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A Soros Problem at NPR

The broadcaster ducks again when it should be swinging

By Joel Meares

In what will presumably be [one of her final columns](#) as NPR ombudswoman, Alicia Shepard has chosen to address concerns about a [\\$1.8 million](#) grant that the Open Society Institute made to NPR back in October of last year. As Shepard points out, the money is directed at a worthy cause: NPR's Impact on Government project. Shepard explains that "the plan is to have two public radio reporters in every state keeping tabs on state government issues that are woefully under-reported by the media. This is to be a multi-media project for radio, the Web and social media." So far, eight states are involved in a pilot program and audiences will begin to see the results of the project on air next month.

The problem with the grant is political: lefty moneybags George Soros founded the Open Society Institute (OSI has also been a major funder of CJR). With the Juan Williams firing and the James O'Keefe sting video, all NPR needed was another political hot potato to have to juggle in its already too-blistered hands. From Shepard's column:

The Open Society grant was announced last Oct. 18 - ironically the same day that then NPR analyst Juan Williams made his infamous remark on Fox News about feeling nervous when he sees Arabs in Muslim garb on airplanes. He was later fired.

The timing was awful, as the poorly handled firing led to a firestorm of criticism from the right - many whom believe NPR caters to a liberal audience and that the government has no business funding public radio.

Adding to this, Soros' foundation also announced last October a \$1 million grant to Media Matters, a liberal activist group with a goal to hold Fox News (no fan of NPR) accountable. Soros has also given millions of dollars to other liberal groups, including MoveOn.org and the Center for American Progress.

Criticism has not been limited to the right. "No news organization should accept that kind of check from a committed ideologue of any stripe," wrote media critic Howard Kurtz in the Daily Beast "Even if every journalist hired with the cash from Soros' foundations is fair and balanced, to coin a phrase, the perception is terrible."

We all know the right wing blogs and talk show hosts cried foul at the time, but Shepard reveals in her piece that the donation rattled some staffers inside NPR as well.

"I remember the email announcing the Impact of Government project only mentioned the Open Society Institute," said one staffer who spoke on the condition of anonymity for obvious reasons. "My cubicle mate immediately said, 'Isn't that Soros?' We Googled to confirm...and were appalled that his name had not been included, as if the company didn't think it was important or were trying to hide something."

And:

"I do have problems with it precisely because he is so left wing and were he on the other side I would still have problems with it," said a long-time NPR producer. "I don't have a problem with people supporting particular causes but I do have a problem when obvious partisanship spills over into your support of those causes."

Considering the situation, Shepard goes on to conclude that she is "disappointed" that, in its e-mail announcing the OSI grant, NPR did not explicitly say that George Soros was involved (though his founding of the Institute is hardly a secret). She writes, "They said they intend to publicly launch the project in June, and want to control the rollout of information, including the names of other funders. Diversification of funders would go a long way toward diluting any suspicions about a Soros connection. The sooner NPR

can provide a varied list of funders for this project, the quicker valid concerns about perceptions and reality will diminish - if not go away.”

“Not go away” might be the key phrase here, and one Shepard and all at NPR should bear in mind as the network plays political piñata. The attacks are going to keep on coming. So far they seem to be successfully painting NPR into a corner. The right is assailing the network’s sliver of government funding from one side and from the other flank generating a political atmosphere so intimidating that the network is afraid of accepting donations needed to expand its valuable journalism.

It is indeed valuable work that this OSI grant would go to. Statehouse reporting is frighteningly under-resourced in this country and any initiative designed to address the gap deserves praise and support. And while it’s true that Soros is a vocal lefty and true partisan, one of the most revealing paragraphs in Shepard’s column might be this one:

The right, in particular, has demonized Soros for the money he has given to other journalism organizations focused on ethics, good journalism and transparency such the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Center for Public Integrity, ProPublica and the Center for Investigative Reporting.

Soros may hand out checks to Media Matters, but this list is hardly a lineup of partisan lefty attack dogs. It’s a group into which NPR fits nicely, and should.

NPR should be as open and honest about its funders as possible as it launches the Impact on Government project, but it should not be ashamed. Soros is many things—political polarizer being high on the list—but he is also decidedly a supporter of quality journalism. With Impact on Government he is putting his money where his mouth is and receiving no apparent oversight provisions, in keeping with his tradition of being a hands-off gifter. Meanwhile, NPR’s critics seek to starve it of funds from both private and public sources while demanding it improve its journalism to better suit their tastes.

Perception is NPR’s currency, says a concerned voice in Shepard’s column. And that’s true. But the value of that currency would get a well-needed bump if the network stopped ducking and weaving every time its critics swung, and let the work, Soros-funded or not, land a punch or two in return. For now, the perception of NPR is less that it is biased than that it is weak. Torturing yourself on the right’s cue over a grant to do good and necessary journalism doesn’t do much to change that.

TAGS: Alicia Shepard, George Soros, Impact on Government, NPR, public broadcaster

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