26th ISOJ More Informed: The Stakes and Future for Public Media

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- Keynote speaker: Katherine Maher, president & CEO, National Public Radio (NPR)
- Chair: Sonal Shah, CEO, The Texas Tribune

Summer Harlow Everyone, welcome to day two of ISOJ. We're so excited to have all y'all back here with us, and I know that you are all looking forward to this keynote, first keynote session of the day, as am I. It's called “More Informed the Stakes and Future for Public Media.” Our keynote speaker this morning is Katherine Maher, the president and CEO of NPR. And the chair is going to be Sonal Shah, who is the CEO of the Texas Tribune, local here to Austin. So please welcome them both to stage. Thank you.

Katherine Maher Hi everyone, it is wonderful to be able to be here with you all today. We planned that I was going to come speak and give a 15 minute keynote a couple months ago, and I had another speaking engagement that was on Wednesday of this week in front of Congress, which was scheduled after we had made the date for this. So with all my apologies, I do not have a prepared 20 minute keynote, unless you'd like me to read my testimony, which I don't think anybody has the need for me to do. So instead, I'll give a few remarks and then Sonal and I are going to sit down and be in conversation. We all felt as though it was a better way to do this because the news cycle is what the news circle is, and we're really actually talking about things that are very live in front of all of us right now.

So I am a year and three days into my tenure as CEO of NPR, and it has been a bit of a whirlwind. It has also been an extraordinary honor to be able to step into the role and on behalf of public media at a time where I personally feel as though public media has never been as important. And I know that we say those things a lot, right? Journalism has never been so important, and all of it is true, and also there's some really hard statistics and facts that undermine my belief that this is of tremendous value in this moment in time. And I know you've heard from many speakers over the course of the last day, and we'll continue to hear from folks over the course of today. It's an extraordinary lineup, and which deeply honored to be a part, of why what we do as journalists matter, but also why, what I believe, public media does that is so important. So for those of you who are aware, NPR is a national news and media and culture producer that works with public media, public radio stations, across the nation. We have 246 member stations in all 50 states and Guam. We cover nearly 100%, 99.7%, of the American population lives within reach of a public broadcasting signal. You've heard, probably, a lot about news deserts over the course of the last few years. There's been great research on that. Public media is often the only news that is available to people in their local communities. When we think about the fact that one fifth of Americans live without access to a local news organization, that doesn't include public media. In fact, as I said, given that nearly 100% of Americans do, that is often the only thing that exists. We know that the decline of local journalism and local papers has been so significant over the course of the past two decades. And what we are really focused on at NPR and with our colleagues at our 200-plus newsrooms across the nation, is how do we step in to be a resource at a time when it feels like so much of what we care about and so much of how we serve communities is going away.

And we've been really proud to be able to set up, not only to work with our partners in local newsrooms, but also to invest in what we call our collaborative newsrooms. In fact, we have six across the nation right now, and our first started here in Texas with our 13 member stations here in Texas that came together to say this is an incredible state, it's a

very large state, it's a very diverse state, and it needs better coverage of the things that matter to Texans that we aren't able to necessarily get in our individual geographic areas. And so, how do we bring together this collaborative newsroom that serves the entirety of Texas? The model was so successful, we've now replicated it across the country, and we're hoping to cover the entirety of the country in order for Americans to not just have national news or perhaps local news, but also things that matter to them for their regions and communities. Because you can imagine the Southwest has very different needs than the Northeast in terms of what they're focused on and how those collaborative newsrooms can respond. So we're deeply invested in how we shore up local news, and local news as a whole is absolutely an unquestionable good in a time where this country, I know we're not all from this country, this country in particular is so polarized. There's been ample research that indicates that the existence of local news correlates with better civic outcomes, higher rates of civic engagement, higher rates of voter participation, lower rates of polarization from a political perspective. Even, it's factored in, I love this fact, it's factored into the ways that local bonds and municipal bonds are evaluated because the presence of local journalism correlates with lower rates of corruption as well. And so 85% of Americans believe that local news matters. 15% of Americans are willing to pay for it, which is where public media steps in. It is part of the way that we step into a breach where markets can't support local journalism, and it is part of our commitment to serving all Americans.

