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ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

### COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-3641

Minority (202) 225-2927

April 30, 2024

Ms. Katherine Maher  
Chief Executive Officer  
National Public Radio  
1111 North Capitol Street, NE.  
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Ms. Maher,

Pursuant to Rules X and XI of the U.S. House of Representatives, the Committee writes to investigate allegations of political and ideological bias at the national program producing office of National Public Radio (NPR). The Committee has concerns about the direction in which NPR may be headed under past and present leadership. As a taxpayer funded, public radio organization, NPR should focus on fair and objective news reporting that both considers and reflects the views of the larger U.S. population and not just a niche audience.

On April 9, 2024, former NPR senior business editor, Uri Berliner, wrote an article published in *The Free Press* that raised concerns about the “absence of viewpoint diversity” at the organization.<sup>1</sup> As the nation’s leading public radio network with a weekly audience of 42 million listeners, it is unsettling to note that “[a]n open-minded spirit no longer exists within NPR” and that the news station is promoting strident left-wing views to the exclusion of alternative viewpoints.<sup>2</sup> According to Berliner, who worked at NPR for 25 years, the lack of viewpoint diversity is also reflected in the newsroom’s voter registration: “Concerned by the lack of viewpoint diversity, I looked at voter registration for our newsroom. In D.C., where NPR is headquartered and many of us live, I found 87 registered Democrats working in editorial positions and zero Republicans. None.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Uri Berliner, *I’ve Been at NPR for 25 Years. Here’s How We Lost America’s Trust.*, Free Press (Apr. 9, 2024), <https://www.thefp.com/p/npr-editor-how-npr-lost-americas-trust>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*; Nat’l Public Media, NPR Audience, <https://www.nationalpublicmedia.com/audience/> (last visited Apr. 23, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Uri Berliner, *supra* note 1.

We also find it disconcerting that NPR's coverage of major news in recent years has been so polarized as to preclude any need to uncover the truth. These have included news stories on matters of national security and importance, such as the Mueller report, the Hunter Biden laptop, and the COVID-19 origins investigation. On each of these issues, NPR has been accused of approaching its news reporting with an extreme left-leaning lens.

According to Berliner, on allegations of Russian election interference in U.S. elections, NPR is said to have:

**hitched our wagon to Trump's most visible antagonist, Representative Adam Schiff. Schiff, who was the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, became NPR's guiding hand, its ever-present muse.** By my count, NPR hosts interviewed Schiff 25 times about Trump and Russia. During many of those conversations, Schiff alluded to purported evidence of collusion. **The Schiff talking points became the drumbeat of NPR news reports. But when the Mueller report found no credible evidence of collusion, NPR's coverage was notably sparse. Russiagate quietly faded from our programming** (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, on the Hunter Biden laptop story, the article stated:

In October 2020, the *New York Post* published the explosive report about the laptop Hunter Biden abandoned at a Delaware computer shop containing emails about his sordid business dealings. **With the election only weeks away, NPR turned a blind eye.** Here's how NPR's managing editor for news at the time explained the thinking: **"We don't want to waste our time on stories that are not really stories, and we don't want to waste the listeners' and readers' time on stories that are just pure distractions."**

But it wasn't a pure distraction, or a product of Russian disinformation, as dozens of former and current intelligence officials suggested. The laptop did belong to Hunter Biden. Its contents revealed his connection to the corrupt world of multimillion-dollar influence peddling and its possible implications for his father.

The laptop was newsworthy. **But the timeless journalistic instinct of following a hot story lead was being squelched.** During a meeting with colleagues, I listened as **one of NPR's best and most fair-minded journalists said it was good we weren't following the laptop story because it could help Trump.**

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

When the essential facts of the *Post*'s reporting were confirmed and the emails verified independently about a year and a half later, **we could have fessed up to our misjudgment. But, like Russia collusion, we didn't make the hard choice of transparency** (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

Finally, on the COVID-19 origins investigation, the article stated:

Politics also intruded into NPR's Covid coverage, most notably in reporting on the origin of the pandemic. . . .

**The lab leak theory came in for rough treatment almost immediately, dismissed as racist or a right-wing conspiracy theory.** Anthony Fauci and former NIH head Francis Collins, representing the public health establishment, were its most notable critics. **And that was enough for NPR. We became fervent members of Team Natural Origin, even declaring that the lab leak had been debunked by scientists.** . . .

Over the course of the pandemic, a number of investigative journalists made compelling, if not conclusive, cases for the lab leak. But at NPR, we weren't about to swivel or even tiptoe away from the insistence with which we backed the natural origin story. **We didn't budge when the Energy Department—the federal agency with the most expertise about laboratories and biological research—concluded, albeit with low confidence, that a lab leak was the most likely explanation for the emergence of the virus.**

Instead, we introduced our coverage of that development on February 28, 2023, by asserting confidently that “the scientific evidence overwhelmingly points to a natural origin for the virus” (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

NPR's reasons for squashing open dialogue on the lab leak theory was to suggest the search for the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic was similar to the Bush administration's search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Not only are the two issues entirely unrelated, but it is incomprehensible that the nation's public radio—supported by taxpayer funding—would choose to allow political ideologies to override journalistic principles of truth, accuracy, and objectivity.

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> Noel King & David Folkenflik, *Why Much Of The Media Dismissed Theories That COVID Leaked From Lab*, NPR (June 3, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/03/1002772810/why-much-of-the-media-dismissed-theories-that-covid-leaked-from-lab>.

