

Public Media and Facebook Money: The Other Public Networks

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Lest you feel this article is singling out NPR for criticism, I have posed similar questions to the other major public broadcasting networks:

1. Has your company ever sold program underwriting/sponsorship or received any funding from Facebook. If so, please let me know when, for what, and the amounts.
2. As a major Producer, has your company ever rejected some funders that wanted to buy underwriting? If so, can you identify them and briefly explain your rationale.
3. Do you have formal policies regarding the acceptance or rejection of potential sponsors? Please point me to them.
4. Do you believe it is your responsibility to identify funders whom you believe are “bad actors” and to refuse to associate with them via program sponsorship? Has your policy/practiced changed in response to the leak of internal Facebook documents?
5. If you have accepted such funding, are you confident it did not affect the content of your programming?
6. If you do accept sponsorship, do you have any obligation to acknowledge that fact in stories or programs that make mention of the sponsor?

Here are summaries of their responses:



Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)



American Public Media (APM)



Public Radio Exchange (PRX)



PBS basks in the fact that for the 17th consecutive year, it has again been named [America's most trusted institution](#). Its [Standards and Practices](#) document calls for accuracy, fairness, transparency, inclusiveness and accountability. The full 12-page document is detailed and well-thought-out, but like NPR, it seems more focused on protecting PBS's good name *rather* than protecting the public from “bad actors.” [PBS lists only 23 corporate and foundation funders](#), but that's because individual public TV shows are produced and funded by stations and other producers. These include NOVA, Frontline, PBS Newshour and the rest of the shows that populate PBS. [PBS Newshour's Corporate Funders](#) include Mutual of America, Consumer Cellular, BNSF, Fidelity, Johnson & Johnson and Raymond James – whose funding is supplemented by more than 200 foundation and individual sponsors.

A PBS spokesperson said the public TV network had rejected “many funders that wanted to buy underwriting” but would not identify them. Specifically, PBS would not answer whether it had ever accepted funding from Facebook. Like NPR, PBS said it was confident that there is firewall between

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funding and program content. The spokesperson declined to answer was whether Facebook had ever been a PBS funder. And, most significantly, it did not respond to the question: “Do you believe it is your (PBS’s) responsibility to identify funders whom you believe are “bad actors” and to refuse to associate with them via program sponsorship?”



[American Public Media](#) was less forthcoming, responding to only 1 of the 6 questions posed. Director of Communication Suzie Kim Scott said APM has never sold program underwriting or sponsorship to Facebook. As an overall policy statement, APM’s Scott said: “American Public Media Group is committed to following best practices when selling underwriting and accepting sponsorships. In all cases we review potential underwriting partners for our inventory. Both our financial and underwriting teams are involved in the review process to ensure that brands associated with our shows align with our mission and values. We will continue our work in strengthening our communities and businesses through these opportunities.”

However, APM was unwilling to say whether it had ever rejected a sponsor; whether it had formal policies on accepting or rejecting sponsors; whether it had any responsibility to identify “bad actor” potential funders; whether it has a clear firewall between funders and its news activities, and whether it has any obligation to disclose funders when they are the subject of a news story.

APM’s web site does list [APM Sponsors](#) and [Total Support](#). It’s policy is succinct: *“American Public Media and its local operating companies accept sponsorship at their sole discretion, and reserve the right to refuse underwriting from any company for any reason. American Public Media accepts sponsorship as an endorsement of the value of public radio and the special value of American Public Media programming. Any implied endorsement flows from the underwriter to American Public Media, not American Public Media to the underwriter.”*

Even though “at their sole discretion” stresses APM/MPR’s independence, I don’t think it is a great policy for a public media company. It focuses on their **independence**, but not **their accountability** to the public. I do like the statement about “Any implied endorsement flows from the underwriter to American Public Media, *not American Public Media to the underwriter.*” But, these are just statements. Let’s be honest. The reason companies sponsor public media is seldom totally selfless ... companies do believe that there is an “implied endorsement” when a public media company accepts sponsorship and acknowledges it on the air.

Because APM is part of the [American Public Media Group](#) which includes Minnesota Public Radio and Southern California Public Radio, there is no way for an outsider like me to break down discretely the total amount of corporate sponsorship APM receives as a percent of total revenue. *As for budget numbers – total corporate sponsorship as a percent of total revenue budgeted, APM’s Scott said, “We’re unable to furnish these numbers at this time.”*

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[The Public Radio Exchange](#) Other than stating that had not accepted funding from Facebook, (PRX) declined the opportunity to comment on corporate sponsorship. It's programs and numerous podcasts are shown [here](#) and include *This American Life*, *The Moth*, *The World, Reveal*, *the Takeaway*, *Snap Judgment* and *Sound Opinions*. Its web site pitches [sponsorship](#). Its most recent IRS filing shows total revenue of \$22-million, with nearly \$5 million (22.3%) in "contributions." Institutional funders include the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the MacArthur Foundation, the Barr Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

PBS's Major Producing Stations

Because PBS's main program producers are major public television stations, the same questions have been posed to WNET New York, WETA in Washington and GBH in Boston. **None of them would reveal whether they had ever accepted funding from Facebook. But WETA did reveal a surprise.**



WETA Washington D.C. is the producing station for the *PBS Newhour*, in association with WNET New York. WETA'S Nick Massella, the *NewsHour's* senior director of brand strategy and communications, **declined to say whether WETA has ever accepted funding of any kind from Facebook, saying only** "we adhere to PBS Funding's Standards and Practices." **However, one of the *NewsHour's* funders is the [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#)**, created in 2015 by Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan. The power couple has said it plans to donate 99% of their wealth over their lifetimes, making it "one of the most well-funded philanthropies in human history." In addition to this gift, the [PBS Newshour list six principal corporate sponsors](#) and some 95 [foundation supporters](#).



New York's WNET also declined to answer any questions about its underwriting/ sponsorship policies and practices including whether Facebook had ever been a program sponsor of any WNET shows including the PBS Newshour which it associate produces with WETA. "We don't have anything to add to your story," said Natasha Padilla, Director, Audience Engagement, The WNET Group. A list of [WNET produced national programs](#) available for sponsorship can be found on their web site. No list of actual WNET sponsors was found. However, the [Sponsorship Group for Public Television](#) – headquartered at GBH in Boston – does identify its [national funders](#).



Likewise, **Boston's GBH (formerly "WGBH") refused to supply answers to the questions including whether they were now or ever had taken Facebook money.** "Thanks for following up. We don't have any additional information to add to your current piece," wrote Erin Callanan, Senior Director of Communications. GBH lists its [current sponsors on its website](#). In addition, see the [Sponsorship Group for Public Television](#) – headquartered at GBH in Boston – and its [national funders](#). for 24 years "television's most-watched history series, [American Experience](#)."