

# The fight over public broadcasting

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

March 17, 2011

The House of Representatives [is voting today](#) on a bill that would prevent public radio stations from paying their NPR dues with federal money. This follows the video that [brought down](#) NPR head Vivian Schiller and senior VP Ron Schiller (no relation to each other).

Of course, the video was heavily edited to be blatantly misleading--and this should come as no surprise. [James O'Keefe](#), the conservative activist behind the sting, has [done this sort of thing before](#). Chris Rovzar [finds](#) O'Keefe's behavior perplexing:

At a certain point, liberal institutions should start counting these O'Keefe videos as actual victories. If he can't make a compelling video without absurd cutting and pasting, surely these places are actually doing something right. At the very least, they'll hopefully stop firing people the minute the "stings" are released and start learning from their mistakes - something O'Keefe himself seems strangely unwilling to do.

I agree that O'Keefe's targets need to handle him better. But his approach would seem a lot stranger to me if it wasn't so effective. O'Keefe released the 11-minute edited video and the two hours of raw footage the same day, inviting viewers to "[judge for yourself](#)." Taking comfort in this gesture of transparency, most people didn't bother watching the longer video--raw footage of a two-hour lunch is awfully boring, and the shorter version helpfully compiles all the interesting stuff that was said.

Along with some that wasn't. But by the time the discrepancies were thoroughly analyzed--[by Scott Baker](#) at Glenn Beck site the *Blaze*--the damage had been done. Which

was of course the whole idea. Well played, O'Keefe--that's some serious (and seriously cynical) media savvy.

Last weekend, NPR's own *On the Media* focused on the organization's PR woes and threatened

funding. [Much of the show](#) was about the history of public funding for broadcasting in the U.S., as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is on congressional Republicans' list of useful, trivially cheap things the government should [stop](#)

[funding](#). Hosts Brooke Gladstone and Bob Garfield went over the history with NPR old-timers, questioned former senator Larry Pressler's charges of unprofessionalism and pointed out that cutting the CPB would hurt small-market public radio stations the most.

One of the more interesting moments came in Gladstone's [interview](#) with libertarian journalist Nick Gillespie, who offered this comparison:

I think that the analogous model here is religion and religious expression. We all want to live in a world where everybody can worship whatever God they want but nobody is forced to pay for other people's belief systems, whether we're talking about Presbyterians and Baptists or FOX News enthusiasts and PBS tote bag holders.

Gillespie went on to insist that he's not concerned about any media organization's sociopolitical leanings, only that they not be taxpayer supported. The argument has a certain libertarian elegance, though it's undercut both by Gillespie's red state/blue state examples and by the leap he makes in calling media preferences "belief systems."

More importantly, there are larger differences between FOX News and public media than the politics of typical viewers and listeners--and it's hard to argue that our democracy would be better off if more news outlets answered to ratings, advertisers and the whims of Rupert Murdoch. To reiterate: less than one 8,000th of the federal budget goes to the CPB.

Later in the program, Ira Glass came on to [issue a challenge](#): instead of soberly discussing the merits of public funding for broadcasting, *On the Media* ought to

directly address charges that public radio's news programming has a liberal bias--by looking at the evidence. It's one thing to say listeners or even journalists lean left personally; it's quite another to find bias in the actual story choices and reporting.

I plan to tune in next week to see what Gladstone and Garfield come up with. At a minimum, it promises to be more edifying than a video edited to intentionally misrepresent a fundraiser (not a journalist) and embarrass his organization.