

We Have No Idea Who's Right: Criticizing "he said, she said" journalism at NPR

September 15th, 2011 by [Jay Rosen](#)

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Apparently, NPR people do not understand what the critique of he said, she said is all about. It's not about editorializing. Or taking sides. It's failing to do the reporting required to shed light on conflicting truth claims.



First I'm going to tell you what happened;
then I'm going to comment on it.

I set my clock radio to NPR because I am a fan and loyal listener. A week ago I woke to [this report](#) about new rules for licensing abortion clinics in Kansas. The report stood out for me as an exquisite example of that dubious genre known as "he said, she said" journalism, which I've been complaining about for some time. My 2009 [essay](#) on it attempts to explain the persistence of this form; it also gives a definition:

"He said, she said" journalism means...

NOTE: SEE ALSO (HIGHLY RECOMMENDED) ALEX COCKBURN:

[The Political Function of PBS / When Tedium is Totalizing](#)

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- There's a public dispute.
 - The dispute makes news.
 - No real attempt is made to assess clashing truth claims in the story, even though they are in some sense the reason for the story. (Under the "conflict makes news" test.)
 - The means for assessment do exist, so it's possible to exert a factual check on some of the claims, but for whatever reason the report declines to make use of them.
 - The symmetry of two sides making opposite claims puts the reporter in the middle between polarized extremes.

In last week's NPR report, the dispute was about the new requirements for abortion clinics in Kansas. These rules were an attempt to drive the few remaining clinics out of business, said abortion providers and their defenders. Nope, just common sense policies for protecting women's health, said opponents of abortion. I didn't think that [leaving it there](#) was good enough, so I sent a complaint to the [NPR ombudsman](#). Then I turned it into a [post](#) at my Tumblr blog, including the audio clip so readers could hear for themselves:

My complaint is not the usual one that you probably get: biased reporting. No. This is [he said, she said](#) reporting, one of the lowest forms of journalism in existence, in which the NPR reporter washes her hands of determining what is true. The new Kansas regulations may be a form of harassment, intended to make life as difficult as possible for abortion providers in that state. Or, alternatively, these rules may be sane, rational, common sense, sound policy: just normal rule-making by responsible public officials.

According to this report, NPR has no idea who is right. It cannot provide listeners with any help in sorting through such a dramatic conflict in truth claims. It knows of no way to adjudicate these clashing views. It is simply confused and

helpless and the best it can do is pass on that helplessness to listeners of "Morning Edition." Because there is just no way to know whether these new rules try to make life as difficult as possible for abortion providers, or put common sense public policy goals into practice in Kansas. There is no standard by which to judge. There is no comparison that would help. There is no act of reporting that can tell us who has more of the truth on their side. In a word, there is nothing NPR can do! And so a good professional simply passes the conflict along. Excellent: Now the listeners can be as confused as the journalists.

It is obvious to me that there's something else going on here. NPR has, in this case, allowed its desire to escape criticism to overwhelm its journalistic imagination. "He said, she said" does not serve listeners. It tries to shield NPR from another round of bias attacks. That's putting your needs—for political refuge—ahead of mine as a listener. I don't appreciate it. It makes me trust you less. And one more thing, a little lesson in realism. They're going to attack you anyway, and crow in triumph when [your CEO is forced out](#) by those attacks. Ultimately there is no refuge, so you might as well do good journalism.

A short time after this was posted, Edward Schumacher-Matos, the NPR ombud, [said](#) he would soon have a reply. He also said that he doubted the abortion report was "the lowest form of journalism." But I didn't say "lowest." I said the "he said, she said" genre is *one of the* lowest. Sounds trivial, but I don't think it is.

Yesterday his column went online. [Lowest Form of Journalism or Constructive and Fair?](#) He thought I had over-reacted, and he got the reporter involved to comment, as well. For which I am grateful: *thanks*, NPR, for being so responsive. On Twitter, Greg Collard, a news director for an NPR affiliate, [said](#) the same thing: "Your criticism was way over the top for that

piece.”

Was it? Let’s dig in. I think in many ways NPR people do not understand what the critique of he said, she said is all about. For example:

We forwarded Rosen’s criticism to the reporter, Kathy Lohr, who responded:

“I’ve covered the abortion issue for 20 years. My goal is to be fair and accurate.

