

Achieving fairness and balance

You can break out of the newsroom echo chamber

This commentary is adapted from a new edition of NPR's news handbook, Sound Reporting, to be completed in 2005. The author is the executive producer for training for NPR News and a former senior editor and executive producer of All Things Considered.

By Jonathan Kern

For most journalists, no charge stings worse than an allegation of bias. Yet such accusations are inescapable—at NPR and at most other news organizations.

Search through the e-mail sent to any NPR news program on a given day and you'll find listeners writing angrily that the network is showing its bias for or against a host of individuals, groups or issues. Listeners accuse NPR of being a spokesman for the U.S. administration (regardless of the party in power), a tool of the Pentagon, a proxy for the Democratic Party, an arm of the Republican Party, soft on the pharmaceutical industry, out to get the oil companies—the list goes on and on, no matter how the news of the day varies. Whether the issue is abortion, the death penalty, the Middle East, tax cuts or politics, listeners are sure to cite what they see as clear evidence that NPR reporters and hosts are trying to stack the deck for one side or the other.

Journalists find it too easy to brush off some of the charges. For one thing, we consider it axiomatic that people at the far ends of the political spectrum will be most inclined to protest, and that the letter (or e-mail) writers don't represent the audience as a whole. Bias, we say, is often in the eye of the beholder. Also, editors and managers console themselves with the fact that people on *both* the right and the left are complaining, often about exactly the same stories; if both sides don't like the way we did our jobs, they reason, we probably did okay. In truth, reports frequently draw criticism from one side for not being partisan enough, and from the other for being biased. So dual-barrel complaints are not in themselves evidence of good journalism.

Moreover, we know that we will get some things wrong, despite our best efforts. Broadcast news is driven by deadlines, and under time pressure, journalists make mistakes—about names, affiliations, places and so on. These errors are regrettable, and we always correct them on the air when they

occur. But they are not nearly as serious as failing to be fair and unbiased. That not only can discourage people from listening; it can undermine NPR's reputation, which is one of its greatest assets. Even occasional lapses can have serious consequences. The price of good journalism is eternal vigilance.

That reporters, hosts and editors sometimes fall short of their own journalistic goals can be attributed to many things. One is working under extremely tight deadlines: It's not uncommon for a story to be assigned at 10 a.m. and reach the air six or seven hours later. Many reporters, rushing to complete their pieces, resort to saying that a source "did not return repeated phone calls"—an explanation that rarely comforts listeners who feel their point of view has been ignored. Sometimes the reporters are able to contact people on all sides of an issue but can only get the principals on one side to be interviewed on tape. That, too, makes it sound like the other side is getting short shrift. The best reporters go out of their way to find surrogates to speak for the absent senator, c.e.o., sports team owner or key player. There are some potential interviewees who simply won't speak to NPR, and for whom there are no appropriate standards. In the run-up to the presidential election, for example, both *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* interviewed Sen. John Kerry, but the White House declined to make President Bush available for either show.

There's also a damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't dilemma for public radio hosts. If they stick to their guns and try to get substantive answers to their questions—if they interrupt their guests to keep them on the subject—many listeners will accuse them of badgering the interviewees. (If the guest is a Democrat, listeners will say they can tell the host "must be a Republican"—and vice versa.) But if the host does *not* try to get a guest to clarify vague answers—if the host doesn't question apparent distortions of the facts—listeners will complain that he or she was simply giving the speaker a forum and that the guest was served up "softball questions to hit out of the park."

Even production decisions can lead to charges of bias. On several occasions, I've seen a host's challenges to his guest get lost during editing of an interview. A producer charged with cutting a 13-minute interview down to four minutes often has to make hard and fast decisions; he may think a follow-up question that yielded an evasive answer "really didn't tell us anything," so out it goes. In those cases, what ends up on the air makes the host sound more passive, and the interview less rigorous, than it actually was. On a couple of occasions, the need to "tighten up" a politician's speech led a producer to edit out most of the applause. Listeners wrote that the excerpts they heard on NPR bore no resemblance to what they saw on TV, and they assumed—wrongly—that the editing was done with malicious intent.

So we know we slip up editorially, for various reasons. But a desire to distort or misrepresent the facts is rarely among them.

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What the newsroom believes

Instead, problems sometimes arise from newsroom “groupthink.” As confirmed by the election results, Americans have sharply different attitudes toward abortion, the death penalty, nuclear power, politics and the military—to name just a few issues—in part because they have led very different lives. If newsrooms were as heterogeneous as the rest of the country, there would be lively debates whenever a story idea was suggested. But public radio journalists—and journalists in general—are more like one another than they are like the population as a whole, and our news reporting can suffer because of it.

In workshops the NPR News Training Unit conducts with public radio journalists, we take an informal poll to get a sense of how much diversity of experience there is among the reporters and managers attending (and by crude extrapolation, in the newsrooms they represent). The questions include:

- Are you a military veteran?
- Do you own a gun?
- Do you have an undergraduate college degree?
- Did you read the *New York Times* this morning?

