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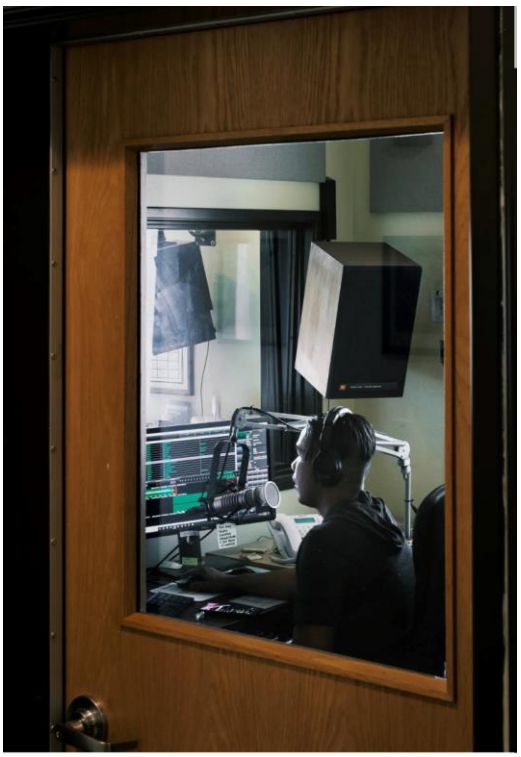
After Trump's Cuts, 'Crippled' NPR and PBS Stations Must Transform

Radio and television stations, facing enormous budget holes, are pleading with NPR and PBS to lower their fees as they examine whether to drop national programming altogether.

By Benjamin Mullin, Jack Healy and David W. Chen

Benjamin Mullin reported from Bunker Hill, Kan., Jack Healy from Porcupine, S.D., David W. Chen from Warm Springs, Ore. Sept. 13, 2025



An employee in the sound booth of KWSO 91.9, a tribal NPR affiliate, records a radio segment in Warm Springs, Ore. Jordan Gale for The New York Times

On the windswept prairie of South Dakota, a tribal public radio station is selling off its old records to pay the bills. In Warm Springs, Ore., the NPR affiliate is considering dropping "All Things Considered" to focus on tribal issues.

In Bunker Hill, Kan., (population 103), the public TV station may eventually have to cut ties with PBS, pulling children's shows like "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood."

"We are crippled here," said Betsy Schwien, the general manager of Smoky Hills PBS in Bunker Hill. "It is the absolute worst-case scenario."

The decision by President Trump and Republicans in Congress to strip $500 million from public broadcasters this summer is forcing profound changes that will reshape the airwaves, especially in rural and tribal areas of the country.

Some stations are beginning to go off the air, as Congress was warned before it went ahead and eliminated funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the taxpayer-backed company that supports public media, ultimately shutting it down. But short of that, no station will be immune from impacts.

NPR and PBS, aware of the strain, have lowered fees for impacted stations. But for many, that's not enough. Some are considering dropping nationally produced shows from NPR and PBS amid enormous budget shortfalls. Florida Public Media, an association of 24 NPR and PBS stations, last month sent a letter to NPR's chief executive, Katherine Maher, pleading for lower program fees.

"Simply put, the fee relief plan NPR has proposed is not sufficient to keep many NPR programs on the air in much of Florida," the stations wrote. (In some states, like Florida, state funding has also been cut.)

Some are turning to grants and emergency membership drives and considering higher fees on corporate sponsors to stanch the bleeding.

Others, fielding complaints from their members, are voicing worries about the political balance in news coverage, a delicate issue for station directors in red states. Republicans have long complained about what they call a liberal bias in public broadcasting, but if rural NPR affiliates shed national shows like "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition," the airwaves would give listeners few alternatives to conservative talk radio in many areas.

Jackie Smith changes the radio station in his truck to KWSO 91.9 in Warm Springs. Jordan Gale for The New York Times

For most Americans, public radio and television won't disappear. NPR and PBS aren't going away, and many stations in the biggest cities will withstand the cuts. But the sudden loss of government support is transforming a cultural touchstone that has endured for more than a half-century.

"Public media leaders will need to be more open to ideas that might have been discarded in the past," said Steve Bass, a public media consultant.

'A great unknown'

Residents in Warm Springs may soon experience cuts to programing at KWSO (91.9 FM), a local station that has been airing since 1986. Jordan Gale for The New York Times

Next year will mark the 40th year since KWSO (91.9 FM), a public radio station owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs in north central Oregon, began airing a round-the-clock mix of news, cultural programming, music and community announcements.

But what the station will look like beyond that anniversary is "just a great unknown," said Sue Matters, the longtime station manager.

About 40 percent of its $600,000 annual budget, which pays for six full-time employees, comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. That will soon be gone.

"I'd say I'm looking to replace $200,000, ballpark," Ms. Matters said.

To fill that hole, everything is on the table, she said, including national programming such as "All Things Considered."

She wants instead to prioritize what makes the station a community bulwark: lessons for the tribe's three languages; announcements for the Warm Springs K-8 public school; coverage of football and other sports from Madras High School; and Native America Calling, a national live call-in program for public radio stations.

To generate more revenue, she is mulling potentially increasing the rates she charges for sponsorships and corporate support, selling clothing and merchandise and even starting a food cart.

Station management has requested additional funding from the tribe, which provides 40 percent of KWSO's budget. And so far, there appears to be a willingness, at least in the short run, to cover things like programming fees and subcontracts for the station's automation system, website and app. But Ms. Matters worries about a zero-sum effect.

"That funding could be going to other things that meet people's needs like food or housing," she said.

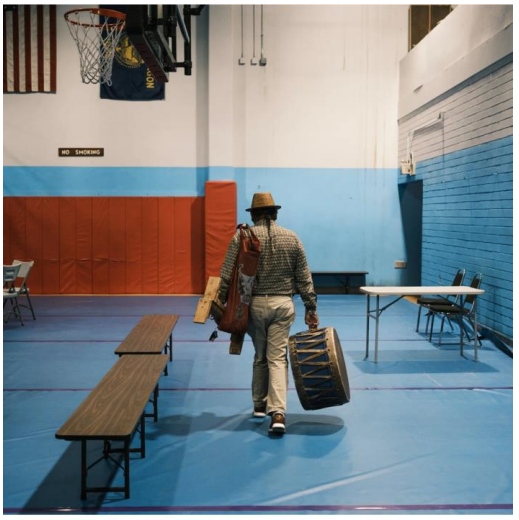
The station's transmitter, atop Eagle Butte, offers commanding views of Mt. Hood and Mt. Jefferson in the distance, and the tribe's Kah-Nee-Ta hot springs resort in the valley below. And a good thing, too, she said, because KWSO is typically the only station offering local and community news that the tribe's 4,500 local residents can hear, especially given the "nooks and crannies" of the adjacent Cascades.

Internet access on the Warm Springs reservation, which encompasses 1,000 square miles, is spotty at best. Cellphones often have no bars or display SOS. And in a community where the median household income of $58,900 is three-quarters the national average, maybe 40 percent of residents don't have television access either, since they can't afford satellite television services, said Daniel Martinez, the tribal emergency manager.

That leaves KWSO.

"It's our conduit to the community," Mr. Martinez said. Those concerns were echoed throughout the reservation.

"If we lose the radio station, it's like you lose an arm or a leg, you lose a foot," Carlos Calica, vice chair of the tribal council, said at an end-of-summer powwow.



"If we lose the radio station, it's like you lose an arm or a leg, you lose a foot," said Carlos Calica, who carried a drum at a tribal powwow in Oregon. Jordan Gale for The New York Times

Last spring, when Mr. Trump and his allies in Congress called for the defunding of public broadcasting, they insisted they were pursuing more political balance on the nation's airwaves. The president called NPR and PBS "radical left 'monsters,'" while the White House, in an announcement formally asking Congress to claw back funds already allocated to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, dismissed its programming as "woke propaganda disguised as 'news.'"

'This is scary'

Recording equipment at the KSWO 91.9 radio station in Warm Springs. Jordan Gale for The New York Times

But with the corporation now gone, the question confronting much of the country, where airwaves are dominated by the chain stations of Sinclair Broadcasting and iHeartRadio, will be how any news can compete with the political right.