Now, right now, as you may be aware, there's a lot of pressure on public media, NPR, PBS, our local network of stations across the nation. The federal funding that goes into public media is an incredibly important piece of ensuring that we remain a 50-state network. And what I mean by that is while larger cities, such as Austin, for example, have multiple and diverse streams of revenue, the ability for stations in smaller communities, rural communities, less economically advantaged communities to be able to support not only their newsroom, but also the infrastructure that goes into covering really large parts of this very large country in which we're very distributed is very expensive. And so public dollars actually help support the existence of that 50 state network. And somebody said to me last night, “It's a little bit like public health. The network doesn't work unless the whole network works.” And that's where those federal dollars come in, and they allow us to raise $7 for every individual dollar. You may have heard some of our fundraising drives over time talking about that. I'm really just here to say how important we believe that this is at this moment in time, how important we believe that public media is in terms of service to Americans. We know that it has extraordinarily high rates of trust even in a diminished trust environment. And what I mean by that is we know that journalism is struggling right now, vis-a-vis people's trust in us as a profession or trust in our organizations. And within that context, yes, our trust rates are much lower than we'd like them to be, but we're still very trusted as media organizations. And we feel as though it's incredibly important for us to still be out there and doing this work.

So I am just deeply appreciative for the opportunity to be here. I'm looking forward to sitting down and answering whatever questions Sonal has for me. I'm going to step away from the podium now to sit down, forgive my extemporaneous remarks. I really appreciate the opportunity to be with you all.

Sonal Shah I just want to say, so it sounds like you had a pretty easy week this week. Let me start with, and we could easily go into all of the things that are going on in media, and we will, but let me start a little bit personally with you. You came to NPR with a background coming from the Wikimedia Foundation. What prompted you to want to come into public media?

Katherine Maher Many things. There's a personal story, but then there's also a story that is deeply informed by my career that culminated with my time at Wikimedia. When I was at Wikimedia, I remember in 2016, seeing a survey that placed us ahead of the BBC in terms of public trust. And a lot of my colleagues were thrilled because Wikipedia, over the course of 20 years, you know, we started in a place where we weren't very trusted, and we worked very hard to talk about what does trust look like in an environment like Wikipedia. And we can talk about that. It's very nuanced. I felt at that point as though that was an indication of shifting sands, and the thing that I said to my colleagues was you can't build a house on a rotten foundation. And Wikipedia is a tertiary source, which means it relies on secondary sources, and media, academic, publishing, et cetera, are those secondary sources. So if trust was plummeting in the press, that meant that that was a very negative indicator for us. And so I started thinking less about what are we doing to support Wikipedia, and what can we do to shore up the information ecosystem as a whole? And for me, public media is an enormously important part of that, not just in the United States, but across the globe. The ability to be part of this work at this moment in time was tremendously appealing. I also grew up as a backseat baby listening to NPR as a child. Like many kids, I thought it was so boring, and then realized it was actually quite interesting. And when I would listen to our international correspondence, I was so curious about the world. It made the world that was so large feel actually quite navigable. And so when I was 18 years old, I packed up my bags and moved to Cairo. It totally changed the course of my life, and I attribute that all to NPR's foreign correspondence, sparking my curiosity.

Sonal Shah That's awesome. We'll come back to trust in a little bit because that is such a core of everything that we need to be talking about. But you also gave a little of an explanation of NPR and how the multiple stations and national work together. Let's go a little deeper in this here and say, tell us, how does a federated model actually work? You're a federate model, it's complicated. But I think understanding that matters because this is an audience that is not all U.S. This is an international audience, and I think it would be helpful for everyone as we get into context on some of this.

Katherine Maher So most public media broadcasters are funded through taxpayer dollars, citizen funds. They tend to be centralized, right? They receive their funding from whatever their central, federal, or national authority is, and then they are unified with a centralized news, sort of news production or programming production and then, they distribute across the nation. This is very different in the United States, where we as NPR, actually are about half the age of some of our oldest members. So there are many public media stations across the country that are more than 100 years old. They predate us, and in the late 60s, early 70s, there started to be a conversation about the value of public media and the importance of it in serving the nation as broadcast media was going through its own transformation and commercialization, and the stations got together and they established NPR as a way of ensuring that they had access to national and international news reporting. Because they were good at covering their own local communities, but to be able to maintain a Washington bureau, to be able to maintain international bureaus was very expensive. And so that was where NPR came from. So today we have 246 member stations across the country, which means that they pay dues to us, we produce programming, and then that programming goes back to them where they can distribute it, not distribute it. It's totally up to the stations. And we're actually in fact about 25% of the programming on a local station. The rest is, the remaining 75%, are other shows that they can purchase from other producers or local programming that serves the needs of a local audience.

