to do more public affairs programming because it's good for democracy.

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