Juan Williams fired for remarks on Muslims, was NPR trying to protect civil editorial discourse?

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Let's offer a word here in defense of National Public Radio (NPR), which spent Thursday getting torched for firing commentator Juan Williams.

Williams told [Bill O'Reilly](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Bill%2BO%27Reilly) Monday that seeing Muslims on an airplane makes him nervous. NPR said this was "inconsistent with our editorial standards and practices, and undermined his credibility as a news analyst."

Conservatives, who have zero use for NPR in the first place, called this another example of an elitist liberal organization practicing smug political correctness.

They also suggested NPR had been thirsting for an excuse to fire a guy who has another gig - at [Fox News](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/FOX%2BNews%2BNetwork%2BLLC), where he often tilts more rightward.

That could be true. It's also true NPR could have voiced its displeasure without firing Williams.

Let's at least consider, however, the possibility that firing Williams was NPR's way to reassert its commitment to a radical mission: trying to maintain a civil alternative in today's raucous media.

What Williams said to O'Reilly, specifically, was this: "I'm not a bigot, but when I get on a plane, if I see people who are in Muslim garb and I think, you know, they are identifying themselves first and foremost as Muslims, I get worried. I get nervous."

Now if you listed the 1,000 most inflammatory comments in talk media on Monday, this might not even make the list. Measured against what [Michael Savage](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Michael%2BSavage) regularly says about Islam, it's a mash note.

So that's exactly why NPR doesn't want one of its commentators to suggest that profiling is reasonable or acceptable - because so much of the rest of the media regularly talk that way.

And in truth, they always have. [America](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/United%2BStates) has had loud, angry and confrontational media since before independence was won. It's part of our tradition and it isn't going anywhere.

NPR simply feels there's also room for an alternative.

That doesn't mean NPR is trying to silence anyone. That's including Williams, who will continue to be heard on Fox and elsewhere.

It means NPR takes a different approach, one that's not for everyone. A survey commissioned by NPR itself last month found many listeners don't even sample NPR because they consider it elitist and stuffy.

Yet at the same time, more and more people do listen.

NPR's anchor news programs, "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered," average more than 20 million listeners a week - more than any other shows on radio, including talk ruler [Rush Limbaugh](http://www.nydailynews.com/topics/Rush%2BLimbaugh).

NPR's total audience has risen more than 60% in the last decade, to more than 33 million, while audiences for almost all other media have fragmented and shrunk.

Maybe by firing Williams, then, NPR was just trying to keep the line of civility where more than 30 million listeners like it.