Sonal Shah And then how does it work with local audiences, national audience, how do you all work together on that?

Katherine Maher We could be better, is my answer. I come from, as you noted, I come sort of from this technology space where audience research is a huge part of how you do your work, and I think that we got a slow start on really thinking about how to reflect our audience's needs and priorities because broadcast, and radio broadcast in particular, it's very hard to know who's listening. It's not digital, right? Digital, you have so much data. We haven't historically had that. We've been trying to find heuristics that tell us a little bit about cross-reference data, et cetera, et cetera. I'd like us to do a lot more in this space, but the answer is, is that we work with our local stations. The way that we program our broadcast clock for our over-the-air broadcast means that stations can come in and cut slices out of it where they want to put their local programming in, so it's a very standardized thing. It gives the listener a seamless experience where if you're sitting here in Austin, you may not even realize that your host of your local Austin broadcast is not sitting in the same room as the host of your national broadcast, and that's exactly what we want. We want people to feel as though that local national connection is very strong. There's a lot of research that shows that because there's so much trust in the local aspect of journalism, the ability for us to then integrate national is a way of also building and bridging trust to national news, and so that's a thing that I think all of us who are thinking about the future of trust really should be deeply invested in as well.

Sonal Shah I think this is going to be a conversation that's going to go on for a while, but I do think this will be an important one. So you were on Capitol Hill on Wednesday.

Katherine Maher I was.

Sonal Shah Tell us, let's dig into some of the things that came up there. First, how much money does NPR get from the federal government?

Katherine Maher We get, on average, 1% of our budget. So our budget's $300 million, so on average in a year, we get about $3 million, and those funds go to support things like body armor for our journalists in war zones, increased capacity to report on our national elections, things along those lines. We also receive an additional $8 million to support what is known as the PRSS, press, you got it, public radio satellite system, which is what allows for us to connect to all of the 1,300 public radio stations in the country, so that they have live, they have access to live real-time broadcast coverage. It also supports some of our emergency broadcasting systems here in the United States. So in total, that's 11.2 million we get directly from the federal government. I know for all the newsrooms out there, that's a lot of money, and it is also not a ton of money relative to our budget, which mostly comes through either our membership fees, or our sponsorship, or direct donations. The total amount of money that goes to all of public radio in this country is $120 million. That supports, as I said, 1,300 public radio stations. It is, again, a lot of money, but relative to the impact that it has in terms of the reporting that it's able to deliver, it is pennies on the dollar per citizen.

Sonal Shah So a lot of the conversation on Wednesday was about funding for public radio. What does public media look like in the future, given sort of what we've seen as trends across other agencies?

Katherine Maher You mean, do we think we're going to be able to keep funding?

Sonal Shah Correct.

Katherine Maher I will start by saying, I believe so deeply in the importance of federal funding for two reasons. One is that we, in order to maintain a network that truly serves the whole country, you have to have federal funds. The cost of maintaining infrastructure in the high desert of the Southwest. The cost of maintaining infrastructure in the hollers of Appalachia, in the valleys of our mountain systems, is extraordinarily high. Infrastructure is not cheap. It requires people who can drive out to towers and make sure they're working. It requires the ability to ensure that that infrastructure stands up to tornadoes and hurricanes and all of the extreme weather events that we have across the nation. That is essential, and that is what a lot of federal funding goes into support. It also means that rural stations in particular, rural stations, tribal stations, stations that serve communities that are not very well off financially are able to continue to exist and report, which allows for Americans across the country to hear from one another. So it is all well and good that New York may have hundreds of different media options for its residents, but if you don't have the opportunity to hear from someone in, say, South Dakota, when something meaningful and important happens in South Dakota, we are no longer a 50 state network, and we're no longer public media. The second thing that I will say is that I also know that in this moment all, I think a lot about, can I be academic for a second?

Sonal Shah We're in an academic institution right now.

