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EXCLUSIVE MEDIA

# NPR Chief Defends Coverage, Accuses Critics of ‘Bad Faith Distortion’ of Her Views

Katherine Maher said controversy stemming from an editor’s essay criticizing the radio network has been a distraction

By [Alexandra Bruell](#) [Follow](#)

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Katherine Maher joined NPR as its new CEO in March. PHOTO: STEPHEN MCCARTHY/SPORTSFILE/WEB SUMMIT QATAR/GETTY IMAGES

When Katherine Maher joined National Public Radio as its new CEO in March, she came ready to field internal scrutiny and concerns about coverage.

What she hadn't bargained for, two weeks into the job, was public criticism of NPR from a longtime editor. The controversy has triggered tumult inside NPR's newsroom and thrust Maher into the spotlight.

Critics have scrutinized her political views and seized on past comments she made on everything from the First Amendment to misinformation to the idea that written history is tilted toward the worldview of white men.

"All of this frankly is a bit of a distraction relative to the transformation our organization needs to undergo in order to best serve our mandate," Maher said in an interview.

In an essay earlier this month on the news site the Free Press, NPR editor Uri Berliner said the public radio network had lost its way by letting liberal bias skew its coverage. NPR erred on big stories including the origins of Covid-19, Hunter Biden's laptop and the Israel-Hamas conflict, he wrote. Berliner was suspended last week and subsequently resigned.

Maher said NPR should be open to criticism, but defended the news organization against the charges Berliner laid out.

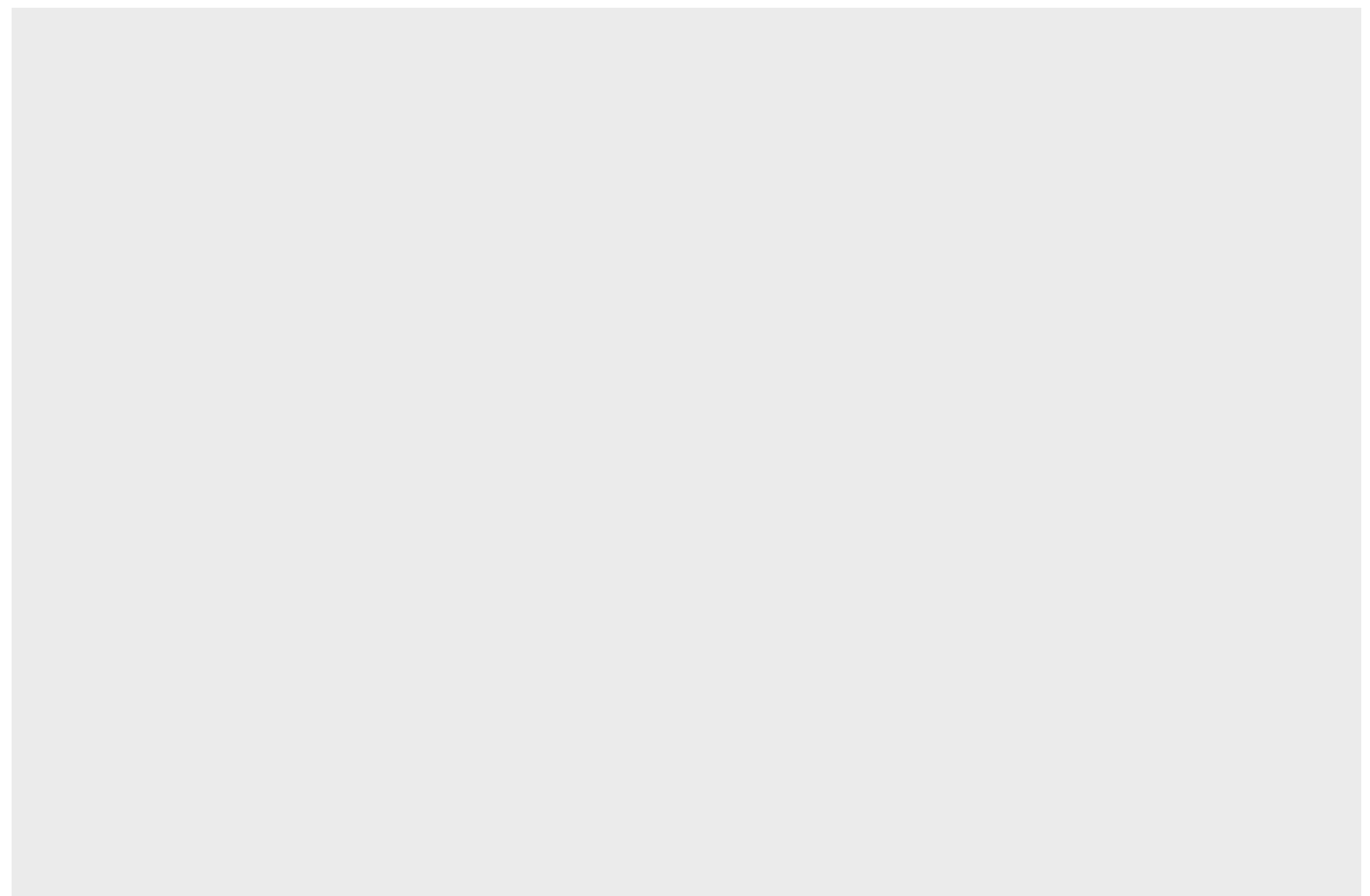
"We have robust conversations across the organization, including in response to the article," she said. "Clear and well-reasoned pieces" from reviewers, like a write-up from NPR's public editor and Poynter executive Kelly McBride that examined coverage of Israel and Gaza, have "found that our journalism is really solid," Maher said.