In the Badlands of South Dakota, the airwaves are saturated with unapologetic conservatism. The road to the Pine Ridge Reservation cuts through a sea of prairie grass, while over the radio, on 90.3, a former lawyer for Mr. Trump rails against the "radical left." Up the dial, between Christian pop and classic rock, other syndicated shows argue against in vitro fertilization and feminism.

KILI, the Voice of the Lakota Nation, has been a counterpoint of sorts, but it is now struggling for its life.

"This is scary," said Oitancan Zephier, manager of the independent station.

KILI is the primary source of local news for one of the poorest parts of the country, delivering updates on tribal politics, wildfires and road closures from a creaky studio where rain sometimes leaks through the foam soundproofing and a stray dog snoozes in the vestibule.

The station has dealt with money troubles and shoestring budgets since its founding 40 years ago. But the loss of around half its annual income, about $180,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, is a different scale of stress.

"We don't know what next year holds for us," Mr. Zephier said.

In a worst-case scenario, Mr. Zephier said KILI could switch to "all software programming," meaning that the flesh-and-blood D.J.s, who play Lakota prayers to start programming every day, tell Lakota-language jokes to connect with elders listening from home and give updates in emergencies, would give way to automation.

To avoid that, the station is trying to sell stacks of old records. Its website is trying to entice donations from sympathetic listeners by declaring that "KILI is under attack!" Meanwhile, Mr. Zephier is hunting for grants and donations.

But with its high rates of poverty and unemployment, Pine Ridge isn't exactly fertile ground for pledge drives, said David American Horse, who is part of KILI's weekly "Voices of the Elders" program.

“We are barely surviving as a people,” he said. “We don’t have the option of passing around a hat or doing a GoFundMe.”

Senator Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican who voted to cut public-broadcasting funds, has said he has secured $9.4 million for tribal broadcasters, but KILI’s board members and staff are unsure whether they will see any of it, or whether it will be enough.

An existential threat in Kansas

“We are crippled here,” said Betsy Schwien, the general manager of Smoky Hills PBS in Bunker Hill. “It is the absolute worst-case scenario.” Clayton Steward for The New York Times

When she started her job nearly four years ago, Ms. Schwien, the general manager of Smoky Hills PBS near the geographic center of Kansas, was holding the organization together with the equivalent of Scotch tape and rubber bands. The only PBS station for more than 100 miles was housed in a limestone relic from the 1800s with a defunct toilet and a fly infestation. Employees think it’s haunted.Then she got a lifeline: a $2.5 million grant for a new building with a studio, a green room and plenty of working toilets to serve the station’s potential audience of 1.2 million viewers.This year, just as construction was being completed, government funding was cut, tearing a $1 million hole in her $1.8 million budget.

Her building might be new, but the budget crisis is an existential threat to Smoky Hills PBS, which will have to cut its staff by nearly half unless federal funding is restored. It might even have to abandon its affiliation with PBS entirely, dropping popular programs like “Carl The Collector,” a children’s show.

Even some local programming could be on the chopping block, Ms. Schwien said. Wrestling tournaments and football games are avidly watched but costly to license and produce. Also at risk — “Doctors On Call,” featuring local physicians (one viewer experiencing a heart attack was ordered to go to a hospital), and “The Kansas Legislature,” a political round table with local elected officials. She is considering an application to the Public Media Bridge Fund, an emergency relief effort that aims to help the most vulnerable station.

Like Ms. Schwien, many PBS general managers have been taking a hard look at their programming this year since Congress began debating whether to pull back funding. In May, an executive at WETA — the PBS station in Washington, D.C., that produces “PBS NewsHour” — met with station executives in Republican states and heard concerns from their members about political bias in the program. “PBS NewsHour” is a linchpin of PBS programming, and its focus on current events can make it a lightning rod in conservative states.

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The KWSO transmitter, atop Eagle Butte, offers commanding views of Mt. Hood and Mt. Jefferson, and reaches remote locations cut off from other broadcast signals. Jordan Gale for The New York Times