

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Armstrong Williams NewsHour

by Frank Rich

Here's the difference between this year's battle over public broadcasting and the one that blew up in Newt Gingrich's face a decade ago: this one isn't really about the survival of public broadcasting. So don't be distracted by any premature obituaries for Big Bird. Far from being an endangered species, he's the ornithological equivalent of a red herring.

Let's not forget that Laura Bush has made a fetish of glomming onto popular "Sesame Street" characters in photo-ops. Polls consistently attest to the popular support for public broadcasting, while Congress is in a race to the bottom with Michael Jackson. Big Bird will once again smite the politicians—as long as he isn't caught consorting with lesbians.

That doesn't mean the right's new assault on public broadcasting is toothless, far from it. But this time the game is far more insidious and ingenious. The intent is not to kill off PBS and NPR but to castrate them by quietly annexing their news and public affairs operations to the larger state propaganda machine that the Bush White House has been steadily constructing at taxpayers' expense. If you liked the fake government news videos that ended up on local stations—or thrilled to the "journalism" of Armstrong Williams and other columnists who were covertly paid to promote administration policies—you'll love the brave new world this crowd envisions for public TV and radio.

There's only one obstacle standing in the way of the coup. Like Richard Nixon, another president who tried to subvert public broadcasting in his war to silence critical news media, our current president may be letting hubris get the best of him. His minions are giving any investigative reporters left in Washington a fresh incentive to follow the money.

That money is not the \$100 million that the House still threatens to hack out of public broadcasting's various budgets. Like the theoretical demise of Big Bird, this funding tug-of-war is a smoke screen that deflects attention from the real story. Look instead at the seemingly paltry \$14,170 that, as Stephen Labaton of The New York Times reported on June 16, found its way to a mysterious recipient in Indiana named Fred Mann. Mr. Labaton learned that in 2004 Kenneth Tomlinson, the Karl Rove pal who is chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, clandestinely paid this sum to Mr. Mann to monitor his PBS *bête noire*, Bill Moyers's "Now."

Now, why would Mr. Tomlinson pay for information that any half-sentient viewer could track with TiVo? Why would he hire someone in Indiana? Why would he keep this contract a secret from his own board? Why, when a reporter exposed his secret, would he try to cover it up by falsely maintaining in a letter to an inquiring member of the Senate, Byron Dorgan, that another CPB executive had "approved and signed" the Mann contract when he had signed it himself? If there's a news story that can be likened to the "third-rate burglary," the canary in the coal mine that invited greater scrutiny of the Nixon administration's darkest ambitions, this strange little sideshow could be it.

After Mr. Labaton's first report, Senator Dorgan, a North Dakota Democrat, called Mr. Tomlinson demanding to see the "product" Mr. Mann had provided for his \$14,170 payday. Mr. Tomlinson sent the senator some 50 pages of "raw data." Sifting through those pages when we spoke by phone last week, Mr. Dorgan said it wasn't merely Mr. Moyers's show that was monitored but also the programs of Tavis Smiley and NPR's Diane Rehm.

Their guests were rated either L for liberal or C for conservative, and "anti-administration" was affixed to any segment raising questions about the Bush presidency. Thus was the

conservative Republican Senator Chuck Hagel given the same L as Bill Clinton simply because he expressed doubts about Iraq in a discussion mainly devoted to praising Ronald Reagan. Three of The Washington Post's star beat reporters (none of whom covers the White House or politics or writes opinion pieces) were similarly singled out simply for doing their job as journalists by asking questions about administration policies.

"It's pretty scary stuff to judge media, particularly public media, by whether it's pro or anti the president," Senator Dorgan said. "It's unbelievable."

Not from this gang. Mr. Mann was hardly chosen by chance to assemble what smells like the rough draft of a blacklist. He long worked for a right-wing outfit called the National Journalism Center, whose director, M. Stanton Evans, is writing his own Ann Coulteresque book to ameliorate the reputation of Joe McCarthy. What we don't know is whether the 50 pages handed over to Senator Dorgan is all there is to it, or how many other "monitors" may be out there compiling potential blacklists or Nixonian enemies lists on the taxpayers' dime.

