

Public Media's Role in Central Florida, Advancing Equitable and Excellent Education

Kiara Velez

[IDS3947_CMB-25Summer 00104](#)

July 12, 2025

3 Credit Hours

WUCF TV PBS Summer Internship Digital Communications

In a time of rapid media technology change, the role of public media has never been more clear and important: to promote equal access to educational content and reliable information for all ages and incomes. This urgency is present within the local crisis in our neighborhood of Central Florida, and the future of free, balanced and educational media access for local stations. WUCF TV, Central Florida's PBS station, and WUCF FM, Central Florida's only 24/7 commercial-free jazz station, are essential in this top 20 designated market area (DMA) because they serve over 4.5 million residents representing a wide range of incomes, ages, and nationalities. With the average cost of subscriptions to cable services, internet access, and streaming services at an all-time high, free educational programming and timely emergency alerts keep communities safe and informed, according to 1. Dellert Mullan, 2024. For over 50 years, public media has been a source for trusted information and educational enrichment. Recent Congressional action, culminating in the Rescissions Act of 2025 which revoked \$1.1 billion in previously allocated funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, poses a direct threat to equitable media access and vital civic engagement across the nation. Federal funding cuts, approved by Congress and amplified by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who vetoed about \$5.7 million from state public media in the state's 2025-26 budget, created an immediate, critical shortfall for stations, especially in rural areas across the U.S as it clawed back already appropriated funding.

Public media is a unique blend of allocated federal funding, state and local government support, and vital member donations that serve educational and public service interests, with non-profit entities like PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio) striving to produce high-quality, responsive programming for all Americans, via the Corporation

for Public Broadcasting (CPB). This research paper will discuss current challenges to the future of public media funding, define the benefits of local stations like WUCF in Central Florida, and analyze the societal and educational effects that may come as a result.

The History of Public Media

The establishment of public media began with the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 which aimed at addressing a societal need for free high-quality, educational programming for children, arts, current affairs programming, and emergency alert services (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, n.d.). Established as a nonprofit and ‘public-private’ partnership, the CPB was uniquely funded by taxpayers to grant public broadcasters nationwide. This Act created a distinct media ecosystem never before seen in the U.S., intentionally separating itself from the commercial pressures that shaped other entertainment television and radio outlets. A 1967 report by the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television called “Public Television: A Program for Action,” analyzed the distinction of commercial mass television and educational material. The Carnegie Commission pushed for a non-governmental foundation to disburse funds, emphasizing its role in enhancing educational television. The commission also advocated for support of local programs, identifying the importance of focusing on tailored needs for individual communities. According to Connelly (2025), "more than 70 percent of CPB’s five hundred forty-five million annual budget goes directly to these local stations through Community Service Grants—sometimes making up as much as half of an individual station’s budget". The fight for public media is about recognizing its fundamental purpose: to serve needs and provide public benefits and public good that commercial media is not designed or incentivized to fulfill."

Recent Defunding of Public Media

On July 18, 2025 the U.S Senate voted to approve a “recissions package” that cut over one billion in already allocated funds. According to the CPB, “By statute, more than 70% of the annual federal appropriation for public broadcasting goes directly to public media stations through Community Service grants,” much of which went to local, smaller stations. One of the several legislative efforts and bills introduced in both the House and the Senate is [H.R. 1211](#), or the ‘No Propaganda Act’. The bill was proposed in February 2025 and was one among several legislative initiatives advocating for reduced federal appropriations (No Propaganda Act, 2025). According to Protect My Public Media— a national network of advocates working to protect local public media stations and their services, “..Federal funding for public media, primarily through the CPB, amounts to about \$1.60 per person per year (ProtectMyPublicMedia, 2025). This money then goes to local public TV and radio stations (like PBS and NPR stations) to help them cover operational costs and produce local programs. In FY24, Central Florida’s WUCF TV only PBS affiliate and WUCF Jazz being the region’s secondary NPR station received about 14% from CPB funding in community service grants according to the station’s most-recent community impact [report](#). WUCF provides no-cost educational, informational and public news content for educators, families, and homeschooling communities across its nine-county service region. This includes access to PBS LearningMedia, free educational events curated by a trained education staff, and hands-on internship opportunities at the WUCF facility located on the University of Central Florida campus. Now, WUCF has lost close to two million in allocated funds they had been counting on for the next two years, putting these programs at risk.

