AMERICAN COUNCIL ON GERMANY

Support Your Local Radio Station:

How Public Media Is Fighting Political Threats

Anna-Maria and Stephen M. Kellen Fellowship Final Report

By

Jule Hoffmann

Reporter for Deutschlandfunk/DeutschlandRadio Berlin

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Research Report

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the consequences of the Trump administration's elimination of federal funding for public broadcasting in the United States – focusing on NPR, PBS, and their affiliated local stations. It examines how this radical step fits into broader political strategies to delegitimize independent journalism, analyzes its impact on local communities, and explores how public media stations are not only adapting to maintain operations but are fighting against the attacks and aiming for support by the public.

The report illuminates the democratic role of public media and the risks posed by its defunding. It will also draw transatlantic comparisons, examining how the US funding model for public media contrasts with European models like ARD, ZDF, or Deutschlandfunk – and look into how the political dynamics and threats remain similar.

The research aims to understand the political, societal, and journalistic implications of this unprecedented attack on public media and independent journalism in general, at a time when trust in media is polarized, and press freedom is under strain. As populist actors in both Europe and the U.S. increasingly undermine public media, there is also the question of what Europe can learn from the American crisis.

1. Introduction

The Attack on Public Media

At the beginning of May 2025, the White House issued an Executive Order directing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to “cease federal funding for NPR and PBS.” The order not only halted direct funding but also prohibited local stations and CPB grant recipients from using taxpayer money to support the two organizations. CPB responded with a statement asserting that it is “not a federal executive agency subject to the President’s authority.” This order followed the White House’s Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Request to Congress, which proposed eliminating federal funding for the CPB for the year. It also came amid a pending rescission package seeking to reclaim $1.1 billion in previously allocated federal funds for public media.

Two months later, in July 2025, Congress approved the funding cut in a 216–213 vote. The measure passed by narrow margins in both chambers, reflecting the intense political divide over public media funding. This vote marked the end of nearly six decades of bipartisan support for federal funding of public media.

Although stations had been able to anticipate that federal funding was at risk, the final decision came in July, while the loss of federal funding took effect in October, leaving stations with limited time to adjust. Since then, more than 500 public media employees have been laid off, according to a tally by SemiPublic. Some stations have responded through mergers and consolidations, with smaller organizations becoming part of larger networks while attempting to preserve limited local reporting capacity and community presence.

As a result of the funding cuts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting ceased operations in January 2026. For 58 years, CPB had served as a stable and reliable source of federal funding for public media. Its sudden disappearance left a significant gap in the system.

But the consequences of the cuts extend beyond NPR and PBS. The U.S. public broadcasting system is highly decentralized, and many local stations – particularly those serving rural, Indigenous, and Spanish-speaking communities – depend far more heavily on federal support than the national organizations themselves.

This distinction is central to understanding the current crisis. NPR, based in Washington, received only about 1 percent of its budget from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For local member stations, public funding typically accounted for 8–10 percent of their budgets. In some rural areas, the share was significantly higher.

The political conflict has therefore centered largely on NPR and PBS, while the financial consequences are being felt most severely by local organizations that were rarely at the center of the political debate.

Why Public Media Matters

Public broadcasting systems exist in almost every democracy. The strongest democracies, as measured by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, have strong public media systems. Studies show a correlation between strong public broadcasting systems and higher levels of political knowledge, greater civic engagement, and lower levels of extremism. And that the existence of local news and, in particular, public radio contributes to lower rates of polarization, higher rates of civic engagement, and greater civic trust.

The role of public media is particularly important in a country as large and geographically diverse as the United States. NPR has 246 member stations operating over 1,300 radio stations nationwide. Before defunding, NPR –

like PBS television – reached over 99 percent of the American population in every state. About 20 percent of Americans live in areas with no local news coverage other than public media.

Public media also provides services that extend beyond conventional journalism. Local public radio stations can serve as lifelines for communities, particularly in rural areas, by providing emergency broadcasts, weather alerts, and critical public safety information. A 2025 NPR/Harris Poll found that nearly three in four Americans – 73 percent – said they rely on public radio emergency alerts and news for their public safety.

The U.S. public media system has a particular mission: to serve everyone. Unlike commercial media organizations, which often cater to specific audiences and can contribute to political and cultural polarization, public media is intended to provide information, education, and cultural programming to the public as a whole. This mission is especially significant in a diverse country such as the United States. The Public Broadcasting Act requires public broadcasters to represent and serve the full spectrum of the American public. By striving to remain inclusive and accessible, public media can provide a shared space for communities that might otherwise have little in common. Yet the American system has always contained a fundamental contradiction. Its public-service mission was established without creating the kind of stable public funding system found in many European democracies.

2. The Unfulfilled Promise of Public Broadcasting in the U.S.

In Germany and much of Europe, public broadcasting is seen as a democratic institution. The U.S. system offers a stark contrast. Unlike many other democracies, the United States never developed a fully publicly funded broadcasting system. From the beginning, American broadcasting was shaped primarily by commercial interests, with major networks such as NBC and CBS relying on advertising revenue.

