

Statement of Katherine Maher
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Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency (DOGE)
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
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Chairwoman Greene, Ranking Member Stansbury, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Katherine Maher, and I am President and CEO of NPR. I have served in the position since March 2024, and lead the organization’s strategic direction, ensuring that we have the resources, strategy, and people to meet our public interest mission, to grow NPR’s audience for all Americans, to uphold the highest standards in journalism in service of the American public, and to elevate local journalism and support stations across the nation.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the essential role of public media in delivering unbiased, nonpartisan, fact-based reporting to Americans. NPR connects with 43 million people each week, and over 100 million people each month, over the air and online to explore news, music, culture, and connection across communities.

Americans listen to public radio as they commute, as they work, and in the kitchen as they cook with family. Almost 100 percent of Americans live within range of one of the approximately 1,300 public radio stations across the country. Our national network serves more American communities than any other news organization and is the nation’s only network with nearly 3,000 local journalists, covering community activities that matter to you – your crop prices, your cookoff, your local sports teams – alongside the news of the nation and the world, from the halls of Congress to coverage of our troops deployed overseas.

The NPR Network has 246 Member organizations across every state in the nation, and in Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, D.C. We are a federated partnership, where each station retains local control over their editorial decisions and operations. NPR and its Members use the term “NPR Network” to refer to the spirit of partnership among our Members, and to show Americans that they can reliably expect high quality, nonpartisan programming from any station that identifies as a Member.

Radio was the first technology to connect our great country in conversation, so that Americans everywhere – from the hollers of Appalachia to the frontiers of Alaska – could follow the news of the nation and participate in shared culture. Audio remains the most powerful medium for conveying information and engaging around our shared American values, from broadcasts of the State of the Union to the many popular call-in local public affairs shows that give voice to citizens in our towns and cities, and an opportunity for elected officials to connect directly with their constituents.

Audio remains one of the nation’s most popular mediums, particularly in recent years with the rise of podcasting reviving a robust, competitive free market for audio news and information. As a result, Americans and local public radio stations have more listening choices than ever before. They can purchase programming from any number of audio producers, including private for-profit audio producers, non-profit audio producers, other public radio stations, and NPR.

Given the range of choices available to stations, it’s critical to note that NPR’s 246 Members are voluntary members of NPR. NPR was founded in 1970 as a membership organization by local public radio stations as a means of pooling resources in order to afford high-quality reporting on national, international, and other issues otherwise unavailable to a local newsroom. For example, most local stations could not afford to report on Congress, Wall Street, or international affairs on their own. Today, NPR remains a membership organization, governed by a Board of Directors with a majority of seats reserved for representatives of Member organizations, along with independent directors chosen for their expertise in matters of business, media, and technology.

In other words, local public radio stations choose to become Members of NPR, and to purchase NPR programming as a matter of local, independent editorial free choice. Stations, their boards, and their audiences choose NPR programming because they believe it has value to their communities, both in terms of the quality and range of topics, and because of the economic value it provides to the station.

In terms of the quality and range of programming, NPR continues to provide a vital service to its Members on issues of national and international import, offering news programming unavailable anywhere else. For example, we are the only non-paywalled news outlet with a dedicated reporter covering veterans' issues. Our reporting has had a direct, positive impact for veterans across the nation: We found problems inside the VA's caregiver program resulting in the VA halting all expulsions from the program for one and then three years. Separately, our reporting detailed an error in the VA's home loan program that left tens of thousands of veterans on the brink of losing their homes though they did nothing wrong. As a result, the VA halted foreclosures nationally for a year while it attempted to fix the problem.

More recently we've expanded our long-standing coverage of religion, partnering with the highly respected, independent Religion News Service. We maintain a dedicated Washington desk that covers the White House, federal agencies, and of course, Congress. Public radio is an essential resource for elected officials to speak to their constituents in an era in which nearly all local newspapers have shuttered their Washington bureaus.

Our international bureaus, numbering 14 in total, have long had a presence in countries that are of critical importance to American policies: until very recently, we were the only American news organization with a reporter in Moscow. We kept staffed bureaus in Kabul and Baghdad long after other major news organizations closed theirs, embedding with U.S. troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.

These priorities are not driven from NPR's DC headquarters. Instead, our programming is designed around the needs of our local stations, based on direct conversations with stations to understand what their audiences care about the most. We plan our quarterly editorial calendar in consultation with our nearly 200 Member newsrooms, and we work to solicit stories from local stations for national broadcast.

The result is that NPR transmits local stories across the country to Americans everywhere, connecting us and helping us better understand one another. Our newsmagazines are designed to seamlessly integrate local news and programming – entirely unique among national broadcasters and media organizations.

Not only does this mean that local stations can customize every aspect of the broadcast, it is also a good financial investment. On average, although NPR accounts for only 25% of a station's programming, the audiences for our programs provide the revenue and scale to subsidize essential local programming, from call-in shows to statehouse affairs. Further, we are deeply integrated with our local Member station partners, providing a network of tools, services, and platforms to support them in serving broadcast and digital audiences.

