



George Blecher, Kevin Klose

Oasis in the desert

A conversation with Kevin Klose, President of the American National Public Radio network

National Public Radio (NPR) is the closest thing in the US to a European state-run media network, although it's neither state-run nor a media network. It was created in 1970 as a non-profit corporation to produce radio programs "in the public interest." In this interview, Klose speaks about public radio that, with its emphasis on fact-based journalism, offers an alternative from the steady stream of sensationalist, right-wing talk-shows available on private radio.

NPR airs its shows over some 750 non-commercial radio stations all over the US "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered," its two double-hour morning and evening newscasts, reach over 14 million listeners at home and overseas. They're virtually the only outlets for national and international news and analysis in a US media desert in which, over the last thirty years, commercial radio has almost completely abandoned broadcast journalism and substituted pop music shows with endless advertisements, or circus ringmaster-like "talk-show hosts" who stir up the stomach bile of their call-in listeners rather than encouraging a real exchange of ideas. During the first years of Klose's tenure, listenership for all of NPR programs increased from 13 to 16 million. The number of listeners had been on the rise since 1980, and in 2000 it "spiked" upward due to people wanting in-depth information about the long political/legal struggle over the Presidential election that autumn. However, the day after 11 September, 2001, the day of the World Trade Tower attacks, the number jumped to 20 million, and since then has added another 2 million.

In depth-analysis and commentary

George Blecher: Why the sudden – and continued – increase in listenership?

Kevin Klose: Think about what happened to the psyche of the country in the days after 9/11. There were tens of thousands of people, maybe hundreds of thousands, who had to get across the country, and because no commercial aircraft were flying, these folks were grounded. A lot of people turned to surface transportation, and the only way they could stay in contact with what had happened was to listen to their radios in their cars as they doubled and tripled-up to get to their destinations. Because NPR has three times as many foreign news bureaus as CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), the commercial radio network that used to be considered the Tiffany of broadcast journalism, what these people found is that we were able to give them substance, not in a ten or eighteen minute repeating loop of short news stories, but in a continuous mosaic of news reporting around the country and around

the world, and to come back in behind the breaking news with substantive analysis, commentary, perceptions, new voices. When they tuned away to television or, God forbid, to commercial radio, there was simply nothing there – nothing more than a series of painful repetitions of the videos of the attack itself.

G. B.: But radio and TV weren't always quite so bad, as I remember. In the past, CBS in particular had outstanding news coverage, didn't they?

K. K.: At the beginning, absolutely.

Back in the 1930s as World War II approached, William Paley, who founded the CBS radio network, realized that radio could be much more than an entertainment and advertising medium which earned a zillion dollars, the licenses of which the owners had gotten for free – apart from a small licensing fee, no radio or TV station has to pay the government for the use of its frequency. He saw that he could broadcast advertising and news to stations simultaneously all over the country, and he figured that if he wanted to keep getting the free right to do this, he'd better do something in the public sector, make something like a social contract, and what that centered on was the creation of a very high quality news service—CBS News. On the eve of the War, he assembled some of the best print journalists in the business, people like Edward R. Murrow and William Shirer, to report over radio from Europe about the gathering conflict – and that created the paradigm for high-quality broadcast news in this country.

G. B.: It seems to me that CBS TV had good reporting until about the mid 70s.

K. K.: Well, first of all, when TV came along, radio stagnated. But even after the rise of TV and the decline of radio there was still a lot of complicated foreign reporting on the air; even if it simplified the issues a bit, it was engaging and it did put difficult problems, such as nuclear proliferation etc., in front of the American public. After the demise of the Soviet Union, however, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Americans took a hike. We weren't very interested in the rest of the world anymore, and all the media reduced their foreign reporting and their engagement with the complexity of ideas that were still looming before us – what we should do, how we should act, as a global power, a vast nation with vast resources, vast challenges and, for better or worse, vast global interests. After 9/11, a large number of Americans started thirsting for information again. They realized that we're living in a dangerous age which can't be gotten through simply by shouting at people whom you may have differences of opinion with: the only way we can get through it is the way that Americans have always responsibly done – by gathering as much information as possible.

