



Statement before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee

Correcting for Bias; How Public Radio Can Better Serve All Americans

AUTHOR

Howard Husock

Date of Testimony
May 8, 2024

Good morning. Thank you Chair Griffith and Ranking Member Cator. I'm Howard Husock, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. I also have a background in public broadcasting. I was honored to serve as member of the Board of Directors of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and as a documentary film producer at Boston public broadcaster WGBH, where I was also a reporter and manager for a nightly news program. Permit me to note not for vanity but for as relevant to my standing to address you that my work was recognized with a national News and Documentary Emmy award and the RFK

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization and does not take institutional positions on any issues. The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author.

award for coverage of the disadvantaged.

I begin my testimony with a reminder of where public broadcasting began—with the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. Of particular relevance to the current situation at National Public Radio is the mandate from Subpart D, Section 396. Public broadcasting, both radio and television, should, it says, **be responsive to the interests of people both in particular localities and throughout the United States.”**

It is here specifically where National Public Radio has come to fall short.

According to the nonpartisan [Pew Research Center’s survey research](#),

87 percent of listeners describe themselves as Democrats, while only 12 percent as Republicans. In contrast, the major commercial network newscasts are close to 50-50. According to the media tracking firm Cision, only one of the top 10 most popular NPR affiliates is found in the South or Southwest. One NPR slide deck boasts that its programming reaches “cultural connoisseurs”, As Uri Berliner put it so well, “Our news audience doesn’t come close to reflecting America. It’s overwhelmingly white and progressive, and clustered around coastal cities and college towns.” Pew reports that NPR’s audience declined by 6% between 2021 and

2022

This is not the mark of a “national” taxpayer-supported program service.

I will discuss both why that is the case but will focus more on ways NPR news can be incentivized to serve a broader audience in new and vital ways. These include changes in the Public Broadcasting Act, virtually unamended in more than 50 years even as a revolution in technology has swept over the telecommunications industry.

NPR’s limited audience is not the result of limited reach. There are more than 1000 public radio stations across the US. Instead, it has come to produce a product which simply does not attract, or indeed, alienates a broad swathe of America. That bias, as you will, is less about individual political personalities than what the eminent American sociologist Herbert Gans identified in his book “Deciding What’s News”: story selection. NPR, per Berliner and others, emphasizes select issues and aspect of our culture that do not reflect the full geography and demography of America.

Modest changes in the public broadcasting act can foster change—as well as help address a crisis that was not anticipated in 1967: the decline of local newspapers,

more than 2000 of which have closed since 2004. Public radio can move to fill this void, as well as to fulfill its mandate, as per the 1967 act, to help communities “solve civic problems”. To do so, we have to let public radio stations across the country keep more of their taxpayer dollars for their own newsgathering rather than having to send them to NPR in Washington.

NPR receives little in direct federal funding but does rely for 31 percent of its revenue on fees paid by local stations. In other words, the funds which local stations receive from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting through their community service grants are sent back to Washington as NPR fees

To make matters even more difficult for local stations, listeners can access NPR program “over the top”, directly through their apps on their phone —bypassing local broadcasters, who need those listeners to provide them with financial support.

This overall model must be revisited. Public radio newsgathering, in order to address the world of today not than of 50 years ago, must be far more local. Rather than simply getting revenue from local stations, NPR should look to them for journalism—stories that surprise rather than hector, stories that will tell us about the range of dramas, conflicts, issues and celebrations in communities across the country. The local stations will provide not the fees but the news itself. In the process, NPR can nurture a new generation of young journalists—and incorporate

their work into its morning and evening news programming. A decentralized NPR will be a forum for voices of all kinds, from poets to preachers, miners and mayors. NPR should, what's more, report regularly, per statute, to this oversight committee as to progress it is making in reaching a broader cross-section of Americans.

In the process, I believe it will build a new and more successful business model that serves what it's meant to serve: a truly national audience.