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Op-Ed: Sequestration Radio

A few cuts here, a few trims there, until the entire playlist has been rendered unrecognizable -- and unusable

By **John Weingart**, March 11, 2013 in **Opinion**

Working as I do at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, I have received a number of inquiries about the meaning and impact of sequestration. After saying, "I don't know" and sprinkling in a few phrases like "It wasn't supposed to happen" and "uncharted territory," I have been struggling for a relevant analogy or example that might be illuminating.

I think I have found one.

Suppose sequestration applied to the radio. More specifically, how would it change the folk music and bluegrass program I host on Sunday evenings? Since the show is on WPRB, the FM and Internet station affiliated with Princeton University, it probably would be covered by a set of guidelines for Broadcasts of Reasonably Obscure Music Emanating from the Basement of College Dormitories.

If we assume an across-the-board cut of 5 percent, my three-hour program would face a reduction of nine minutes each week. No big deal, most would agree. Cut one song off the beginning and one off the end and who will even notice?

True, the resulting silence for the first four or five minutes might lead some to conclude that the program had been entirely eliminated, but if they really need the musical services I offer, they ought to be willing to stick around to wait for the show to open.

The solution is simple and might end the conversation, but in this case simple solutions were deliberately defined to be against the law. Sequestration was designed to loom as such a complicated and unattractive threat that it would be unthinkable for Congress not to act to prevent its implementation. As a result, now that the unthinkable somehow has become inevitable, merely cutting two songs from my playlist would not be sufficiently disruptive to comply with the letter or spirit of sequestration.

Instead, I would need to make reductions to each of the services housed under the program's antenna; that is, each song would need to become 5 percent smaller. Since I get to play about 50 songs and tunes per show, it follows that each would need to be reduced by 10.8 seconds. The program would still be reduced by a total of nine minutes, but the impact would be felt in every track. This policy could be labeled as No Cut Left Uncut.

Critics of sequestration will say this is an insane and unworkable outcome, but they may have been turning a deaf ear to the extent to which waste, fraud, and abuse permeate much of the music we have long taken for granted.

To begin with, choruses are by definition repetitious. They are remnants of a bygone era when the daily time deficits most of us now experience were not even on the horizon. Scrap one or two and some songs could easily fit within the sequestration guidelines.

Others could be shrunk by removing the virtually identical lines and verses that, perhaps unknowingly, have been transplanted from one folk song to another -- literally for centuries. This redundancy is often carried out under the guise of continuing some sort of "folk tradition."

Additional savings could be realized by focusing on instrumental breaks. Removing any number of seconds from a banjo or bagpipe solo, for example, would probably be applauded as a public service, even by many who normally support generous appropriations for those needing the services radio provides.

Thus, despite all the uproar, a program could be brought into conformance with sequestration requirements merely by eliminating duplication and waste. That, however, is just one of three areas where further reductions are essential.

Identifying lyrics that focus on any type of fraud or abuse must also remain high on the political/musical agenda. Countless studies have identified old songs that seem to exist only to lionize bank robbers and other outlaws or simply to chronicle the violence inflicted by would-be, present-day, and former lovers on one another. Most of these ballads could be rescinded in their entirety.

In conclusion, sequestration could be considered a laughing matter -- if only it didn't apply to thousands of programs even more important than the one I do on the radio.

John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, also hosts Music You Can't Hear On The Radio on WPRB (103.3 FM and wprb.com) on Sundays from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

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