



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on March 13, 2011

Public Radio Exec Admits Criticism of NPR Legit, Network Must Broaden Audience

But Susan Schardt, executive director of the Association of Independents in Radio, speaking at an NPR board meeting in February, also said NPR erred in targeting the white liberal elite, which is just 11 percent of the population, and should cultivate all Americans as listeners. According to Schardt:

We have to look at this because the criticisms that are coming at us — whether they're couched in other things — do have some legitimacy. We must, as a starting point, take on board some of this criticism.... We have to own this.



NPR's Demographic

The numbers on NPR's audience are remarkable.

Their household income is about \$90,000 annually, compared to \$55,000 for the hoi polloi who listen to normal radio. As well, its audience is 86 percent white. Only 5 percent of its audience is black. And about 70 percent of its audience has a college degree, compared to 25 percent of the American population. Moreover, an NPR fact sheet brags, its listeners are three time more likely to have finished graduate school: 32 percent of NPR listeners hold graduate degrees.

NPR's audience does not, apparently, include a sizeable portion of Tea Party Americans.

No wonder Schardt spoke out. Her remarks are particularly salient considering the mess the leftist network is in because of the shocking video and audiotapes featuring its executives, which went viral on the Internet last week. Project Veritas, created by conservative gumshoe James O'Keefe, set up a sting at which the NPR executives viciously ridiculed Tea Party members.

The video, which depicts a lunch meeting between NPR execs and phony Muslim philanthropists, shows NPR executive Ron Schiller calling Tea Party members stupid racists. The audio features an executive who attended the lunch, Betsy Liley, telling the prospective "donors" that NPR will accept their \$5 million contribution anonymously and hide the origin of the donation from auditors.

The philanthropists claimed they represented a front for the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim Education Action Center, that wanted to establish Sharia law in the United States. That news did not deter the executives, if they even know what the Muslim Brotherhood and Sharia law are.

But it was Schiller's comments about conservatives that invited the hurricane of negative publicity and led to not only his resignation but also that of Vivian Schiller (no relation), NPR's leftist CEO. Vivian Schiller embarrassed herself and the network in October when she said veteran NPR man Juan Williams, a liberal, needs psychiatric care because he admitted that Muslims on airplanes make him



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nervous.

NPR's board of directors forced her to resign.

NPR ombudsman Alicia Shepard echoed Schardt when she wrote that Ron Schiller's remarks reinforce the view that many Americans have about NPR:

Schiller comes across as an effete, well-educated, liberal intellectual — just exactly the stereotype that critics long have used against NPR and other bastions of the news media. It's also a stereotype that NPR journalists try hard to combat every day in their newsgathering.

What Schardt Said

Schardt offered her opinion before Project Veritas released its recordings, but it is particularly relevant given ousted NPR executive Ron Schiller's intemperate and imprudent comments about Tea Party Americans, most of whom, again, don't listen to NPR.

Speaking at an NPR board meeting on February 25, Schardt explained that its narrow audience may not keep it going, and that the decision NPR made to cultivate a miniscule slice of the American population — the white liberal elite — may have been a mistake. For most Americans are not part of the white liberal elite.

"We have arrived at a transformational moment for public broadcasting," she said, according to a transcript of her remarks at Current.org, a publication of American University. "We must choose whether to let the forces that are coming towards us define what we will become, or to decide on our own terms what path we take." She continued,

The crisis we're facing threatens this culture we have created. ...

I believe there's an elephant in the room. There is something that I'm very conscious of as we consider this crisis that I'd like to speak to. ...

We have built an extraordinary franchise. It didn't happen by accident. It happened because we used a very specific methodology to cultivate and build an audience. For years, in boardrooms, at conferences, with funders, we have talked about our highly educated, influential audience. We pursued David Giovannoni's methodologies. We all participated. ...

What happened as a result is that we unwittingly cultivated a core audience that is predominately white, liberal, highly educated, elite. "Super-serve the core" — that was the mantra, for many, many years. This focus has, in large part, brought us to our success today. It was never anyone's intention to exclude anyone.

But we have to accept — unapologetically — that this is the franchise we've built. ...

Schardt then explained that it doesn't make much sense to appeal to just 11 percent of the American population, meaning the white liberal elite, and she questioned whether NPR can legitimately accept taxpayer subsidies given that it appeals to such a narrow demographic.

In other words, most of the taxpayers who subsidize NPR don't listen to it.

One choice, at this transformational moment, is to say, "We are satisfied with what we are doing. We — in radio — are providing 11 percent of America with an extraordinary service." If this is our choice, we need to carefully consider whether we warrant public funding and, if so, what the rationale would be.



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Another choice is to say, “We have cultivated and built an extraordinary infrastructure of interconnected stations that’s now adopting networked digital technologies. More important, we have created a culture of human beings who — in this building, at stations, and in my constituency of hundreds of producers — are fluent in a particular craft rooted in an idealism of service. Individuals whose intention at every step is to contribute to the greater good. Ours is a human endeavor. That is what differentiates us. This is what is at stake. This is what we must preserve.”

I believe we need to say, in this moment, “You’re right. We are not satisfied, either. Now that we have achieved this huge success over a 30-year incubation period, we now are poised to commit ourselves to translate and bring what we have to everyone in America. Within the next five years, seven years — we set the timetable. We are absolutely committed to serving — truly — and speaking in the voices — truly — of 80 percent or 90 percent of the public.”

The question is whether NPR’s programs, which do not feature Lady Gaga or ranting right-wing talk-show hosts, would appeal to the 89 percent of Americans who listen to other fare.

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