We do know that it's standard practice for this administration to purge and punish dissenters and opponents—whether it's those in the Pentagon who criticized Donald Rumsfeld's low troop allotments for Iraq or lobbying firms on K Street that don't hire Tom DeLay cronies. We also know that Mr. Mann's highly ideological pedigree is typical of CPB hires during the Tomlinson reign.

Eric Boehlert of Salon discovered that one of the two public ombudsmen Mr. Tomlinson recruited in April to monitor the news broadcasts at PBS and NPR for objectivity, William Schulz, is a former writer for the radio broadcaster Fulton Lewis Jr., a notorious Joe McCarthy loyalist and slime artist. The Times reported that to provide "insights" into Conrad Burns, a Republican senator who supported public-broadcasting legislation that Mr. Tomlinson opposed, \$10,000 was shelled out to Brian Darling, the G.O.P. operative who wrote the memo instructing Republicans to milk Terri Schiavo as "a great political issue."

Then, on Thursday, a Rove dream came true: Patricia Harrison, a former co-chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, ascended to the CPB presidency. In her last job, as an assistant secretary of state, Ms. Harrison publicly praised the department's production of faux-news segments—she called them "good news" segments—promoting American success in Afghanistan and Iraq. As The Times reported in March, one of those fake news videos ended up being broadcast as real news on the Fox affiliate in Memphis.

Mr. Tomlinson has maintained that his goal at CPB is to strengthen public broadcasting by restoring "balance" and stamping out "liberal bias." But Mr. Moyers left "Now" six months ago. Mr. Tomlinson's real, not-so-hidden agenda is to enforce a conservative bias or, more specifically, a Bush bias. To this end, he has not only turned CPB into a full-service employment program for apparatchiks but also helped initiate "The Journal Editorial Report," the only public broadcasting show ever devoted to a single newspaper's editorial page, that of the zealously pro-Bush Wall Street Journal. Unlike Mr. Moyers's "Now"—which routinely balanced its host's liberalism with conservative guests like Ralph Reed, Grover Norquist, Paul Gigot and Cal Thomas—The Journal's program does not include liberals of comparable stature.

This is all in keeping with Mr. Tomlinson's long career as a professional propagandist. During the Reagan administration he ran Voice of America. Then he moved on to edit Reader's Digest, where, according to Peter Canning's 1996 history of the magazine, "American Dreamers," he was rumored to be "a kind of 'Manchurian Candidate'" because of the ensuing spike in pro-C.I.A. spin in Digest articles. Today Mr. Tomlinson is chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the federal body that supervises all nonmilitary international United States propaganda outlets, Voice of America included. That the administration's foremost propagandist would also be chairman of the board

of CPB, the very organization meant to shield public broadcasting from government interference, is astonishing. But perhaps no more so than a White House press secretary month after month turning for softball questions to “Jeff Gannon,” a fake reporter for a fake news organization ultimately unmasked as a G.O.P. activist’s propaganda site.

As the public broadcasting debate plays out, there will be the usual talk about how to wean it from federal subsidy and the usual complaints (which I share) about the redundancy, commerciality and declining quality of some PBS programming in a cable universe. But once Big Bird, like that White House Thanksgiving turkey, is again ritualistically saved from the chopping block and the Senate restores more of the House’s budget cuts, the most crucial test of the damage will be what survives of public broadcasting’s irreplaceable journalistic offerings.

Will monitors start harassing Jim Lehrer’s “NewsHour,” which Mr. Tomlinson trashed at a March 2004 State Department conference as a “tired and slowed down” also-ran to Shepard Smith’s rat-a-tat-tat newscast at Fox News? Will “Frontline” still be taking on the tough investigations that network news no longer touches? Will the reportage on NPR be fearless or the victim of a subtle or not-so-subtle chilling effect instilled by Mr. Tomlinson and his powerful allies in high places?

Forget the pledge drive. What’s most likely to save the independent voice of public broadcasting from these thugs is a rising chorus of Deep Throats.