Berliner wrote that NPR had placed too much emphasis on certain diversity and inclusion efforts that didn't have the intended effect of drawing a more diverse audience. NPR's listener base has shrunk in the past several years, which the company attributes partly to changing consumer habits since the pandemic, including more remote work and less in-car listening.

Berliner took aim at a “North Star” strategy that predates Maher. It tracked whether NPR stories drew on a diverse range of sources and added more affinity groups for staffers based on identity markers such as race and gender. Maher said her predecessor’s initiatives were “necessary but not sufficient” to accomplish the goal of reaching more listeners.

What is needed is a more comprehensive business strategy, she said. “How do we actually go out and grow audiences, how do we use data in order to inform our decisions, how do we understand what’s working?” she said.

Part of it will be changing the tone of its broadcasts. Research shows people see the network, which includes over 240 member organizations, as “accurate and intellectual,” she said. “We want to be able to speak to folks as though they were our neighbors and speak to folks as though they were our friends.”



NPR employees wrote to Katherine Maher and urged her to call out factual inaccuracies in Uri Berliner’s

Days after Maher sent a note to staff addressing Berliner's essay, NPR employees wrote to her urging stronger support for employees and asking her to call out factual inaccuracies in the piece. "Without true leadership, resentment and discontent are festering among your staff," the staffers wrote.

In a written response, Maher thanked staffers for their input, saying it would take time to consider specific courses of action, and acknowledging what she said were "unwarranted, unacceptable, directed personal attacks at many of our colleagues."

In a statement, Berliner said, "I wish that the company would have addressed and taken seriously some of the points I made." If NPR wants to foster a broad range of views, "suspending and then rebuking a staffer is not the best way to go about it," he said.

Before joining NPR, Maher, 41 years old, spent five years as CEO and two years as head of communications of the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit organization that houses Wikipedia. She doubled the foundation's fundraising and raised Wikimedia's first endowment.

Maher is chair of the board of the Signal Foundation, which is behind the encrypted Signal Messenger app, and sits on boards of other organizations, including the Center for Democracy and Technology, Consumer Reports and the Digital Public Library of America.

Maher became part of the story when critics including writer Christopher Rufo—of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank—resurfaced her past posts on X that indicate liberal leanings and progressive views. In 2018, she called former President Donald Trump a racist in a post that has since been deleted, and a couple of years later she shared a photo of herself in a "President Biden" campaign hat.

"There are many professions in which you set aside your own personal perspectives

in order to lead in public service, and that is exactly how I have always led organizations and will continue to lead NPR,” she said.

Rufo and others also circulated a video clip from a 2021 interview in which Maher describes the First Amendment as the top challenge in the fight against disinformation. Maher was referring to the difficulties of regulating social-media platforms. She said it was important for tech companies to have free-speech rights, but “it also means it’s a little bit of a tricky road to be able to really address some of the real challenges of where does bad information come from.”

She said she has a “robust belief in the First Amendment,” and her comments were taken out of context. She was referring to the “landscape of constitutional protections and why that limits options of policymakers taking on certain issues,” she said. “It is by no means a personal perspective; it’s a very bad faith distortion of a nuanced perspective on a policy landscape issue.”

Maher said she is focused on NPR’s long-term growth, not “a news cycle that asks about statements as a private citizen from many years ago.”

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