The direction of American broadcasting was determined by a major policy debate in the early 1930s over whether broadcasting should be treated primarily as a public resource or as a commercial enterprise. One of the most significant missed opportunities in this debate was the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment to the Communications Act of 1934. The amendment proposed reserving 25 percent of the nation's radio broadcasting facilities for nonprofit educational institutions and organizations. These educational broadcasters would have been permitted to sell advertising to support their operations, while commercial broadcasters would gradually have given up portions of the spectrum as licenses were renewed.
Had the amendment passed, the United States might have developed a much stronger public broadcasting sector alongside commercial broadcasting. Instead, the amendment was defeated, helping cement the dominance of commercial broadcasting. Congress instead adopted the broader requirement that broadcasters operate in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity."

In practice, this left the American broadcasting system largely dependent on commercial priorities and advertising-based business models. Efforts to create a public alternative continued for decades and eventually led to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. PBS, established in 1969, and NPR, established in 1970, emerged from this framework, providing educational and public-interest programming.

However, American public media was never designed to be fully publicly funded. Instead, the system was designed to require public broadcasters to continually seek additional resources from private individuals, corporations, and philanthropic foundations. This dependence was not accidental. It was the consequence of policy choices that deliberately limited direct public financing and prevented the emergence of a stronger publicly funded broadcasting model.

Three Characteristics of the U.S. Model

The U.S. public broadcasting system is shaped by three principles that distinguish it from many other public media models: universal free access, a mixed public-private funding structure, and a highly decentralized organization.

1) Universal free access

From its creation, U.S. public broadcasting was designed as a free service available to the entire population. Public media in the U.S. – notably NPR and PBS – serve about 99 percent of Americans with fact-based journalism, educational programming, and local reporting.
Around 99 percent of Americans can access public radio and television over the air without charge, while many organizations have expanded access through digital platforms, streaming services, newsletters, and mobile applications.

Unlike many commercial media organizations, public media does not rely on subscription models or paywalls. Instead, its mission is to provide information, education, and cultural programming regardless of a person’s ability to pay. This commitment to universal access remains a central part of the public broadcasting model.

As financial pressures on public media organizations have intensified, some outlets, including NPR, have emphasized this commitment through prominent messages on their websites and apps. Rather than introducing a subscription paywall, visitors on the NPR app are greeted with statements such as, "Were you expecting a paywall? Not our style." The message is accompanied by a fundraising appeal that underscores the organization's public-service mission.

2) A mixed public-private funding model

U.S. public broadcasting was designed as a partnership between government support and private funding. While public broadcasting in countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom is primarily funded through public contributions or license-fee systems, the United States has developed a more complex model that combines federal support, state funding, private donations, foundations, and corporate underwriting.

The federal government provided some funding through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), but stations were expected to generate much of their own revenue through individual donations, foundations, corporate contributions, and community support.

In 2024, CPB funding totaled roughly $600 million, while local stations generated several billion dollars from other sources. This structure gives communities a direct role in sustaining their local media organizations, but it also creates ongoing financial uncertainty. Public broadcasters must continually demonstrate their value to audiences and donors to maintain funding.

3) A highly decentralized system

The most distinctive feature of the U.S. system is its decentralized structure. Rather than being controlled by a single national organization, public media consists of hundreds of locally governed and operated organizations. Around 544 local public media organizations operate more than 1,600 broadcast facilities, reaching approximately 99% of the country.
This differs significantly from centralized public broadcasters such as the BBC in the United Kingdom or ARD in Germany. PBS and NPR do not own most local stations. Instead, they provide national programming, services, and support to independent local broadcasters. Public television and public radio are separate sectors, although some organizations operate both and are known as joint licensees. Many local stations combine their own reporting and programming with content from national providers and other public media producers, including organizations such as American Public Media and PRX. What audiences often perceive as “NPR” or “PBS” is therefore actually a much broader network of independent organizations contributing to public media content.

This decentralized model allows public media to reflect local communities, but it also makes the system more complex and financially vulnerable. Because each organization operates independently, there is no single overview of the financial condition of all stations, making it difficult to assess how many may be at risk following the withdrawal of federal support. According to Tim Isgitt, CEO of Public Media Company, a number of stations are currently facing serious financial challenges and may be at risk of closure.

The structure also means that the loss of CPB has consequences beyond funding. CPB provided shared services including music licensing, legal support, and system-wide coordination. Some of these responsibilities have since been taken over by PBS and NPR within their respective sectors, but the loss of a central coordinating body raises broader questions about how a decentralized public media system can maintain long-term stability.

3. The Defunding Crisis

The vulnerability built into the U.S. public media system became particularly visible after the Trump administration moved to eliminate federal support. The loss of federal funding has forced public media organizations to rethink how they finance their operations, relate to their audiences, and demonstrate their value to the communities they serve. The response has taken several forms: legal action, restructuring, cost-cutting, fundraising, and – perhaps most importantly – a renewed emphasis on the relationship between local stations and their audiences.

NPR filed a federal lawsuit on May 27, 2025, together with three Colorado member stations, arguing that President Donald Trump's executive order directing the CPB to halt funding for NPR and PBS violated the First Amendment, exceeded presidential authority, and unlawfully interfered with Congress's power over appropriations. PBS filed a similar lawsuit three days later, on May 30, 2025, joined by Lakeland PBS, a member station in Minnesota. The case raised many of the same constitutional arguments. The litigation proceeded alongside related legal challenges involving the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In March 2026, a federal judge ruled that President Trump had violated the First Amendment by issuing an executive order directing federal agencies and the CPB to cut NPR's funding.

The court found that the order amounted to unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination and exceeded the president's authority. As a result, federal agencies remain legally permitted to provide funding to public media organizations when that funding has been authorized by Congress, although the broader legal and political debate over public media funding continues. The legal battle, however, has unfolded alongside a fundamental change in the system's financial structure: in January 2026, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting ceased operations.

To help local member stations cope with the loss of federal support, NPR reduced the programming fees that stations pay to carry its content. While this eased the financial burden on stations, it also reduced NPR's own revenue. In May 2026, NPR announced staff reductions of approximately 4 percent, affecting employees who produce news, podcasts, and music programming. The cuts came through a combination of voluntary buyouts and layoffs and were part of a broader effort to reduce operating costs after the loss of federal funding and declining revenues. NPR also scaled back some coverage areas, including science reporting, as its newsroom continued to shrink.

These developments also form part of a broader debate about press freedom and the relationship between government and independent media institutions. Recent conflicts between the U.S. government and major news organizations, including restrictions on press access and increased political pressure on media outlets, have raised concerns about the broader environment for independent journalism. One significant development was the White House's decision to take greater control over the selection of journalists participating in the presidential press pool, breaking with the long-standing practice that allowed the White House Correspondents' Association to manage access for news organizations.

More recently, FCC Chair Brendan Carr warned that broadcast licenses could face scrutiny for how some media outlets covered the war in Iran. Critics argued that using the government's licensing authority in response to editorial decisions threatens broadcasters' independence and could pressure news organizations to align their coverage with government preferences.

In this increasingly hostile political environment for journalism, NPR and PBS have become prominent targets of government criticism and political pressure. However, the consequences of these attacks extend far beyond the two national organizations most often at the center of the debate. While NPR received only a small share of its funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, many local stations – particularly those serving rural, Indigenous, and Spanish-speaking communities – are far more dependent on federal support. Because they serve small, sparsely populated areas, many cannot replace these funds through private donations.

This creates a striking irony. Although the political battle over public broadcasting has centered on NPR and PBS, with accusations that they are politically biased or "leftist," the funding cuts have relatively little impact on these national organizations. Instead, they fall most heavily on local stations that were never at the center of the political conflict.

4. Fundraising as a Core Part of the US Public Media Model

For my research, I visited NPR headquarters and PBS NewsHour in Washington, D.C., as well as several local public media stations across the United States. These included West Virginia Public Broadcasting in Charleston, Cincinnati Public Radio, Ideastream Public Media in Cleveland, Michigan Public, Detroit PBS, KJZZ in Phoenix, Arizona, Minnesota Public Radio in Minneapolis, and KMUN in Astoria, Oregon. I wanted to understand how local stations were responding to the political and financial crisis through fundraising, restructuring, and community mobilization. I was also interested in how the origins and decentralized structure of the American public broadcasting system shape its ability to respond to political pressure.

The experience revealed that the system's greatest weakness – its dependence on audiences for financial support – may also be one of its greatest sources of resilience.

Because public media organizations rely heavily on private support – now more than ever, fundraising has become a central part of their operations. Their most stable, no-strings-attached source of funding is listener support. Individual donations provide unrestricted funding that allows stations to maintain editorial independence and continue producing news and educational programming regardless of changes in the political climate.

Stations use a wide range of strategies, including online donations, direct mail campaigns, on-air fundraising drives, and planned giving through financial instruments such as stocks, bonds, and retirement accounts.

Coming from Germany's public broadcasting system, where funding is secured through mandatory public contributions, I was struck by how central this culture of fundraising is to American public radio. I spent several days at Detroit's NPR member station, WDET, where I observed its spring fundraising drive. Watching a pledge drive firsthand meant hearing editors and reporters explain on air why their work matters, why independent, fact-based journalism is essential, and why listeners should contribute.
The experience also revealed how deeply the station was connected to its community.
Fundraising was not simply presented as a transaction in which listeners paid for a service. Instead, it was framed as an opportunity for people to protect something they considered valuable and to participate in the future of their community. That distinction is important. In the United States, fundraising is not merely a mechanism for replacing lost government money. It is also a mechanism through which public media builds and maintains relationships with its audience.

U.S. Donation Culture and Audience Relationships

What once appeared to be a major weakness of the US public media system may now prove to be its greatest advantage – and perhaps the key reason why public media has a chance of surviving under the Trump administration.

Donations are much more deeply rooted in American culture than in many European countries, a cultural difference reflected in the development of two very different public broadcasting systems. Vincent Duffy, News Director at Michigan Public, suggested that this difference reflects contrasting cultural mindsets. He argued that European societies tend to have a stronger sense of collective responsibility, in which everyone contributes to shared systems, whereas American culture places more emphasis on individual choice and control over how money is spent. According to Duffy, this individualistic approach is also reflected in debates over healthcare and social security. He said that many Americans still hold the view that they should take care of themselves and their families rather than relying on collective solutions.

Interestingly, the same collectivist mindset in Germany may also have created a dependency. Without the broadcasting contribution, German public broadcasting would most likely quickly go dark. Unlike in the United States, there is little expectation that individuals will step in to sustain these institutions through private contributions, as responsibility has traditionally been assigned to the collective.

The American model creates a different relationship. Because listeners are asked to contribute directly, they are repeatedly given an opportunity to decide whether a station is worth supporting. This can create a stronger sense of personal ownership and involvement.

Beyond the financial aspect, fundraising serves as a way to build relationships with audiences. Public media organizations do not present donations simply as payments for a service, but as an opportunity for people to support something they value and remain connected to their communities. In this sense, audience participation becomes a central element of the public-private funding model.

This reflects a fundamental difference in the relationship between U.S. and German public media. The dependence on listener contributions in the U.S. may appear to be a disadvantage, but it has also helped create a strong and lasting connection among stations, their audiences, and the communities they serve. In U.S. public media, audience engagement extends beyond fundraising campaigns and is embedded in everyday operations. Organizations regularly seek feedback, ask audiences about their concerns, and incorporate this dialogue into their editorial decisions. This ongoing exchange strengthens the perception that audiences have a meaningful stake in the organization.

At PBS Detroit, for example, Ed Moore, Vice President of Content, pioneered the so-called "engagement-to-content model," which focuses on direct interaction with community leaders, stakeholders, and neighborhood residents and uses their feedback to shape programming. Based on this approach, Detroit PBS has developed sustained coverage of issues including racial injustice, environmental justice, police reform, neighborhood revitalization, and workforce equity and development.

Such practices point to a fundamental distinction between public and commercial media. The relationship between a public media organization and the public is not merely that of a broadcaster to a consumer, but of a public institution to the communities it serves. Audience engagement therefore reflects the original idea underlying public media – to provide a shared space in which citizens can see their experiences and concerns represented, encounter different perspectives, and participate in the formation of a common public discourse. Its democratic importance lies not only in the information it provides, but also in the sustained relationship it maintains with the public and the accountability that this relationship entails.

"Rage-Giving": The Audience Strikes Back

The relationship between public media and its audiences became particularly visible after the federal funding cuts. Across the United States, threats to public broadcasting have sparked an unexpected wave of public support for local public radio and television stations. As communities reacted to the attacks, many listeners opened their wallets – a phenomenon known as "rage-giving."

By July 2025, roughly 120,000 new donors had contributed around $20 million to public radio and television stations nationwide, according to Michael Heiplik, president and chief executive of the Contributor Development Partnership. Overall donations were approximately $70 million higher than during the previous 12-month period, reflecting a significant increase in public engagement. For many supporters, the donations represented more than a financial contribution: they were a way to defend trusted local institutions and preserve journalism, educational programming, and emergency information services.

The impact has been especially visible at individual stations. "Rage donations" helped drive record-breaking fundraising campaigns, including an unprecedented $8 million in private contributions for South Dakota Public Broadcasting (SDPB). During my visits to public media stations, I repeatedly heard similar accounts. Staff members described pledge drives that had performed better than ever before and reported receiving a significant number of "rage donations" from listeners who wanted to demonstrate their support in response to the funding cuts.

A study of 50 public media organizations, conducted by the industry publication Current, found that donor growth increased by 61 percent between August 2024 and August 2025. The shift was also notable among younger audiences: the share of donors aged 45 or younger nearly doubled, reaching 24 percent of all contributors. This suggests that public media's appeal extends beyond its traditional donor base and may be reaching a new generation of supporters.

The national public radio network NPR also received two of the largest gifts in its history. An $80 million donation was designated to support NPR's digital transformation, while another $33 million gift was intended to provide financial relief to member stations facing severe budget pressures. Together, these contributions demonstrate the depth of support for public media at a moment of uncertainty.

However, the surge in donations cannot fully compensate for the scale of the financial challenge ahead. The more than $535 million in federal cuts initiated last July represent a long-term funding gap, and public broadcasters had also been relying on additional federal support to sustain operations in the coming years. While "rage-giving" has provided an important short-term boost, a wave of public anger or urgency is unlikely to continue indefinitely.

For many stations, the path forward depends not only on moments of crisis but on years of relationship-building with their audiences. Fundraising experts emphasize that lasting support comes from trust, transparency, and the demonstration of value to communities. Leslie VanSant, Chief Advancement Officer at WAMU 88.5 in Washington, D.C., has noted that successful fundraising is built on long-term relationships rather than fear or outrage.
Public media organizations cannot repeatedly tell audiences they are on the verge of shutting down unless donations increase. Such messaging risks creating the impression of an unstable organization and may discourage potential donors from contributing.

Instead, successful fundraising focuses on understanding how donors will react, nurturing lasting relationships, and demonstrating the value of supporting public media. The goal is to create a sense of community in which supporters feel they are genuinely part of the organization rather than simply paying for a service. This makes the current crisis more than a story about fundraising. It is a test of whether decades of audience relationships can provide sufficient institutional resilience to offset the loss of public funding.

5. Local Journalism

The greatest consequences of a national political conflict are being felt by local broadcasters that were rarely the primary focus of the debate. These stations provide essential community services and have built a high level of trust within their communities – a striking contrast to the broader trust challenges facing national news organizations.