“It would be inappropriate to take a position on an issue I’m covering. So, I don’t do that, with abortion or other issues.”

Take a position on the issue? No, Kathy. This is not what I’m saying: at all. Lohr tried to change my criticism into something she knew how to respond to. Thus, our exchange went something like this.

Me: Why does NPR throw up its hands and tell its listeners: we have no idea who’s right? Is that really the best reporting you can do? Is that the excellence for which NPR is known?

Kathy Lohr: You want me to take a position on a public controversy. You want me to editorialize. To pick a side. What you don’t understand is: That’s not my job!

I do understand how you define your job. What I’m asking for is *more reporting*, not editorializing or picking a side.

For example: Opponents of abortion in Kansas say the regulations are just common sense. NPR could compare the proposed regulations for abortion to other procedures that are performed at clinics in that state: do the regulations for, say, colonoscopies specify that storage areas for “janitorial

supplies and equipment” must be at least 50 square feet per procedure room? Or is that kind of requirement unique to the state’s proposed rules for abortion rules? I don’t know the answer, but NPR could try to find out. And if it’s not NPR’s job to find out, who’s job is it?

The ombudsman gave another example of the same point: It’s not about editorializing, it’s doing the reporting required to shed light on conflicting truth claims. Abortion opponents have submitted to Kansas courts 2,500 pages of evidence arguing that abortion clinics nationwide are unsafe. Edward Schumacher-Matos:

I would like to see NPR directly tackle the claims of operating room safety, instead of leaving the matter only to the courts. Such claims are apparently hard to measure, even though the Kansas abortion opponents say they have 2,500 pages of documentation supporting their claims... Such a report, however, requires a lengthy investigation. Who knows? It might find that there are indeed safety problems in some abortion clinics. [A report earlier this year](#) by Lohr found sordid conditions in a Philadelphia clinic, for example. Or the investigation might find that the 2,500 pages of “proof” contain little of substance and that the safety requirements are silly.

Exactly. And is that editorializing? No. It’s evaluating the evidence. Reporting! You know— journalism! But when you don’t have time to do that... or you lack the knowledge required... or you’re fearful of the criticism that might follow (or all three at once) what do busy journalists tend to do? They fall back on “he said, she said.” It’s understandable. But it is not admirable.

And when challenged on it, NPR journalists do not say: sorry, we didn’t have time to figure out who’s right. They say things like: “It would be inappropriate to take a position on an

issue I'm covering," which is a non-sequitur. Or they say what the NPR ombudsman did:

Rosen apparently wanted the report to explicitly prove that the regulations were harassment. If that was his concern, the public health experts felt it was sufficiently communicated. His criticism, however, does demonstrate that NPR's reporting comes under attack from both the right and the left.

In other words: we get hit from both sides, which suggests that our reporting is straight down the middle. Our critics are ideologically motivated, but we are not ideological, and that is probably why they find us deficient.

I think this is lame. You can [judge for yourself](#), but I say there was nothing particularly "left" in my post criticizing NPR for relying on he said, she said. True, I have no sympathy for abortion opponents in Kansas, but I also don't know—and didn't claim to know—what an honest attempt to investigate these clashing truth claims would find. Maybe the Kansas regulations *do* have a public health justification, and some basis in common sense. I doubt it, but without investigating myself, how do I know? Isn't this why we need journalists willing to dig into the matter? Isn't this why we need NPR?

A subtler, but more interesting problem came with this passage from the NPR ombudsman:

Lohr's piece made clear that politics were at least as big a driver here as patient safety. By happenstance, this past weekend I was with a group of researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health, most of them women who favor abortion rights. Some of them had heard the NPR report and had no complaints with it. They felt it was an everyday story presented in a straightforward way.

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public health experts felt it was sufficiently communicated.

Weird! "Lohr's piece made clear that politics were at least as big a driver here as patient safety." No, it did not, Mr. Ombudsman. What Lohr's piece *said* is: some think politics is the big driver here, but others claim that public health and common sense are behind the regulations. Nothing clear about it. In fact, it's the opposite of clear. It says: we have no idea who's right. You figure it out!

But when Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri President and CEO Peter Brownlie says on NPR that the regulations are "riddled with requirements which do nothing to improve the safety and health of women," that kind of quote sends a coded message to, say, researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health (most of them women who favor abortion rights.) The coded message is: NPR is including in its report what you guys think these rules are really about. The logic here is representation of recognized interest groups, not clarification of the actual dispute, or verification of the actual facts.

