

Are We Entitled To Our Own Facts?

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At the end of his show on October 22, 2008, Keith Olbermann stares down the camera and says in his trademark angry tone that he's going to play a game called "Sarah Palin in the big leagues! Or, 'Are You Smarter Than a Third Grader?'" An interview clip of Palin comes up on the screen, during which she takes a written question from a third grader; the question is "What does the Vice President do?" Palin's response includes "[the Vice President is] in charge of the United States Senate, so if they want to, they can really get in there with the Senators and make a lot of changes that will help [American] families." Olbermann looks into the camera and shouts condescendingly, "Oh, so sorry, Governor! The correct answer can be found in the Constitution of the United States, Article One, Section Three." Continuing, Olbermann reads Article One Section Three of the Constitution, which details the organization of the Senate and reads, "The Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no Vote, unless they be equally divided." Olbermann then looks back into the camera and says, "so the Vice President is not in charge of jack, Governor, let alone the Senate. And you, Governor, are NOT smarter than a third grader." Olbermann concludes the clip by saying that Palin is either "stupid," or plans to move the parameters of Vice Presidential power outside of what is allowed by the Constitution. His final line is "At least wait until you achieve office before you attempt to seize power extra-Constitutionally!" (Olbermann).

By the end of watching that clip, you may feel satisfied to hear someone say so clearly what you have been thinking this whole time. You may feel tired and as though Olbermann was too harsh and too dramatic to make such grandstanding claims from one interview moment – after all, it was just one blunder, right? You may also feel skeptical about how biased Olbermann seemed in his commentary – couldn't you find a clip of Joe Biden slipping up like that if you tried? Should you have included that clip alongside the one of Palin? Would that have been evenhanded, or fair and balanced? It turns out that Olbermann doesn't have to do *any* of that. Why? Because he isn't a journalist.

As it turns out, Keith Olbermann wasn't delivering the news when he hosted *Countdown* in MSNBC's primetime slot every night for almost ten years. Neither is Rachel Maddow today, and neither is Sean Hannity, or was Bill O'Reilly. None of these people are journalists, so none of them are delivering news. They are delivering news *commentary*. The difference between news and news commentary is not well understood; it is understudied and yet so crucial to mass communication in the United States and across the world because people are paradoxically only watching political commentators on television, yet the public's perception of media bias is incredibly polarized. With MSNBC and Fox News' primetime lineups being dominated by political commentators, their millions of viewers are being pulled to opposite ends of the political spectrum, making communication across political lines nearly impossible, and making the gridlock in American politics even worse.

Media Bias: Perception vs. Reality

The greatest threat to America is not necessarily a recession or even another terrorist attack. The greatest threat to America is a liberal media bias."

- Rep. Lamar Smith (R)

The world has an ever-growing number of news sources coming in different media from different people and companies. Additionally, distrust in the media is more common and encouraged than ever before. During election cycles, particularly the most recent one, television news plays a critical role in shaping and narrating campaigns and elections, but it is becoming more common for candidates to have their own team of news organizations that they trust, while bashing a group of other ones (take CNN vs. Fox, for example). With charges of bias coming from both sides, it's hard to know which news sources are trustworthy. Is it true that media has a large-scale partisan bias? How can you measure bias if no one can have a totally non-biased view of the news themselves? We all prescribe to our individual political beliefs and any lens we watch the news from will be filtered by that lens.

Regardless of what the objective truth may be as far as it can be measured, public perception of media bias is at an all-time high. According to a 2011 Pew study, "66% [of Americans] say news stories often are inaccurate, 77 % think that news organizations tend to favor one side, and 80% say news organizations are often influenced by powerful people and

organizations” (Bedard). You have probably heard the term “fake news” or “mainstream corporate media” to describe these feelings. *So many* Americans think that the news sources they don’t subscribe to are biased and untrustworthy, and half of the country thinks the same of the news sources they consume. The same study results mentioned that Fox News and CNN were the most commonly mentioned news cites when asked to describe media bias. So clearly, the perception of television news sources has become so polarized that people just chose one source for their news and write off all of the others. But regardless of the public’s perception of media bias, does this media bias actually exist?

You’ve probably heard the term liberal media, or liberal corporate media, or some term to that effect thrown around, especially if you’re a fan of Fox News. Conservative political commentator Ann Coulter dedicated a whole book to it; *Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right* is Coulter’s book about, to use her words, “the left’s hegemonic control of the news media” (Coulter 10). This accusation that all media sources are liberal leaning or “in the bag” for Democratic politicians is something that liberal-minded newscasters and politicians have to face and fight against because the accusation has become so commonplace. But how true is this claim?

