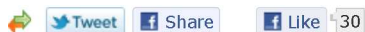




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[Is Public Broadcasting Biased?](#)

David Boaz - April 4, 2011



There's been a [renewed debate lately](#) over whether [NPR](#) and [PBS](#) are tilted to the left. I've offered [some examples](#) of bias before. I noticed a couple more last week:

* NPR's *Diane Rehm Show* [devoted an hour to Sen. Bernie Sanders](#), the independent socialist from Vermont, talking about his new book *The Speech*. But it looks like Diane has not interviewed Sen. Rand Paul, the constitutional conservative from Kentucky, about his new book *The Tea Party Goes to Washington*, even though it's selling better than Sanders's book. It's pretty clear to book publicists that it's much easier to get a liberal author on the *Diane Rehm Show* than a conservative or libertarian author.








* Meanwhile, this week PBS is featuring the latest in its program *Journey to Planet Earth*, this episode featuring "environmental visionary Lester Brown," the long-time president of the Worldwatch Institute. The episode, "Plan B: Mobilizing To Save Civilization," "delivers a clear and unflinching message – either confront the realities of climate change or suffer the consequences of lost civilizations and failed political states." Matt Damon hosts. But Lester Brown's decades-long predictions about environmental disasters have been wrong more often than the 5.9 million NCAA brackets filled out on ESPN. See [this review from 1999](#) or this one [from 2000](#) or this one [from 2009](#). Meanwhile, a PBS documentary featuring the ideas of [Julian Simon](#), who challenged doomsday orthodoxy and notably [got things right](#)? Don't bet on it.


* Check out the [Forum Network](#), "a PBS and NPR public media service in collaboration with public stations and community partners across the United States [intended] to bring a diverse range of perspectives on both local and global issues to audiences around the world" through an online library of "thousands of lectures by some of the world's foremost scholars, authors, artists, scientists, policy makers, and community leaders, available to citizens of the world for free." If the tilt of the videos isn't obvious, just click on any letter under Speakers and see how long it takes to encounter a conservative or libertarian speaker. Or try searching for speakers like Arthur Schlesinger and Milton Friedman, Julian Simon and Lester Brown, and see what results turn up. Or check out the [10-part series on same-sex marriage](#), which appears to be tilted 8 to 2 in favor. Which is OK with me, as that's also my position, but it might not quite reflect the viewpoints of the diverse taxpayers who are paying for the service.

But one might say, so what if NPR and PBS tilt to the left? Lots of media have an ideological slant. You're not likely to see Bernie Sanders on Fox, and Rand Paul has probably learned [what kind of reception](#) he'll [get at MSNBC](#).

The difference is that NPR and PBS are funded by taxpayers (not entirely, but to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars a year). The [First Amendment](#) protects freedom of speech and of the press. But no one has a right to government funding of his or her speech. And when government does speak or fund speakers, the legal rules become [far more complex](#) than when a private person speaks. Surely the taxpayers and their representatives have some say over what they will pay for, and that means that recipients of government funding are constantly looking over their shoulder to see if they're offending their patrons in Congress.

[Some people](#) on the left have advocated that public broadcasters liberate themselves from taxpayer funding so they could become more aggressive. It's quite possible that an NPR free of taxpayer funds and political strings would be more vigorously liberal than it is now. That's fine. Under the First Amendment, independent media have the right to be as liberal, conservative, libertarian, socialist, national socialist, bigoted, or religious as they want. Just don't make the taxpayers pay for it.

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8 Responses to “Is Public Broadcasting Biased?”

- *Allison:*
[April 4, 2011 at 10:21 am](#)

I think the fact that PBS is not solely funded by public dollars is why you’ll see some stories lean one way or the other. We all know what happens when money gets involved. As someone who did reporting for about 2 1/2 years, I don’t claim to be an expert but I do know how difficult it can be to remain unbiased. Having more than one set of eyes reviewing a story/segment will also help to filter out some of the biases.