Katherine Maher Yeah, there's this political philosopher, Benedict Anderson, who talked about imagined communities and imagined nations, and what he was referring to is prior, up until a certain point, all of our nations were organized around something like a monarchy or religious order. And so if you wanted to organize a nation around a set of ideas or values like democracy, you had to bring people into conversation about those values, especially since we were never going to meet one another. It's one thing to say, hey, we all share the same religion, we all share the same tribal connections, of course, we're all a nation. It's a very different thing to say we come from different backgrounds, different histories, different stories, but something connects us. And his view was that the thing that enabled this initially was the printing press, but commercial media was what accelerated the idea of an imagined nation, because it had a market incentive to go as wide as possible, to serve as big an audience as possible, in a national conversation. Unfortunately, that is no longer true of commercial media. Most of how commercial media operates today is to identify a sub-demographic and to hyper-serve that sub-demographic. It could be around politics. It could be about identity. It’s primarily around politics. Being a public broadcaster means that we have to speak to all Americans. The fact that we receive federal funding is a commitment to serve the entire nation and not accidentally slip into this idea of partial targeting of a certain demographic. And so if we believe that a nation should have a conversation among people of differing views and differing backgrounds, that is something that public media can offer, and in fact is required to offer as part of its mission and mandate. So for me, that's a reason why I believe very deeply in federal funds. Now what happens if they go away?

Sonal Shah Exactly, keep going.

Katherine Maher Yep, keep going. So the total public media infrastructure in the country is about, I think I've seen estimates, it's like $1.2, $1.3 billion to keep the whole system running. That includes public television and public radio. So it's a lot of money to cover a nation of 330 million people, as large as we are. That $100 million that goes into radio is a

piece of it. There's an additional $400-something million that goes into television. Forgive me, I don't work on the television side, so please fact check my numbers on that. It would be very difficult. It would be very difficult for some of our stations to continue to operate. I think it would break the fabric of a public national network. We at NPR, of course, want to make sure that we sustain and support that and are thinking in conversation with our member stations about what that would look like to be able to continue to serve the entire nation. Obviously we are online, yes, and we have podcasts, and our digital presence. But that broadcast piece is all about that universal service, and so how might we work with our stations to maintain it? How do we support additional fundraising from the public is a big question. So, you know, I don't want to speculate exactly, but I think that we all know that it would be very damaging to the system to lose funds, and we are thinking very hard about what it means for us to step in to try to support and sustain that system if need be.

Sonal Shah You're probably not going to want to answer this, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Is there a sense of what percentage would be lost if that funding were lost?

Katherine Maher Percentage of?

Sonal Shah Local stations.

Katherine Maher I've seen different estimates, but it is significant in terms of coverage, for sure. Remember, there are so many little stations out there that provide direct support to small communities, and those are the ones that often have the high, like the infrastructure cost of maintaining those towers, you know, the cars that drive around to make sure that the towers are working. That's pretty expensive stuff.

Sonal Shah No percentage?

Katherine Maher I'm not going to give a percentage. Yeah, sorry.

Sonal Shah I tried.

Katherine Maher You did, and I respect you for trying.

Sonal Shah Let's go to other criticisms that were sort of laid out. As you heard on, several times actually, from several members, much of it was about Berliner's piece. And this was, I think, your second day on the job?

Katherine Maher Second week.

Sonal Shah Second week on the job. A lot of it was around the fact that NPRs, about NPR's bias and inability to sort of get beyond the bias. The three things that came up at least several times were the Trump-Russia collusion, the Hunter Biden laptop, and the lab leak theory. How are you addressing that? Like, what's the thing that didn't get asked of you? And there is a perception, and that's out there, that NPR is biased. How are addressing that, and how are you thinking about it?

Katherine Maher I want to start by just defending and standing up and advocating for our newsroom. I think that we produce excellent journalism, and it's not just my opinion here. We produce award-winning, extraordinarily strong journalism. I think we've had one issue of a retraction in more than a decade. We are very proud of the work that we do. We break important stories, and we often break important stories on beats that are under covered in

this country, including our work around veterans and education. Veterans, education, and disability are three beats that we have that are robust and respected and almost nobody else, and certainly nobody else without a paywall, offers that kind of investment into things that matter for the public interest. We also have an extraordinary, sorry, ethics policy that's available publicly that all of our journalists adhere to. We release information about our standards and practices in a public fashion. We have a public editor so that our audiences are able to write in with questions and get answers about how we choose to do our journalism. I really, I just want to say I stand very firmly with and behind our newsroom.