Public radio represents one of the nation's most efficient public-private partnerships. The vast majority of the \$121 million annual federal appropriation allocated for radio – more than \$100 million – goes directly to 386 local noncommercial radio grantees across the nation. This investment enables your local station to raise an average of \$7 for every one federal dollar. In places that serve more rural, distributed, or lower income communities, that dollar goes even further – public radio is very often the only news service in places where market economics does not support the expense of local news. The entire federal investment in public media averages about \$1.60 per person per year.

As a private non-profit, the majority of NPR's funding comes from donations and sponsorships. NPR had \$11.2 million in operating revenue last year as a grantee of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

These funds are used to ensure America has robust infrastructure to support sharing news and information over the airwaves, to and from local public radio stations. This is a critical investment that allows us to maintain the national Public Radio Satellite System (PRSS) infrastructure, enabling public radio and emergency alerting to reach every corner of America, from the high deserts of the Southwest to Downeast Maine, from West Texas to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, even when electricity, cell phones and broadband go down. This system safeguards our national security, civil defense, and disaster response. CPB funds additionally help protect our journalists covering our troops overseas, and reverse the decline of local journalism across the nation by supporting our growing network of regional journalism collaborations.

The NPR Network's regional newsrooms are entirely unique in America. Beginning with 13 NPR Member stations in Texas in 2019, we worked to pool resources, increase efficiency, and improve state and regional coverage for smaller or more rural local newsrooms, enabling more and better coverage of the great state and its citizens, from the Gulf Coast to the Austin statehouse. Today, we have six regional newsrooms, including Texas, the Gulf States, Appalachia-Mid South, the Midwest, California, and New England News collaborations, with a plan for a Rocky Mountain collaboration in the works.

RAND defines "civic infrastructure" as places, policies, programs, and practices that improve civic literacy, civic identity, and civic engagement. I am certain that each of us believes in the value of civic infrastructure to strengthen our communities and our nation. Public media is a form of civic infrastructure, strengthening the fabric of our nation through information, culture, and connection among citizens.

As a recipient of federal funds, it is our responsibility to answer legitimate questions about how they are spent. I understand that there is skepticism from the Subcommittee around why public funds should go to NPR, whether NPR is truly committed to serving the totality of the American public, and whether we are an effective steward taxpayer dollars.

I hear, respect, and understand those concerns. I want to share with you my vision for the future of NPR and public radio, and how I have started to—and will continue to—address your concerns.

As an initial matter, NPR must continue to grow and be responsive to our audiences across the country, of all backgrounds and from all communities. Americans are unequivocal in their support for local journalism – per data from Pew Research, 85% of Americans believe local news is important to their community. Recent independent research from February 2025 found that they are also aligned around bi-partisan support for public media, with 75% of Americans believing that federal investment in public media should stay at the same or increased levels.

The benefits aren't just in the eyes of individuals: local public media journalism provides a highly efficient return on public investment for the health and well-being of our nation. The presence of local journalism in a community correlates with higher rates of civic engagement, greater civic cohesion, and even economic advantages, including improved municipal bond ratings.

Secondly, it is critical for NPR's newsroom to operate with the highest journalistic standards. That means our journalists and editors do their jobs independently. As CEO, I wish to state clearly and plainly that I have no editorial role at NPR. Unlike other media organizations, there is a strict firewall between NPR's CEO and NPR's newsroom. In other words, I do not direct coverage, I do not influence stories, I have no control over editorial decisions, and I have no say in how NPR's journalists will cover today's

hearing. This firewall safeguards against any real or perceived conflict of interest or undue influence, to protect the integrity and independence of NPR's reporting.

I take this firewall extremely seriously in every facet of my role. For example, my role prevents me from endorsing or opposing candidates, and I am committed to strict and impartial principles that dictate that I set aside my personal views as a matter of professional duty. In the same way that a lawyer or doctor must look beyond their personal views in order to act in the best interests of their client or patient, I must and willingly do the same. As CEO of NPR, the actions I take are with the interests of our Member organizations in mind. The robust editorial firewall and impartiality principles are points of pride for NPR. They are also a reflection of NPR's allegiance to our nation's unparalleled commitment to free speech and a free press.

It is my job to lead NPR's strategy, and ensure the newsroom has the resources, processes and policies in place so that we serve all Americans – not just a particular slice of the country, or listeners with a specific point of view. I was brought to NPR to revive and reorient the organization, with the purpose of introducing public media to a wider audience, a new generation, and new platforms beyond broadcast. I believe that we have a public interest responsibility to serve the American public, across the full political spectrum, in an impartial, nonpartisan fashion. I aspire that NPR is yet again a pathbreaking, innovative representation of the voice of the American public – relevant, authentic, and trustworthy—and I've taken significant steps to make sure that goal is being met

To achieve this aim, NPR must be scrupulously impartial in our news coverage, and adhere to the highest of journalistic standards. We must closely reflect the news needs and cultural interests of the American people. We must seek to maintain our status as the country's most trusted news media organization. We must ensure fair treatment of differing perspectives, politics, and policies. We must reflect the culture of our country with respect, covering the spirit, innovation, and artistic ability that characterizes our

great nation. We must successfully fill a need in a competitive media environment to be worthy of the trust and time of American listeners.

