

# CQ Researcher

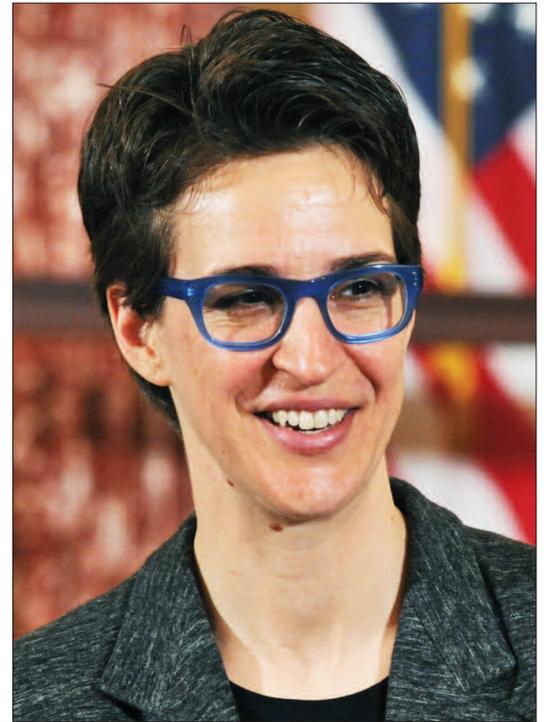
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## Media Bias

*Is slanted reporting replacing objectivity?*

An unprecedented number of Americans view the news media as biased and untrustworthy, with both conservatives and liberals complaining that coverage of political races and important public policy issues is often skewed. Polls show that 80 percent of Americans believe news stories are often influenced by the powerful, and nearly as many say the media tend to favor one side of issues over another. The proliferation of commentary by partisan cable broadcasters, talk-radio hosts and bloggers has blurred the lines between news and opinion in many people's minds, fueling concern that slanted reporting is replacing media objectivity. At the same time, newspapers and broadcasters — and even some partisan groups — have launched aggressive fact-checking efforts aimed at verifying statements by newsmakers and exposing exaggerations or outright lies. Experts question the future of U.S. democracy if American voters cannot agree on what constitutes truth.



At MSNBC, which features left-leaning commentator Rachel Maddow, 85 percent of airtime is dedicated to commentary — rather than straight news — compared to 55 percent at Fox News and 46 percent at CNN, according to the Pew Research Center. Some media analysts say the public's growing perception of media bias is due partly to the rise of opinion-dominated TV and radio talk shows.

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RECIPIENT OF SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE ♦ AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION SILVER GAVEL AWARD

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# Media Bias

BY ROBERT KIENER

## THE ISSUES

“A total embarrassment.” “A fawning interview.” “A targeted barrage of softballs.”

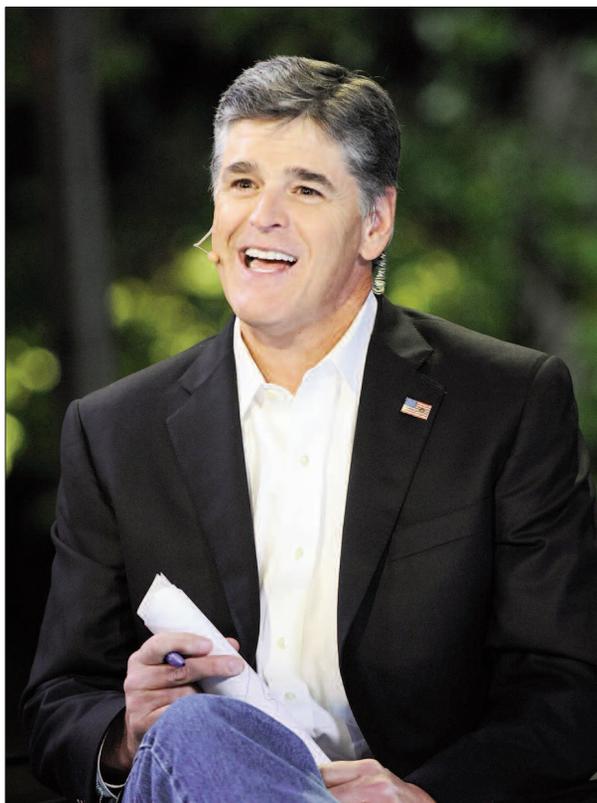
A wide variety of journalists and media critics used those disparaging terms to attack CBS reporter Steve Kroft’s Jan. 27 “60 Minutes” interview with President Obama and outgoing Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.<sup>1</sup>

*The Atlantic* compared it to Scott Pelley’s earlier, much tougher “60 Minutes” interview with President George W. Bush and proclaimed “a glaring double standard” favoring Democrats.<sup>2</sup> *The Washington Post* called Kroft’s sit-down with Obama and Clinton a “soft-as-premium-tissue” interview.<sup>3</sup>

Fox News claimed the interview “totally epitomizes liberal media bias in the modern era.”<sup>4</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page dubbed it “embarrassing” evidence of “the mainstream media fawn-a-thon toward the current president.”<sup>5</sup>

The complaints are only the latest in a rising chorus of charges that the nation’s mainstream media — major newspapers, newsweeklies and broadcasters — lean either to the left or to the right. And polls show that the perception of media bias is growing, and that it comes from both sides of the political spectrum.

For example, some mainstream media outlets were accused of slanting their coverage of the Senate’s recent refusal to mandate background checks on gun purchases. “Television hosts, editorial boards and even some reporters have aggressively criticized and shamed the 46 Senators who opposed



Getty Images/Chris McKay

*Conservative talk show hosts such as Sean Hannity have found huge audiences — mainly among Republicans — at Fox News. Some media critics trace the rise of partisan programming to the government’s 1987 decision to abandon the Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to devote airtime to policy debates and offer contrasting views on those issues. The government said the rapid growth of cable outlets made the rule unnecessary.*

the plan, while some have even taken to actively soliciting the public to contact [the senators] directly” to express their displeasure, reporter Dylan Byers wrote in *Politico*. “The decision by some members of the media to come down so firmly on one side of a policy debate has only served to reinforce conservatives’ longstanding suspicions that the mainstream media has a deep-seated liberal bias.”<sup>6</sup>

The Sunday talk shows also are criticized for hosting Republican and conservative guests more often than Democrats or liberals. Of 400 guests hosted by the major Sunday morning talk shows on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox during the first three months of

2013, 40 percent were either Republicans or conservatives, and only 29 percent were Democrats or liberals, complained the left-leaning media watchdog group Media Matters. Centrist, nonpartisan and ideologically neutral guests made up 31 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The claim that the mainstream media — or as former vice presidential candidate and Alaska governor Sarah Palin calls them, the “lamestream” media — lean to the left has been a favorite theme of the Republican Party for years. “As a conservative I’ve long believed that there is an inherent media bias, and I think that anyone with objectivity would believe that that’s the case,” vice presidential candidate Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., said last September. “I think most people in the mainstream media are left of center.”<sup>8</sup>

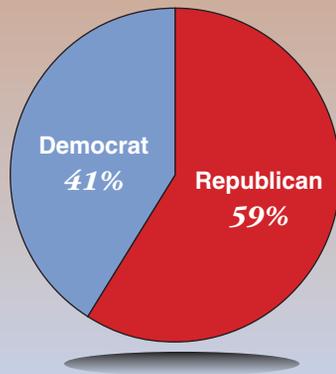
The media are “out of control with a deliberate and unmistakable leftist agenda,” the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog group in Alexandria, Va., charged in an August 2012 “open letter” to the “biased” news media during last year’s presidential race. “To put it bluntly: you are rigging this election and taking sides in order to pre-determine the outcome.”

During the 2012 presidential election, however, Democrats received more negative coverage than Republicans, according to the 4thEstate Project, which examined three months’ worth of 2012 election coverage. It found that 37 percent of Obama’s coverage was negative, compared to 29 percent of Romney’s. About 60 percent of the partisan quotes came from GOP-oriented sources.<sup>9</sup> (See *graph, p. 404.*)

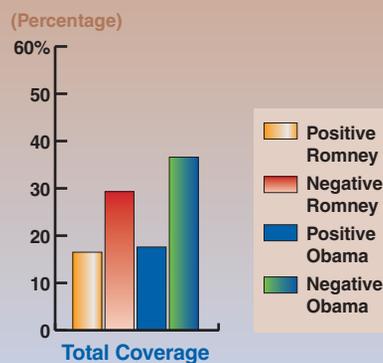
## Coverage of Democrats Was More Negative

Republican-oriented sources accounted for about 60 percent of the partisan quotes during three months of media coverage of the 2012 presidential campaign, according to the 4thEstate Project, which conducts statistical analysis of the media. It also found that media coverage of health care, the economy and social issues was more negative for President Obama than for GOP challenger Mitt Romney. Thirty-seven percent of total election coverage during the period was negative for Obama, compared to 29 percent for Romney.

**Party Affiliation of Partisan Newsmakers Quoted in Election Coverage, May-July 2012**



**Nature of Coverage of Presidential Candidates, May-July 2012**



Source: "Liberal Media Bias: Fact or Fiction," 4thEstate Project, July 2012, [specialreports.4thestate.net/liberal-media-bias-fact-or-fiction/](http://specialreports.4thestate.net/liberal-media-bias-fact-or-fiction/)

Others see a conservative, pro-GOP slant at some popular media outlets. Fox News is "vital" to the conservative movement, said Republican Jim Gilmore, former governor of Virginia.<sup>10</sup> And a 2009 Pew Research poll found that Fox News is considered the most ideological channel in America, with 47 percent of respondents saying Fox is "mostly conservative."<sup>11</sup>

Measuring media bias is an inexact science, and researchers who try to quantify it have found mixed results, with some studies showing a left-leaning bias and some a rightward tilt.