Public finances and private radio stations

Because the media systems in Europe and the States are so different from each other, it's worth taking a quick look at the history and topography of American broadcast media to see the advantages and limitations of a non-profit organization like National Public Radio, whose financial resources are far below those of the commercial radio networks—that is, up until a few months ago, when NPR received over 200 million dollars from the estate of Mrs Ray Kroc, widow of the founder of McDonald's.

The first thing to remember is that there are a staggering 13,450 licensed radio stations in the US. Anybody who flips the car radio dials at night hears the overcrowding, the static, the pounding music and shrill ads, as well as the often delightful locality of the voices – radio is probably the only American medium left that allows regional accents to be heard. As well as a staggering number of stations there's also a unique diversity in these stations, both in terms of size and listenership, and in terms of concept. Radio stations can and do range from Harlem hip-hop outlets to fundamentalist Christian groups offering advice on how to prepare for the Judgment Day to small college-owned classical music stations, where the hosts speak in hushed, meditation-teacher whispers. In the early days of radio, the federal government recognized that it was necessary to protect this diversity by preventing the monopolization of the airways by commercial interests, and they made sure to give out license to non-commercial as well as commercial enterprises.

Networks of commercial stations developed early in the history of radio, but, with few exceptions, it wasn't until the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 and the subsequent creation of NPR in 1970 that "public" stations created similar networks. Supporting themselves almost exclusively through individual listeners who pay a voluntary annual membership fee, over 750 of these stations form a loose, non-binding network under the umbrella of NPR, paying NPR for the use of selected programs while remaining free of centralized control.

In recent years commercial radio has gotten worse than ever. New, brutally single-minded conglomerates like Clear Channel (which owns 1,225 radio stations and 37 TV stations) take up a lot of space on the airwaves. Consisting mostly of pop-music stations, Clear Channel focuses mainly on younger listeners, and claims a listenership of 114 million weekly. Unlike their predecessor networks, they don't even pretend to have an interest in news reporting or political debate. The only thing that matters is the famous American "bottom line."

K. K.: I guess you could sum up the commercial approach to news by the apocryphal story they used to tell about CBS News. Some chieftain of CBS News, I think in the 1970's when it was still a great place, came to his senior staff and said, "I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that for the first time in its history the news division made a profit for the company. The bad news is that for the first time in its history CBS News made a profit."

That's the issue. What's happened is that the cost of doing news, even in radio, is higher by a huge factor than the cost of programming a hard drive to play music. It takes people to report the news, to produce, edit and direct a high-quality news show. That's what we do. The commercial networks like Clear Channel and the others have no interest in making that kind of financial commitment for a lower profit margin than the way they can do it.

G. B.: So what you're saying is that, even though the commercial networks have considerable financial resources, they don't have news bureaus anymore, they don't have any news gathering apparatus? How do they gather and broadcast news?

K. K.: They can go to their local stations, where they might have one or two news people on staff, or even seven or eight. But that's the exception, not the rule. Generally they'll go to the Associated Press, which is a cooperative news service that has a broadcast division, and get the AP "feed" – their audio or

video news summaries.

Here's an example of how commercial networks have killed their news reporting possibilities. Some years ago in Richmond, Virginia, the capitol of the state, a big conglomerate bought eight local commercial stations. Basically the first thing they did was fire all local staff and programmed these eight stations into very specific segments of music with some headline news. But this was also segmented: you can get headline news that is aimed at an "urban" audience – this is shorthand for "black city dwellers" – or a "country and western" audience – they can break down the news into that kind of segmentation. It's very simple to do. So all the local news capacity in these eight stations disappeared. And these are stations in the state capitol, where they have a Governor and State Legislature, billions of dollars each year at stake in policy setting with regard to such things as the environment, public health and safety, education and so forth – all this stopped being reported on the radio. This goes on all over the country, unless one or two of the local stations can scrape up enough resources to make a case to preserve some ability to do that kind of reporting.

Right-wing talk-show hosts

Instead of news reporting, commercial networks have turned more and more to so-called talk-show "hosts"—fast-talking propagandists who challenge their call-in listeners to a verbal battle where all the Right-wing verities (strong American military, repeal of pro-abortion laws, reduced government and lower taxes) are paraded one after the other and attached, as it were, to the American flag: anyone who disagrees with the host is showered with insults that range from questioning their masculinity (or femininity) to accusing them of harboring Communist or socialist sympathies. The call-in program of Rush Limbaugh, the most successful of the talk-show hosts, is the No. 1 radio show on the air, with a listenership of some 14.5 million. (NPR's morning news show is No. 2, trailing behind Limbaugh by a few hundred thousand.) Other talk-show figures include Sean Hannity, whose show is No. 3, and on TV Bill O'Reilly, a staple of the Fox TV network. Jerry Springer, a former Mayor of Cincinnati, is a daytime TV sensation, whose show offers a steady diet of raunchy, emotional confrontations between family members, former lovers, etc. (In March of this year Air American Radio, a small, Left-oriented network, went on the air with outlets in five cities.)

