

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Examining Accusations of Ideological Bias at NPR, a Taxpayer Funded News Entity”

May 8, 2024

This hearing is a complete waste of this Committee’s time. We are here today solely because Speaker Johnson sees NPR as an easy punching bag as he attempts to placate the most extreme right wing of his party. He directed the Republican Committee leadership to hold this hearing.

It is deeply disappointing that the majority has agreed to play along by attacking NPR and, in a very disturbing turn, demanding that it disclose the political affiliations of its employees and board members. These are the same tactics employed during the dark days of McCarthyism. I thought that was over. This is 2024, not 1953. But, again, this is all being done to distract from the Republican leadership’s inability to govern and their failure to fulfill any of their promises on their frivolous investigations. I think this Committee is better than this hearing.

This hearing was so rushed that the Republican majority demanded that NPR CEO Katherine Maher appear—with only a week’s notice—on the same day as NPR’s annual Board Meeting, which has been scheduled and publicly noticed for at least a year. As further evidence of a lack of seriousness, the majority has refused to accept any alternate date offered by NPR. It is fully understandable that Ms. Maher is not here today. None of this follows the normal Committee process for scheduling a witness in good faith.

And even if she could have testified, she’s only been CEO for six weeks, yet Republicans would have wanted her to answer for heavily criticized allegations of “bias” from a former, disgruntled employee. This is particularly absurd given that NPR’s CEO plays no role in editorial decisions and does not control NPR’s content.

These Republicans attacks are unfortunate considering that public media plays an important role in all of our communities and should be supported now more than ever. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting is a nonprofit organization that was established by Congress in 1967 as the steward for federal investment in public media. It serves all Americans with free informational, educational, and enriching content. NPR—a media organization that produces, acquires, and distributes quality news programming—receives investments from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and plays a vital role in democracy by providing important and unbiased information to our communities.

These public investments primarily flow directly to local television and radio stations that are often the last line of defense against growing “news deserts” and I have one in New Jersey

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where communities really lack any local journalism. There is a reason that Republican efforts to defund public media have failed for nearly fifty years – that’s because the American people value the service. Many Americans, especially those in rural areas, rely on public news outlets as their primary source of local information.

Only a very small portion—less than 1 percent—of NPR’s budget comes directly from taxpayer dollars. In fiscal year 2022, NPR received just over \$5.5 million in direct grants from the CPB. And federal dollars that NPR receives indirectly are because local radio stations have chosen to pay NPR for its high-quality programs.

If Republicans were truly concerned about journalism and editorial integrity, they would have to recognize that it is actually the vast landscape of rightwing media organizations that have a long history of peddling misinformation, disinformation, promoting partisan agendas, and sowing fear and division. Major conservative networks have paid out vast legal settlements and lost on-air talent who refused to abandon impartiality and continually lie about our democracy and elections. Why aren’t we having a hearing about conservative media and their efforts to stifle alternative views?

Just last year, Fox News paid over \$787 million to settle a defamation lawsuit after its anchors repeatedly and knowingly lied on air about Dominion’s voting machines. Its owner even admitted, under oath, that those lies were to help Donald Trump overturn the election he lost. Fox News, One America News, Sinclair, and Breitbart are all examples of media organizations that air biased, false, harmful, and damaging content. Public cynicism about the media doesn’t come from NPR – it comes from the rightwing media.

This hearing is particularly worrisome because we have a Republican candidate for president who spends a good amount of his time peddling unfounded attacks on the media and the freedom of the press.

There are so many other things that we could be focused on today that could improve the lives of the American people. This is not one of them.

And with that I yield back the balance of my time.