A Media Matters survey found that about 60 percent of the nation's newspapers publish more conservative syndicated columnists than liberal ones

every week, and among the country's top 10 columnists (as ranked by the number of papers that carry them), five are conservative, two centrist and three liberal.<sup>12</sup>

A classic study by the media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) found in 1998 that most journalists were relatively liberal on social policies but significantly more conservative than the general public on economic, labor, health care and foreign policy issues. Journalists "nearly always" turn to government officials and business representatives — rather than labor representatives or consumer advocates — when covering economic policy, a practice that critics say led to the nation's business

reporters being blindsided by the 2007-09 recession.<sup>13</sup>

Tim Groseclose, a political science professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), has developed a statistical model for measuring the "slant quotient" of news stories. In his 2012 book *Left Turn: How Liberal Bias Distorts the American Mind*, he concludes that "every mainstream national news outlet in the United States has a liberal bias." Of the 20 news sources he studied, 18 were left of center, he said.<sup>14</sup>

But David D'Alessio, an assistant professor of communications sciences at the University of Connecticut, Stamford, says his research shows that "while some individuals may produce biased reporting, over time both sides tend to balance one another. There is no clear bias for one side or the other."

Many observers agree that distrust of the media often depends on one's political leanings. "Democrats trust everything except Fox, and Republicans don't trust anything other than Fox," said a Public Policy Polling press release announcing its latest survey of media credibility.<sup>15</sup> "If Fox tilts right, that doesn't bother conservatives; they don't necessarily see it as bias," said Bernard Goldberg, a Fox contributor and author of *Bias* and other books on media partiality. "And when MSNBC goes left, liberals . . . see it as 'truth.'" <sup>16</sup>

"Fox is perfectly entitled to be a conservative news organization" said former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller. "I will always defend their right to be that. My criticism of Fox is that a lot of the time they pretend that they're not. And I think that just tends to contribute to cynicism about the media. All news organizations, including the ones that try very hard to play fair and to be even-handed in their reporting and writing, get tarred by the Fox brush."<sup>17</sup>

Despite the inconclusiveness of the studies, skepticism about media credibility is growing. For instance:

- A 2013 Public Policy Polling survey of news media trustworthiness found that Fox's credibility had dropped significantly: 46 percent of those surveyed said they do not trust the network — up 9 points since 2010.<sup>18</sup>

- A 2011 Pew Research Center poll found that 77 percent of respondents believed news organizations “tend to favor one side” — up from 53 percent in 1985.<sup>19</sup>

- A September 2012 Gallup survey found that 60 percent of respondents said they had “not very much” or no trust or confidence that the mass media report the news fully, accurately and fairly — up from 46 percent in 1998.<sup>20</sup>

“These are big increases, says Mark Jurkowitz, a former *Boston Globe* journalist and media reporter and now the associate director of the Pew Research Project for Excellence in Journalism. “For the last three decades there has been a seriously embedded, growing thought among the public that the media, especially the liberal media, are biased.”

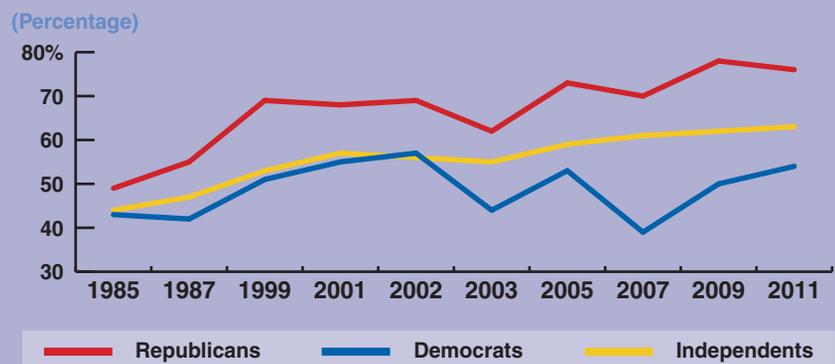
Larry Light, editor-in-chief of the financial website AdviceIQ.com, contended that public antipathy toward the news media is the result of what he called the right-wing's ongoing “war against journalists,” which he maintained has stepped up its tempo recently. The perception of bias “has nothing to do with people's individual observations” but everything to do with “a juggernaut of conservative, anti-media propaganda that has grown more and more powerful,” he wrote. “The propagandists repeat the phrase ‘biased liberal media’ a zillion-fold everywhere. That it is a crock of baloney is beside the point.”<sup>21</sup>

Some observers blame the changing perceptions on the rise of cable television, radio talk shows and Internet sites and blogs, which have enabled thousands of new players to spread their often partisan messages. Commentators such as conservatives Sean Hannity of Fox News and radio personality Rush Limbaugh, and lib-

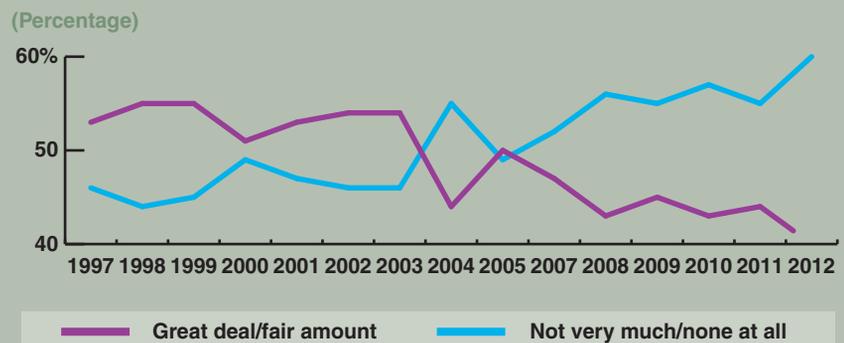
## Most Americans See Media as Politically Biased

*More than three-fourths of Republicans consider the media politically biased, a perception shared by 54 percent of Democrats and 63 percent of Independents. Sixty percent of Americans say they have little or no confidence in the media to report news fully, accurately and fairly.*

### Percentage of Americans Who Say the Media Are Politically Biased, 1985-2011 (by Party Affiliation)



### Trust and Confidence in Mass Media to Report News Fully, Accurately and Fairly, 1997-2012



Sources: Lymari Morales, “U.S. Distrust in Media Hits New High,” Gallup, September 2012, [www.gallup.com/poll/157589/distrust-media-bits-new-high.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/157589/distrust-media-bits-new-high.aspx); “Views of the News Media: 1985-2011,” Pew Research Center, September 2011, p. 11, [www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/9-22-2011%20Media%20Attitudes%20Release.pdf](http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/9-22-2011%20Media%20Attitudes%20Release.pdf)

erals such as Rachel Maddow of MSNBC, along with news sites such as the right-leaning Drudge Report and left-leaning *Huffington Post*, have helped blur the line between straight news and opinion. “The public does not always differentiate between these

partisan outlets and the more objective mainstream media,” says S. Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University in Annandale, Va., and co-author of the 1986 book *The Media Elite*.

Indeed, 63 percent of respondents cited cable news — particularly CNN and Fox — when asked what comes to mind when they hear the term “news organizations,” according to Pew.<sup>22</sup> Pew also found that opinion and commentary, as opposed to news reporting, fill 85 percent of MSNBC’s airtime, 55 percent of Fox’s and 46 percent of CNN’s.<sup>23</sup>

Some say the public’s perceptions about media bias may also have been influenced by the growth of media watchdog groups, such as Media Matters and the Media Research Center, which track inaccurate reporting, media bias and political gaffes. Often financed by wealthy partisans, the groups comb the media searching for examples of perceived right- or left-wing bias.

“Part of their message is, ‘The other guy is lying to you,’ ” says Jurkowitz. That helps to convince the public that “the media are biased,” he says.

Others say fact-checking groups such as PolitiFact and FactCheck.org may also have increased the perception that the media are biased. (*See sidebar, p. 414.*)

Surveys repeatedly have shown that most mainstream journalists in New York City and Washington, D.C., have liberal leanings, but most reporters say they separate their personal views from their reporting.<sup>24</sup> “An opinion is not a bias,” said Michael Kinsley, former editor of the online publication *Slate*.<sup>25</sup> Longtime *Washington Post* political reporter David Broder once famously declared that “the charge of ideological bias in the newsroom [is] laughable. There just isn’t enough ideology in the average reporter to fill a thimble.”<sup>26</sup>

As scholars, journalists and news consumers explore bias in the quickly changing media world, here are some questions they are asking:

### ***Should journalists try to be objective?***

As the media landscape grows more varied — with cable broadcast-

ers, bloggers, Twitterers and others adding their often-partisan views to those of the established media — many media analysts are asking if journalistic objectivity is becoming passé.

