

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Perils of state-owned news outlets

By Richard W. Rahn

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published June 5, 2003

If the federal government suddenly announced it had acquired the New York Times and now was going to force taxpayers to subsidize it, how would you react? Furthermore, assume you were told they would keep the same left-leaning editorial personnel and practices. Most Americans would be justifiably outraged because they would understand they were being forced to pay for political propaganda they may disagree with; that the government-subsidized paper had an unfair advantage over its private sector competitors; and that the paper could be used by political authorities for their own advantage.

In fact, these same arguments are equally valid against the government-owned Corporation for Public Broadcasting and its subsidiary, National Public Radio (NPR). NPR has a well-known and documented left-wing political bias with views almost identical to that of the New York Times. NPR has a strong advantage over its private sector competitors because it receives the government subsidy and tax-deductible, private contributions to its operations.

Advocates for NPR often claim conservatives have more talk radio hosts with bigger audiences so, even if NPR has a leftist bias, it is not a danger. However, there is a fundamental difference. If you do not like Rush Limbaugh, you can boycott his sponsors by not buying their products. If you do not like NPR and try to boycott its sponsor (the federal government) by withholding your taxes, you can be sent to jail.

The idea of a free society and liberty is fundamentally undermined if the government can force you to pay for propaganda that supports ideas contrary to your own beliefs. Anyone who ever listens to NPR quickly understands it has a very liberal social, environmental, and economic agenda. There would be nothing wrong with the NPR broadcasting its views, provided those who disagree were not forced to financially support it.

NPR claims it provides serious news, but though delivered in a serious tone, it frequently has no more substance than many of the flashy tabloids. The NPR news shows — "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered" — typically include people who consider themselves victims and who demand that taxpayers or corporations pay for their misfortunes, even if caused by their own behavior. NPR is preoccupied with AIDS and

homosexual and women's rights, while government misspending and the rights of taxpayers are routinely ignored.

It took NPR more than a year to apologize (after great pressure) for falsely suggesting a conservative Christian group was behind the anthrax attacks. Its economic reporting is often characterized by intemperate and unsupported attacks on business people and advocates of limited government. NPR's Nina Totenberg recently referred to the just passed tax cut as "really stupid," and their senior commentator, Daniel Schorr, continues week after week to spout false Keynesian nostrums about the economy that he learned a half-century ago.

As long as it is a government-owned entity, NPR will never be fair and balanced. Because it depends on government, it will always support government spending over the rights and needs of taxpayers. It attracts a staff that is hostile to the private sector, and that loves government and the party of government — the Democratic Party.

Supporters of NPR claim that without the government subsidy people would not be able to get the programming they want — huh? There are thousands of radio and TV stations catering to almost every conceivable desire. If the government subsidy were taken away, the good programming on NPR would still have a market that people would be willing to contribute to, i.e., classical music, etc. NPR very actively solicits corporate sponsorship with attendant recognition much like its private sector competitors do. It concentrates its "pledge drives" (actually commercials) in several weeks each year. And finally, in its endless pleading for more government spending, it is, in fact, giving an ongoing commercial for big government.

The real danger of public broadcasting is that almost every government-owned medium on the globe at one point or another is used for political propaganda against the interest of the people. The evils of the old Soviet broadcast system and Saddam's were well-known. But even the venerated BBC looks more and more like a left-wing, would-be monopolist. It is not only extremely hostile to the British Conservative Party, but even to the more moderate parts of the Labor Party. It has engaged in a highly effective campaign to gain more channels for itself, while at the same time greatly limiting the number of private-sector competitors, leaving the British public with little in alternative news.

NPR continues to grow because of its preferred tax status and government subsidies. Unless it is privatized, it is only a matter of time before its arrogance and intolerance will grow, as it increasingly squeezes its private-sector competitors, like the BBC. Congress needs to privatize public broadcasting, before it is too late.

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute and an adjunct scholar of the Cato Institute.