

Corporate Sector Overwhelmingly Dominates Public TV Governing Boards

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The corporate and financial sectors have an overwhelming presence on the governing boards of major public television stations, a new FAIR study finds.

The study looked at the occupations of the current trustees of WNET (New York City/Newark), WGBH (Boston), WETA (Washington, DC), WTTW (Chicago) and KCET (Los Angeles).

Out of these boards' 182 total members, 152—or 84 percent—have corporate backgrounds, including 138 who are executives at elite businesses. Another 14 members appear to be on the board because of their families' corporate-derived wealth, often with a primary affiliation as an officer of a family charitable foundation.

Many board members are affiliated with major corporations like Boeing, Wells Fargo and Citigroup. Seventy-five board members, nearly half of all those with corporate ties, are financial industry executives. Another 24 are corporate lawyers.

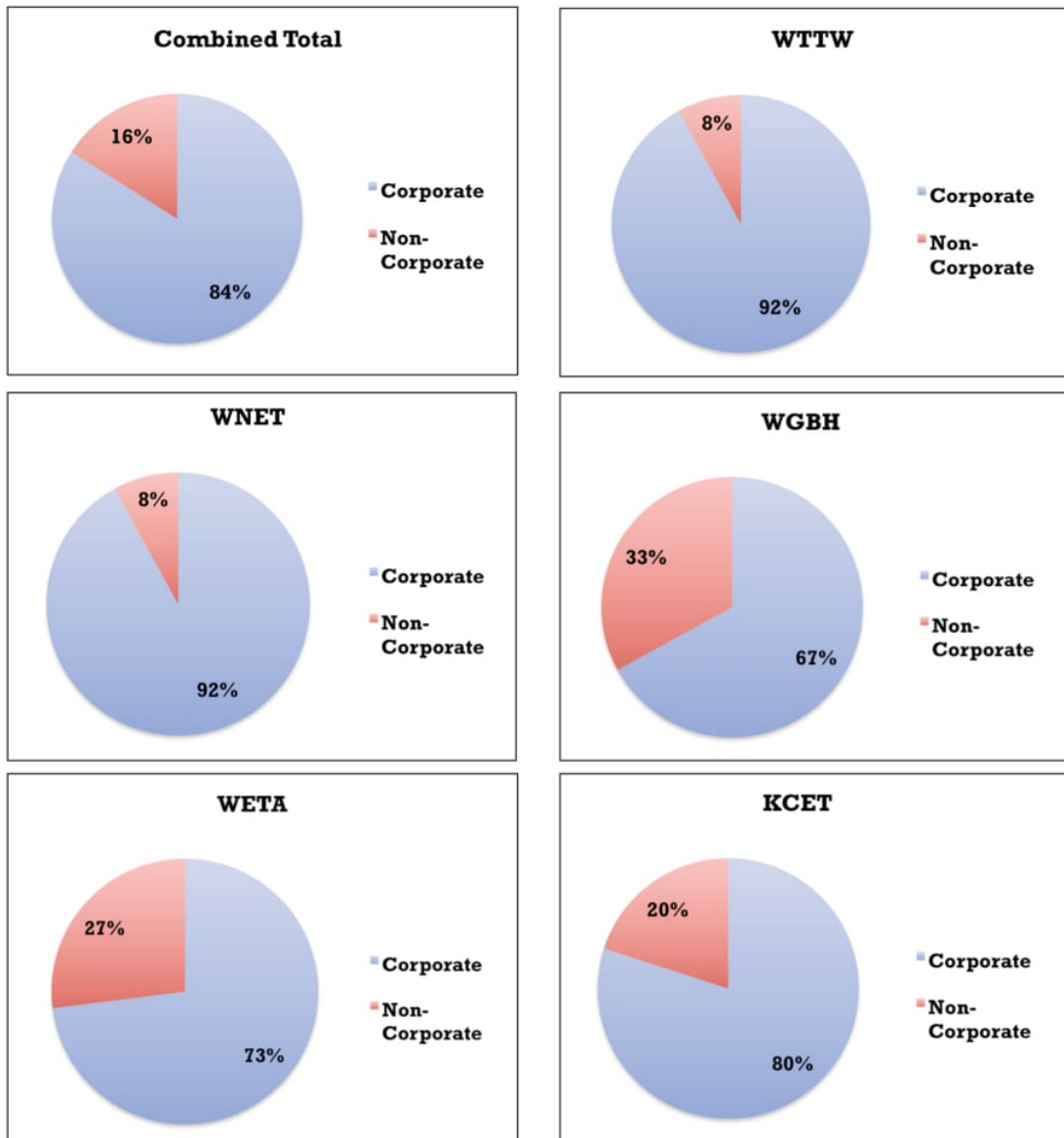
Public TV board members without corporate ties were few and far between. Of these, nine are categorized as academics, while six are affiliated with nonprofit groups (not counting family grant-making foundations). There are three former government officials, two non-corporate lawyers, two journalists, one religious educator and a former principal of a magnet school. Six board members are station insiders.