In a sense, Limbaugh and his cohorts are the verbal equivalent of professional wrestlers: the outcome of their "dialogues" is never in doubt, and the audience takes pleasure in a kind of cartoonish depiction of Good and Evil. Which would be harmless except for the fact that the opinions on these programs often pass for fact – and, though there aren't any statistics to prove it, talk-show hosts may be exerting considerable political influence on a portion of the American voting public.

An interesting side note is that some of the radio and TV networks are surprisingly private about the number of listeners to their shows; an inquiry to the Fox Network, for example, about Bill O'Reilly's listenership received the response that "We don't give this information out," and repeated inquiries to Clear Channel about their demographics were met with silence.

K. K.: A lot of listeners listen to these types of shows because it's a little like listening to a barker at a carnival sideshow. It's not really based on fact-finding journalism but on opinion, point of view, bombast. The talk-show hosts are

trying to be provocative, and they are entertaining in their way – you listen because you want to hear what this guy is going to do next.

What's interesting, though, is that Rush's audience has been pretty stable, or you might say stagnant, for a number of years, while our morning news show is steadily increasing its listenership. Because we do what the others have opted out of doing – namely, fact-based journalism.

G. B.: But what's fascinating to me is that this battle isn't really about politics at all – the Right-Wing against the liberal/intellectual/left-wing Easterners – but a commercial battle, a battle for listeners. For isn't it true that the commercial radio stations put on these right-wing commentators not because they share their political beliefs but because they make money for the stations?

K. K.: In many cases, yes. I know several owners and managers of commercial stations who listen to NPR, not to their own stations. I would think that this should be especially telling to Europeans, because our paradigm is so completely different from theirs. When the airwaves, the electromagnetic spectrum, was first understood as a medium in which you could do radio, the European nations by and large held control, theoretically in the public interest, and didn't allow it to be used for commercial purposes. In the United States it was completely the other way around. In a country whose mass culture values, and whose ability to entertain and divert by means of the presentation arts, are so powerful, we've built our system around the idea of delivering an audience to a potential advertiser in order to sell things.

That's a very powerful transactional dynamic – which NPR has been freed from, because we're non-profit. And as more and more commercialism moves into the previously public sector – for example, police departments are experimenting with putting advertisements on the front fenders of their police cars –

G. B.: – and a juice distributor has contracted with New York City for the sole rights to put their juices in vending machines in the public schools –

K. K.: – so when, in contrast, you have something like NPR that isn't governed by that set of relationships, solely and wholly commercial, then you start to create not a transactional relationship but a values relationship, one that's not primarily based on entertainment and transaction, but on information and values.

I want to say a little more about the conservative talk-radio people. In the guise of discussing ideas, they're really quite intolerant of anybody's ideas but their own. I think that they've done a great deal of harm to American public dialogue and diction, because of their use of verbal tricks, and misusing opinions and twisted versions of facts and sequences of events to find perpetrators, people that other people can be mad at – people like "bleeding heart" liberals, "activist" federal judges, abortion advocates, critics of the Bush Administration's foreign policy, critics of the Iraq war, etc. Rather than engaging in an exploration of what really happened in a situation, the talk-show hosts invoke base responses in their listeners – it's really a kind of propagandizing and propagandistic presentation of facts. Let me give you an example. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Peter Jennings, one of the most famous TV news people here, wondered on the air about the whereabouts of the President. This was basically translated by the loudmouth radio talk-show hosts into a questioning of the President's courage. Within moments Jennings'

TV station was flooded by e mails insisting that he be taken off the air, be punished, etc. The version that the talk-show hosts reported was completely inaccurate, and one that they never corrected.

