

CPB budget cuts from President Trump could kill Big Bird

By **James Williams** - March 16, 2017



The White House budget would cut CPB funding and put their future in doubt

Well cutting the budget is tough on everyone but looking at the first budget presented in the last 24 hours by President Donald Trump, could kill Big Bird. The White House budget would eliminate the money allocated to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, or CPB. Federal funding for CPB amount to about \$500 million per year—or about \$1.35 per citizen, annually.

Trump's 2018 budget, called "America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again," requests increases in defense spending and reduction of domestic programs.

Truly eliminating funding from PBS and NPR would take a while due to “the nature of contracts,” Mick Mulvaney, director of the Office of Management and Budget, told reporters during a briefing Wednesday

“We proposed ending funding, but technically what you’ll see—it’s an elimination—but you’ll see an amount of money in the budget, and it is some amount of money that’s necessary for us to unwind our involvement with CPB,” Mulvaney said. “So you won’t see a zero next to it, but the policy is that we’re ending federal involvement with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.”

The vagaries of public TV and radio funding make for a more complicated question of what “privatization” would actually mean for the non-profit group. The Corporation receives \$445.5 million from the government every year, about half of which goes to the nation’s roughly 350 public television stations.

They, in turn, give the money in fees to the non-profit PBS, which distributes ad-free content like PBS NewsHour, and Frontline [...] The rest of the stations’ money, totaling roughly half of their operating budget, comes from public support, in the form of charitable donations and the ever-present pledge drive.

A similar setup exists over in radio, although NPR was “weaned” off of federal cash back in the ‘80s, meaning only about 10 percent of the system’s money comes directly from the government.

Without federal funding it is very possible that PBS would have to go into the traditional television business and sell ads. They could also become a cable network where they could be like an AMC, TNT, FX and other cable outlets.

It is possible that shows like Masterpiece Theatre’s Downton Abbey, Sherlock, and Elizabeth. Children’s shows like, Sesame Street, educational programming like Nova and the very popular News Hour, could end up on other broadcasting outlets.

As you might expect that cut was not well received by the folks at PBS across the Potomac

at their Alexandria, Virginia offices.

“There is no viable substitute for federal funding that ensures Americans have universal access to public media’s educational and informational programming and services,” said Patricia Harrison, president and CEO of CPB in a statement. “The elimination of federal funding to CPB would initially devastate and ultimately destroy public media’s role in early childhood education, public safety, connecting citizens to our history, and promoting civil discussions for Americans in rural and urban communities alike.”

Let’s be clear here getting rid of spending on both PBS and NPR is nothing new. Every Republican since President Ronald Reagan has slowly but surely cut money from the two public broadcasting outlets over the years.

For the record during the Reagan’s presidency, public television lost its funding but found a way to survive. One Republican who was a fan happened to be Mitt Romney was criticized for saying that he was a fan of PBS. “I like PBS. I love Big Bird. I’m not going to borrow money from China to pay for it.”

Congress has the final say over all discretionary budgets, so President Trump faces a tough fight to get rid of agencies like the NEA and the NEH, even though many Republicans don’t believe the federal government needs to fund arts projects, especially those seen as subversive or frivolous

Photo: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.) has the votes needed to make the drastic cuts to both PBS and NPR. Ryan has previously supported a budget sans funding for both outlets.

So, if CPB’s federal funding were to be completely eliminated, the organization would lose \$445 million annually. About \$298 million of this is appropriated to public television, \$99.1 million to public radio and the rest to system support and operating costs.

A look at a 2012 CPB report on alternative sources of funding, which is the last time it’s

addressed the issue, estimated that elimination of federal funding at the time would have put stations in 54 markets in 19 states at risk of shutting down.

“The federal appropriation is vital seed money that helps local stations raise additional funds,” Letitia King, CPB’s SVP of communications, said. “If that funding was discontinued the entire public media service would be debilitated.”

Besides PBS and NPR the budget would also stop funding for some other popular items. The budget would also eliminate the budgets for both national endowments, which stood at \$148 million each in 2016, as well as \$230 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which supports libraries and museums. Additional cuts would affect two tourist mainstays in Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian Institution and the National Gallery of Art.

Some quotes used in this story were from The Hollywood Reporter and ASSOCIATED PRESS.

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Jim Williams is the Washington Bureau Chief, Digital Director as well as the Director of Special Projects for Genesis Communications. He is starting his third year as part of the team. This is Williams 40th year in the media business, and in that time he has served in a number of capacities. He is a seven time Emmy Award winning television producer, director, writer and executive. He has developed four regional sports networks, directed over 2,000 live sporting events including basketball, football, baseball hockey, soccer and even polo to name a few sports. Major events include three Olympic Games, two World Cups, two World Series, six NBA Playoffs, four Stanley Cup Playoffs, four NCAA Men’s National Basketball Championship Tournaments (March Madness), two Super Bowl and over a dozen college bowl games. On the entertainment side Williams was involved with Berman Concerts and directed over 500 concerts for Showtime, Pay Per View and MTV Networks.