But for many mainstream media organizations, objectivity is a core part of their brand and very much worth preserving. “Objectivity is like virtue; it’s . . . the thing that you always strive toward” in search of the truth, said *New York Times* conservative columnist David Brooks.<sup>27</sup>

He and other journalists say being objective means not playing favorites, regardless of one’s personal views. “It means doing stories that will make your friends mad when appropriate and not doing stories that are actually hit jobs or propaganda masquerading as journalism,” said Alex S. Jones, director of Harvard University’s Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. “It is essential that genuine objectivity should remain the American journalistic standard.”<sup>28</sup>

In its *Handbook of Journalism*, the Reuters news service warns journalists: “As Reuters journalists, we never identify with any side in an issue, a conflict or a dispute.”<sup>29</sup>

But many media specialists today question whether journalists can ever be truly objective or neutral. “No journalist is completely objective,” says Pew’s Jurkowitz. “There are subjective judgments made in every story: what quote a reporter uses in his lead, the prominence he gives to certain facts, who gets one or two quotes, the language used, etc.”

“Objectivity is in the eye of the beholder,” says Barrie Dunsmore, a former ABC News foreign correspondent. “It’s not just reporting both sides, which often aren’t equivalent in terms of moral, legal or sociological balance. It has to be coupled with knowledge of a subject. It’s easy to be objective if you don’t know anything.”

“The big problem with objectivity is that it has no bias toward truth,” says Eric Alterman, a journalism history professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate School of Journalism and a liberal journalist. “You can quote both sides of an issue, and they can both be false. This doesn’t bring readers any closer to the truth.”

“Good journalism, like good science, starts out with a hunch, not with an observation, and then builds its case from there” says Reuters media critic Jack Shafer. “It’s the method the journalist uses to arrive at his conclusion that has to be objective.”

Some journalists have held that being objective means producing “balanced” stories — stories that give various sides of an issue. But many now see that approach as misleading and often producing weak reporting.

“There is no such thing as objectivity, and the truth . . . seldom nestles neatly halfway between any two opposing points of view,” the late Texas columnist Molly Ivins declared. “The smug complacency of much of the press . . . stems from the curious notion that if you get a quote from both sides . . . you’ve done the job. In the first place, most stories aren’t two-sided, they’re 17-sided at least. In the second place, it’s of no help to either the readers or the truth to quote one side saying, ‘cat,’ and the other side saying ‘dog,’ while the truth is there’s an elephant crashing around out there in the bushes.”<sup>30</sup>

After seeing his reporting reduced to a formulaic, he-said-she-said news story, former *Los Angeles Times* reporter Ken Silverstein complained to his editors that “balanced” reporting can be “totally misleading and leads to utterly spineless reporting.” In the end, he continued, “It’s just an easy way of avoiding real reporting and shirking our responsibility to inform readers.”<sup>31</sup>

Constantly demanding balance can lead to a false equivalence, critics argue. “Al Gore says about 97 percent of

climate scientists agree that global warming is real and manmade, but only about 50 percent of news reporting will say that, because they . . . want to give equal weight to both sides,” says Alterman.

“The term ‘balance’ implies equal time, and that’s not sufficient for accurate and fair reporting,” says Dunsmore. “It is more important to be accurate and fair than merely showing both sides of an issue in order to be balanced.”

Longtime Washington observers Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, and Thomas Mann, a senior fellow at the centrist Brookings Institution, recently excoriated the mainstream press for insisting on writing balanced news stories that gave equal weight to often-outlandish political views, such as the comment by former Rep. Allen West, R-Fla., that “78 to 81” members of Congress are communists.

“Our advice to the press: Don’t seek professional safety through the evenhanded, unfiltered presentation of opposing views,” they said. Instead, reporters should ask: “Which politician is telling the truth? Who is taking hostages, at what risks and to what ends?”<sup>32</sup> Choosing balance over common sense does the public a disservice, they said. Taking a “balanced treatment of an unbalanced phenomenon distorts reality.”<sup>33</sup>

Others, such as George Mason’s Lichter, differentiate between objectivity and balance. Objectivity is “such a valuable gift from America to the world of journalism that I’d hate to lose it,” he says. “We owe a debt of gratitude to the wire services and papers such as *The New York Times* for making objectivity their goal.”

But some journalists today argue that reporters should not be afraid to declare their biases. With many new-media platforms producing journalism that is increasingly laced with opinion, it’s more important than ever to know a reporter’s agenda, says Jurkowitz. “Or-

ganizations have to be clear about their motives and agendas. Transparency is the new objectivity,” he says.

### ***Has the proliferation of media watchdog groups fostered perceptions of media bias?***

Much of the criticism of the “biased right-wing press” and the “lamestream media” has originated with self-styled media watchdog groups that exist mainly to monitor the media in hopes of discovering bias, inaccuracies or inconsistencies. Often funded by politically inspired financial backers such as conservative billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch or liberal financier George Soros, these groups comb the media searching for examples of bias.

“An entire cottage industry exists to highlight the media’s alleged failings,” wrote Paul Farhi, a reporter at *The Washington Post*.<sup>34</sup>

By publicizing failings, groups such as the Media Research Center (MRC), Media Matters for America, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting and others also have ratcheted up the volume in the national conversation about media bias. “Their message that the media are biased has certainly seeped into the public consciousness,” says Pew’s Jurkowitz.

For example:

- L. Brent Bozell, founder and president of the conservative MRC, said the mainstream media are “the ‘shock troops’ of the Obama administration because they are the ones doing all the dirty work for him so that he doesn’t have to do it.”<sup>35</sup>

- Left-leaning Media Matters said Fox News often uses “offensive words” to refer to undocumented immigrants. The group claimed that between Nov. 7, 2012, and Feb. 15, 2013, Fox’s prime-time hosts and their guests used what Media Matters called anti-immigrant language — such as “illegals,” “illegal aliens” and “anchor babies” — 99 times.<sup>36</sup> (Recently The Associated Press

dropped the term “illegal immigrant” from its *AP Stylebook*.)<sup>37</sup>

- Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting complained that the mainstream media “failed” to properly question the Bush administration’s justification for the Iraq War by neglecting to sufficiently question the existence of weapons of mass destruction and other assertions.<sup>38</sup>

These groups have “created the perception that the media is more biased than it really is,” says Si Sheppard, an assistant professor of political science at Long Island University and author of *The Partisan Press: A History of Media Bias in the United States*. “That’s their objective. They like to say that the media play favorites, but studies have shown that there has not been consistent favoritism in reporting over the last few decades.”

Others say that because these groups are open about their own biases, their findings do not unfairly taint the press. “Everyone has to parse everyone’s arguments for themselves,” says Reuters media critic Shafer. “I find these groups valuable.”

But others say the groups have crossed the line from unbiased critics to political partisans. “When watchdog groups push their political agenda to the detriment of facts, they are becoming biased political operators,” says Andrew R. Cline, associate professor of journalism at Missouri State University, in Springfield. “They stop doing a good service.”

“Media criticism has become political criticism by another name,” says George Mason’s Lichter.

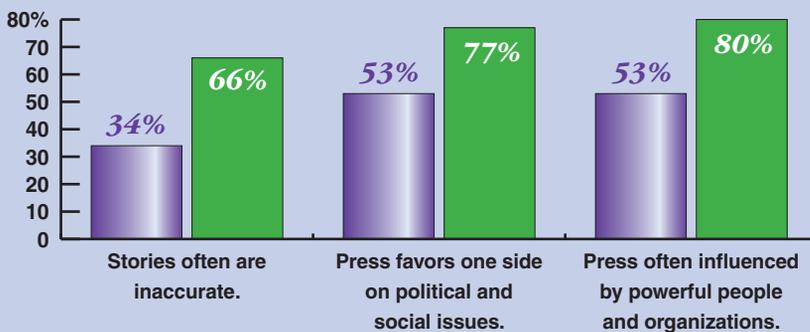
But the MRC’s Bozell disagrees. “Data is data, numbers are numbers. While our interpretation of those facts may be subjective, we aren’t forcing the public to see bias everywhere. We are showing them what different news organizations are reporting and the way they are reporting and let them decide.”

“By awakening the public to bias, these watchdogs are doing a favor,”

## Negative Views of Press Growing

The public's assessment of the press has become increasingly negative since the mid-1980s. Two-thirds of Americans say reports often are inaccurate, compared to about one-third in 1985. Seventy-seven percent say the press shows bias on political and social issues, while 80 percent say the media often are influenced by powerful people and organizations. Experts say the rise of cable television and the Internet has led more media outlets to engage in partisanship, with less regard for accuracy.

**Public Views on Press Performance, 1985 and 2011**



Source: "Views of the News Media: 1985-2011," Pew Research Center, September 2011, p. 1, [www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/9-22-2011%20Media%20Attitudes%20Release.pdf](http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/9-22-2011%20Media%20Attitudes%20Release.pdf)

1985  
2011

says UCLA's Groseclose. "They are moving people's perceptions closer to the truth that the media is biased."

However, some media observers say the groups make the media look more biased than they really are. "These groups' criticisms are certainly reinforcing that opinion," says Lichter. "Instead of just beating up the other side, there is more beating up on the media for being biased."

This is more than politically oriented criticism. "The new part of some of these groups' message is, 'the media are lying to you,'" says Jurkowitz. "That has become a significant element of the message that goes out on both sides of the spectrum."

Lichter and others blame the public's declining trust in media in part on the watchdog groups' repeated allegations of bias.

Media Matters executive vice-president Bradley Beychok disagrees.

"The fact that public trust in the media continues to fall says more about the media than it does about media watchdogs. The media landscape is expanding beyond television and newspapers. As it does, there is more of a need to combat misinformation from new sources."

