

The soft bias of unasked questions

Show of hands, please. How many of you think that it's only the answers to questions that reveal your bias. Really? I hate to break it to you, but it's more often the *unasked questions* themselves that betray your political position. A case in point is National Public Radio (NPR). In just about any program, whether produced in-house or purchased outside the organization from its many vendors, NPR excels in what I call *the art of purposeful no-speak*. Put simply, the company is king when it comes to oblique journalism that hides a distinct political bias. I realize that this will be no shock to many conservative-leaning listeners who've come to know the *real* NPR, but it needs to be called out - repeatedly - if we're ever going to force them to be even moderately balanced in their reporting, much of which is done with our tax dollars.

Tune in any Saturday morning to 'Weekend Edition' and you'll hear mild-mannered soft-spoken host Scott Simon lull you gently awake with his special brand of Mr. Rogers-style interviewing. Make no mistake, Simon is no Mr. Rogers. He's not inviting you in to the real neighborhood. He's only interested in making you believe that your (conservative) neighborhood is in peril and it's all your fault. Simon is good at what he does which is probably why he's still on the air. He's played the counterweight to the more aggressive NPR reporters who routinely go for the jugular. Simon believes in slow time-release blood-letting and allowing others to place the needle in the corpus of an issue.

He is very adept at his craft of softly stated purposeful no-speak and has become your favorite doting aunt who always comes to your aid when the outside world has intruded on your comfort zone, often offering a "there, there...everything will be alright...trust me" as he proceeds to coax his guests to say what's really on HIS mind with "When did you stop beating your wife?" questions that usually refer to Republicans or his favorite punching bag, Donald Trump. Just this morning, Simon proved my point with two different interviews. The first was with an Alaskan doctor, Anna Zink, Chief Medical Officer for the State of Alaska, who was discussing the current state of Covid-19 patients in that state's hospitals. Before we go any further, it must be said at this point that NPR's reporters and interviewers generally know the answers to the questions they ask because they only ask them of politically like-minded guests, so it was no stretch for Simon to set the scene by asking how many of Alaskan hospitals' patients were unvaccinated. Unfortunately, he never asked the other obvious question: "How many of the patients in your Alaskan hospitals with Covid-19 WERE vaccinated?"

The second softball interview was with Ms. Vicki Gaubeca, an immigrants' rights activist with the Southern Border Communities Coalition about the treatment of illegal immigrants (NPR just refers to them as *migrants*) at the southern border. Simon allowed her free rein to discuss illegal immigration as if it were a God-given right and allowed her to portray America's immigration policies as hateful and bias-driven. As expected, there was no question asked about the illegality of such immigration nor was there any attention given to the problems all these illegal immigrants are creating for U.S. border residents, especially in the Del Rio, Texas area. Instead, he let Gaubeca go on and on about the need for us to be 'welcoming' and to reject the on-the-books rules for asylum-seeking. In short, the art of purposeful no-speak was invoked by a milksop Simon who came away from both interviews as sounding (predictably) sympathetic and compassionate.

Make no mistake. Soft-spoken propagandizing is still propagandizing and we had better start calling out those who adopt the Clintonian approach of purporting to *feel our pain* by avoiding their journalistic Hippocratic Oath to seek the truth no matter where it hides. We must remember that it's not just those media types who have what Shakespeare called the "lean and hungry look" to worry about. The mild-mannered ones with hidden agendas like Simon are just as dangerous.

Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics. He operates a political news story aggregator website, www.projectpushback.com. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com