While the accusation that media has a liberal bias is widespread, there are many professionals in communications that see this claim as dishonest and dangerous. *Economist* and *New York Times* contributor Paul Krugman has written about this phenomenon and argues that this accusation creates a fear in mainstream media outlets, which affects their reporting. He writes, “The media are desperately afraid of being accused of bias. And that’s partly because there’s a whole machine out there, an organized attempt to accuse them of bias whenever they say anything that the Right doesn’t like” (Krugman). This means that, according to liberal columnists like Krugman, people who demean mainstream media as left-wing have been successful in their strategy because it influences the way mainstream media outlets behave. Whether they mean to or not, mainstream media outlets are fearful of being called disreputable, so they tiptoe around those accusations, which works in favor of the right.

In his book *Lies and The Lying Liars Who Tell Them*, former US Senator Al Franken dedicates a chapter to examining this “liberal bias,” which he argues doesn’t exist. He cites a study from Pew that examined the 2000 presidential election, which actually found that democratic nominee

Al Gore received 7% *more* negative coverage than Bush, while Bush received 11% more positive coverage than Gore (Franken 42-43). The same trend has continued into more recent elections. A 2009 study for *Daedalus* found a stronger pro-McCain bias for Fox News than there was a pro-Obama bias for CNN in 2008 (Jamieson and Gottfried). Focusing on the 2012 election, a study conducted by Elon University found that Mitt Romney's campaign received more coverage on average from television and print media than the Obama campaign; additionally, more stories on average were negative towards Obama (Quackenbush). Franken assesses in his book that because there is such a widespread conception that there is a "liberal bias" in the media, that mainstream media networks and papers feel as though they need to fight against that assertion, which causes them to subconsciously report with bias against liberal politicians (Franken 44). This is how coverage of the 2016 Commander-in-Chief forum on NBC was analyzed.

In September of 2016, Matt Lauer hosted a question-and-answer event with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and Lauer received criticism from political commentators and newscasters across the political spectrum for his uneven treatment of the two candidates (Byers). During the event, which featured back-to-back live interviews with both of the candidates with town-hall style audience questions, Lauer notably interrupted Secretary Clinton far more times than he did Donald Trump, and asked far more antagonistic questions, focusing on her email scandal, while comparatively throwing "softballs" as Trump (Gyrnbaum). Lauer was criticized for being unprepared, sloppy, and irresponsible for treating the candidates so unevenly in his role as the moderator (Gyrnbaum). While there is certainly an argument to be made that this is partially attributed to sexism, Lauer's critics also argue that his performance has an example of journalists "giving in" to right wing commentators who project the notion that all media is liberally biased, and trying to come off as balanced by going harder on left-wing candidates.

So, what accounts for the large skepticism that the public has for the so-called "liberal media," when study after study indicates that this assumption makes the mainstream news media skew in the other direction? It's because people more often than not are watching news commentary when they think they are watching the news. And there's a big difference.

Commentators vs. Journalists

“People want me to make fun of Sean Hannity tonight but I can’t. This dinner is for journalists.”

–Michelle Wolf, White House Correspondents Dinner, April 28, 2018

The simple difference between a journalist and a commentator is that straight journalists are required to be much more balanced in their reporting of news stories. The job of a journalist is to offer any objective facts about a news topic, then offer representation to any relevant points of view, and report them accurately (“The Difference”). All journalists must abide by the School of Professional Journalists’ “Code of Ethics” (“SPJ”). The code’s four core tenets explain that journalists must: seek truth and report it, act independently, minimize harm, and be accountable and transparent (“SPJ”). These are all codes that outline that journalists must never deliberately distort facts or context for stories, take responsibility for the accuracy of their work, avoid conflicts of interest, never editorialize or give their opinion on a story, and label commentary as commentary (“SPJ”). There are protections for journalists under the First Amendment, as well as strict potential punishments for libel, spreading falsehoods, or misrepresenting one’s views or opinions when reporting on them, according to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (Saharko). What’s essential to journalists is that they offer what the opposing views to an issue are, and not comment on it themselves. This isn’t to say that journalists only give surface level information. They are expected to do in-depth analysis of their stories, but they must fairly and accurately analyze the viewpoints and facts involved in a story.

