

National public unfairness

by *L_Brent_Bozell*

There's a huge hole in all of the public discussion about the reimposition of a "Fairness Doctrine" or a return to "localism" on the talk-radio format: What about National Public Radio (NPR)? Liberals would like to "crush Rush" and his conservative compatriots by demanding each station balance its lineup ideologically. But since when has NPR ever felt any pressure to be balanced, even when a majority of taxpayers being forced to subsidize it are center-right?

Why no Fairness Doctrine attention to NPR? It is because those preaching "fairness" on the radio are hypocrites.

Conservatives argue that the media's liberal bias drives people to talk radio for an opposing viewpoint. Limbaugh jokes: "I am the balance." But new numbers from NPR suggest its ratings may be nearly as imposing as Limbaugh's: The cumulative audience for its daily news programs — "Morning Edition" and its evening counterpart, "All Things Considered" — has risen to 20.9 million per week.

It's not just news that's drawing listeners in. Talk-radio programs increasingly have become part of the nationally distributed NPR diet. Indeed, NPR's developing talk-show lineup was an obvious factor in the commercial failure of competing liberal networks like Air America. One could argue that NPR's audience gains came directly in response to liberal desires to vent about Team Bush.

Radio shows like "Fresh Air with Terry Gross" were a regular forum for Bush-bashing authors and experts, especially on the War on Terror and the liberation of Iraq. Gross was memorably upbraided by NPR's ombudsman in 2003 for showing great hostility to Bill O'Reilly, in stark contrast to her giggly rapport with liberal Al Franken. Now NPR is touting that "Fresh Air" was NPR's "first non-drive-time show in public radio to better 5 million weekly listeners" on over 300 stations.

NPR also sounded thrilled at the news that its afternoon show "Talk of the Nation" showed "remarkable gains," up 21 percent to 3.5 million listeners weekly. On Inauguration Day, that show featured NPR Baghdad Bureau Chief Lourdes Garcia-Navarro reporting that Iraqis wished good riddance to President Bush and hoped for change under Barack Obama. She said she had yet to find a single Iraqi who was grateful for the American defeat of Saddam Hussein. She asked many Iraqis: "Did this invasion, do you feel, give you a better life? And across the board, I didn't find one Iraqi who said to me, actually, I'm glad this happened."

Only on NPR does one hear journalism that calmly suspends logic.

The other talk show NPR publicists touted was "Tell Me More," hosted by Michel Martin, a former reporter

for ABC. Martin recently told NPR listeners she is far too similar to Michelle Obama to feel objectively about her, and she thinks Rush Limbaugh is racist, and explains thusly: "Some people hate the federal government because they can't get past the fact that the government switched sides from being a weapon in the violent oppression of black and sometimes brown people, to being one of the tools creating opportunity for them, as well as other people."

NPR regularly airs liberal commentators (like former CBS reporter Daniel Schorr), and its idea of a conservative is David Brooks of the New York Times. A few weeks ago, in one of their regular evening political roundtables with liberal columnist E.J. Dionne, "All Things Considered" anchor Robert Siegel asked Brooks if he, as a moderate, was comfortable with Obama: "Are you getting more or less comfortable or more or less moderate?" Brooks replied candidly: "I'm getting less comfortable. I don't know about my gross ideological disposition these days."

Neither do conservatives, and yet Brooks is the man who's supposed to represent us.

Public broadcasting has been incredibly hostile to anyone who would dare to police it for fairness and balance. Conservatives ought not forget what happened to Kenneth Tomlinson, the former board chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Fur flew when liberals discovered Tomlinson had conducted a private study to determine if PBS and NPR shows tilted to the left. An inspector general's report suggested Tomlinson somehow had violated CPB bylaws, and he was forced to resign.

Liberal congressman John Dingell insisted Tomlinson had "inserted politics" into public broadcasting, and yes, feel free to insert a laugh track at this point.

It's only "inserting politics" when anyone bothers to object to the everyday liberal politics of NPR and PBS. Ever since Congress passed the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, the nation's taxpayer-funded news outlets have operated free of any real fear that someone would disturb their pattern of putting their big broadcasting thumb on the scale of liberalism.

If NPR's drawing a Limbaugh-sized audience, isn't it time someone started asking why a "Fairness Doctrine" shouldn't apply to them?

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