Thus, NPR is saying to its listeners: Pro-choice? Your side is heard. *These regulations are trying to drive abortion providers out of business.* Pro-life? Squawk not, we got you covered. *These rules are just common sense, public health measures. But it would be great if there were no more abortions in Kansas!* I have written about this pattern, too. I [call](#) it the production of innocence.

The unstated message of which is: don't complain. Your views are in there. Which is why I wrote: "He said, she said does not serve listeners. It tries to shield NPR from another round of bias attacks." If I'm correct, then interest groups are likely to be satisfied with this kind of treatment, but a huge portion of the audience is going to feel confused, stranded between warring camps, or poorly informed.

John McQuaid, formerly a Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, picked up on this dynamic. Over Twitter he [wrote](#), “NPR’s ombud basically says: for the truth, read between the lines.” Which is strange, he [said](#), because it assumes “a level of subject matter or journalistic expertise most people don’t have.” Let me say it again: He said, she said is not about serving listeners. Rather it protects journalists from complaints that the most vocal interest groups are likely to raise. Thus:

The Atlanta-based Lohr, a go-to reporter for NPR on abortion issues, in NPR, is respected by both sides in the contentious abortion debate as fair.

See what I mean? He said, she said is a kind of three-way pact among journalists and the two most obvious sides in a predictable dispute. Groups on the left get their quotes. Groups on the right get corresponding quotes. The journalists at NPR get protection. It’s the listeners who get screwed.

Don’t believe me? Have a listen to [this story](#), which aired September 15. “During a House hearing Wednesday, Republicans attacked the administration’s decision to fund Solyndra. Democrats defended the loan program and accused Republicans of trying to twist the story for political gain.” Republicans attacked. Democrats defended. And NPR has no idea who’s right, or [what’s up](#).

I don’t think that’s good enough anymore. Do you?

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Who's Right: Criticizing "he said, she said" journalism at NPR"

1. [MIKE PLUGH](#) SAYS:

[September 15, 2011 at 8:26 pm](#)

How much of this situation is driven by the journalistic turn taken as television seeped into American discourse as the driver of news? I understand that objectivity saw its way into the equation as a result of multiple, complex factors, but TV reduces discourse to what can be reported in a short period of time, unburdened by the complication of being tied to prior or subsequent reporting which would require time-consuming and repetitive background explanation.

Social media, being interactive and multi-directional, add the troubling wrinkle of feedback for such stories in the form of critique, correction, and lots of flaming. Where TV pushed reporting to the oversimplified surface details of any story, eliminating context or connection, feedback has turned journalists into overly-cautious producers of bland and useless information. There needs to be information, and LOTS of it, thanks to capacity and demand, but none of that information can afford to be complicated for fear that it will be ignored.

So, as a commercial endeavor, journalism needs to appeal broadly, offend as few as possible, and avoid overly-complicated explanations of issues that are actually terribly complex and intertwined. Journalism suffers, but the logic of safety in news means that a bland, homogenous narrative on everything will prevail and keep all the players in business.

[Reply](#)

2. [JOHNEPDX](#) SAYS:

[September 15, 2011 at 8:51 pm](#)

As someone retired from journalism, this has been my complaint for so long. I take it back to the first Iraq War when Bush I and the Pentagon would announce something patently false and NPR would not investigate. The president said it and that is enough was their response. That isn't what journalism is about, it is/was about getting the truth back in the last century when I had far more respect for the profession. One side says the sky is blue, the other says it's green. Then they leave it at that. I no longer listen to NPR.

[Reply](#)

▪ [DEAN](#) SAYS:

[September 16, 2011 at 8:04 pm](#)

I quit listening to NPR news around the time of the Clinton impeachment fiasco. They haven't gotten any better. I like their musical playlists but in order to listen to that I have to be ready to go to cd when their Nice Polite Republican(NPR, I didn't coin it) begins. They're still shills, maybe if they just went to music all the time and only read news headlines?

I made the comment in 2001 after the Florida and supreme court election that it must be in NPR's contract to say President George W. Bush every 5 minutes...they still suck.

[Reply](#)

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THANK YOU.