I think that on those three issues that came up. There was the question of, did we cover the lab leak? What about the Russia collusion, and the Hunter Biden laptop? I was not at NPR at the time, and I'm not on the editorial side, so I'm now privy to all the conversations that happened. But I have spoken to our editorial leadership, and they would say the following. They wish that they had been more aggressive and earlier on the Hunter-Biden laptop story. I was speaking with one of our editors who said, “Look, I have a general rule. If we speak about something for more than five minutes, we should probably cover it. We spoke about that for more than five minutes, we didn't cover it, we should have. You know, let's acknowledge that.” I love that spirit. I'm a very big believer that when there's criticism, you have to hear it, you have to listen to it, you have to think about what it means for your work, and then you get better by integrating criticism that is valid and meaningful. And very often when we receive criticism, it is not bad faith criticism, it is good faith criticism from people who want to see themselves and their aspect of American life reflected in our work. How we remain open to that is an important question. On the COVID lab leak, I think our science and health desks were, I will go back and say, if we all remember, it was a novel virus, we didn't know much about it, and we were covering what we knew at the time in terms of the robustness of the science. I do think that it would be, it's important for us to acknowledge that there are different theories out there and to report on those different theories. Again, I wasn't there at the time. I think our coverage in terms of the biological implications, the public health implications is very strong. We're still, even today, however many years out, five years out, I think we're still as a world grappling with the implications of what COVID meant, and how we covered it, and what we were able to foresee, and what we were not able to forsee. On the Russia collusion story, I was again, not there at that time. One of the criticisms that we received is that we had too many members of the Democratic Party on our air. One thing that I always want to come back to is, yes, we should have representation of everyone on our air. I will say we do struggle with booking conservatives. We make the same outreach. I think we've had more than 100, our bookers have reached out more than 100 times to this administration, and I think that we've had people on air twice. And that's in the last seven weeks, right? So it is not for lack of trying. I think we need to continue to try. I also think this comes back a little bit to this perception of bias. If we are not hearing from conservative voices on air, that is something that is a missed opportunity in my mind because we reach as many people in our morning and afternoon broadcasts as any cable television show. But I think often people are unaware of sort of the size and the scope and the ability to speak and speak in a meaningful way to the American public. I know that you have follow-up questions. I'll let you get to them.

Sonal Shah Well, look, I have lots of follow-up questions, but let me just, there are a lot of people, and the narrative has taken, right? Which is I've heard this, you've heard this, which is people will say the left-wing media carries the Democratic talking points. And if the question that you say is that you've invited conservatives, how do you let the public know that, other than we invited Person X, and they didn't come in? But how do you let people know what you just said, which there were 100 people invited and nobody came?

And how do we as a media ecosystem be more transparent about the approach we take, not necessarily what we're just reporting?

Katherine Maher Well, I think, first of all, we need anyone who comes on our shows or on our air to feel as though they're going to be treated fairly. And what I mean by that is they're going to be treated with respect, they are going to be asked the questions that are important for the day for public knowledge. This is not about pulling punches, but we will be fair. I think that we need to be fair, and I think that we need to be tenacious, regardless of people's political, partisan affiliation. I think it is important that we ask hard questions of everyone, hard questions of people in power, hard questions of people not in power. And that is something that I know that my newsroom agrees with, and I know that we have a real desire to be seen and understood as being a place where you can both get a fair shake, but you will also be asked the fair or hard questions if appropriate for the subject matter. I will say, we do a terrible job of telling our own story. I'm speaking about NPR right now, but I think it's also sort of true of journalism as a whole. NPR does almost no public marketing communications about our work. We did the thing that all sort of mission-driven organizations do, and I think it is a challenge that is perennial with a mission-driven organization, where you invest all of your resources into the thing that is your mission, in our case is our journalism. But we haven't told our own story, and it's very important that we tell our own story. For example, I mentioned our veterans and education beats. These are not political issues. These are issues that affect every single person in this country, and we are not out there talking about the work that we do. We're not in the national conversation in the way that other media outlets are. It's important for us to sort of stand up and speak on our own behalf. I think that historically, we have wanted the work to speak for itself. That is really good and powerful, and I respect the humility in that. And also, if we don't speak for ourself, other people will, and that story will get told in ways that maybe doesn't reflect our work and our intentions.

Sonal Shah And I'm just going to follow up with a question from here, because I think the audience question, I think, fills directly into what we're talking about here. How do you balance the responsibility to provide fair and diverse coverage, while avoiding both government interference and accusation of bias?