Another former NPR staff member remarked that the core editorial problem at NPR has long been “an abundance of caution that often crossed the border to cowardice,” and an entrenched culture that “encouraged an editorial fixation on finding the exact middle point of the elite political and social thought, planting a flag there, and calling it objectivity.”<sup>8</sup>

You yourself have stated that you view “the First Amendment as ‘the number one challenge’ because speech protections make it ‘tricky’ to suppress ‘bad information’ and the ‘influence peddlers who have made a real market economy around it.’”<sup>9</sup> Ironically, both you and NPR have used the same First Amendment to protect your own views and statements.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, you took issue because the *New York Times* chose to publish an op-ed written by Republican Senator Tom Cotton, calling the piece “full of racist dog whistles.”<sup>11</sup>

In August 2021, at your TED talk, titled *What Wikipedia Teaches Us about Balancing Truth and Beliefs*, you introduced the concept of “minimum viable truth” and praised Wikipedia’s approach to truth, stating:

But the people who write these articles, they’re not focused on the truth. They’re focused on something else, which is the best of what we can know right now. And after seven years of working with these brilliant folks, **I’ve come to believe that they are onto something. That perhaps for our most tricky disagreements, seeking the truth and seeking to convince others of the truth might not be the right place to start. In fact, our reverence for the truth might be a distraction that’s getting in the way of finding common ground and getting things done.**

.....

And so, in the spirit of that, I’m certain that the truth exists for you and probably for the person sitting next to you. But this may not be the same truth. This is because the truth of the matter is very often, for many people, what happens when we merge facts about the world with our beliefs about the world. **So, we all have different**

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<sup>8</sup> Alicia Montgomery, *The Real Story Behind NPR’s Current Problems*, Slate (Apr. 16, 2024), <https://slate.com/business/2024/04/npr-diversity-public-broadcasting-radio.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ariel Zilber, *NPR Boss Katherine Maher Opposed ‘Free and Open’ Approach at Wikipedia: ‘White Male Westernized Construct’*, N.Y. Post (Apr. 18, 2024), <https://nypost.com/2024/04/18/media/nprs-katherine-maher-opposed-free-and-open-approach-at-wikipedia/>.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Mullin, *NPR C.E.O. Faces Criticism Over Tweets Supporting Progressive Causes*, N.Y. Times (Apr. 15, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/15/business/media/npr-chief-executive-criticized-over-tweets.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Flood, *NPR Defends Embattled CEO against ‘Bad Faith Attack’ as Critics Unearth Her Far-Left Social Media Posts*, Fox News (Apr. 17, 2024), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/npr-defends-embattled-ceo-against-bad-faith-attack-critics-unearth-far-left-social-media-posts>.

**truths.** They're based on things like where we come from, how we were raised, and how other people perceive us.<sup>12</sup>

The Committee is therefore concerned that your personal views and opinions on matters of public interest heavily influence your decision making at NPR and may cloud objective reporting of the news at NPR.

You are requested to appear before the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee for a hearing on May 8, 2024, to explain the allegations of political and ideological bias rampant at NPR. In addition, please provide the Committee with the following information by, no later than, May 14, 2024:

1. In the past five years, how many registered Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and registered voters who are not required by state law to declare an affiliation, has NPR employed as part of its news media staff?
2. Were any internal written work products (e.g., memoranda, emails, etc.), including drafts, created relating to the lack of political viewpoint diversity at NPR? If so, please produce copies to the Committee.
3. In the past five years, what percentage of NPR's Board of Directors were registered Republicans?
4. In the past five years, did members of NPR's Board of Directors raise concerns about the lack of political viewpoint diversity at the station? If so, whom?
5. In the past five years, what strategies, if any, did NPR implement to recruit individuals registered as Republicans or those who espouse non-left-leaning viewpoints (i.e., conservative or libertarian)?

In your own words, "slowing down a little bit and bringing the conversation in, [] listening with sincerity, debating with respect, consulting widely, and weighing difficult decisions with candor," might be what NPR needs to rebuild the damage to its reputation and credibility.<sup>13</sup>

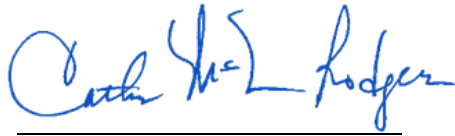
If you have any questions, please contact the Majority Committee staff at (202) 225-3641. Thank you for your attention to this request.

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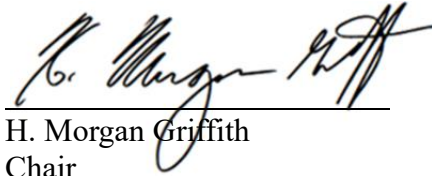
<sup>12</sup> Katherine Maher, *What Wikipedia Teaches Us about Balancing Truth and Beliefs*, TED (Aug. 2021), [https://www.ted.com/talks/katherine\\_maher\\_what\\_wikipedia\\_teaches\\_us\\_about\\_balancing\\_truth\\_and\\_beliefs/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/katherine_maher_what_wikipedia_teaches_us_about_balancing_truth_and_beliefs/transcript).

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Maher, *supra* note 8.

Sincerely,



Cathy McMorris Rodgers  
Chair  
Committee on Energy and  
Commerce



H. Morgan Griffith  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Oversight and  
Investigations



Bob Latta  
Chair  
Subcommittee on Communications  
and Technology

cc: Frank Pallone Jr., Ranking Member, Energy and Commerce Committee  
Doris Masui, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Communications and Technology  
Kathy Castor, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations