

**COLUMN RIGHT/
BOB DOLE**

Big Bird Doesn't Need Tax Handouts

■ There's no GOP conspiracy against public broadcasting—just a desire for open debate.

Why are taxpayers subsidizing an organization that grosses \$100 million a year and has an investment portfolio worth another \$52 million?

It's a good question, because that's just what happens when Congress sends your tax dollars to the Children's Television Workshop, the so-called nonprofit production company behind "Sesame Street." Now, we all love Big Bird and the Cookie Monster, but do they really need a \$14-million annual taxpayer subsidy when "Sesame Street" merchandising power rakes in piles of retail cash?

It's one example of the problems in public broadcasting, an effort launched 25 years ago with high ideals but that today, after billions of taxpayer dollars, is no longer the altruistic alternative we were promised.

The Senate has opened debate on future funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the umbrella bureaucracy that oversees public television and radio. The CPB wants Congress to authorize a 50% increase in federal funding, to \$1.1 billion for 1994-1996. This sort of full funding two years in advance is rare—even the National Institutes of Health and the Education Department don't get this red-carpet treatment.

That's why a recent campaign of misinformation and hysteria on Santa Monica public radio station KCRW is so puzzling. Yes, several Republican senators placed a temporary "hold" on the CPB funding bill. What KCRW didn't tell you during its fund-raising frenzy is that there is no crisis—what with National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service fully funded through 1993—and that "holds" are routine in the Senate. They were invoked by members of both parties on two-thirds of the approximately 250 spending bills reported out of committee last session. (I didn't get one complaint from KCRW when liberal senators used holds to block Reagan nominees.) Republican senators have merely ensured that CPB's big-money bill will be debated in the light of day.

In my view, any time the taxpayers are asked to fork over \$1.1 billion, they have a right to know how it is being spent. Unfortunately, when it comes to public broadcasting, accounting for taxpayer dol-

From the lavish offices of highly paid public television executives in Los Angeles, New York, Boston and Washington, the message is, "We're doing a great job, so don't ask any questions. And keep that taxpayer money pouring in." Taking a look

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at some of their salaries, expenses and benefits, you can see why they don't want too much sunshine breaking through their cloud cover: a \$641,000 package for the Children's Television Workshop's president; \$207,000 for its vice president; \$309,000 for the executive producer at New York City's public television station WNET; \$242,000 for the president of Los Angeles' KCET, not to mention \$2.1 million for public-television lobbyists.

Then there is the multimillion-dollar satellite network the taxpayers recently bought for public broadcasting. Apparently, PBS and its affiliated companies and stations are now making money by renting time on the satellite.

My concerns are not with the local public stations, but rather with the East and West Coast power brokers who dominate programming. Of the \$44 million in taxpayer dollars used for program development for 341 PBS stations, half goes to only two stations—WGBH in Boston and WNET in New York. Another \$10 million goes to producers affiliated with WNET, to three other stations and to PBS itself. No wonder folks in Kansas think public television reflects big-city bias.

With public television and radio, you have to pay even if you're not watching or listening. It's your tax dollars feeding the meter. That doesn't mean we should use taxpayer funds for a conservative network—that would be as wrong as wasting public money for liberal cheerleaders.

Public television was a much-needed alternative to the pap that dominated commercial television decades ago. But now Americans enjoy a staggering array of programming, none of it taxpayer-subsidized. Whether it's the Arts & Entertainment Network, the Discovery Channel, Bravo, ESPN, the so-called super stations, CNN, the local video store or library, Americans enjoy almost unlimited choices for information and entertainment. Public television holds no monopoly on quality.

At the very least, the public broadcasting Establishment needs fine-tuning. Is it time to let the marketplace take control? If "Sesame Street," "Masterpiece Theater," Mister Rogers or the Civil War series were offered on the open market, they would flourish—without tax money.

So stay tuned—the debate over public broadcasting is in the public interest.

Bob Dole of Kansas is the Senate Republican leader.