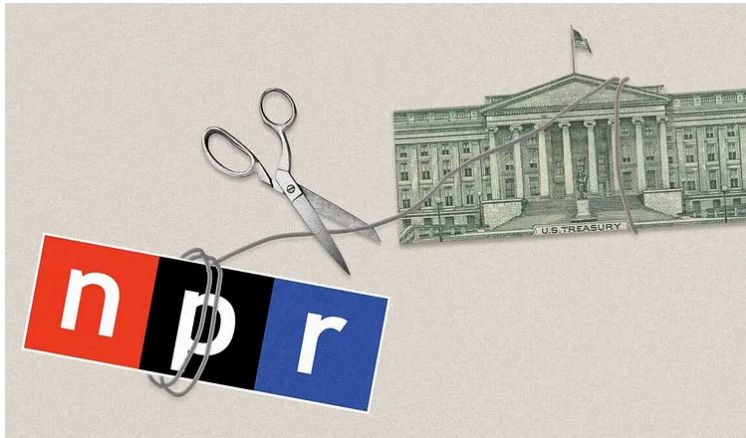




Uri Berliner: NPR Should Refuse to Take Federal Funds



(ILLUSTRATION BY THE FREE PRESS)

The broadcaster needs to stop pretending it's a network for all of America, and become the progressive institution it truly wants to be.

By Uri Berliner

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On Wednesday morning, a DOGE subcommittee will grill the CEOs of NPR and PBS about the trustworthiness of their news coverage, and whether they still deserve federal funding. Expect fireworks at the [Capitol Hill hearing](#), especially between the chairwoman, right-wing firebrand Marjorie Taylor Greene, and NPR's boss, Katherine Maher, who arrived at the network last year with a track record of [hyper-progressive](#) positions.

Over the decades, Republican lawmakers have regularly threatened to pull funding from NPR and PBS because of left-leaning bias. Each of the attacks floundered when the broadcasters rallied enough bipartisan support to save rural public radio or *Sesame Street*.

But this time the axe could finally fall. Today's NPR is a boutique product facing an openly hostile Trump administration and a country that's not buying the identity politics the network has to offer.

After I wrote a [viral story for The Free Press](#) about my disillusionment working for NPR, I've been asked repeatedly if I feel the network should be defunded. And I've always said no. Instead, I suggest a different approach.

NPR should regain its respect by doing something no one ever does in American life: Turn down government support. Get ahead of the game and say, *We'll survive without it*. In other words: Become truly independent.

If Congress does ultimately kneecap the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and its [\\$545 million annual budget](#) that supports public television and radio, NPR will largely have itself to blame. The broadcaster's claims about considering all things and its mission of creating "[a more informed public](#)" were demolished when it unquestioningly repeated the talking points of the Biden administration and the public health establishment during Covid.

For most of the 25 years I worked at NPR as a business editor, I felt honored to work there. But I became troubled by examples of bias that stemmed, I believe, from the lack of viewpoint diversity among NPR's journalists. Though I tried flagging my concerns to my bosses, it fell on deaf ears.

And so, nearly a year ago, I wrote my whistleblowing piece in these pages, arguing that NPR had morphed from a liberal but open-minded news organization driven by curiosity into a conduit for progressive ideology. I made the case that its preoccupations with gender, racial politics, and climate fill the airwaves—with dissenting views rarely found.

After my essay went viral, and after a [separate Congressional hearing](#), NPR said last May it was creating a [new vetting process](#), called the "Backstop"—a [team of senior editors](#) that would work 24/7 "to ensure that all coverage receives final editorial review." The [\\$1.9 million CPB grant](#) that financed the Backstop stressed the importance of "balance, objectivity, and transparency, and the obligation to include diverse viewpoints."

But it doesn't seem to be working.

For example, when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was assassinated last September, [his NPR obituary](#) noted that the terror group he ran "provides social services" and that Nasrallah studied theology and "had many admirers" across Lebanon and the region. Missing was any mention of Hezbollah's history of terrorism, notably its role in the [bombing of the Marine barracks](#) in Beirut that killed 299 people, including 220 Marines, 18 sailors, and three soldiers—the largest loss of life in a single day for the Marine Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945. This is the kind of detail that would presumably be relevant to an American audience. Yes, Hezbollah's terrorism was noted in updated versions of the story, but how did this crucial detail slip past the new, 24/7 "Backstop"?

And then there's NPR's exit interview in January with Rachel Levine, the transgender former assistant secretary for health at the Department of Health and Human Services. The piece [described Levine](#) as having a "friendly, low-key personality" as well as being a Joni Mitchell fan who "brings her lunch from home—today, it's a turkey wrap."

All fine, except the story did not mention the most newsworthy event of Levine's tenure. According to court documents, [she pressured](#) the World Professional Association for Transgender Health to eliminate minimum age requirements for children from the [Standards of Care](#) for transgender medical treatment, including surgery.

These kinds of omissions won't help Katherine Maher's case that NPR is impartial and transparent.

Over the decade that NPR's journalism priorities have narrowed, so has its audience. Back in 2011 it was [roughly divided](#) between liberals, moderates, and conservatives, tilting just slightly to the left. By 2023, progressive listeners [outnumbered](#) conservatives by six to one. Today's programming is delivered by left-leaning journalists to [affluent listeners](#) clustered in coastal cities and college town blue zones—the very definition of an echo chamber.

Meanwhile, the rest of the country tunes out. NPR's weekly audience fell from 60 million in 2020 to 42 million last year, according to an [internal report](#) cited by *The New York Times*.

NPR says direct payments from the CPB and indirect federal funding through its member stations account for [just 4 percent](#) of annual revenues. That adds up to \$13 million—a [skimpy slice](#) out of NPR's 2024 revenues of \$336 million.

If it's not much of a gravy train, why the big fuss?

NPR argues that federal funding is vital for scrappy radio stations in small towns and cities that are part of the public radio ecosystem. In an ideal world, federal support keeping these local stations afloat would be protected. But the White House and Congress may not be in the mood for such distinctions. More likely, they'll look to eliminate CPB altogether.

That's why I'm suggesting a different way. Just don't take the money.

Ditching federal dollars would cause some hardships, notably to member stations who, on average, get 10 percent of their revenues from the CPB. But NPR could alleviate that by lowering or eliminating the fees it charges those stations to acquire NPR programs like *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*.

Beyond that, by turning down federal money, NPR could openly plant its progressive flag without fear, as an opposition force in the Trump era, opening new fundraising pathways from left-leaning megadonors such as MacKenzie Scott, Reid Hoffman, or the Soros family.

In short, NPR should drop the *public* from its mission statement and embrace the progressive. Don't try to conceal what everyone knows already.

Once it's acknowledged and out in the open, there's a place for advocacy journalism. And yes, there are tons of hard-hitting stories to cover about MAGA World and President Trump's heedless use of power.

NPR can still be a significant part of the American conversation, just without the federal support. It's time, NPR. Cut the cord.



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