### ***Are the media biased in favor of President Obama?***

During the Sept. 16, 2012, presidential debate, Republican candidate Mitt Romney implied that Obama's personal funds likely included investments in China, a charge that had been leveled at Romney.

"Mr. President, have you looked at your pension?" asked Romney.

Obama shot back, "You know, I don't look at my pension. It's not as big as yours, so it, it doesn't take as long."

In a nearby room where reporters were watching the debate, a round of applause broke out.<sup>39</sup>

While conservative commentators used this outburst as proof of their oft-repeated claim that much of the media favored Obama, others said all it showed was that reporters, like anyone else, enjoy a good debate comeback.

Many conservatives, such as the Media Research Center's Bozell, say the media are pro-Obama and his administration. "Saying the media aren't Obama-biased is like saying ducks don't waddle," says Bozell.

David Freddoso, editorial page editor of the conservative *Washington Examiner* and author of *Spin Masters: How the Media Ignored the Real News and Helped Reelect Barack Obama*, echoes the bias claims but believes that much of it is unintentional. "A lot of the mainstream media's pro-Obama bias is a product of the 'liberal bubble world' most journalists live in," he says. "When you and most of your colleagues are liberal, that can easily skew your perceptions."

Freddoso believes the mainstream media have "misrepresented Obama's so-called economic recovery" in Obama's favor and "emphasized Romney's gaffes during the campaign instead of attacking Obama's handling of the Benghazi attack," in which the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, was attacked by insurgents in September, 2012.

Some conservative journalists claim there has been a double standard in coverage of the Obama and George W. Bush administrations. "There was no fear of affronting Bush," said Fred Barnes, executive editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard*. "He faced relentless scrutiny. . . . The media raised questions about his motives, the constitutionality of his policies, his brainpower. . . . Obama's adoption of these same policies has drawn minimal attention."<sup>40</sup>

Lichter disagrees. "While Obama did get extremely positive coverage during his extended honeymoon period in 2009, the press since then has been fairly balanced in its coverage of

him and his administration.”

Other media critics claim journalists are so swayed by Obama’s personal story that it is hard to “resist” him. “He is liberal, Ivy League and a person of color. That is simply too powerful a combination for the media to resist,” wrote Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center. “One gets [the] sense that journalists not only like Mr. Obama; they are in awe of him.”<sup>41</sup>

But NBC chief White House correspondent Chuck Todd called such charges “mythology.” He said conservatives increasingly believe, without cause, that the “big, bad non-conservative media is out to get conservatives.”

However, Light, the editor of Advice IQ.com, wrote, “anti-media critiques are often absurdly one-sided. Their anti-media world is one where you whine about perceived slights to your side and conveniently ignore bad press that Democrats get. Anything that doesn’t embrace the right-wing line is, by definition, biased.”<sup>42</sup>

Likewise, Romney strategist Stuart Stevens said after Romney’s loss in the election that the media were not “in the tank” for Obama nor were they too sympathetic to him.<sup>43</sup>

The public as a whole believes the press was fair in its coverage of the candidates. During the 2012 election, 46 percent of those polled by Pew said the coverage of Obama was fair, and an equal percentage said Romney’s coverage was fair. However, when only Republicans were polled, 60 percent



AFP/Getty Images/Saul Loeb

*Conservatives claimed moderator Candy Crowley (center) of CNN favored President Obama when she intervened on his behalf during the Oct. 16, 2012, presidential debate. GOP candidate Mitt Romney repeatedly asserted that Obama took “days” to call the Sept. 11, 2012, attack on the Benghazi consulate in Libya an “act of terror,” while Obama insisted he did so the day after the incident. When Romney refused to accept Obama’s answer, Crowley said the president “did in fact” call the incident an act of terror on Sept. 12. Crowley later said she was only trying to move the debate along to other topics.*

said the press coverage of Obama was “too easy,” compared to just 4 percent of Democrats.<sup>44</sup>

While critics point to negative coverage of Romney as an example of media bias, others say it reflected the nature of political reporting: Journalists tend to cover politics as a horse race, and gaffes make for entertaining copy. A lot of Romney’s negative coverage, they say, was due to his numerous gaffes, such as his critical comments about how London was handling security for the Olympics or his blaming Palestine’s lack of economic success on cultural differences with Israel.

The 4thEstate study found no pro-Obama bias during the election period it examined. From May 1 to July 15, 2012, Republicans were quoted in news reports 44 percent more often than Democrats, and negative coverage of Obama was 17 percent higher than such coverage of Romney, the group said. “Our data does not support the thesis of a liberal media bias as it relates to Election 2012 coverage,” 4thEstate said.

“If anything, our analysis suggests a media bias towards both Mr. Romney and Republicans.”<sup>45</sup> The organization also found that the media discussed Romney more than Obama: 41.8 percent of the time versus 36.8 percent.<sup>46</sup>

However, a Pew Research poll found that Obama enjoyed a surge in positive coverage during the last week of the campaign.<sup>47</sup>

“But on the whole, both candidates got equally negative coverage,” says George Mason’s Lichter. ■

## BACKGROUND

### Journalism’s ‘Dark Ages’

Historians are quick to point out that the roots of American journalism were deeply embedded in partisan soil. Bias was the norm during journalism’s formative years in this country. Indeed, the very idea of an unbiased press was anathema to the nation’s early citizens.

Newspapers reflected the opinions of their owners and publishers. “For most of American history . . . there was only opinion, and highly partisan opinion at that,” said Sheppard of Long Island University.<sup>48</sup> In *The Partisan Press*, Sheppard cites several early newspaper owners and publishers who attacked the ideas of balance and objectivity:

- On Sept. 4, 1798, the *Newark Gazette* described giving equal time

to both sides of the political divide a “‘folly that should not be tolerated.’”<sup>49</sup>

- On July 17, 1799, *The Washington Mirror* said treating parties equally was impossible, and that “printers who ‘pretended’ neutrality succeeded only in willfully misleading the people.”<sup>50</sup>

- On March 10, 1800, the *New York American Citizen* called impartiality “‘injurious to the best interests of mankind.’”<sup>51</sup>

Newspapers and their political pamphlet cousins were “mouthpieces” for the political parties of the era.<sup>52</sup>

Many newspapers were even supported directly by politicians. For example, Thomas Jefferson helped pay for the startup and running of the *National Gazette*, and Alexander Hamilton supported the *Gazette of the United States*.

“This gave an acrimonious tone to public discourse, since newspapers had no incentive to temper the language they used to criticize opponents,” wrote George Mason University’s Lichter.<sup>53</sup> In addition, newspapers often had lucrative government printing contracts, which also promoted biased reporting.

To temper the political bias of the press, the government — led by President John Adams’ Federalist Party — passed the Sedition Act of 1798, which made it a crime to publish “false, scandalous and malicious writing” about the president or Congress. It enabled the government to close down many opposition Republican newspapers but caused such a voter backlash that Adams was not re-elected. The act expired in 1801.<sup>54</sup>

The partisan press also placed party above accuracy. Some editors and re-

porters even worked part-time for politicians.<sup>55</sup> Others were key party leaders.<sup>56</sup> Some have called the first quarter of the 19th century the “Dark Ages of American journalism.”<sup>57</sup>

“Even Jefferson, who famously preferred newspapers without government to government without newspapers, later complained that newspapers made their readers less well informed because ‘he

approach was more inclusive and could, in turn, attract more advertising. By mid-19th century the penny press’ less partisan approach dominated journalism.

“Henceforth the reader would typically be viewed as a consumer rather than a partisan, and the nostrums of private enterprise would replace those of political ideology in paying the bills,” wrote Lichter.<sup>59</sup>

But the penny papers were not apolitical. They often endorsed candidates, sometimes from more than one party. With “a business model incorporating the independence of action afforded by financial self-reliance, the critical first steps towards objectivity had been established,” explained Sheppard.<sup>60</sup>

Toward the end of the 19th century, rapid industrialization and urban growth increased the audience for newspapers. Entrepreneurial publishers such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst

helped develop a profitable formula that relied heavily on a sensationalist mix of sex, crime and gossip that came to be known as “yellow journalism.”

A combination of factors soon pushed newspapers to become less sensational. Their increased reliance on advertising made them reluctant to offend readers and led papers to improve their product and expand circulation. The expansion of the railroad and telegraph created new demand for instantaneous news from isolated communities where political sentiments might differ from the paper’s hometown. Wire services, such as The Associated Press, formed in 1846, prospered by supplying subscribing newspapers with concise, accurate and objective copy.

*Continued on p. 412*



Getty Images/Mario Tama

*Antiwar demonstrators protest the mainstream media’s Iraq War coverage outside NBC headquarters in New York City on March 15, 2006. Critics said the press was too willing to accept the Bush administration’s assertions that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003. No such weapons were ever found.*

who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehood and errors,” wrote Lichter.<sup>58</sup>

## ‘Penny Papers’

The rise of the “penny papers” in the 1830s transformed journalism’s partisan character. Edited for the middle and working classes rather than for the elites, cheap, tabloid-style papers such as the *New York Sun* were able to prosper by offering an entertaining, informative product less dependent on partisan politics — for a penny apiece.

This was largely an economic decision. A partisan approach would inevitably alienate a large sector of a paper’s potential readership, while a less political

# Chronology

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## **1690-1798** *News-papers move from partisan approach to more independence.*

### **1690**

*Publick Occurrences* becomes first newspaper published in America.