Research consistently shows that local media enjoy significantly higher levels of public trust than national news organizations. Studies conducted by the Poynter Institute and the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) indicate that while many audiences express skepticism toward national broadcast networks, they tend to place considerable trust in local journalists. This trust stems from the close relationship between local reporters and the communities they serve. Unlike national correspondents who may only cover a community during major events, local journalists often live in the area, have longstanding ties to residents, and are visible members of the community. They are perceived as accessible and accountable, allowing audiences to interact with them directly and fostering a stronger sense of personal connection.

Victor Pickard, the C. Edwin Baker Professor of Media Policy and Political Economy at the University of Pennsylvania, similarly emphasizes that survey data consistently demonstrate relatively high levels of trust in public media across the political spectrum. He argues that this trust is linked not only to the public service mission of these organizations but also to their local presence. Even respondents who express general distrust of the media or perceive national news organizations as politically biased often report positive attitudes toward their local media institutions, suggesting that familiarity and community engagement can overcome broader skepticism toward the news media.

Maryanne Zeleznik, Vice President of News at Cincinnati Public Radio, highlights how the role of public radio has evolved in response to changes in the media landscape over the course of her 40-year career in public radio. Public radio initially focused primarily on distributing national content from NPR, with relatively little emphasis on local reporting. But as audiences gained access to national and international news from an increasing number of sources, and as local newspapers and other community news outlets declined, the value of locally produced journalism became increasingly apparent. Public radio stations have therefore shifted their focus toward providing in-depth local reporting and strengthening their connection to the communities they serve.

The Decline of Local Journalism

Because public media has become such an important provider of local journalism, it is especially concerning that the smallest local stations have been hit hardest by the recent funding cuts. According to NPR, only two member stations have left the network since the funding cuts took effect. If those figures are accurate, KMUN is one of them. I visited KMUN, a small community radio station on the Oregon coast. The station lost about 25 percent of its budget due to the cuts, forcing difficult decisions about its future. Rather than reducing its local news operation, KMUN chose to discontinue NPR programming and concentrate on what it considers its greatest strength: local reporting.

This decision allows the station to remain a vital source of information for communities across the Astoria region – not only by providing local news, but also by serving as the area's official emergency broadcaster. Its public-service role has become even more important as the local media landscape has deteriorated. The station has not only faced cuts to its own funding, it has also seen a drastic decline in the quantity and quality of local journalism available to it.

The broader local media landscape has been shrinking for years. Most recently, “The Astorian”, the region's oldest local newspaper, was sold, and its newsroom was significantly reduced. KMUN has partnerships with local newspapers, sharing content and resources, but many of those organizations have been in decline for years as print media and local news have struggled. As a result, the station is operating in a fundamentally different media landscape, with far less locally produced content available to draw on. Much more of the reporting now falls to KMUN itself, which covers five counties.

Katie Frankowicz, who appears to be one of the area's last remaining local reporters, pointed out that local newspapers increasingly reprint state press releases as news articles – something she said would be unthinkable in a healthy, robust news environment. She told me that local journalism had a much stronger presence when she began her career ten years ago. Today, she said, people in her coverage area are simply no longer accustomed to being approached by reporters. Public officials have grown less used to media scrutiny and often feel little urgency to respond to press inquiries. As local newsrooms disappear, she argues, public accountability weakens. When officials no longer expect journalists to be watching their work regularly, they become less responsive – even when there are stories of clear public interest, such as officer-involved shootings, which Frankowicz mentioned as an example. This erosion of local journalism represents one of the most serious challenges facing local communities.

6. How Public Media Is Adapting

In response to the financial uncertainty caused by the loss of federal support, the Public Media Bridge Fund was created as a short-term emergency effort, financed by a group of philanthropies, to help local stations remain operational as they adapt to a new funding environment. The fund is an initiative of Public Media Company, a nonprofit organization that has worked for 25 years to help local media organizations strengthen their business models and achieve long-term sustainability.

According to Public Media Company CEO Tim Isgitt, the average public television station previously received about 14% of its revenue from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), while the average public radio station received about 7–8%. However, the impact varied significantly: Public Media Company identified approximately 115 local public media organizations that received 30% or more of their revenue from CPB funding and classified them as at risk of severe financial difficulties or potential shutdown.

To support these vulnerable organizations, the Public Media Bridge Fund has raised approximately $73 million in philanthropic support toward its $100 million fundraising goal, according to Isgitt. The funding is intended to give locally governed and locally owned public media organizations time and resources to adapt to the loss of federal support and to develop sustainable, long-term strategies. The goal is not to permanently replace CPB funding, but to help stations remain operational while they transition to a post-CPB environment.

Besides NPR and PBS, nonprofit organizations such as Public Media Infrastructure and Greater Public are working to help stations strengthen their audience research, digital infrastructure and marketing capabilities. Greater Public's approach to what it calls "audience development" focuses on identifying unmet needs within communities: finding areas where people are looking for information, services or connection, and determining how public media can respond. That response might take the form of traditional radio programming, live events, daily text messages or other forms of engagement. The aim is not only to serve communities but also to explore whether these relationships could eventually support new models of financial sustainability.

Greater Public's "Researching Unmet Needs" (RUN) Study, a major public media audience research project conducted in 2024–2025 and led by the Station Resource Group, Greater Public and the Public Media Content Collective, examined the information needs of communities across the United States. The project involved conversations with roughly 30,000 people to understand what kinds of local information they wanted, which needs were going unmet, and whether they were aware of the role public media could play in addressing those gaps.

Among the key findings of the RUN Study was a strong unmet demand for live, in-person community connection and hyperlocal reporting, rather than repetitive national news feeds. Audiences also valued transparent, solutions-oriented journalism that highlights how local communities are addressing challenges. The research found that liberals and conservatives alike expressed a strong desire for more local news and historical programming, despite some differences on more specialized topics.

7. Who Pays for Public Media?

When private money sustains the system, is it still public media?

Despite its public-service mission, U.S. public media has long relied heavily on private revenue sources. In that sense, calling it a "public" system could be seen as something of a misnomer. Now that public funding has disappeared, other actors are likely to step in. Individual philanthropists and large foundations are expected to provide support where government funding once existed. But does relying more heavily on private donors mean media organizations become beholden to particular groups or individuals? That is a legitimate concern.

Traditionally, public media has relied heavily on small-dollar donations from members. Because funding comes from a broad base of supporters, no single donor typically wields disproportionate influence. Minnesota Public Radio, for example, has built a donor base of around 150,000 people in a single state, illustrating how a large and diverse membership can help protect editorial independence. A diversified funding model provides additional safeguards: at many public radio stations, corporate underwriting accounts for roughly a third of revenue, while individual donors provide most of the rest. Most of these contributions remain relatively small, with the vast majority of donors giving less than $1,000.

Foundations, by contrast, have historically played a limited role in funding public media. Their support has generally been project-based—funding specific reporting initiatives, new beats, or collaborations—rather than providing unrestricted operating support. As a result, individual donors have remained the primary source of revenue. The distinction is not always clear-cut, however, as many foundations are ultimately funded by individual philanthropists.

Since the loss of public funding, the share of revenue coming from major donors has increased significantly. According to Andrew Leitch from Greater Public, contributions from large donors have risen from the high-20-percent range to nearly 40 percent of total funding. Organizations are consequently seeing more gifts in the $5,000, $10,000, or even $20,000 range, meaning funding is becoming more concentrated.

The reasons for this shift are complex. One important factor is that participation in charitable giving in the United States has declined in recent years, driven partly by rising living costs and broader economic pressures.

The debate ultimately comes down to a difficult question: how can public media secure the resources it needs without compromising its independence? There is no perfect funding model. The challenge is balancing two competing risks: dependence on government and dependence on private wealth. Hungary under the past government of Viktor Orbán illustrates the dangers of relying on government funding when political leaders erode the boundaries between public financing and editorial independence. Those norms can weaken – and in parts of Europe and elsewhere, they already have.

8. Two Models of Public Media: Germany and the United States

How does the American public broadcasting system compare to the German one, and despite the differences, is there anything Germany can learn from the way U.S. public media are defending themselves in this political climate?

From a German perspective, it is fascinating to see the range of organizations and initiatives in the United States working to sustain, strengthen, and expand public media. Unlike Germany, where public broadcasting is organized through institutions such as ARD, the U.S. system operates within a much more decentralized and competitive media landscape. Across the country, a wide range of organizations, stations and initiatives have emerged to address different aspects of public media – from content production and audience development to fundraising, digital infrastructure and marketing. The ecosystem is further diversified by organizations such as American Public Media and PRX, which, alongside NPR and PBS, produce and distribute public media content.

According to Andrew Leitch, COO at Greater Public, roughly 7.3 million people in the United States contribute financially to public radio and public television. This represents a significant level of public engagement, especially considering that participation is entirely voluntary. In Germany, by contrast, public broadcasting achieves near-universal participation through the mandatory broadcasting contribution system.

Andrew Leitch pointed to public media's long-established fundraising system as an important advantage. He argued that the fundraising infrastructure built up over several decades allows stations to use existing revenues to cross-subsidize efforts to reach new audiences. This gives stations room to experiment with reaching underserved or younger audiences without the immediate pressure to generate revenue from them.

Younger audiences, in particular, often have less disposable income and tend to contribute less to charitable organizations. Leitch argued that putting too much emphasis on monetizing these audiences too early could hinder efforts to build lasting relationships with them. Instead, a station might identify a strong interest in an issue such as water quality in northwestern Illinois and focus on building a community around it. The goal would be to develop a passionate and engaged audience first – one that could eventually become a source of financial support for the station.

What is particularly interesting in this context is the so-called sustaining membership model that many U.S. public media stations offer alongside traditional one-time donations. Under this model, listeners commit to contributing a fixed amount each month, providing stations with a more predictable and stable source of revenue. In principle, this approach bears some similarities to Germany's broadcasting contribution system: both rely on regular payments from the public to sustain media institutions. However, there is one fundamental difference. While Germany's broadcasting contribution is a legally required public fee, sustaining members in the United States choose whether and how much to contribute voluntarily.

This distinction is more significant than it may initially appear. In Germany, critics of public broadcasting have popularized the term "Zwangsgebühr" ("forced fee"), a pejorative term frequently used by opponents – particularly from the populist right - to portray the broadcasting contribution as an unfair obligation. At the same time, some liberal and younger audiences have raised similar questions from a different perspective: why should they pay for services from organizations such as ARD or Deutschlandradio if they rarely use them, especially when a vast amount of information and entertainment is available online?

However, this argument overlooks a central principle behind publicly funded broadcasting systems. In the United States, public broadcasters can emphasize individual choice: audiences decide whether to support a station, whether they value its journalism, and whether they want to contribute to its future. In countries with stronger public broadcasting models, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, the purpose of a universal funding mechanism differs. The goal is to ensure an independent, fact-based media system that is not dependent on audience preferences, popularity, or individuals' willingness to pay. By separating funding from direct consumer choice, these systems aim to protect public-interest journalism and uphold the principle that reliable, independent information should be available to society as a whole.

Ideological Battlegrounds

Public media has long been an ideological battleground, with a seemingly endless dispute over political bias – in the United States as in Europe, critics repeatedly accusing broadcasters of leaning towards progressive or left-wing positions.

A majority of Republicans accused PBS and NPR of having a left-leaning bias and being a waste of taxpayer money. In a post on Truth Social, Trump described NPR, the public radio network, and PBS, the network of non-commercial television stations, as “radical left monsters.” In April 2025, the White House published a statement titled “The NPR, PBS Grift Has Ripped Us Off for Too Long,” accusing both organizations of spreading “radical, woke propaganda disguised as ‘news.’” The White House cited a number of examples in support of its allegations, including an NPR Valentine’s Day program about queer animals and an NPR report examining the link between fatphobia and racism. Other examples, the White House argued, demonstrated that NPR and PBS had “zero tolerance for non-left viewpoints.”

The debate in the United States is also resonating in Germany, where public broadcasting has come under increasing pressure from the political right. With state elections approaching and the right-wing AfD potentially on course to win a majority in Saxony-Anhalt, there is particular concern about the future of public broadcasting. The AfD has opposed Germany’s public broadcasting system for years and has said it would seek to abolish the license fee and fundamentally dismantle the system if it came to power.

Public broadcasters in Germany are under fire not only from the AfD and right-wing media outlets that support it, such as Nius and Apollo News. Within the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), too, there is a growing chorus of criticism alleging a “left-wing” bias in the broadcasters’ coverage. The right-wing conservative think tank „Republik 21“, which has close ties to the CDU and advocates abandoning the longstanding political firewall against cooperation with the AfD, has campaigned systematically against Germany’s public broadcasting system for years. More recently, influential CDU politicians and officeholders have joined the criticism. In late 2025, for example, Minister of State for Culture Wolfram Weimer described public broadcasting as being "politically left-leaning," and by referring to the license fee as "compulsory contributions" (“Zwangsbeiträge”), a pejorative term widely used by the populist right, he openly adopted their framing.

Many journalists at public media outlets told me how much effort they put into producing reporting that is factual, fair and politically independent – in an increasingly polarized debate in which public broadcasting itself has become an ideological battleground.

Jerome Vaughn of WDET, for example, stressed that the station’s goal was not to favor one political party over another, but to report what was happening and leave listeners to make their own judgments. He contrasted this approach with explicitly partisan outlets such as Fox News and MS NOW, formerly MSNBC, arguing that public media should occupy a space between the two rather than skew its coverage toward either side of the political spectrum.

Maryanne Zeleznik of Cincinnati Public Radio likewise described her newsroom as politically independent and committed to balance. In her view, however, the increasingly conservative orientation of other news outlets has made NPR and public radio appear more liberal by comparison, even though she considers their reporting broadly centrist.

Yet established journalistic standards may not settle a dispute that has become fundamentally ideological. Victor Pickard, a leading scholar of media policy, journalism, and the political economy of communication, questioned whether the debate over “bias” itself was useful. In the current political climate, he argued, virtually any reporting that challenges Donald Trump’s preferred narratives or talking points can be dismissed as liberal, creating an inherently skewed definition of what constitutes bias. More broadly, he said, journalists have historically been accused of liberal bias simply for scrutinizing those in power – a fundamental part of the journalistic role.

Pickard also argued that public media should not necessarily be judged by the same standard of balance as commercial news organizations. Because public broadcasters exist within a wider commercial media ecosystem, he said, they should focus on stories and communities that commercial outlets tend to overlook, including ethnic minorities, racial justice issues, and the experiences of poorer people. Yet these subjects, he noted, are often themselves characterized by conservatives as evidence of a liberal agenda. For Pickard, framing the legitimacy of public media primarily around whether its coverage is "balanced" therefore misses the point: its purpose is not to provide equal weight to every political position, but to provide journalism that serves the public interest.

Lessons for Europe?

Victor Pickard offers a particularly stark warning about the trajectory of the US media system. His research focuses extensively on the relationships among media institutions, democracy, public policy, and the commercial pressures that shape journalism. From this perspective, he describes the United States as "a cautionary tale for what not to do".