[Reply](#)

- *Bias at NPR and PBS? | Cato @ Liberty:*
[April 4, 2011 at 11:13 am](#)

[...] my Britannica Blog column today I look at some brand-new examples of what might seem to be liberal bias at NPR and PBS: [...]

[Reply](#)

- *Dave:*
[April 4, 2011 at 11:57 am](#)

A few examples? I suggest that you take a different approach – take one issue and research how NPR reports on it compared to, say, Fox. Then repeat that about 100 times. After that, you might have enough data to make a bias statement with confidence.

[Reply](#)

- *Scott:*
[April 4, 2011 at 1:02 pm](#)

Allison, do you actually listen to NPR? This isn’t a case of a few people on NPR displaying bias once in a while, it’s much more systemic than that.

I like NPR. My wife and I (different sex marriage) support NPR. I’m relatively conservative but I consider myself open minded. I consider myself smart enough to know biased reporting when I hear it, so i take what’s being said / reported with a grain (or pound) of salt.

If you’re looking for other examples of bias, try listening to the Tavis Smiley show. As a middle aged suburban white guy I used to appreciate Mr. Smiley’s opinion and reporting from a different section of US society. However over time his show has moved to a full time liberal talk show. First it was Bush bashing, it’s moved to a full time “progressive” talk show. The addition of Cornel West as a co host was the last straw for me – I just can’t listen any longer. I wrote to my local NPR station about this. I never heard from them (maybe it was because I said I wouldn’t stop donating to them) but what would they say?

I don’t know if NPR executives live in an echo chamber in the Upper West Side/Berkeley/Madison, Wi. or if they think they can continue to demonize Congressional critics to keep their gravy train going but it’s hard to see how this can continue on the path it is. Then again, they’ve made it this far.....

[Reply](#)

- *Bernard I. Westing:*
[April 4, 2011 at 2:20 pm](#)

There’s enough liberal media without us paying for it.

[Reply](#)

- *Mike Licht:*
[April 4, 2011 at 4:58 pm](#)

For the record, Scott, the Tavis Smiley radio program is distributed by Public Radio International, not National Public Radio. In fact, if I am not mistaken, NPR dropped the Tavis Smiley Show for the very reasons you cite.

[Reply](#)

- *Still not making a point:*
[April 4, 2011 at 5:35 pm](#)

Editorial content on Fox news: 80%

Editorial content on NPR/PBS: 10%

Those numbers show that the not-for-profit world respects news and recognizes its value.

And who cares if Rehm interviewd a REAL socialist and not a dime a dozen conservative republican? Thats not bias its a booking decision.

[Reply](#)

- *Kate:*
[April 5, 2011 at 12:10 pm](#)

Liberal media is a hoax perpetrated by the most right wing media America has ever seen... FOX news. It's interesting that anything considered intellectual – well-thought out, thought-provoking, critical analysis is thought of as liberal. I actually take that as a compliment. I think the best part about being liberal is that you are open to different views and ideas and art and music. We don't close ourselves off to the world because our church or party and blindly follow like sheep what they say. Thank heaven for NPR over the years – the content of most programs today is utterly shallow – via that show about Jersey kids and on and on. Although I will say the content on public stations is now greatly reduced to it's former stature I say keep it alive so that we can have nature programs, thoughtful analysis of the state of the world and something other than the drivel that is on most stations today!

[Reply](#)

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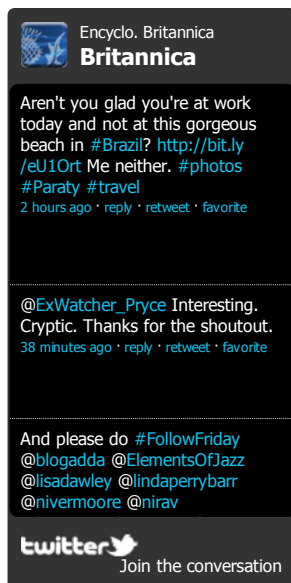


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