NPR's financing

If, like most everything else in the US, commercial radio is governed by the bottom line, where does NPR get its money? According to its own literature, its yearly budget of \$100 million comes from a combination of membership dues and programming fees from the local stations, contributions from private foundations and corporations, and revenue from the sale of transcripts, books, CD's, and merchandise. Only a very small percentage of its budget – 1–2 percent – comes from grants from government organizations like the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Science Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Asked if this connection to the government meant any sort of control or censorship, Klose felt that it didn't: though there's a consistent level of criticism of NPR from the Congress, mainly from the Republican Right, the limited amount of federal money that NPR and its local stations receive prevents the self-censorship that might occur if the percentage were higher. In addition, NPR's mandate, as Klose and his Board of Directors see it, is not primarily as a partisan, investigative organization but as a medium in which a variety and balance of differing opinions can be heard.

But what about reporting, for instance, on the Iraqi war? Does Klose feel that the government in any way controlled – and still controls – the flow of news?

Iraq war coverage

G. B.: It seems to me that during the Vietnam War, the US government wasn't very good at using the media. The hippies were the ones who understood the value of the broadcast media as a way to sway public opinion, and made good use of it against the government. Since then, however, the government has wised up. In the reporting of the Iraqi war, they put "embedded" journalists where they wanted them, and each journalist had to be approved beforehand. Did this amount to censorship?

K. K.: As far as the embedded journalists go, the answer is no, I don't think that it did.

We had five people covering the hostilities, of which two were "embedded." One was with the 3rd Infantry Division, which was one of the armored spearheads, and the other was with the First Marine Expeditionary Force, which was the other principal spearhead. We chose the correspondents, and we participated in the discussion about what the ground rules should be. We sent these journalists and some others to a training course at Quantico Marine Base outside Washington, D.C., to learn survival techniques so that they'd be as little a liability as possible while being unarmed and not having had any combat training.

We had three other journalists in Iraq, a so-called "unilateral" in Northern Iraq, our own correspondent live from Baghdad reporting every hour during the assault and the aftermath, and one at the Central Command Headquarters, where they were doing the official briefings.

In addition we had a number of other correspondents who worked for other news organizations or were there as freelancers, including John Laurence, a

fabulous reporter from the Vietnam War era, and Rick Atkinson, a former *Washington Post* reporter who's now a Pulitzer-Prize winning military historian. But the thing about censorship is this: since both of our "embeds" had satellite phones and thus could communicate directly with editors in Washington, there was no censorship in the conventional sense of submitting for review by military censors, as was the case in World War II and Korea, but not in Vietnam.

However, they were extremely limited in what they could see. Remember that they were traveling in armored personnel carriers, the so-called Bradley fighting vehicles. They're sitting in the back of a machine that has a thick slit, a glass covered aperture that might be a few inches wide and gives them a perspective of 10 degrees in the direction in which they can see. They're sitting in this thing, it's clanking along, rumbling and growling, they hear radio stuff going on in the cockpit amongst the crew, there're 8 or 9 other men in there, mostly infantrymen riding inside, and there's a commander, driver, and a guy in a turret. Pretty much everything, as you know, is happening at night. They hear incoming fire. They don't know where they are, they can't see anything, all they can do is hear. It's quite frightening. They hear explosions around them and return fire from the vehicle, but they have no idea in which direction the return fire went, and even if they saw it, all they'd see is a muzzle flash in the darkness, hear a boom, try to see where it landed. They have no idea how many people fired at them and who fired at them. In addition they're moving very fast, and their objective is to get to Baghdad.

So we knew from the very beginning that what the embeds would see would be quite confined, and we always couched it that way. It became part of a mosaic of coverage that included live reports from other correspondents, among them one in Baghdad who stayed there the whole time, defying a Presidential request for all reporters to leave before the incursion. Our unilateral in Northern Iraq was moving at will among the Kurds, the anti-Saddam forces, and with the US troops when they let him. And the guy at CentCom was obviously covering the official version of things, but he was also developing sources that were unofficial, and told us all kinds of things that were not presented in official briefings – such as the doubt among some of the military command that we didn't have enough troops there. Plus we had reporting from foreign capitals – Cairo, Amman, Riyadh, London, Rome, Warsaw, etc. We felt that we offered our listeners the widest spectrum of information possible.

NPR's listeners

G. B.: On the subject of the wide perspective, do you also have a wide spectrum of listeners, or are they mostly, as the conservative talk hosts would have us believe, white, college-educated, and leaning to the left?