Historically, the US made a fundamental policy choice by leaving much of its broadcast media system dependent on advertising revenue and commercial profit. When public broadcasting was finally established in the late 1960s, it was created on a relatively weak and chronically underfunded basis. Rather than providing stable public financing, policymakers required public media institutions to compete for private donations and funding from individuals, foundations, and corporations. The highly commercialized, corporate-dominated media system in the United States today was therefore not inevitable. It was the result of deliberate policy choices. Pickard sees the current political moment as exposing the consequences of those choices.

The Trump administration has sought to undermine independent journalism and suppress critical and dissenting voices in the media. This has included defunding public media, publicly attacking journalists and news organizations, restricting access to certain institutions and press spaces, and using regulatory mechanisms to pressure media companies.
Pickard argues that the Federal Communications Commission has also become an important instrument in this broader strategy. Regulatory decisions concerning mergers, media ownership, and ostensibly neutral policies such as equal-time requirements or rules concerning news distortion can, in his view, become tools for political pressure when media organizations fear that challenging the administration could jeopardize their corporate interests.

Pickard draws a parallel to the model of media control associated with former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, arguing that an aspiring authoritarian leader need not seize newsrooms directly. Instead, political power can work through sympathetic or dependent business elites who exert influence over media organizations on the government's behalf. In the United States, the growing power of wealthy media owners and oligarchs, including Elon Musk, the Ellison family, Rupert Murdoch, and Jeff Bezos, illustrates how concentrated private ownership can facilitate such political influence. The danger lies precisely in the structure of the media market: a highly commercialized and concentrated, oligopolistic system can become particularly vulnerable to authoritarian capture because a relatively small number of powerful individuals and corporations control large parts of the information environment.

This, Pickard argues, offers important lessons for Europe and other democratic societies. The American experience demonstrates what can happen when a media system becomes vulnerable not only to government capture, but also to capture by concentrated private capital and market forces. For him, the central issue is therefore not simply the conduct of an individual political leader. It is the underlying structure of the media system that makes such political intervention possible.

Pickard calls the result a “perfect storm”: decades of deregulation, commercialization, media concentration, and weakened public-interest protections have left the US media system unusually susceptible to political takeover. What is happening under Trump, he says, should therefore not be understood solely as a sudden assault on journalism, but as the culmination of structural weaknesses that have been developing for generations.

For Europe, Pickard's argument is ultimately a warning about the importance of media policy as a pillar of democracy. Democratic societies cannot assume that independent journalism will survive on its own if media institutions are left entirely to market pressures. Protecting pluralism requires deliberate policy choices: sustainable public financing, safeguards against excessive media concentration, meaningful public-interest obligations, and institutional protections for independent journalism.

Conclusion

The crisis facing American public media is about more than the loss of federal funding. It is a test of whether a decentralized public-service media system can remain independent, locally relevant and financially sustainable when one of its central sources of support disappears. The consequences are being felt most strongly not by NPR and PBS, which dominate the political debate, but by the local stations that provide journalism, emergency information and community services in places where other news organizations are disappearing.

The American model has always contained a contradiction. Public media was created to serve the public interest without the stable public financing found in many European systems. That made it financially vulnerable, but it also forced stations to build unusually close relationships with their audiences. The wave of “rage donations” following the funding cuts demonstrates that these relationships can provide remarkable resilience. As Victor Pickard argues, donations show a genuine public appetite to preserve public media. But he also cautions that voluntary contributions are unlikely to provide a sustainable funding model, particularly for smaller and rural stations with limited donor bases. In the long term, he believes federal funding will need to return – and at substantially higher levels than before.

At the same time, the disruption may create opportunities for innovation. Tim Isgitt argues that CPB funding often helped preserve the existing system rather than encouraging stations to reconsider how they operated. Its disappearance is now forcing organizations to confront questions of scale, cooperation and shared services. Some stations may lose out, but others may use the disruption to experiment with new ways of working and reaching audiences.

The American experience therefore offers Europe a more complicated lesson than simply “public funding is better” or “audience funding is better.” Audience fundraising can create a powerful sense of ownership and community, but it cannot easily replace the stability of public funding. Conversely, Germany’s guaranteed funding provides important protection from market pressures and individual donors, but that security may also have contributed to a weaker direct relationship between public broadcasters and their audiences. The recent political attacks on public broadcasting in Germany make that question increasingly important.

What is striking about the American response is that stations have been able to frame their survival not as a government responsibility but as a matter for the public itself. Messages such as “Defunded but not defeated” and “By the People, For the People” turn financial vulnerability into a claim of independence. There is something genuinely grassroots about this model – but it should not be romanticized. Audience fundraising is both an inspiring example of civic engagement and a consequence of a system that never provided public media with sufficient stable funding.

Ultimately, the lesson of the American crisis is that public media needs both financial security and public legitimacy. Neither government funding nor private donations alone can guarantee independence. What matters is whether media institutions can maintain the trust of the communities they serve while being protected from political interference and excessive dependence on private wealth.

For Europe, the American experience should therefore be understood as both a warning and an opportunity. Public media cannot take its legitimacy for granted, but neither should financial security come at the expense of meaningful relationships with audiences. The future of public-service journalism may depend on finding a balance between the strengths of both systems: the stability of collective public funding and the sense of ownership, engagement and accountability that can emerge when audiences are directly involved in sustaining the media they value.