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Position Paper for “Britannia Rules the Waves?: Popular British Programming
on American Public Television” Roundtable

In early March 2011, U.S. news media extensively reported the details of a secretly recorded meeting between a National Public Radio (NPR) fundraiser and two members of a group claiming to be prospective funders. Highlighted in most media accounts were the fundraiser’s comments that NPR would be better off without federal funding and that the Tea Party was racist and xenophobic. In reality, the potential donors were imposters working for a conservative activist named James O’Keefe who specializes in hidden camera exposés. Until now, his most notable sting involved recording and disseminating a video showing staffers of the low-income advocacy group ACORN seeming to encourage fraudulent applications for federal assistance. (That uproar led Congress to vote against providing additional federal funding for ACORN, after which the group disbanded.) Within a few days of the NPR tape being made public, both the fundraiser and the CEO of NPR, Vivian Schiller, had resigned. The timing of this controversy could not have been worse for NPR, coming in the midst of a contentious debate over federal budget appropriations for the Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB), NPR’s parent agency. Some legislators, claiming that public broadcasting is inefficient as well as irrelevant in today’s media environment, have advocated for stripping all federal funding for CPB.

The NPR controversy raises a number of pertinent issues for media communicators. Of central focus are the ethics of newswork, especially the practices sometimes used in investigative journalism -- namely, the use of surreptitious recording devices and other means of deception. Another concern voiced about these changes and the broader effort to pull CPB funding is that it

is symptomatic of the ongoing process of the privatization of the public sphere -- or, in the view of a London *Guardian* newspaper article (“Scott Walker’s Real Agenda,” March 10, 2011), the complete *dismantling* of the public sphere. That article concerns the efforts by Wisconsin governor Scott Walker to strip the collective bargaining rights of state workers and make them pay much heftier fees for health insurance and retirement benefits. (The legislation in question was ultimately passed by the Wisconsin Assembly, but, recently, several parts of it were ruled unconstitutional by a state judge; the state plans to appeal this ruling.) The article authors Michael Hudson and Jeffrey Sommers see such a bold move as representing the “final stage” of neoliberalism, where “[t]he US government itself and its regulatory agencies effectively are being privatised.”

The vilification of public sector workers, especially teachers (manifest in the union-busting legislation of Walker and other governors as well as the rhetoric undergirding the school reform movement) and the scrutiny facing publicly-financed media draw many parallels. Both sites (public schools and public broadcasting) are framed as ideologically biased, inefficient, and unnecessary. And, both sites face calls to be more profitable and accountable, or face elimination/closure. Regarding public broadcasting, whose existence has been contested since its formation in the late 1960s, some legislators say PBS and NPR are no longer needed in the current “multichannel” media landscape. This assertion can, of course, be challenged when we consider the homogeneity, lack of comprehensive news reporting, and concentrated ownership of these sources (and, also, the fact that broadcast networks as well as cablecasters are increasingly pursuing specialized, “upscale” audiences and ignoring “undesirable” audience members. I will explore these issues in further detail during the roundtable discussion.