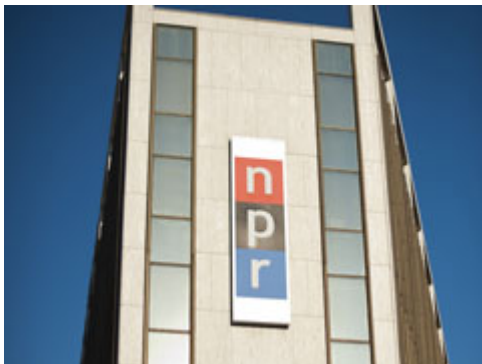


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NPR: 'Not Particularly Religious'?

by Heidi Schlumpf



The headquarters of National Public Radio in Washington (Roll Call Photos/Bill Clark)

At the beginning of each semester, I informally survey students about where they get their news. It's a daring, occasionally depressing, exercise, but I need to know.

'Anyone listen to NPR?' I ask. Usually this question prompts blank stares, but this time a young woman raises her hand and mentions a conservative talk radio station.

'Uh, that's not really National Public Radio,' I tell her.

'Oh,' she says, not particularly convinced.

Despite the partisan bickering about NPR's federal funding that has become as predictable as the stations' equally annoying pledge drives, perhaps the bigger threat to this journalistic enterprise is the lack of interest from the next generation.

My college students may not be listening, but I am. In our house we wake up to 'Morning Edition,'

download podcasts of "This American Life" and pretty much worship Terry Gross. Not only is Chicago's WBEZ our radio station of choice in the car, but we know how to hover around the low end of the FM dial to find other NPR stations when we travel.

My husband and I -- and most of our friends and colleagues who are NPR groupies, too -- fit the bill of the typical NPR listener, except perhaps for the median household income of \$90,000 part. We're older, have advanced degrees and even have been known to drink soy lattes.

But here's the rub: We believe in God and even practice an "organized religion," which makes us somewhat atypical members of the Lakshmi Singh fan club.

Don't get me wrong: I am a fan. I think NPR is one of the most, if not the most, respectable sources of national and international news out there. Which is why I feel it's my duty to point out that they could do a better job covering religion.

Does the "public" in NPR effectively erect a wall of separation between church and station? You can go days, indeed weeks, without hearing a substantive mention of religion on NPR, save Garrison Keillor's anecdotes about Minnesota Lutherans. The only subject NPR probably covers less is sports.

Yes, NPR does have a religion correspondent, although she is listed as serving both the religion and national beats. Barbara Bradley Hagerty does a fine job of covering the major religious news in the world, usually two to four stories a month for "Morning Edition" or "All Things Considered." In May she did six stories, but four of them were about the "rapture" predicted by a fringe evangelist.

She also has done some extraordinary features, like a backgrounder on black liberation theology during the Rev. Jeremiah Wright controversy, and received the radio award from the Religion Newswriters Association in 2003. In fact, an NPR-related station has won that award four times out of the past 10 years, but competition is hardly steep.

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Another NPR religion high point is "On Being," the hourlong religion news show formerly called "Speaking of Faith." Host Krista Tippett has solid religious and journalistic credentials and does an excellent job of covering the breadth of religious experience in American.

Maybe a little too broad. Since the name change a year ago, Tippett speaks less and less about faith. I mean, is an exploration of elephant vocalization really a religion story? But, as the website explains, the show is no longer just about religion. Now it, "seeks conversation, shared life, and problem-solving within and across religious traditions and across categories of belief and nonbelief."

It's still excellent journalism, deeper than most secular print religion coverage and worthy of your hour, although in most markets it broadcasts on Sunday mornings -- precisely when a lot of religious folks are actually getting ready for or already at church.

This show's acquiescence to atheists and agnostics mirrors what I fear is a stationwide bias against religion, at least the traditional kind. I pray that NPR doesn't accept the stereotype of their average listener as an East Coast liberal whose religious affiliation is limited to being culturally Jewish or dabbling in Buddhism.

Perhaps that stereotype was confirmed in 2003, when after NPR deliberately increased its religion

coverage, listeners complained. Some thought the coverage of Pope John Paul II's death (thank you, Sylvia Poggioli) was excessive, while others were unhappy about a piece on a growing evangelical church.

Ombudsman Jeffrey A. Dvorkin explained on the NPR blog: "Unquestionably, there has been a lot of reporting on the topic."

Really? I guess that depends on your definition of "a lot."

"We think that it's significant and we need to report it, even if it may make some of our longtime listeners uncomfortable," responded "Weekend All Things Considered" senior producer Walter Watson.

He's right. Some NPR listeners may not want increased coverage of this significant, relevant and newsworthy aspect of American life, but a bunch of us would. It might even attract some of those younger listeners.

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