A news commentator will typically offer the same raw facts as a journalist, but has license to offer their opinion, which they usually also call “analysis,” though this analysis is more one sided and not required to be as in depth as a journalist’s (WGBH). This means a commentator has more license to insert their opinions into stories, and are not held to as high standards with issues of bias, and even conflicts of interest. Just this month, Sean Hannity came under fire for a potential conflict of interest. On his Fox News show, Hannity was discussing the possibility of a federal investigation into President Trump’s lawyer Michael Cohen regarding the payments he supposedly made with his own money to silence Stormy Daniels, an adult film star who apparently had an affair with the President in 2006. Hannity openly discouraged the idea of an investigation, which

came under fire when it was revealed that Michael Cohen is Hannity's personal lawyer (Farhi). That would violate a journalist's code of ethics in two ways; if he were a journalist, Hannity should not have given his opinion about the pending investigation at all, and he would have had to recuse himself from covering a story involving someone he has personal or business ties to. But Hannity's defense was "I never claimed to be a journalist" (Farhi). Hannity has misleadingly called himself "a journalist. But [an] advocacy journalist, or an opinion journalist," which is just another term for a commentator (Farhi).

The difference between a news story and a commentary piece can be quite difficult to detect, especially when there are commentators and journalists on the same news channel. For example, on February 2nd 2018, when President Trump declassified the Republican members House Intelligence Committee's memo accusing the FBI of favoring Democrats and abusing their power during the early stages of the Russia investigation, different shows on Fox News reported it very differently. When Shep Smith reported the story, his headline read "Controversial Republican Memo Released" (Fox). Smith only presented raw facts about the memo and its possible political ramifications, taking into account the contents of the memo, as well as the bias of its authors, since it was written by Republican members of the Intelligence Committee. This is in line with journalistic standards, as he considers both sides and frames the context accurately, and refrains from sharing his opinion. When Sean Hannity reported the story on his primetime show, the headline read "The FBI purposefully deceived a federal court" (Fox). Hannity went on to summarize the memo and agree with it wholeheartedly, the report was laden with Hannity's own opinion, and the analysis of the memo was one sided; Hannity did not explore any other takes on the story (Fox). This would have been in violation of a journalist's standards, but Hannity isn't a journalist, so he can tell his opinion on his show all he wants, with no obligation to represent an opposing view. But at first glance, they are both talking heads in a news set, and their setups are similar, so there hardly seems to be a difference between them, right?

The trickiness of distinguishing opinion from straight journalism is much more difficult on television than it is in a newspaper. In a newspaper such as the *New York Times*, stories are categorized into different sections. The world politics, US politics, style, sports, and *opinion* sections are all

segregated. So when you're reading about the news, you know definitively if you are reading a story by a journalist who has to abide by standards, or if you are reading someone give their personal opinion about the news. On television, how are you supposed to tell the difference between a journalist and a commentator?

Network television has been able to blur the line between journalism and opinion since the FCC repealed the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 (Fletcher). The Fairness Doctrine was implemented in 1949, which dictated that public broadcast license-holders must present important issues to the public and give multiple perspectives while doing so (Fletcher). This was back when there were only three major television networks – ABC, CBS and NBC – and lawmakers were concerned about any of those networks abusing their platform to push a biased agenda. By 1970, the FCC maintained that the doctrine was the “single most important requirement of operation in the public interest” (Fletcher). But it was repealed in 1987 under President Reagan. The reason for the repeal was that the Reagan administration saw the doctrine as something giving the FCC the ability to censor news content (Fletcher). Ever since, commentators have become more and more present in cable news.

Can you say definitively whether Jake Tapper is a journalist or a commentator? How about Rachel Maddow, Shep Smith, or Tucker Carlson? All four of those newscasters are on cable news networks; they all look and speak relatively similarly, they talk about the same news stories, and their sets even look the same. Before researching this, I thought that Rachel Maddow and Jake Tapper were journalists and that Shep Smith and Tucker Carlson were commentators. As it turns out, Tapper and Smith are both journalists while Carlson and Maddow are commentators. But there isn't a banner across the television when Tucker Carlson or Rachel Maddow are on television saying “This is commentary, not news.” In fact, if you go to the websites for any of the major news networks, the section of the website that lists photos of their “news team” includes journalists and commentators, so it's not easy to distinguish between them (CNN; Fox News; MSNBC).

The real media bias

“The bias of the mainstream media is toward
sensationalism, conflict, and laziness.”

– Jon Stewart

So what does this have to do with Keith Olbermann? He was always pretty open about the fact that he was delivering commentary, not straight news. After he was abruptly fired from *Countdown* in 2011, MSNBC was in renegotiations to allow him to return to the network and host a news show without commentary, Olbermann backed out of the talks, saying that he did not see the point in doing a show where he couldn't do commentary (Rosenberg). If Olbermann is honest about his bias, that's not a problem, right? The problem, and Olbermann is an example of this, is that as networks have been allowed to have more commentary in their lineups, the commentary shows have brought in more revenue and viewers for the networks, which motivates the networks to dominate their lineup with commentary shows. At its peak, *Countdown* was the highest rated show on MSNBC (Carter). It had the primetime slot of 9pm, and its significant rival was Glenn Beck's show – another commentary show – on Fox News at the same time. Commentary shows bring in enthusiastic niche audiences, so networks are incentivized to make more of them (Hagey). The polarizing nature of commentary shows is very attractive to the viewers who agree with particular hosts; the ease of watching a news show that you will definitely agree with will not only make you more likely to tune into that show, but it will make you excited to watch it every night.

