

## **PBS Stations Shared Donor Lists With Democrats, Stirring Trouble**

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### **Body**

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At least three public television stations in the biggest markets in the country say they have been trading their lists of contributors with Democratic fund-raising groups, a practice that may be legal but that some Congressional Republicans suggest could jeopardize the public financing of all public television and radio stations.

Officials from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have condemned the practice and said today that they were trying to determine the extent of stations' swapping, selling, renting or otherwise providing their donor lists to political parties in preparation for an emergency Congressional hearing set for Tuesday. Public television stations in New York, Washington and Boston acknowledged that they had sold or swapped their lists but said they had stopped doing so. The Boston and New York stations said they had fired those responsible, and the Washington station said it was evaluating the case.

The disclosures by the stations -- WNET in New York, WGBH in Boston and WETA in Washington -- have roiled Republicans on Capitol Hill, who are taking them as confirmation of longtime concerns that public television leans to the political left and should not be financed with public tax dollars. The Federal Government provides about 15 percent of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's \$200 billion budget.

Nonprofit organizations are prohibited from engaging in political activity. But the Internal Revenue Service says such organizations can sell or rent their mailing lists to candidates or parties if it makes such lists available to all candidates and parties.

Spokesmen for the stations said that in some cases they had made their lists available to Democratic and Republican groups alike. But they said they were concerned about the perception that they were biased, which could damage their standing among members and cripple their financing from Washington.

"Anything that our viewers and listeners could reasonably interpret as a partisan act, we shouldn't engage in," said Robert T. Coonrod, president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. "Regardless of the reality, it looks like you were doing something political."

Mr. Coonrod said the practice of list-swapping was common, but usually did not extend to political organizations and that the corporation did not condone that practice.

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"The health of public broadcasting is built on the trust we have with our viewers and listeners, and anything we do that might erode that trust is just not smart," he said.

Concerns were first raised when The Boston Globe reported in May that WGBH had exchanged membership lists with the Democratic National Committee on two occasions -- a move that Republicans said initially appeared to be isolated. But as of today, officials at public stations in New York and Washington acknowledged that they, too, had shared their fund-raising lists.

Republicans said documents showed that the station WQED in San Francisco had provided its member list to a broker who in turn provided it to Democratic organizations, including the 1998 re-election campaign of Senator Barbara Boxer of California. A spokesman for the station, David Shaw, told The Associated Press today that the station had leased its list, through a broker, to the Democratic National Committee in 1996.

Stella Giammasi, a spokeswoman for WNET in New York, said that an internal investigation found "that without our knowledge and through some misinterpretation of our policy, the list brokers we employ had made our list available to both Democratic and Republican organizations," which she would not name. "We can only guess this was done as a purely commercial gesture; it did not reflect station policy, and they were fired," she said. She would not name the list brokers, which are third parties that conduct the transactions.

Ms. Giammasi said there had been more than one instance of list sharing but the matter was still being investigated. Still, she sought to assure the station's donors that their names were not given out for political purposes by noting that donors were given the chance to "opt out" of having their names given to other organizations. But she acknowledged that this still posed a political problem for public stations in general. "We're always worried about our funding," she said.

Republicans came to power in Congress four years ago attacking public broadcasting as liberal and elitist and promising to eliminate Federal money for it. But the broad public support for programming like "Sesame Street" helped silence Republican hostility. As Ken Johnson, a spokesman for Representative W.J. "Billy" Tauzin, a Louisiana Republican and chairman of a subcommittee that oversees public broadcasting, put it, "From a practical political standpoint, it was a public relations nightmare for Republicans to talk about shoveling dirt on Big Bird."

As a result, Congress increased financing for public broadcasting. And earlier this month, Mr. Tauzin's committee was preparing to raise the authorization for next year to \$300 million from \$250 million. It was also providing money to help public television with its \$1.7 billion conversion to digital broadcasting.

But the disclosures that the stations have shared their donor lists with Democratic interests, including the Democratic National Committee, in a number of instances over a period of years, have prompted Mr. Tauzin to scale back the dollars and to vow to impose restrictions.

"He feels betrayed, misled and lied to," Mr. Johnson said. "We had many members committed to some type of increase for fiscal 2000, only to have this blow up in our faces. It reinforces the old stereotypes, it picks the scab off the wound, and it opens up public broadcasting to another big fight on Capitol Hill."

Mr. Tauzin is also trying to satisfy other Republicans who have never been happy with the financing increases. One is Representative Michael G. Oxley, Republican of Ohio, who is competing with Mr. Tauzin for the chairmanship of the Commerce Committee next year when the current chairman must give it up because of term limits.

Peggy Peterson, Mr. Oxley's spokeswoman, said that Mr. Oxley and Mr. Tauzin were negotiating now on a new level of financing for public television and that it would be lower than Mr. Tauzin's earlier amounts. She said of Mr. Oxley, "His stance has been to limit the funding and try to slowly increase C.P.B.'s reliance on private funds."

Mike Collins, a spokesman for the Republican National Committee, said that his organization had "never leased a public broadcasting list," but he added that in rare cases it had used lists from charities. "It's reckless," he said. "It puts these public broadcasters in a very embarrassing position with regard to their donors and a dangerous one with regard to the I.R.S."

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Jenny Backus, a spokeswoman for the Democratic National Committee, said the practice was common and that the television stations had done nothing unusual. She said the committee's broker had given it a list of 123 organizations and the committee picked 62, which included WGBH, from which it wanted 20,000 names to send solicitations. "We didn't have any way of knowing that WGBH had an internal policy against this," she said. "This is standard practice conducted on the open market."

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## Classification

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