Almost without exception, we find a near total absence of veterans and gun-owners and an overwhelming majority with college educations. The proportion of *Times* readers generally varies from a low of about 50 percent to a high of nearly 100 percent, depending on the location of the newsrooms.

Compare that with the adult U.S. population as a whole: more than 12 percent are veterans, more than 25 percent own guns, three-quarters *lack* college degrees. In a country with more than 110 million households, the *New York Times* has a circulation of about 1.1 million.

Then we ask a few more questions—but to maintain the participants’ privacy, we ask them just to *think* about how they would respond.

- Did you vote for a Republican in the last presidential election?
- Would you unhesitatingly describe yourself as “pro-life”?
- Do you favor the expansion of nuclear power plants in the United States?

Even though we don’t know for sure how people would answer these questions, we can infer that there would be as much similarity in their responses as there were for the previous set. In other words, NPR journalists seem to be surrounded by people who are—at least in some important respects—very much like themselves.

This would be true, I suspect, in many professions as diverse as pro basketball and dentistry, in which people develop skills through years of experience and training. I can imagine a number of benign reasons why people of similar backgrounds might gravitate to journalism in general and to public radio in specific.

People who are suspicious of those who hold power—politicians, government agencies, large corporations, Wall Street and so on—may be more inclined than others to seek reporting jobs. They may be interested in working for public radio, as opposed to commercial radio, because they oppose commercialism per se, and because they like what they hear on NPR—international news, in-depth stories, classical music and an intellectual approach to some admittedly arcane subjects. (The NPR Library lists numerous pieces on Tuvan throat singers—not your usual AM radio fare.) NPR looks for reporters and editors who are familiar with a wide range of subjects,



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and who write well and speak fluently—skills that are honed by attending college. All of that could contribute to our having a pool of people with similar experiences, educational backgrounds and political views.

Plus, people who think they don’t “fit in” may leave.

Whatever the reasons, this homogeneity can be a problem. It can lead to an “echo chamber,” where reporters hear their own views reflected back to them by their editors, when what they actually need to ensure fairness and balance is some hard, skeptical questioning.

Here’s what happens, though in this illustration I’m imagining the specifics: A reporter pitches a story on “how a new housing development is ruining the quality of life for longtime residents” of a community. The editor or news director echoes that idea by providing the names of people who used to have the view of a mountain but now see only row upon row of townhouses. He suggests the reporter look into whether the new homes might place a burden on local water and sewer systems, what it will cost the town to build roads to the development, whether there is a negative environmental impact of cutting down all the trees, and so on.

These might all be valid questions to raise in the story. But because the reporter and editor see eye-to-eye on the subject, neither suggests talking to some of the people moving *into* the housing area, to hear how they feel about getting the chance to own their own homes. No one asks whether the property taxes paid by the new homeowners will help out the community. They don’t investigate what all the homebuilding is going to mean for local construction companies, whether it will help the regional economy, etc. The story ends up being one-sided, not out of prejudice or malice but because the newsroom lacks anyone inclined to question the premise of the original story pitch.

Test your work

A valuable exercise for anyone truly committed to reportorial balance is to try to frame a story in completely different ways. For example, if a reporter suggests doing a story on how big-box retailers have eliminated mom-and-pop stores in the American suburbs, the editor can ask whether the story might be reframed as a piece on how those same retailers have given jobs to hundreds of people or saved consumers’ money. If the reporter wants to do a piece on how development is eliminating wetlands, the editor may suggest looking at whether some states and municipalities have expanded the definition of wetlands for political (as opposed to scientific) purposes.

The point here isn’t to look for good news rather than bad news, or to switch from slanting a story in one direction to slanting it in another. The exercise helps the reporter recognize how a story *could* be viewed through another lens and framed in different or even opposing ways. The aim is to guarantee that all important viewpoints get equal treatment—especially those viewpoints that don’t spontaneously occur to the reporter.

The best story meetings work just this way. As the senior editor at *All Things Considered*, I frequently had to explain to new producers or interns that their story pitches were subjected to rigorous vetting for a purpose—namely, to make sure that the premise was solid. They would become dispirited if most of their trial balloons were deflated by tough questions from the staff. I would explain it was better for everyone that their colleagues played devil’s advocate rather than air a story and have *listeners* correctly assail it as one-sided.

Of course, journalists need to do more than solicit a multiplicity of opinions; they should also ensure that those opinions are supported by the facts, to the extent that facts can be ascertained. If statements on either side of an issue can be proven false—or are clearly in doubt—it’s not enough for the reporter to give equal time to both sides. In other words, it’s important not to respond to the mandate for fairness by creating an *artificial* sort of balance.

Nothing is less illuminating than “he says/she says” stories, where every claim on one side of an issue is offset by a counterclaim on the other and there’s no indication where the facts come down.

In a typical report of this type, residents of a community might say numerous instances of cancers in children living near high-tension power lines prove they are hazardous to people’s health. The reporter would seek balance by including the same number of clips of power company executives and scientists insisting the lines are safe. Listeners inclined to distrust big business will end up siding with the concerned residents; many who own a business or tend to be scornful of environmentalists will agree with the power company. And everyone else is left no closer to the truth. (In fact, NPR reported a few years ago that the largest, most definitive study of the subject—carried out by the National Cancer Institute—found no link at all between power lines and childhood cancer.) A reporter who produces a seemingly “balanced” story that relies on assertions that are untrue does the audience a disservice—even if it appeases one faction that feels strongly about the issue.

