

**THE BLOG**

# Gaming the System, NPR Division

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By Marty Kaplan

12/15/2005 01:40 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Because National Public Radio depends on public funds, because Congress is populated by right-wing showboats who love to mau-mau NPR for being a Bolshevik cell, and because the Corporation for Public Broadcasting has become the FEMA of the media — a dumping ground for Republican hacks — the watchword for the many talented people who work at NPR is caution.

If you quote an expert who says that W hasn't defined what victory in Iraq means, or if you pull some clips from presidential speeches demonstrating that he's offered changing and contradictory definitions of victory, or if you cite evidence that the word "victory" has proliferated like measles because there's a new expert on the Bush team who's got poll numbers saying that's what people want to hear — well, if you do any of that, and you don't want to get your ass busted, your best bet is to juxtapose that information with sound bites claiming that victory is at hand, and that W has always had a consistent strategy, and that he doesn't care about polls.

This is a hypothetical, but you get the idea: even if you believe that the truth lies on one side and not the other, your job as a reporter is to squelch what you think is true, and create a one-hand/other-hand collage. Even as Fox broadcasts Republican talking points and calls its faux news "balanced," NPR reporters, like most journalists in the MSM, have to inject what they know to be ideologically motivated disinformation into their stories in order to inoculate themselves from the charge that they're not "balanced."

As a result, no one is well-served — not listeners, who are force-fed propaganda along with useful information; not management, which will be branded as liberal no matter how far it bends over backwards to avoid the charge; and not reporters, who have found themselves in a career that values equal-opportunity stenography more than enterprise journalism.

Republicans have been particularly deft at making it easy for reporters to find experts who will say black is white in order to balance sources who say black is black. Over the years, reactionary billionaires have poured huge sums of tax-deductible money into creating Potemkin think tanks for this purpose. Their skill at injecting bunkum into public discourse is awesome, but it has not gone unnoticed by NPR's audience.

Jeff Dvorkin, the NPR ombudsman, has been fielding listener complaints about news stories' reliance on experts from right-wing think tanks without fully identifying their institutions' political biases. Dvorkin agrees, and he deserves props

for it: “Putting experts in some sort of context will go a long way to allaying the suspicions of many listeners who seem convinced that NPR is trying to portray experts as neutral when in fact, they aren’t.”

But then, succumbing to the pomo disease that there’s no such thing as truth, that everything is about point of view, everything is a debate, everything is he-said/she-said, he goes on to say this: “More importantly, NPR needs to make sure that it is presenting an appropriate range of ideas and not just from one side of the debate.” By this logic, every story that mentions Darwin needs a quote from a creationist; every piece about Auschwitz needs a clip from a Holocaust denier; every global warming piece needs an oil company flack to lend balance; every cancer story needs tobacco-financed “research” study to show “the other side.” Conservative think tanks *manufacture* debate. That’s what they do: their aim is to create controversy, even when the facts are indisputable, because they know how enslaved contemporary journalism is by the tyranny of false equivalence.

Here’s Dvorkin’s 2005 tally of think tank talkers on NPR:

American Enterprise - 59  
Brookings Institute - 102  
Cato Institute - 29  
Center for Strategic and Intl. Studies - 39  
Heritage Foundation - 20  
Hoover Institute - 69  
Lexington Institute - 9  
Manhattan Institute - 53

“Brookings and CSIS,” Dvorkin says, are seen by many in Washington, D.C., as being center to center-left. The others in the above list tend to lean to the right. So NPR has interviewed more think tankers on the right than on the left. The score to date: Right 239, Left 141.”

Heritage doesn’t “lean” to the right; it *is* the right. It’s hilarious to think that Brookings and CSIS are the counterparts of Heritage, Hoover, AEI et al. “Seen by many in Washington, D.C.”: now there’s a journalistic gold standard for you.

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