K. K.: In terms of finding out listeners' political allegiances, it's a little hard because the only way to do it is by "prompted self-identification" – people identifying themselves as either Republican or Democrat. When we've done the surveys it works out, and has worked out for years, that our listenership is roughly 1/3 Conservative/Republican, 1/3 Moderate/Independent, and 1/3 Liberal/Democrat. In terms of age, the median age of the US population is 47 while our median age is 45, but it's been getting older as the general population ages. If you break the population down into age segments (18–34, 34–45, etc.) our listenership is represented in these groups pretty much to the exact ratio of the general population.

The one thing that distinguishes our listenership is that it's well-educated. A vast majority identify themselves as having a B.A., and a substantial minority hold degrees beyond that – M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s. Racially, it's a primarily white audience, but it's increasing in diversity, probably because the American population is increasingly diverse. There's a Latino component that's rising – it's still in the mid-single digits. There's an African-American component that's also in the single digits but rising as well, because we've created programming aimed specifically at them and the issues that they talk about.

We're very much trying to reach a younger and more diversified audience. Two years ago we met with representatives of about 40 of our member stations, stations whose licenses are held by black colleges and universities, and in consort with them we created something which had never existed before: a national-level, morning-drive news and commentary show directed at issues in the black community. It's gained an audience of about 1 million listeners and has become a centerpiece for many of these stations whose listenership is mainly African-American. But the show has also done something which I thought would happen: it's caught the interest of a lot of non-African-Americans, and so a lot of the bigger non-commercial stations have also put it on the air because they're getting a tremendous response from their predominantly white audiences.

We're also just starting research in how we can serve Latino audiences, a segment of the population that's rising explosively. We don't believe that this means Spanish-language programs, but high-quality English-language programs focused on issues that are alive in the Hispanic/Latino community, and have a different feel, a different psyche, than those in the non-Hispanic communities. It's just that the encounters of life there are different, and we need to have quality news-reporting on those issues, and we believe that we serve that potential and rising listenership in ways that we've never done before.

One of the Board members of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is a Mexican-American who thirty years ago took a moribund TV station in Los Angeles and made it one of the leading for-profit stations in the area. He found that no matter what sort of entertainment shows he ran, whether they were in Spanish or English, the thing that distinguished his station from all others is that he did high-quality journalism about issues relevant to his viewers. People are always interested in information: the more information we have, the better we can function in any society.

Renewed interest in public radio

G. B.: I suppose that one of the big questions that Europeans would have about NPR at this moment in time is whether you can serve as some sort of countervailing force to the Right-wing opinion makers, the talk-show hosts that you talked about earlier.

K. K.: It's hard to say, and I don't really know if it's our mandate to do this. Our job as we see is to present a variety of points of view, so that listeners can decide for themselves. But I do know that local support for public radio is rising. I travel the country a lot and visit local radio stations – I'm basically the ambassador from NPR – and when I go into hotels, the check-out clerks say, "You work for NPR? I listen to it all the time." Half the taxis I ride in are tuned to NPR programs.

The commercial networks say that nobody's interested in foreign news, you can't put it on the air because nobody will watch or listen to it. But we know that the No. 1 priority for our audiences is high-quality foreign and/or national news. We have replaced the commercial networks as the place that people turn to when they want this information.

There's something else to add to this. Two-thirds of the licenses of our member stations are held by colleges and universities. Most of them are public, state-supported colleges, but many are under the auspices of religious denominations. Because of this, I talk a lot to college presidents and administrators.

A year after 9/11, I started asking them if anything had changed on their campuses in terms of what the students are interested in. Recently I was on the campus of the University of Wisconsin, the Milwaukee campus, with a population of approximately 25,000 students. I learned that the University was looking for four or five teachers of Arabic, this on a campus where they had never previously taught Arabic. Also, studies in political science, international relations, public policy, comparative religion, cultural anthropology are all experiencing renewed interest, because on the fringes of the mass student body, which has to be concerned just with getting a college degree so that they have more earning power – at the edges of this population, just like during the Cold War, there are students who want to know what else is going on. And that has an effect. Those kids become a natural constituency for a serious presentation of issues. They're going to come to us.

For more information on NPR and to find out how to listen to NPR worldwide, go to: www.npr.org

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