WUCF Educational Programs

WUCF demonstrates its commitment to equitable education through ongoing educational programs and initiatives. Early learning is a primary focus of the station's annual On My Way To K summer program which is designed to equip caregivers with practical strategies to nurture literacy, math skills, and problem-solving abilities. Meet the Helpers, a multi platform project designed to teach children about important community helpers, helping families better prepare in emergency situations. Introducing children to helpers like police officers, doctors, and meteorologists can ease anxiety and help them feel less afraid during emergencies.

WUCF actively partners with local public libraries and book stores to provide support for children's developmental journey. One such community engagement effort, WUCF's Community Book Bash, resulted in the collection of over 5,000 books for Head Start programs in February 2025. By delivering free educational resources, amplifying local stories, and providing a platform for diverse perspectives, WUCF fosters community connections that reflect the unique needs of Central Florida.

The station recently launched the Broadcast Emergency Alerts and Communications Operations Network (BEACON), an emergency broadcast service for Central Florida, providing 24/7 real-time, critical updates through HD Radio, online streaming, and a mobile app. Loss for public media in Central Florida goes beyond programming cuts, it would impact families who rely most on public media, especially those with limited access to educational resources, by threatening free programs, games, and interactive events that support early learning

across all income levels. Public radio and television provide a resilient pathway for public safety and emergency services to the most vulnerable populations. Through the Florida Public Radio Emergency Network (FPREN), statewide multimedia updates during hurricanes or other weather emergencies are sent to stations across the state through websites, social media channels, and mobile devices. In an increasingly digital and internet connected world, public broadcasting is an irreplaceable asset for ensuring access to reliable information, especially for those without dependable broadband or digital access.

PBS and NPR are non-profit entities that are required to provide educational, high quality content especially for underrepresented communities and kids. As non-profit public service broadcasters, PBS and NPR are mandated to serve the public interest, providing free, high quality content that reflects the needs of children and families. One growing concern is the rise of ‘news deserts’, rural communities isolated with little or no access to local journalism, threatening reliable information where public media may be the only consistent source. The national trend shows fifty-five million Americans have limited or no access to local news as of late 2024 (Metzger, Kristen, 2024) In Central Florida, Sumter County is one of the nine counties within WUCF-TV’s coverage map. WUCF currently provides Sumter County School District with PBS LearningMedia, a free online platform provided by local PBS stations that gives teachers and students free, curriculum-aligned digital resources for PreK-12. Sumter County encompasses several rural communities, where web access is inconsistent and local news outlets are primarily focused on neighboring urban areas, such as The Villages. In 2022, Sumter County asked community participation for a ‘Broadband Availability Map’ for the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, conducting speed tests across the county, implying need for greater

coverage (Sumter County Clerk of Courts, 2022). Public media reaches nearly 99% of the U.S population, critically in many rural communities where public media stations are the only source of local media (Protect My Public Media, n.d.).

Enriching and Excellent Content

Another problem is the loss of enriching content, particularly science, history, and cultural programming. Unlike commercial outlets, which often overlook these genres due to limited profitability, public stations prioritize educational, informational, and culturally valuable programming that might otherwise disappear from the media landscape. Unfortunately mass media companies are driven to ignore subgenres of local and quality material, simply because it does not make them enough money to pursue. PBS reaches 58% of households, averaging 15.5 million monthly users. The homogenization of where we get our entertainment means that fewer corporations control what Americans see, hear, and read, and is beginning to be observed with a decrease in local coverage across the country. The chances for politically slanted content, gaps in ‘news deserts’, and missed local stories continues to grow. According to Rebuild Local News: American Journalism Projects (n.d.), "Massive consolidation in the newspaper industry has shifted editorial and business decisions to a few large corporations without strong ties to the communities where their papers are located."

While supporters argue public media’s vital role in providing unbiased, educational content, and supporting underserved communities, a common counterargument is that federal tax allocations are politically slanted, and that the media produced holds a discernible liberal bias.