Under my leadership, NPR has begun work toward these strategic goals. We recognize there are many more Americans we must reach and serve well. It is imperative that we earn their trust through fair reporting. Under my leadership, the organization is taking several concrete steps to ensure our coverage is rigorous, unbiased, and in service to all Americans.

Beginning in May of 2024, we established regular quarterly meetings with our nearly 200 newsrooms across the country. The goal of these meetings is to provide a consistent and regular forum for station leaders to discuss editorial planning and decision-making topics with NPR's editorial leadership. It also forces accountability on the part of NPR to ensure that its editorial calendar reflects the needs of all Americans, from Idaho to Alabama. These meetings have been well-received and well attended by the leadership of our Member organizations' newsrooms.

We also established and implemented a regular newsroom retrospective. Every month, we look back at the most important or challenging stories, analyzing them for how to improve and learn for the future. In the past year, these discussions have addressed topics such as coverage of antisemitism on university campuses and religion.

In the fall, NPR received a grant from the CPB to invest in our editorial review and implement measures that allow the organization to put more eyes on every piece of reporting, to make sure all pieces are accurate, impartial, and comprehensive. Our editorial enhancements included the hiring of nine new senior editors. Seven of these editors form our "editorial review" or "Backstop" team, ensuring every NPR story has a second editor before it goes on our website, airwaves, or podcast feed. Two of them joined NPR's standards and practices team, which has a broad mandate to support and enforce standards across the organization. We also hired two analysts so we can ensure that we're giving fair airtime to different voices and issues.

We've established a cadence of off-the-record "editorial briefings" with leaders from across business and politics so that our editorial leaders can hear from a range of leading voices across the political spectrum – and interviewing them on air, so our audience can hear their perspectives too.

We've also been listening to Americans directly. For the first time, we are now conducting qualitative audience research with audiences without prior pre-screening for educational attainment – in other words, we're asking people of all education levels, especially those without college degrees, what they want out of public radio. We've been speaking with communities in places like Hoover, Alabama, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa to listen to what they want and need from public media, and hearing some informative, and often moving, perspectives.

We've learned that the defining characteristic of Americans is curiosity – a trait that is universal to all ages, backgrounds, and political beliefs. We've learned that people do appreciate hard news – but they also are looking for more stories about joy, connection, and wonder. And we've heard that Americans everywhere want to feel welcome in public media: connected to relatable hosts, connected to journalists across the country and world, and connected to one another.

I joined NPR because I believe in the importance of building a strong American public discourse, and the vital role of free information, news, culture, and entertainment in serving a strong and dynamic nation. I believe deeply in public service, and our responsibility to all of our fellow Americans.

I know that Americans are smart and curious, and that by covering issues that matter – from the price of eggs to the security of elections – we show them respect. I believe that Americans voted for a transformative administration, and that it is NPR's responsibility to cover that transformation fairly, with integrity and tenacity. I believe we honor our

public interest mission, and the vital role of the free press in our country when we do all of this accuracy and impartiality.

Each week, 43 million people choose public media as a part of how they stay connected to their community, country, and the world. In fact, Morning Edition and All Things Considered have an audience of almost 15 million listeners—an audience that is larger than any cable news show. Over the past two quarters, NPR and the NPR public radio station network have seen audience gains across both digital and broadcast platforms, correlating with the changes we've made in response to audience research and the introduction of our newsroom's editorial enhancements.

And although there is a perception that NPR only serves a liberal audience, NPR data shows us a different fact pattern. On our digital platforms, where we have the most granular data about our listeners, we find that the political beliefs of visitors mirror the political makeup of the country, with visitors across the ideological spectrum.

Independent polling from February 2025 found that more than sixty percent of all Americans and more than half of Republicans trust public broadcasting to deliver fact-based news. About half of Americans report that NPR is important to them personally.¹

I have been CEO of NPR for one year and one day. I have made changes to leadership, to planning, and to budgeting. I have invested in our editorial integrity, and committed to expanding our audience and increasing our relevance for all Americans. While NPR is taking significant steps in the right direction, change doesn't happen overnight. The year ahead will be my first full year of strategic planning, goal-setting, and implementation. I will be the first to say that there is still much to do, and I and my leadership team look forward to this work.

¹ Another respected study recently found that NPR is the most trustworthy news media brand in the nation (out of the 20 national news brands surveyed). HarrisInteractive, Harris Brand Platform, 2024 Q4.

Given the support that 75% of Americans have for public media, for NPR and PBS, and for their local stations, I respectfully ask Congress to give us the opportunity to continue to serve the American people with this unique and vital resource.

And in the meanwhile, I invite all Members of Congress to listen with a fresh ear to your local station, experiencing for yourself the news and programming that 43 million people listen to each week and over 100 million each month, rely upon, and appreciate every day. And of course, our newsroom invites you to join us on air, or in the newsroom of your local public radio station.

Thank you for your interest in NPR, and I welcome your questions.