

Center for American Progress



Think Again: NPR and O'Keefe: Déjà Vu All Over Again



SOURCE: AP/Haraz N. Ghanbari

James O'Keefe, right, with Hannah Giles, once again duped the mainstream media with his doctored video of a meeting with an NPR fundraiser.

By **Eric Alterman** | March 17, 2011

It's difficult to decide what is most infuriating—or depressing—about the spectacular success of James O'Keefe's sting operation. But here are a few nominees.

O'Keefe is a known fabricator, and the mainstream media has already allowed him to make them look like idiots. And yet they did it again. I went on the NPR show "On Point" last week to discuss the still-exploding scandal and suggested that whenever anyone discussed any alleged malfeasance discovered and presented by the criminal right-wing provocateur, it's a good idea to wait a few days and find out **what he's lying about**.

O'Keefe lied to the country about his big ACORN sting. He lied about his meetings with ACORN officials and the videos he doctored in support of those lies. You can find examples **here**, **here**, **here**, and **here**. He makes no bones about this. O'Keefe sets up his sources, lies to them, and then lies to the public about what they said and did. And he's not above using **criminal methods** to stalk his prey.

Even so, many media outlets swallowed O'Keefe's version that his sting video caught NPR in the act of being a parody of what NPR's critics say it is. (And how many reporters owe their audiences regretful rethinks of what they originally wrote, like **this one** by *Time's* James Poniewozik?)

Few people stopped to think when the video was first dumped by the shamelessly sensationalistic **Daily Caller site** that no matter what an NPR fundraiser says to a bunch of pretend Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, it proves nothing at all except that some NPR fundraisers are silly people. This is someone who has no authority whatsoever over the content of NPR broadcasts—indeed, has no relationship to the people who report and edit the news.

Any number of conservatives who assess the coverage of NPR will find that if anything, its reports and editors bend over backwards to be more than “fair” to their point of view as Glenn Reynolds, Michael Medved, Tony Blankley, and Tea Party activists Katrina Pierson, Lisa Davis, and Toby Marie Walker, among many others, **will all attest**.

So the issue at the center of this controversy is a nonissue. But even saying as much gives too much credit to the media organizations that treat the story as somehow significant. For it turns out—surprise, surprise—that the video that caused all the ruckus was, as per O'Keefe's modus operandi, dishonestly doctored. And perhaps the most shocking/depressing aspect of this entire episode is the fact that it took—I can't believe I'm writing this—Glenn Beck's website to do the due diligence on O'Keefe's shenanigans that the mainstream media failed to do.

Beck's website, “The Blaze,” **examined** the entire two-hour video and found that in contrast to much of what was reported, the phony donors never really made clear their alleged connections to the Muslim Brotherhood. And when calling members of the Tea Party racists—hardly an unsupportable view on the basis of the evidence one cannot help but add—it actually shows that the fundraiser, NPR's Ron Schiller, was **recounting the views** of two high-level Republicans to whom he had recently spoken.

Perhaps most significantly, the edited version of the tape does not include the part where Schiller made it known to his luncheon companions that there existed at NPR “a big firewall between funding and reporting: Reporters will not be swayed in any way, shape or form.” He actually offered some form of this disclaimer six separate times.

Appearing on CNN, O'Keefe **all but admitted** his deception by claiming that others do it, too. “Journalists have been doing this for a long time,” he argued. “It's a form of investigative reporting that you use to seek and find the truth.”

Another sad but predictable aspect of these events is how little self-confidence NPR demonstrated in dealing with O'Keefe's attack and how little support it received from other journalists who profess to believe in fair reporting. O'Keefe said on CNN's “Reliable Sources” that his sting was inspired by NPR's decision to drop longtime news analyst Juan Williams last October after Williams made comments on Fox News about Muslims. That firing of Williams, and the firing of longtime NPR executive Ellen Weiss that resulted from it, were examples—like Vivian Schiller's immediate resignation over the recent video—of NPR's constant attempt to appease the critics who wish to destroy it.

That's pointless. Congress is going to cut off NPR's funding—or not—regardless of this or that particular embarrassment. Much more important is the network's ability to do good work and reach as many people with it as it can. Clearly NPR's critics will use anything they can against it. Folks like Chris Wallace on Fox are going to use any weapon available, and they are unwilling **even to admit** O'Keefe's nefarious methods. Perhaps this is due to the fact that such “journalistic” methods are consistent with those of the entire Murdoch empire. (**Palm trees in Madison, Wisconsin?** Really?)

So too, right-wing critics like David Boaz, vice-president of the Koch-Brothers-funded CATO institute, who—surprise, surprise—used our joint appearance on NPR's “On Point” to attack its coverage of climate change. (The Cato Institute began in 1977 with a grant from the conservative billionaires Charles and David Koch. According to the Center for Public Integrity, between 1986 and 1993 the Koch family gave \$11 million to the institute. Ed Crane, the institute's founder and president, enjoys no credentials whatsoever as a scientist and **informed** *The New Yorker's* Jane Mayer that “global-warming theories” needed to be resisted **because they justify** “giv[ing] the government more control of the economy.”)

Boaz's argument demonstrates the true agenda behind the attacks of those like O'Keefe, Fox, CATO, and any number of conservatives. Good reporting—even reporting like that of NPR's that bends over backwards to be more than fair to conservatives—is bad for their business. So, too, alas, is truth. Unfortunately, too many in the increasingly beleaguered mainstream media have concluded that they, too, would rather switch than fight.

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