Katherine Maher So government interference, we are an independent media organization. I think that's very important to say. We're not state media. We are a private 501c3 nonprofit. We are independent. We have an independent board. I was independently hired by that board. We do not have the same, I know that there's been a lot of concern about organizations and agencies in the U.S. right now, and what political interference may or may not look like. That is not something that can happen under our governance structures at NPR. We are private. We are independent, and that is really critically important. So in terms of how we think about how to navigate that, I think that we have to wake up every single day and produce excellent journalism, demonstrate our commitment to the public, demonstrate our commitment to fair principles, speak to why we make the decisions we make in a way that I don't know that we do enough today. I'm not talking about media literacy in the form of explaining to people, but rather instead, how do you show the work? And I know that is often talked about and hard to do, but it does feel really important for us to reflect on the challenges. We've been talking about how do we have more of like a journalist notebook that explains the decisions behind the stories. I think that we oftentimes have wanted, journalists have not wanted to be the story, and it makes a lot of sense why that's the case. But it is difficult to build trust with the public who doesn't understand your motivations and doesn't understand why you make the decisions you make. Journalism is an extraordinarily self-regulating effort. Good journalists

recognize good journalists, good journalists recognize journalists who are not good journalists. People who are not good journalists or interfere or fabricate information don't last long in this world, right? But I don't know that the public understands the code by which journalism operates. We don't have the same sort of professional associations that speak to the public as other professions do, like the medical profession, for example. There's no Hippocratic oath that the pubic is familiar with.

Sonal Shah There's more questions, but I'm going to ask you one more question. One of the other pieces that was talked about on Wednesday was about your tweets, your personal tweets, prior to joining NPR. How do you sort of think through, what were your personal opinions now being used as a way you might run an organization? How are you approaching that? How are you thinking about it? What's your answer to those saying, but you came in with this bias?

Katherine Maher Yeah, I mean, I appreciate the opportunity always to address this. When I was, prior to joining NPR, I was running an organization that also had an extraordinarily strict firewall between the infrastructure and the strategic leadership as CEO and the editorial policies of the organization. And so I lived so deeply in that world, it was never even a question as to whether my personal opinions affected the work that we did or the work that Wikipedia editors did because there was just this extraordinary firewall. And if I'd ever tried to interfere with that, I would have had my hand slapped, right? Like they would have rejected any even hint of interference. That was obviously a different world with a little bit less scrutiny, and so from my mind, I've always lived with that really strong divide. But I think even more importantly, the reality is that I wasn't working in journalism at the time. And as soon as I left my role at Wikipedia, I stopped being active online at all. Not even when I came to NPR, but many years before that. My view is that I set aside all of my opinions when I stepped into this role. I think of it as public service. If you are tapped for public service, you serve everyone. Your personal views do not come into it. I serve the mission. I signed a code of conduct and ethics to serve the mission, and that is the only thing. I think also, there's something to, if we are going to be successful, we have to serve everyone. I view that as a far stronger motivator than any sort of personal views that I may or may not hold. I want to see us thrive, I want to see journalism thrive, I want to see public media thrive. That to me is going to be the driving force behind all of my decisions rather than any personal views that I might hold or not hold.

Sonal Shah Let's go back to broadly the brand and media in general, but let's just talk about, there are many that will say media is biased. There are also others that don't have one view or the other. We could focus on just the criticisms, but there's also a swath of people that want to be persuaded, or to be asked, or to be participating. What do you say to them? What are you saying that is like, there's the very pro, very against, there's a lot in between. What's your argument to them on why NPR, why public media?

Katherine Maher When I came in, I found out something that just broke my heart, which is that historically, all of the audience research that we did was only for people with some college education or advanced education. Meaning, you've studied at college, you have a college degree, you have an advanced degree. That is 35% of the American public. That means we were not speaking to the needs of 65% of the American public, and we are public media. To me that feels, it was like a punch in the gut, in all honesty. So I think the first thing that we did, so what we have done this past year, and what we will continue to do, is to try to understand the needs of Americans in terms of what they need from public media. I think there was a belief that we understood what that was. I'm not sure that we did understand it as well. And what we have heard repeatedly, time and time again, is that