### **1702**

*Daily Courant* becomes first English-language daily newspaper.

### **1791**

First Amendment is added to U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing the right to publish news, information and opinions without government interference.

### **1798**

The Alien and Sedition Acts prohibit publishing anything “false, scandalous and malicious” about the president or Congress. More than 20 editors are arrested; some are imprisoned. The laws later expired or were repealed.

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## **1800s-1900**

*Newspapers flourish as the “penny press” gains in popularity; journalism becomes a profession.*

### **1830**

United States has 715 newspapers.

### **1833**

*New York Sun* is launched, marking beginning of “penny press.”

### **1846**

Newspapers with varied political views create the nonpartisan Associated Press wire service.

### **1850**

Only 5 percent of U.S. newspapers are “neutral and independent.”

### **1851**

Believing that a free, independent press is important to an educated populace, the Post Office offers a cheap mailing rate for newspapers.

### **1870**

Nearly 5,100 newspapers are published in the United States.

### **1878**

University of Missouri begins offering nation’s first journalism courses.

### **1896**

Adolph Ochs buys *The New York Times* “to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest.”

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## **1900-2000**

*Government regulates, then deregulates, the broadcast media. Radio, television and then the Internet change the face of media.*

### **1934**

Communications Act creates Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to regulate radio.

### **1940**

American Institute of Public Opinion says 52 percent of Americans rely on radio for political information; 38 percent rely on newspapers.

### **1949**

FCC’s “Fairness Doctrine” requires broadcasters to devote airtime to controversial issues and to offer contrasting views.

### **1963**

TV surpasses newspapers as the leading source of daily news.

### **1981**

Survey by George Mason University journalism professor S. Robert Lichter shows that 81 percent of mainstream journalists voted for Democrats for president between 1964 and 1976.

### **1985-1986**

Non-journalistic corporations buy all three major television networks, sparking cost cutting and staff reductions in the news departments.

### **1987**

FCC drops Fairness Doctrine, saying the growth of cable and broadcast outlets make it unnecessary.

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## **2000-2013** *Newspaper circulation drops; many papers cease publication. Cable broadcasting surges; social media play an increasing role in opinion journalism.*

### **2001**

Fox becomes most-watched cable-news network.

### **2007**

Nearly 1,500 newspapers sell 55 million copies daily.

### **2012**

Gallup survey finds 60 percent of Americans have no or not very much trust that the mass media report the news accurately and fairly, up from 46 percent in 1998. Pew Research Center finds that 36 percent of Twitter users follow the news, compared with 19 percent of social media users.

### **2013**

Pew Research Center finds that opinion and commentary fill 85 percent of MSNBC’s airtime, 55 percent of Fox’s and 46 percent of CNN’s.

# Media Bias Seen as Threat to Democracy

*“I don’t know if democracy can survive without an actively free press.”*

**H**ow important is a free and vibrant press to a healthy democracy? The nation’s founders, even though they were not always pleased with the partisan newspapers that proliferated at the time, thought it was vital.

“No government ought to be without censors, and where the press is free, no one ever will,” Thomas Jefferson told George Washington in 1792.<sup>1</sup> The First Amendment to the Constitution offered special protection to the press by barring Congress from abridging its freedom.

Throughout American history, the press has been viewed as such an important source of checks and balances on the government that it became known as the “Fourth Estate” — as important to democracy as the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. However, while the founders stressed the need for a free press, they never claimed, for example, that the press should be nonpartisan.

As Americans increasingly complain that the media are becoming more biased, some media critics are asking if such a trend is healthy for democracy.

“We designed a constitutional system with many checks and balances,” said Democratic pollster Patrick Caddell. “The one that had no checks and balances was the press, and that was done under an implicit understanding that, somehow, the press would protect the people from the government and the power by telling — somehow allowing — people to have the truth. That is being abrogated as we speak, and has been for some time.”<sup>2</sup>

Caddell and others argue that an increasingly partisan press

not only is slanting the news but choosing not to cover news that could cast an ideology or party in a bad light. Such bias by omission, said Caddell, has led the media to make “themselves a fundamental threat to the democracy, and, in my opinion, made themselves the enemy of the American people.”<sup>3</sup>

At the 2013 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), an annual political conference attended by conservative activists and elected officials, Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, said, “When the media don’t report the facts, Americans can’t make good decisions. And if Americans can’t make good decisions, our democracy is at risk. So media bias, to me, is a major threat to our democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

“If society doesn’t have knowledge of the workings of government, how can it pass judgment on government?” asks L. Brent Bozell, president of the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog group “I don’t know if democracy can survive without an actively free press.”

Not everyone agrees that today’s media threaten democracy. “When anyone tells me that the media is so biased that democracy is at risk, I remind them that even at the beginnings of our democracy the media was much, much more partisan,” says S. Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University and co-author of *The Media Elite*. “There were no boundaries then, and people were accused of all sorts of heinous, outlandish things. We survived then, and we will now.”

A continuing decline in the number of journalists and the closure of print and broadcast outlets in recent years could be

*Continued from p. 410*

When Adolph Ochs purchased *The New York Times* in 1896, he announced his intention, “to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect, or interest involved.”<sup>61</sup> As journalism history professor Alterman says, “We can date the beginning of serious, objective reporting in America with Ochs’ purchase of *The New York Times*.”

In part because of Ochs’ paper, objectivity began to play a more important role in journalism. Journalism schools proliferated after the turn of the 20th century and taught the importance of objectivity along with accuracy and ethical reporting. According to a study cited by Lichter, the proportion of objective stories in news-

papers and on wire services doubled from 1897 to 1914. “Having previously served the common good by standing aside from the world of politics, the press would now do so by standing above it,” noted Lichter.<sup>62</sup>

## Electronic Media

**R**adio, which burst onto the scene in the 1920s, soon transformed the media landscape. Between 1927 and 1934 the number of homes with radios jumped from 25 percent to 65 percent. Politicians, some angered by what they perceived as a biased press, saw radio as a medium to get their unfiltered message directly to the public. President Franklin D. Roosevelt

famously used his iconic “fireside chats” to circumvent what he considered to be a hostile Republican press and speak directly to the people.

Because the airwaves were considered a public resource, radio was regulated. Under the Communications Act of 1934, created by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), stations could lose their licenses if their broadcasts were considered too controversial, and stations had to offer equal time for political candidates.

By the 1940s radio was the main source of political information for 52 percent of the public, compared to 38 percent who relied on newspapers, according to a 1940 American Institute of Public Opinion poll.<sup>63</sup>

more of a threat to democracy than partisan media, say other observers. “There is no end in sight to job losses in journalism,” says Eric Alterman, a journalism history professor at CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. “Losing journalists means people will be far less informed as citizens, and that’s bad for democracy. Also, the bad guys will be able to get away with a lot more because there won’t be as many people watching them.”

Others are concerned about the growing concentration of media ownership, which could result in corporate influence on what is covered and how it is covered. Six corporations (Disney, News Corp, Viacom, Time-Warner, Comcast and CBS) control 90 percent of the nation’s news and entertainment media, up from 50 percent in 1983.<sup>5</sup> “Rupert Murdoch owns *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Post*, and he and the Koch brothers are reportedly trying to buy the Los Angeles Times,” says Alterman, referring to wealthy, conservative billionaire brothers who have donated millions of dollars to libertarian, free-market advocacy groups and conservative politicians. “That would result in much less of a national conversation.”

Former “CBS Evening News” anchor Dan Rather, who recently described a free and independent press as “the red, beating heart of democracy and freedom,” warned of the dangers of such concentrated ownership.

“These big corporations, for whom news is only a small part of their business — they manufacture defense products and weapons, they run theme parks, they have all kinds of in-

terests — this makes them dependent in large measure on whoever is in power in Washington,” said Rather, who now anchors the news on the cable channel AXS TV. “I think we can all agree that we don’t want to have a few very large corporations, working in concert with a powerful political apparatus in Washington, deciding what we see, read and hear — and they do, to a very large degree.”<sup>6</sup>

— Robert Kiener

<sup>1</sup> *The Jeffersonian Cyclopaedia* (1900), p. 130, <http://books.google.com/books?id=ZTtoAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA130&lpg=PA130&dq=%E2%80%9CNo+government+ought+to+be+without+censors,+and+where+the+press+is+free,+no+one+ever+will,+%E2%80%9D+Thomas+Jefferson+told&source=bl&ots=vamgnUacT4&sig=gHinV3U0Chb16W3EjRdujaEhRo4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=X7x2UZu6lcXy0QGL9oD4Ag&ved=0CEMQ6AEwAzgK#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9CNo%20government%20ought%20to%20be%20without%20censors%2C%20and%20where%20the%20press%20is%20free%2C%20no%20one%20ever%20will%2C%E2%80%9D%20Thomas%20Jefferson%20told&f=false>.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Caddell, “Mainstream media is threatening our country’s future,” Fox News, Sept. 29, 2012, [www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/09/29/mainstream-media-threatening-our-country-future/](http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/09/29/mainstream-media-threatening-our-country-future/).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “Congressman Smith speaks at CPAC 2013 Re: media bias,” press release, March 14, 2013, <http://lamarsmith.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=324058>.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley Lutz, “These 6 companies control 90% of the media in America,” *Business Insider*, June 14, 2012, [www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6](http://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6).

