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Christine M. Flowers: Foul air at National Public Radio



By Christine M. Flowers
Philadelphia Daily News

A FEW months ago, Mississippi Public Radio temporarily dropped "Fresh Air," the program hosted by local legend Terry Gross. The reason given was the program's "gratuitous discussions on issues of an explicit sexual nature."

I rarely listen to "Fresh Air" because of its time slot, and also because I'm not a huge fan of NPR, but I have friends who swear by Ms. Gross (probably in part because of those "gratuitous" and "explicit" discussions.)

The initial reaction from Gross' local fans was much more revealing than Mississippi's decision to clean up its airwaves. A review of the comments to an article that appeared on Philly.com were running 10 to 1 against the decision, attributing the cancellation to what one commenter called "backassward" Southerners.

There were others who tried to engage in a civil discussion, but most of the comments were along the lines of "It's all the fault of those right-wing Christians."

Seems that people who listen to NPR have a tendency to blame those horrible Christian wing-nuts for so many things, including the persecution of their beloved Terry. Well, after some pressure, the delta dudes backed down and welcomed Gross back. (Albeit in a different time slot when the kiddies didn't have to hear about bestiality, group sex and KamaSuitYourself, Baby.)

Apparently, the rednecks have a lot more tolerance for diversity than the corporate heads at the headquarters of our tax-supported public radio network.

Immediate case in point: After saying on the Bill O'Reilly show that he felt uneasy when he saw people in Muslim garb on an airplane, Juan Williams was axed from his longtime gig at NPR.

The network said Williams' remarks "were inconsistent with our editorial standards and

practices, and undermined his credibility as a news analyst with NPR."

Please explain the difference between "news analyst" and "commentator." I understand the difference between "reporter" and "op-ed writer." The first is supposed to be unbiased and unopinionated (yeah, right) while the second is supposed to be as biased and opinionated as they come; otherwise she's not doing her job.

But how can you actually "analyze" the news if you don't inject your own honest perspective into the mix? Reporting is different. You simply do what the guy on "Dragnet" said: Just the facts, ma'am. But Williams wasn't hired to be a reporter at NPR.

Although he started out his distinguished career as a journalist, he spent years as a columnist and editorial writer at the *Washington Post*, and has produced a prodigious body of work on the civil-rights movement, including a well-known biography of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

Apparently, it was OK for Williams to have strong opinions about segregation, but not about whether seeing someone in religious garb on a plane gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Sure, it's not the politically correct thing to say that overtly religious Muslims make you uncomfortable when you're holding a boarding pass at the airport.

But neither is admitting, as Jesse Jackson once did, that "There is nothing more painful for me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery - then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved."

Or telling a buxom Latina journalist that it's not a good idea to show her puppies in a men's locker room.

It's a clear part of opinion journalism - and also part of what actually makes the First Amendment the journalistic icon that it is - to promote the clash of ideas in the public sphere.

What happened to Williams is despicable. We help support NPR with our money, so we expect it to provide reportage that doesn't cater to any particular demographic. If we're going to be worried about offending the sensitivities of some groups and their secular liberal proxies, maybe we should also start a campaign to prevent NPR from airing any more of their heavy-handed and clearly opinion-driven reports on many topics, including the pedophilia scandal in the Catholic Church.

Maybe it can clamp down on stories about how racist the tea partyers are, especially when a recent report issued by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, suggests that's just not the case. And perhaps it should stop allowing

Nina Totenberg to blast the Supreme Court for decisions she doesn't like under the guise of "analyzing the news."

Because once you start worrying about hurting people's feelings when you talk about important public topics, Pandora's got a very nice box for you.

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