WNET, WGBH and WETA are considered to be the “big three” PBS affiliates, producing a large share of programming for PBS nationally. WTTW and KCET were included because they serve two of the largest US metropolitan areas. Four of these stations are affiliated with PBS; KCET disaffiliated in 2010, but remains a prominent regional public television station.

The boards range in size from WTTW's 63 members to KCET's 20. WTTW and WNET have the most corporate representation on their boards, each at 92 percent. KCET's board is 80 percent corporate-affiliated, while DC's WETA is at 73 percent. Corporate-tied board members were least common at WGBH, where they still made up two-thirds of the board.

One hundred sixteen members (64 percent) are male. It was not possible to do a breakdown of board members' ethnicities.

Occupations of Public Television Boards



Last year, the issue of corporate influence over public television was thrust into the spotlight when the film *Park Avenue: Money, Power and the American Dream* was broadcast by PBS affiliate WNET (New Yorker, [5/27/13](#); FAIR Blog, [5/21/13](#)). The film examined the concentration of wealth and power in the United States by looking at the super-rich residents of 740 Park Avenue—who included then-WNET board member and major station donor David Koch, a billionaire industrialist well known for his donations to right-wing causes.



WNET president Neil Shapiro was said to be “concerned” about a film critical of one of his biggest funders. WNET ended up not receiving a large donation from Koch—potentially in the seven-figure range—because *Park Avenue* was broadcast, the *New Yorker*’s Jane Mayer reported.

PBS then preemptively pulled the plug on *Citizen Koch*, another film that examined the Koch family’s political influence—apparently practicing self-censorship in an attempt to placate a wealthy donor. Koch would eventually resign from the WNET board of trustees. Since then, a [campaign](#) has been launched demanding that Koch also resign from the board of Boston’s WGBH, where he is still a trustee.

Public television stations depend on underwriting from the corporate sector, which is undoubtedly why executives and their families so dominate public TV’s boards. Over the years, FAIR has found public TV displaying bias and favoritism towards corporations (Press Release, [10/19/10](#); Action Alert, [4/23/12](#)).

Some individuals within public TV acknowledge the problem of such influence. In a leaked farewell address, former PBS producer Sam Topperoff (Gawker, [5/24/10](#)) was scathing about the state of New York public television, including WNET:

I see our general programming for the wider public as elitist and offensive in the extreme.... But, of course, when stations run on very rich people’s and corporate money, how could it be otherwise? And when the corporation is directed by those very clever and very ambitious fellows whose careers will float them to good places no matter what, what else could we reasonably expect?

Controlling the board means wielding ultimate power over the direction and character of a public television station. Boards have the power to elect top executives (presidents, CEOs, CFOs, etc.), manage the station’s finances and, of course, oversee the programming that their stations produce.

To join a public television board, an individual must be elected by existing board members. What sort of people are these business-dominated boards likely to select? They will likely perpetuate the corporate culture, rendering the “public” in Public Broadcasting Service an ironic anachronism.

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