<sup>6</sup> Brad Martin, “Dan Rather warns of media control,” *American Libraries*, June 24, 2012, <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/annual-conference/dan-rather-warns-media-control>.

Meanwhile newspapers continued to become more objective. As publishers realized readers were attracted by objective, authoritative reporting, a church-state-style wall separated the advertising and news sides of the business. Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, took this separation so seriously that he had two sets of elevators installed in his headquarters building in the early 20th century; one was for reporters and editors, the other for the business side.<sup>64</sup>

After World War II, television emerged as the dominant news medium. Nearly half the nation’s households had a television as early as 1953, and by 1963 television was America’s leading source of daily news.<sup>65</sup>

To guarantee that the public airwaves exposed audiences to a variety of viewpoints, the FCC’s 1949 Fairness Doctrine required broadcasters to devote airtime to controversial matters of public interest and to offer contrasting views on those issues. The act also forbade stations from censoring campaign or political ads. Another FCC rule, calling for “equal time” for political candidates, did not apply to newscasts, documentaries, entertainment programs or political advertising.

Television’s popularity was a factor in the closure of the nation’s afternoon newspapers, which could not compete with the immediacy of the evening news broadcasts. However, many papers responded to the new journalistic competitor by “expanding

their interpretative coverage and news analyses, where print held a competitive advantage,” wrote Lichter. “Mainstream journalism began to take on a sharper point of view, often including opinion and advocacy in its reporting. . . . For the next decade, reporters were thrown onto the front lines of political battlegrounds that ranged from the civil rights movement to campus protests, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal.”<sup>66</sup>

## New Media

The 1980s were marked by major changes in American media. In 1985 and ’86, non-journalistic corporations bought all three major televi-

## Fact Checkers Proliferate — and So Do Their Critics

*Media services expose deception, but partisans often ignore them.*

“Here’s the truth the president won’t tell you,” said Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., at this year’s Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), an annual political conference attended by conservative activists and elected officials. “Of every dollar that you hold in your hands, 70 cents of that dollar that’s supposed to go to the poor doesn’t. It actually goes to benefit the bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. — 70 cents on the dollar.”<sup>1</sup>

True? Not exactly.

*The Washington Post’s* “Fact Checker” column found that Bachmann was off by at least a factor of 10 — or even a factor of 200 — depending on what was included in her figures. It awarded her four “Pinochchios” — its worst rating — “for such misleading use of statistics in a major speech.”<sup>2</sup>

Written by veteran reporter Glenn Kessler, “Fact Checker” is just one of many fact-checking operations that have sprung up over the last decade or so — including those at CNN, The Associated Press, Fox and ABC — to examine the accuracy of statements made by politicians and public officials. Such operations also fact-check major speeches, most notably after presidential debates, major addresses such as the State of the Union and claims made in campaign ads.

Groups such as PolitiFact, the Pulitzer Prize-winning site started in 2007 and a project of the *Tampa Bay Times* (formerly *St. Petersburg Times*), and FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, describe themselves as nonpartisan. FactCheck.org, for example, says it is a “nonpartisan, nonprofit ‘consumer advocate’ for vot-

ers that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics.”<sup>3</sup>

But as fact-checking programs have proliferated, so have their critics. Not surprisingly, many of these criticisms fall along ideological lines. On its conservative-leaning editorial page, *The Wall Street Journal* argued that fact checking is “overwhelmingly biased toward the left,” while liberals, such as City University of New York journalism professor Eric Alterman, often claim there is a growing conservative bias among the fact checkers.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, candidates have been accusing the fact checkers of bias. During the 2012 presidential election, fact checkers labeled as deceptive a Mitt Romney campaign advertisement depicting President Obama as saying, “If we keep talking about the economy we’re going to lose.” Although the fact checkers explained that Obama was merely quoting Republican Sen. John McCain, Romney’s strategists quickly went on the offensive. “We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers,” said Romney campaign pollster Neil Newhouse.<sup>5</sup> After Romney lost the election, Media Research Center’s research director, Rich Noyes, said his defeat was due partly to opponents “pounding Romney with partisan fact checking.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact, both parties often attacked or simply ignored fact checkers’ claims of inaccuracy or deceit. “Both candidates’ campaigns laid out a number of whoppers, got clobbered for doing so, and then kept right on saying them,” said *New York Times* media critic David Carr.<sup>7</sup>

Bill Adair, the departing editor of PolitiFact, agrees. “I think there has always been a calculation by political campaigns to forge ahead

sion networks, leading to sweeping cost-cutting and staff reductions in the news departments.

Meanwhile, public perceptions that the media were fair were plummeting. By 1984, 38 percent of those surveyed said newspapers were “usually fair,” down from two-thirds who felt the press was “fair” in 1937.

The FCC dropped the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, arguing that the growth of cable and broadcast outlets made it unnecessary. The decision, favored by Republicans, is seen as one of the main causes of the rise of conservative talk radio in the 1980s and ’90s.<sup>67</sup> Legislation that liberalized media-ownership restrictions, such as the 1996 Telecommunications Act, led to widespread

broadcast media consolidation via mergers and buyouts.

Meanwhile, competitive constraints and government regulation of cable channels were relaxed by the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984. The industry boomed, with hundreds of stations reaching households across the country. Soon, thanks to advances in cable and satellite technology, all-news “24/7” cable channels such as CNN and later Fox News and MSNBC would change the face of television journalism. Outspoken conservative hosts such as Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly would find a lucrative audience, mainly among Republicans, on Fox News. And equally sharp-tongued hosts on talk radio, no longer ham-

pered by the need to present both sides of an issue, filled the airwaves and prospered.

Many journalists were shocked “that they were widely perceived as just another cog in a distant establishment, an elite group of wealthy and influential snobs who had forgotten their roots,” said Lichter.<sup>68</sup> Surveys repeatedly confirmed that the mainstream media were generally to the left of the American public on such hot-button issues as gun control and abortion.<sup>69</sup>

Many GOP politicians agreed with the perception that the media were left-leaning and fanned the flames. For example, during the 1996 presidential election, Republican candidate Bob Dole exhorted, “We’ve got to stop the

with a falsehood if they think it will score the points they want to score.”<sup>8</sup>

A recent rise in partisan fact-checking organizations, such as Conservative Fact Check and the Media Matters-sponsored Political Correction, has led to even more charges of bias.

“The term ‘fact check’ can easily be devalued, as people throw it onto any sort of an opinion that they have,” said Brendan Nyhan, an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College. “The partisans who pay attention to politics are being conditioned to disregard the fact checkers when their own side gets criticized.”<sup>9</sup>

Fact checking has proved to be a valuable resource, but media experts warn that it is no substitute for sampling a diverse range of news and views. As Northeastern University journalism professor Dan Kennedy noted, “Perhaps the biggest lie of all is that fact-checking can act as some sort of short-cut to the truth. For news consumers, there’s really no getting around the time-intensive work of paying attention to multiple sources of information and making their own judgments.”<sup>10</sup>

— Robert Kiener



*The online fact-checking organization PolitiFact — a Pulitzer Prize-winning site started in 2007 by the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times) — uses a “pants on fire truth-o-meter” to show when a politician is not telling the truth.*

<sup>1</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Bachmann’s claim that 70 percent of food stamps go to ‘bureaucrats,’” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2013, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/bachmanns-claim-that-70-percent-of-food-stamps-go-to-bureaucrats/2013/03/18/3f85d042-8ff5-11e2-bdea-e32ad90da239\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/bachmanns-claim-that-70-percent-of-food-stamps-go-to-bureaucrats/2013/03/18/3f85d042-8ff5-11e2-bdea-e32ad90da239_blog.html).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> “About Us,” Factcheck.org, [www.factcheck.org/about](http://www.factcheck.org/about).

<sup>4</sup> James Taranto, “The Pinocchio press,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 4, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444301704577631470493495792.html>.

<sup>5</sup> As *The New York Times* pointed out, “The truncated clip came from a

speech Mr. Obama gave in 2008 talking about his opponent, Senator John McCain of Arizona.” The full Obama quote was: “Senator McCain’s campaign actually said, and I quote, ‘If we keep talking about the economy, we’re going to lose.’” See Michael Cooper, “Campaigns play loose with truth in a fact-check age,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 1, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/09/01/us/politics/fact-checkers-howl-but-both-sides-cling-to-false-ads.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/01/us/politics/fact-checkers-howl-but-both-sides-cling-to-false-ads.html).

<sup>6</sup> Mike Burns, “Fox blames Romney loss on the ‘biased’ fact-checkers,” *Media Matters*, Nov. 7, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> David Carr, “A last fact check: It didn’t work,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2012, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/a-last-fact-check-it-didnt-work>.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Dan Kennedy, “PolitiFact and the limits of fact checking,” *The Huffington Post*, Dec. 13, 2011, [www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-kennedy/politifact-and-the-limits\\_b\\_1144876.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-kennedy/politifact-and-the-limits_b_1144876.html).

liberal bias in this country. . . . Don’t read that stuff! Don’t watch television! Don’t let them make up your mind for you!”<sup>70</sup>

Also in 1996, Fox News was launched by Australian-born news magnate Rupert Murdoch, who appointed former GOP media consultant Roger Ailes as CEO.

Says Lichter, “The idea that journalists were presenting news from their own point of view was growing among the public.”