Arguing a revaluation for funds and public funding for *PBS* and *NPR*, critics contend that taxpayer money should not support institutions perceived as promoting a particular political agenda, especially given the abundance of digital media alternatives available. However, data refutes this, taxpayer funds totaling to only \$1.60 per American per year. Local public media stations also play an irreplaceable role in bridging critical gaps, particularly in the vast "news deserts" across the U.S. Many times these outreach communities end up being ignored, with no reliable source of local news and community-specific information (Protect My Public Media, n.d.; PEN America, 2025).

Continuing on that point, public media is generally highly trusted by Americans across the political spectrum, and against disinformation, crucial for reliable information in areas prone for exclusion. A study published in the *Journal of Communication* found that Americans from all across the political spectrum trust PBS, crucially because it is publicly funded and perceived as unbiased. 3% of Republicans said they trust PBS (AP, 2025). Additionally, 54.5% of self-declared "extreme conservatives" in the study's survey sample considered PBS a major source of news and information (Current.org, 2025). While a specific trust percentage for Independents was not detailed in the provided snippets, the study generally found that trust in PBS for news and political programming is shared by viewers "across the political spectrum" and that PBS is considered the news organization "least associated with political ideology" by respondents.

Public media produces programming that more broadly serves low-income households, communities of color, linguistic and ethnic minorities, and regions that for-profit media often

neglect ([Picard and Pickard 2017](#)). Rural communities by nature can be vastly separated and densely populated. Poverty rates are often higher in rural communities as well, leading many susceptible to misinformation as they are positioned in areas with limited broadcast or internet service, and most notably, fewer resources for growth or learning (Farrigan, 2024). Media for children is greatly important, Age appropriate content made for children is vital for their development because it supports social-emotional learning and critical thinking. and an area often dismissed by commercial media conglomerates. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) states, "Content is crucial: experimental evidence shows that switching from violent content to education/prosocial content results in significant improvement in behavioral symptoms, particularly for low-income boys" (p. e20162591). According to a study by Tracey Farrigan, the poverty rate for rural children under 5 years old was 20.9% in 2023, the highest of any age group in both rural and urban areas. Public media's mission focuses on underserved audiences and kids, to lay a foundation of future success for families from all backgrounds who can have the tools to learn.

Research from EDC and SRI International from 2021 connected positive effects of PBS KIDS series on children's learning. Two nine-week studies of 263 elementary school first grade children from low income households across the country found children who watched PBS KIDS programming, specifically the show *MOLLY OF DENALI* games and television for longer periods, showed greater learning benefits. "Findings from a study by the Education Development Center and SRI International, as reported by PBS (2021), demonstrated that more exposure to high-quality educational content resulted in greater learning gains for children. A research article from 2025 from SRI International American non-profit on the introducing the PBS kid's show

Cat in the Hat to kids stated, “Children who were provided access to the Cat in the Hat resources outperformed those who did not have access on measures of how the properties of objects and materials make them suitable for different purposes..”, in other words improving kid’s knowledge of science and engineering. "Public media isn’t just a rewarding experience for our kids, it’s a unique mission driven work for the adults who work there. WUCF was recognized with The Orlando Sentinel’s Top Workplaces Award for 2024, among 129 Central Florida companies. “I have spent over 30 years of my life working in media, half in commercials and half in public media. Getting to serve our community and help change lives of the people we get to meet every day makes the struggles we face entirely worth it. To see a child light up when they meet Daniel Tiger, to see an older couple enjoy a sneak peak of their favorite television program, we get to share the world with people every day. As a kid I grew up on Mister Rogers and Reading Rainbow. Those shows made me who I am today and I know that the programs and experiences we offer, are helping to educate and inspire a whole new generation,” said Jennifer Cook, WUCF Executive Director.

The power of public media is greatly shown with the success and reach of WUCF in Central Florida, playing a vital role in providing free access to expert-informed kids content, high-quality documentaries and entertainment, and disseminating emergency alerts, particularly in Florida where harsh hurricanes can impact low-income communities the hardest. To ensure these indispensable public services remain strong requires a combination of diversified local funding, stable federal investment, and community donors. Surveys and research show public media delivers accessible, equitable educational content and features important local programming that is often underrepresented in commercial media.

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