

I'm not Paying for Your Highfalutin Show!
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Why should a show such as *Downton Abbey* be financed with a single tax payer dollar or pound sterling, much less a mingling of the two? The idea seems positively un-American. Yet there was a time before 1934 when the thought of a commercially dominated media system in this country was not a given. While a *Downton Abbey* may increase the profile of PBS, choosing particular shows to serve as poster children for public media funding leads to the familiar rabbit hole of taste, of liberal versus conservative administrations battling over the red herring of content. This fruitless exercise should be avoided, giving way instead to the real question, one posed in the call: “Who is public service television really serving?” PBS serves all of the American people by offering a vital alternative to a commercial media system increasingly unable to support certain kinds of public goods such as education, the arts, and news. This debate is greatly heightened by the related issues of neoliberalism and a disrupted media landscape. I shall tackle neoliberalism first.

In a sense, neoliberalism and PBS grew up together. From its infancy, PBS was under siege by Nixon and a still very present, often bi-partisan mindset that hinges on neoliberalism, defined here as efforts to make private what was once public. Of course, this privileging of the free market was not new in the 1970s, however the global, multinational corporation so characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism was beginning to blossom. It is a sad irony that PBS now depends heavily on the philanthropy of such private enterprises for its existence; it is after all public television. But why, as so many politicians have argued, should regular, working class folk be taxed for the liberal, well-heeled likes of snooty British drawing room dramas?

My first counter to this line of argument is to answer a question with a question: Why should any class of people in America subsidize major television corporations like Fox or NBC? The spectrum the FCC practically gives away on our behalf is worth billions more than we the people receive in our federal coffers. These billions could be used towards funding more public television for example. The neoliberal opposition might counter that the scarcity argument is dead in the digital age, and they would be partially correct. We do indeed have an abundance of space/time now at our disposal thanks to digital signals and the freeing up of once precious analog spectrum, but this does not erase the fact that, as a matter of cultural precedent, the airwaves, the land, the outer-space for the satellites, the very ether itself is, at least

in this country, a public resource, and thus managed by our public representatives at various levels. Nor does a spectrum auction, a neoliberal feeding frenzy, address the content problem with all forms of television in this country. By content problem, I do not refer to *Jersey Shore* versus *Sherlock*, or pointless judgments of high/low taste. I am speaking of a shortage of particular kinds of public goods. We are in the midst of a market failure.

This market failure in U.S. television is in part related to a disruption in the media landscape. But the failure actually pre-dates the Internet. For example, many privateers hailed the proliferation of cable channels as the death knell of PBS. The reasoning was that in an age of narrowcasting, cable programmers could produce opera for the masses on niche channels like Arts and Entertainment. The fact that this channel is now just called A&E is a clue to how successful that project was. Setting aside the obvious problem of class demonstrated by typical cable bills reaching over \$100 a month, we also clearly have a production problem. The market, now further disrupted by the business model black hole that is the Internet, does not have the answer to providing public goods such as opera or news. News is perhaps a more persuasive case as it eschews the aforementioned taste debacles associated with so much of the arts. News is expensive, and it is not just newspapers that are struggling to produce it in the contemporary moment; television is not immune. Yet, news is a public good that PBS does extremely well, as evidenced by shows such as *Frontline*.

There are some who would agree, but counter that the public in U.S. public media has already been sucked out of it with federal funding dwindling year after year, and commercials or “sponsorships” becoming less and less about philanthropy and more about advertising. There are many Americans who see nothing wrong with that, but they might object to ideology masquerading as news or to a televisual landscape with less of that all-American value: choice. We need to increase funding of public media in the U.S. if only to offer an alternative, a fail-safe to something as valuable as information in the form of news, education, and entertainment—the stuff that makes us better citizens and more interesting people on either side of the pond.