## Blurring the Lines

The growing belief that the media were biased, coupled with liberal-

izing legislative changes and technological developments, opened a new chapter in the history of the American media. Television and radio airwaves were soon populated with a growing band of commentators and pundits who helped blur the line between journalism and opinion for many media consumers.

The media landscape changed dramatically. Talk radio, cable news networks, Internet-based websites and blogs fragmented the media but also have made them more populist. The new partisan media, much like their historic predecessors, the *National Gazette* and other 18th century publications, have offered a wide variety of ideological slants on the news.

As former University of Wisconsin-

Madison journalism school director James Baughman wrote, “In contrast to the fractious newspaper culture of the mid-19th century, today’s media culture is in fact divided between the new partisan media of the radio, Internet and cable, and those news outlets that still endeavor to report the news seriously. Serious news services won’t, for example, provide platforms for those who insist the president was born in Kenya, or that the Bush administration was behind the destruction of the World Trade Center.”<sup>71</sup>

While new media outlets sometimes offer biased slants on the news, the mainstream — or what some term the “elite” — media that still strive to be nonpartisan attract the larger audiences.

But, some media experts say, as the media landscape becomes more partisan, that grip may become more and more tenuous. ■

## CURRENT SITUATION

### Agenda-Driven News

Each day in more than 20 states across the country, some 35 reporters are investigating topics such as government waste, corruption and fraud. But they are not employed by traditional newspapers or television stations.

Rather, they are part of a nonprofit media program that has quietly been hiring and training reporters in state capitals. The Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity is an investigative nonprofit based in Alexandria, Va., that is funded by the State Policy Network — a group of conservative think tanks — and other conservative organizations such as the Richmond, Va.-based Sam Adams Alliance and by the Koch brothers.

The center, which the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) called “the most ambitious conservative news organization you’ve never heard of,” hires journalists to report on government waste and public unions, usually from a pro-free-market, anti-labor viewpoint. Its news stories are published on its website, Watchdog.org, and elsewhere.<sup>72</sup> Often, the stories are picked up by blogs and by often-understaffed regional newspapers, but only some of the papers tell readers the stories originated with the center.

Although the center describes itself as nonpartisan, the liberal *Washington Monthly* called it “more like a political attack machine than a traditional news machine.”<sup>73</sup> A Pew Research

study of Franklin Center-sponsored stories found that 41 percent were pro-conservative versus 11 percent that favored the left.<sup>74</sup>

Some media observers also accuse the center of not being transparent. CJR said “a reader of one of the local and regional newspapers that run Franklin Center statehouse reporting might not even be aware of the Franklin Center and its agenda or ‘point of view.’ ”<sup>75</sup>

Says Steven Greenhut, Franklin’s vice president of journalism, “I reject the description of us as partisan. We have a free-market philosophy and have done plenty of stories that have offended both conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats.”

This sort of nonprofit, sometimes agenda-driven, news organization is a relatively new phenomenon. Since 2000, cash-strapped newspapers have lost 30 percent of their news personnel, according to Pew, and few can afford the personnel for complex or investigative stories. Nonprofit organizations have moved in to fill some of that void.

Think tanks and partisan organizations, such as the conservative Heritage Foundation, also have begun hiring “news reporters” to help spread their messages to a wider audience. “This is the wave of the future,” says George Mason’s Lichter. “Heritage Foundation and others have realized they don’t need to depend on a few gatekeepers at major media outlets to run their material. They merely have to put it on the Web themselves.”

Nonprofit organizations such as ProPublica produce nonpartisan, non-ideological investigative journalism, often in partnership with other major media outlets. The Kaiser Health Foundation produces objective health-related news stories under the brand *Kaiser Health News*. The stories are regularly published by newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, but the stories are clearly identified as coming from those sources.

For-profit ideologically driven journalistic operations also are proliferating. In 2010 the conservative online

news site *Daily Caller* was launched with 21 reporters and editors. Other sites such as Breitbart.com report news with a conservative agenda. Liberal, for-profit news sites include *The Huffington Post* and the *Talking Points Memo* political blog.

“Efforts by political and corporate entities to get their messages into news coverage are nothing new,” according to Pew. “What is different now . . . is that news organizations are less equipped to question what is coming to them or to uncover the stories themselves, and interest groups are better equipped and have more technological tools than ever.”<sup>76</sup>

More is not necessarily better. “I have warned conservatives to be careful what they wish for,” explains the Media Research Center’s Bozell. “With the old media, at least there were rules, such as the two-source rule. In the new media there’s the no-source rule. Stories can be written by innuendo. The public is finding it harder to differentiate between news and conjecture.”

### Tweeting and More

About 35 percent of Americans turn to online sources for news, and as more and more do so, journalists have responded by using blogs, social media sites like Facebook and, more recently, Twitter to reach their audience.

“Tweet your beat” is a common refrain among online journalists. According to recent surveys, only 3 to 4 percent of the public gets its news either regularly or sometimes via Twitter, but that number is reportedly growing.<sup>77</sup>

Twitter’s immediate and direct (and usually unedited) nature creates a more intimate relationship between journalist and reader than existed in the past. As a Pew Research Center report noted, “Twitter users appear to be more closely connected to professional journalists and news organizations than their social-

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# At Issue:

## *Do mainstream outlets have a political bias?*



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, MAY 2013

One can tell the tilt of the “mainstream” media merely by listening to conservatives and liberals complain about the tone of the news. Conservatives demand that the media cover both sides of public policies and controversies. Liberals such as President Obama lament that the media too often present a “false balance” — that conservatives get any air time to be blatantly incorrect. This suggests the media’s default is to favor liberal views and downplay or ignore conservative ones.

In 2011, former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller wrote, “If the 2012 election were held in the newsrooms of America and pitted Sarah Palin against Barack Obama, I doubt Palin would get 10 percent of the vote. However tempting the newsworthy havoc of a Palin presidency, I’m pretty sure most journalists would recoil in horror from the idea.”

In 2008, the Pew Research Center surveyed 222 journalists and news executives at national outlets. Only 6 percent said they considered themselves conservatives, compared to 36 percent of the overall population that describes itself as conservative. Most journalists — 53 percent — claimed they are moderate; 24 percent said they were liberal and 8 percent very liberal.

Only 19 percent of the public consider themselves liberal. And it’s not much of a leap to presume many of the 53 percent who describe themselves as “moderate” are really quite liberal, since Keller thinks most are horrified by a President Palin.

Our studies of TV news repeatedly show a liberal tilt. Media Research Center news analysts reviewed all 216 gun-policy stories on the morning and evening shows of ABC, CBS and NBC in the month after the Newtown, Conn., school shooting. The results showed staggering imbalance: Stories advocating more gun control outnumbered stories opposing gun control by 99 to 12, or a ratio of 8 to 1. Anti-gun sound bites were aired almost twice as frequently as pro-gun ones (228 to 134). Gun-control advocates appeared as guests on 26 occasions, compared to seven for gun-rights advocates.

But the most insidious bias is what the national media choose *not* to cover. For example, in 2012 there was only one network mention (on ABC) that Obama promised to cut the deficit “by half by the end of my first term in office.”

Inconvenient clips of tape go missing, while network anchors can find the time to ask the president about Dr. Seuss books and which superhero’s power he would like to possess.



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, MAY 2013

Liberal media bias is an article of faith to conservatives, who see the news as a reflection of journalists’ well-documented liberal perspectives and Democratic voting preferences. However, the truth is more complicated.

First, the media aren’t the closed shop they used to be. The Internet hosts a thriving competition between left-wing and right-wing websites and blogs, and any reasonable definition of the “mainstream media” would have to include Fox News and conservative-dominated talk radio.

Second, both conservative and liberal media watchdog groups have long lists of complaints about biased stories. What’s missing is evidence of a broad pattern of coverage that consistently favors one side. For example, a meta-analysis of every scholarly study of election news found no systematic bias in the amounts of good and bad press given to Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. Another study compared news coverage of measurable conditions, such as unemployment and murder rates, under Democratic and Republican administrations at every level of government. It too found no consistent evidence of partisan favoritism.

Journalists do suffer bouts of “irrational exuberance,” when they wear their feelings on their sleeves. Yet, even Barack Obama’s well-documented media honeymoon in 2008 and 2009 soon gave way to the highly critical coverage that every recent president has suffered. By 2012 Obama’s campaign coverage was as negative as Mitt Romney’s.

So why do conservatives see liberal bias at every turn? One answer is what’s called the “hostile media effect.” Partisans treat criticisms of their own side as bias, while assuming criticisms of the other side are well-founded.

But some aspects of political journalism don’t affect both sides equally. In their role as a watchdog over the rich and powerful, journalists see the world in terms of competing economic and political interests, with the media standing above the battle and serving the public interest. They are sympathetic toward those who define themselves the same way, such as “public interest” groups or social movements demanding equality for excluded groups.

Thus, what conservatives see as liberal bias is often the byproduct of a professional norm that runs parallel to liberal values. And journalists can filter their personal political views out of their stories more easily than their professional identities. So the problem for conservatives is not *just* that journalists are liberals, it’s that they’re journalists.