Reporters know this, and usually try to approach all their interviews with a large dose of skepticism; problems arise when the reporters are unconsciously inclined to believe the assertions of one side more than another—to adopt conventional wisdom uncritically or to see one group as the good guys and the other as the bad guys.

Trust, but verify

Imagine that a reporter is doing a piece on a Detroit community whose residents are trying to get the city to pay to have their houses stripped of lead paint, and who are suing paint manufacturers for possible future damage to their children’s health. (This is a fictitious example, by the way.) In the course of doing interviews for the story, the reporter talks to someone from an organization advocating for people with mental retardation. And she says, “In the U.S. today, lead poisoning affects 4 million children—that’s one out of every six kids under the age of six.”

This is a powerful piece of tape! But is it true?

A skeptical journalist might ask: What does “affect” mean in this

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context? Is the speaker saying that 4 million children in the United States are at risk of developmental disorders, kidney damage, coma or premature death? Does the assertion conflict with common sense? In other words, if we gathered 600 children at random, would 100 of them really be “affected” by lead poisoning? These are all reasonable questions. But they may never occur to a reporter who thinks of himself as an environmentalist, who believes that businesses frequently avoid

dealing with the health consequences of their products, and who assumes that more government regulation is in the public interest.

And it doesn’t matter what side of the issue the reporter and interviewee are on—just whether they’re on the same side. For instance, a reporter who strongly supports the U.S.-led war in Iraq may not be disposed to take issue with the Army’s statements about the number of insurgents, the reconstruction of Iraq’s infrastructure or the mood of the Iraqi people toward the United States.

This absence of skepticism might be described as a journalistic sin of omission. But there are also sins of commission, the most common of which is using loaded language where more neutral words and phrases would insulate the reporter or host from charges of taking sides.

Take “reform,” a word embraced—indeed, seized and occupied—by anyone who wants to change the status quo. NPR frequently reports on tax reform, Medicare reform, education reform, electoral reform, CIA reform, campaign finance reform, health care reform and many other “reform” plans. In every case, the “reformers” are on one side of the issue—and the label alone seems to put them on the “right” side.

If a report on the McCain-Feingold campaign finance legislation keeps describing it as “a campaign finance reform law,” for instance, its opponents end up being portrayed as against reform—that is, against making things better. If a reporter describes a tax cut (or tax increase) proposal as “a federal tax reform plan,” then anyone who doesn’t support it appears to be against correcting whatever is wrong with the current tax system.

In the same way, opposition to “health care reform” almost sounds like opposition to health care. That’s why politicians love the word “reform.” News people may adopt it both because they’re quoting those politicians and because it’s shorthand; it’s easier to say “the campaign reform law” than to say “the law that restricted so-called soft money donations—contributions not subject to federal limits because they technically go to state political parties instead of actual candidates.” But this might be a case where the burden of the additional verbiage may be offset by the impartiality it affords. Otherwise we may seem to be endorsing one faction and demonizing the other.

There are many other loaded words—too many to list, and the list changes all the time. The key thing is to think about the effect even a single word may have on the listener—and on yourself, if you’re reporting a controversial story. Is that new housing area out in exurbia a sure sign of “sprawl,” “growth” or “development”? Is the city council debating where to put a nuclear waste “dump” or a “disposal site”?

This is not to say that reporters and hosts should strip their

scripts of every powerful word. It is simply a reminder that reporters and editors need to be aware of how language itself can slant a story one way or another, predisposing a reporter to frame his piece in a way that excludes contrary—and legitimate—points of view.

Why be fair?

Finally, we should note that there are both philosophical and practical reasons to frame potential stories in a variety of ways, and to present all sides of a story once the reporting is under way.

For one thing, fairness and balance (along with accuracy and honesty) are valued in the profession generally and specifically listed as indispensable principles in the NPR Code of Ethics and Practices. Most NPR news people tell us they have a visceral sense that being evenhanded is the right thing to do—that it's part of their "mission" or their "public service." For them, reporting means finding out all you can about a given topic and delivering that information to listeners in a way that helps them make up their own minds

about the issue at hand. Simply (and perhaps grandiosely!) put, their goal is to find the truth—and being fair and unbiased are the routes they think will get them there.

News directors, reporters and editors also suggest some *practical*, even self-interested, reasons for going out of their way to get both sides of the story. One is that fair treatment of news sources gives them a better chance of getting fair treatment in return—continued access to those sources.

They also point out that our reporting is more credible if it presents a spectrum of viewpoints. Since listeners—and potential listeners—have a wide variety of opinions, they are more likely to trust NPR if they know their own attitudes and experiences will be reflected by the people we interview. In addition to believing more of what they hear, they may be inclined to listen more. In fact, being fair and balanced is a good business practice for any news organization whose success depends on the goodwill—and on the contributions—of its audience. ■