Even today, the primetime (7-11pm) lineups for Fox News and MSNBC are *all* political commentary shows (Fox News; MSNBC). This means that most Americans who watch the news after work are only watching commentary; they have very little access to journalism or straight news, which is very dangerous. In his *Politico* article, "Cable After Beck And Olbermann," Keach Hagey warns that cable news is veering in an extreme direction by emphasizing their commentary shows with extreme hosts such as Glenn Beck and Keith Olbermann, as doing so worsens political polarization. If most Americans are getting their news from a given political commentator, they are experiencing the news very differently from whoever is listening to a different commentator, which makes even more difficult than it already is to find common ground to bridge the gap of political partisanship we are currently grappling with. When there were only three major television networks tightly monitored by an FCC with a Fairness Doctrine, there was at least a common reality and basis of facts with television news. Today, if you watch an episode of

Rachel Maddow then watch Sean Hannity immediately after, you may question whether those shows exist in the same universe.

The importance of rectifying the error of editorializing cable news cannot be understated. The 2016 presidential election was so shocking to newscasters and the public in terms of the perception of media bias and false claims that it has yet to be thoroughly studied. However, there have been analyses of the media coverage of the election that found that Americans have never had a stronger distrust in the news sources that are watched most frequently, namely Fox News and CNN (Sides). Additionally, that *Washington Post* analysis of media bias found that while there are ideological biases in networks like Fox News and MSNBC, they share a bias towards a juicy, salacious story (Sides). Frederick Fico et al's journal article "Broadcast and Cable Network News Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election: An Assessment of Partisan and Structural Imbalance" examined the structural bias in cable news when covering Presidential elections. The study found that while Fox News and CNN had the most ideologically imbalanced stories, all networks shared a *structural* bias, meaning they all possess the flaw of chasing more entertaining or salacious stories, which are more likely to be false.

This is the underlying danger of political commentary dominating our news cycle, and it is non-partisan. If political commentary shows are primarily geared towards appealing to their niche audiences, they will gravitate towards gossipy stories, most likely about members of their opposing political party. This leads to a lack of actual substance in news stories, which did not happen so frequently when there were strict guidelines for balanced, accurate reporting of the news on television. Why else do you think Fox News spent so much time talking about Clinton's emails, while MSNBC dwelled on Trump's scandals?

How political commentary makes polarization worse

"Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts"

– Sen. Daniel Moynihan

In an interview for *Vice's* documentary "A House Divided," which examines political polarization, former Speaker of the House of Representatives John Boehner attributed much of the United States' polarization to television news. He said in the interview:

we've got all these cable channels and all they do is politics all day long. And then all of a sudden you have Facebook and Twitter and Americans are choosing where they want to get their news. And you know, a lot of people get their news from Talk Radio. I mean, that should scare the Jesus out of anybody!... It's pushed or pulled Americans to the right or left, leaving fewer and fewer people in the middle. Members of Congress represent their constituents. All of a sudden, their constituents are way left or going way left, making it almost impossible to get anything done.

This feedback loop is the consequence of the news commentary consumption in the United States. As Speaker Boehner explains, as people have switched from news to political commentary talk shows to get their information, their opinions become more extreme, so they are inclined to vote for more extreme candidates. This results in a more extreme and polarized group of representatives in Congress, particularly in the House of Representatives, where candidates are accountable to smaller groups of constituents. The absence of moderates in Congress results in political gridlock, which is a term to describe situations where there is such little compromise or common ground between political parties that nothing gets done (Kim). This lack of progress frustrates constituents, who become more extreme in their own views as a response because their commentator of choice is telling them that it's all *the other side's* fault. They then vote in more extreme representatives, and so on and so on (Kim).

If Americans are largely only watching biased commentary shows that are geared towards non-substantive, slanted stories, they will become so politically polarized that they won't be able to see any common ground with people with whom they disagree. This phenomenon pulling people to opposite ends of the political spectrum is reflected in the representatives they vote into office; we've seen pretty clearly in the past three years what can happen when people depend on television for their news, and an extreme candidate who they've seen on television runs for office. It is imperative that the difference between news and commentary be made clearer. Because as of right now, millions of Americans get home from work, turn on the TV, and absorb whatever Fox, or MSNBC, or CNN tells them.

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