Americans who are looking for, what they want from public media is they want joy, they want curiosity, and yes, of course, they want the news. They want to know what's going on in the world, they want to know what's going on in the country, but then they also want to be moved and transported by things that can inspire and connect. So I think a lot about this is, when I think about joy, it's not that there's joy in conflict, like we're not reporting about joy in the war in Ukraine or what have you. It's about science, and discovery, and our fellow citizens, and what people around the world are doing that gives us the confidence in our humanity. And I think audio in particular is such a remarkable tool for connecting on the level of humanity. When we do our work best, it's like James Joyce said, the specific is the universal. Everybody around the world gets up, they want to take care of their family, their community, they want their coffee, or their caffeine, or their tea, however you want to think about it. They put on their clothes the exact same way, one leg at a time, as the expression goes. So when we can speak to that humanity, that's something that everyone can connect with. It is not about partisan ideology. It is not about educational attainment. It is what is happening in this world, and how do I feel like I'm a part of it.

Sonal Shah Let's just keep going down this. Everybody today is journalism. Information is now considered journalism. People don't distinguish journalism from information. Elon Musk says Twitter is a journalistic platform. How do we, in this environment, where information, if I grew up seeking information, today everyone is just sorting a lot of information coming to us. How do you distinguish a brand in this space, and how do you think about what is journalism versus what is just information?

Katherine Maher I heard a story the other day about somebody who does the recapping of news on TikTok, who was saying that there was a, I don't remember if it was over the holidays or what, they had nothing to say because the media wasn't working, right? And I don't mean not working, I mean, there just wasn't a lot of actual news being researched and broken. And I think we need to differentiate between the investment that goes into sort of the act of journalism, you could think about this, since we are in an academic institution, as foundational research, right? What is the thing that costs a lot of money to go out and do, versus the act of recapping and communicating that news to an audience? I think it is actually really positive that we have new interlocutors who are able to take the news and make it relevant to audiences that might otherwise not necessarily tune in to an evening broadcast. I think that there's more that we can do as journalistic organizations to find partners in that space in order to be able to say, “Look, you're out there sharing this, let's make sure that you have access to understand what the context is for the stories, that we're providing you with the information.” You know, our hosts on public radio are not that dissimilar from the hosts of like a TikTok show. And I don't mean that in a negative way, I mean that in a really positive way. It's about building trust with the audience. It's about asking the right questions that you know that your audience is going to be interested in. So what does it mean for us to move into that space? In terms of how you build a brand, I mean, that is a classic question of trust. You have to earn it over time. You have to make sure not to lose it. But there's also something that I think is very different today than it was 30 years ago or even 10 years ago. You also have to let your audiences own your brand, meaning they will come to it with a certain projection of your values, your mission, your role in their lives, and you have to be okay with that. You want your audiences to embrace and advocate for you. You have to let go of a little bit of control. For many people in this country, we're not news, we're actually music. We're Tiny Desk. And that's actually, that's fine, that’s great. In fact, what I wish we could do, and what I think we need to do, is say, all right, so you like Tiny Desk. Have you heard of Life Kit, which is our adulting podcast? If you like Life Kit, maybe you like Planet Money, which is all about the markets and the economy. If you liked Planet Money maybe you actually also will like Up First, which is our

podcast about the day's news. I think that it's okay for us to be known how people know us and trusted how people trust us. And we have to trust that our audiences are smart, and they are telling us what they need.

Sonal Shah All right, final question, but you got to make it fast because.

Katherine Maher I know, I'm sorry, I am very long winded, I apologize.

Sonal Shah What advice do you give for others who are going through allegations of bias, and what is it we can do collectively?

Katherine Maher I think we have to be really strong and firm in our first principles. This came up when I was preparing for testimony. What are the values that you have, and how do you return to those values? And I know for me, those values are integrity and fairness come immediately top of mind. I don't like bullies, for example. I want to make sure that everyone gets a fair shake. I think that it's important for all of us who are fighting any allegations of bias to come back to those first principles, and feel as though we're really confident that every single thing we do every day lives into that. I talk a lot about the desire to be trustworthy rather than trusted. Trusted is a static state. Trustworthy means it's a state that we earn every day. I think we have to get up and make sure that we're living into our values every single day, and at the end of the night, we go to bed with a clear conscience. This is a difficult moment. There's no question about it. We have to, someone said to me, another media CEO, it's like an attack against one is an attack all. We have to stand for each other. We have to stand for the principles of what we do. We cannot be cowed by any accusations, and we have to be really confident that we represent the values that we claim to represent.

Sonal Shah Katherine, thank you so much, and thank you for doing this today.