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networking counterparts when it comes to relying on them for online news.”<sup>78</sup>

“Twitter is a venue for news but also opinion,” says Pews’ Jurkowitz. “It’s tempting to say something memorable and pithy in 140 characters or less.” As some journalist have found, however, tweeting and blogging opinion can prove disastrous:

- CNN’s senior editor for Middle Eastern Affairs, Octavia Nasr, was fired after posting this comment on Twitter: “Sad to hear of the passing of Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadhallah. One of Hezbollah’s giants I respect a lot.” CNN called

her tweet “an error of judgment,” and said, “It did not meet CNN’s editorial standards.”<sup>79</sup>

- *The Washington Post* rebuked managing editor Raju Narisetti for tweeting, “Sen. Byrd (91) in hospital after he falls from ‘standing up too quickly.’ How about term limits. Or retirement age. Or common sense to prevail.”<sup>80</sup>

Narisetti — who has since moved to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp as a senior vice president and deputy head of strategy — subsequently closed his Twitter feed. *The Post* promptly drew up new guidelines, saying its journalists “must refrain from writing, tweeting or posting anything — including photographs or video — that could be perceived as reflecting political, racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism that could be used to tarnish our journalistic credibility.”<sup>81</sup>

Other papers have drawn up similar conduct codes. “I think that the same

guidelines for reporters would hold true in social networking or any other ways they conduct themselves in their life



Getty Images/Bill Pugliano

*Former Republican vice presidential candidate and Alaska governor Sarah Palin has been highly critical of the nation’s major newspapers and other mainstream media, calling them the “lamestream media” and alleging they are biased against conservatives. Studies on media bias have produced mix results.*

outside of work,” said Martin Kaiser, editor of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. “It’s the same way [that] we don’t want reporters putting bumper stickers on their cars for candidates.”<sup>82</sup>

Those who get their news from social networks prefer unbiased reports, according to a recent Pew poll. More than half of the respondents preferred nonpartisan news: 52 percent of those who get their news on Twitter and 56 percent of those who get news on social networks prefer news sources without a particular point of view.<sup>83</sup>

Not all journalists agree that opinion should be banned from reporters’ social media outlets. “It’s time to get rid of the hoax that all reporters are objective,” says journalism professor Alterman. “I am all for journalists exposing their personal biases on Twitter, their blogs or wherever.”

Reuters takes a more balanced approach in its social media policy. Ac-

knowledging that posting on Twitter and blogging can be like “flying without a net,” it reminds its reporters that “social networks encourage fast, constant, brief communications; journalism calls for communication preceded by fact-finding and thoughtful consideration. Journalism has many ‘unsend’ buttons, including editors. Social networks have none.”<sup>84</sup>

Whatever side a journalist takes on the social media debate, there’s no denying the power of the new technology. This February, moments after NBC’s Todd claimed that charges of a liberal media bias were “a mythology,” his Twitter feed and others were filled with tweets, pro and con. After watching the messages pour in, he tweeted, “when you want to spark a conversation on Twitter, simply talk about media bias.”<sup>85</sup> ■

## OUTLOOK

### Dizzying Changes

The numbers are grim. Nearly every week brings news of another newspaper or magazine cutting staff, shrinking the publication, reducing frequency or even closing. Television stations, especially local operations, are trimming staff, and national networks are downsizing and closing bureaus.

The Internet has essentially “blown up” the old media world and transformed the way news is delivered and consumed. Given the dizzying changes in the media world and the speed with

which they have altered the landscape, many experts say it's impossible to know the future of bias.

"Remember, it wasn't until the 1990s that we even had Web browsers," says George Mason University's Lichter. "Since then, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have completely changed the way people interact with media. One thing is sure: We will see a lot more innovations that change the way people think about the media and its biases. It is difficult to see what's ahead, but if current trends continue it looks like the media will be becoming increasingly partisan."

Some even see an end of traditional "hard news" coverage. Bozell believes "journalism is losing its seriousness. The line between news and infotainment is being blurred." Others worry that as newspapers continue cutting back and producing less hard and investigative news, readers will continue to desert them, as the Pew surveys and others suggest.

"Infotainment is luring more and more people away from solid journalism, so I think the news will be playing a lesser role in people's lives than it does today," says Sheppard, the Long Island University journalism professor. "Kim Kardashian has over 17 million Twitter followers, and many of those people are probably following her instead of reading the news. There's a worry for the future of the republic!"

Many media experts claim the media will grow increasingly partisan, resembling the early days of journalism. "I see the wheel turning, not full circle, but toward more partisan narrow-casting," says Sheppard. "We will see the media creating more partisan information, which will then be seized upon by ideological audiences."

According to Sheppard and others, the financial success of Fox News and talk radio will likely spawn even more imitators, each hoping to serve a niche, partisan market. However, if the ideological middle disappears in the media, some worry that new media will merely be "preaching to the choir."

A more fragmented media will offer more choice but would also further change the public's perceptions of the press. "The decay of the traditional agenda-setting function of the press will continue, and with it the idea of 'the public' as a large, interconnected mass of news-consuming citizens," said a recent Columbia School of Journalism study. "Choice in available media outlets will continue to expand, leading not so much to echo chambers as to a world of many overlapping publics of varying sizes."

"Seen in this light, the long-term collapse of trust in the press is less a function of changing attitudes toward mainstream media outlets than a side effect of the continuing fragmentation of the American media landscape."<sup>86</sup>

Will there be an increase in transparency? "The media will be more open about their views because they realize people want a point of view in their news," says CUNY journalism professor Alterman. "There will always be an audience for trustworthy news organizations such as *The New York Times*, but media with strong points of view will increase. Fewer people will complain about media bias."

As long-established and valued newspapers face closure or purchase by partisan owners, many journalists believe the nation will be worse off. Many question how democracy can continue to function if voters become so inundated by "advocacy journalism" that they give up trying to even make an objective, informed decision or simply disengage from the democratic process altogether. (See sidebar, p. 412.)

"The world will not be a better place when these fact-based news organizations die," said former *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges. "We will be propelled into a culture where facts and opinions will be interchangeable, where lies will become true and where fantasy will be peddled as news. I will lament the loss of traditional news. It will unmoor us from reality."<sup>87</sup>

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## About the Author

**Robert Kiener** is an award-winning writer based in Vermont whose work has appeared in *The London Sunday Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, *Reader’s Digest*, Time Life Books and other publications. For more than two decades he worked as an editor and correspondent in Guam, Hong Kong, Canada and England. He holds an M.A. in Asian studies from Hong Kong University and an M.Phil. in international relations from England’s Cambridge University.

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Accuracy in Media**, 4350 East West Highway, Suite 555, Bethesda, MD 20814; 202-364-4401; [www.aim.org](http://www.aim.org). Conservative media watchdog organization that searches for potential liberal bias.

**American Society of News Editors**, 209 Reynolds Journalism Institute, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211; 573-884-2405; [www.asne.org](http://www.asne.org). Promotes ethical journalism, supports First Amendment rights, defends freedom of information and open government.

**Center for Media and Public Affairs**, 933 N. Kenmore St., Suite 405, Arlington, VA 22201; 571-319-0029; [www.cmpa.com](http://www.cmpa.com). Nonpartisan research and educational organization that studies the news and entertainment media.

**Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting**, 104 W. 27th St., Suite 10B, New York, NY 10001; 212-633-6700; [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org). Liberal media watchdog organization that monitors bias and censorship.

**Media Matters**, P.O. Box 52155, Washington, DC 20091; 202-756-4100; [www.mediamatters.org](http://www.mediamatters.org). Liberal media watchdog group that looks for potential conservative bias.

**Media Research Center**, 325 S. Patrick St., Alexandria, VA 22314; 703-683-9733; [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org). Conservative media watchdog group that searches for potential liberal bias.

**Pew Research Center for the People & the Press**, 1615 L St., N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036; 202-419-4300; [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org). Nonpartisan media research organization funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

**Poynter Institute for Media Studies**, 801 Third St. South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701; 727-821-9494; [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org). Journalism education and research organization; ethics section of its website ([www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)) includes articles, discussions, tips and case studies.

**Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Committee**, 3909 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis, IN 46208; 317-927-8000; [www.spj.org/ethics.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethics.asp). Advises journalists on ethical matters; website contains ethics resources and a blog.

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The editorial page editor of the conservative *Washington Examiner* contends the mainstream media manipulated coverage of the 2012 presidential candidates, were obsessed with Mitt Romney's gaffes and refused to cover stories that could have portrayed President Obama in a negative light.

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A UCLA political science and economics professor concludes that nearly all mainstream media have a liberal bias, based on a formula he uses to analyze political content in news stories.

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Media experts explore the history of bias, the meaning of objectivity, whether the mainstream media are biased toward Democrats or Republicans, whether bias in financial reporting contributed to the nation's financial crisis and more.

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An assistant political science professor at Long Island University places the debate about media bias in historical context. He tracks media bias from the early days of the nation's partisan press to the rise of objectivity in the 20th century to today's technology-driven media alternatives.

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In reporting on the Iraq War, reporters ignored traditional journalistic practices in order to dismiss counter-evidence

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**Carr, David, "Tired Cries of Bias Don't Help Romney," *The New York Times*, Sept. 30, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/business/media/challenging-the-claims-of-media-bias-the-media-equation.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/business/media/challenging-the-claims-of-media-bias-the-media-equation.html?_r=0).**

Although the press is frequently accused of exhibiting a liberal bias when conservative candidates drop in the polls, the media increasingly are made up of right-leaning outlets, says the *Times* media critic.

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Charles and David Koch, the billionaire supporters of libertarian causes, reportedly are considering trying to buy the Tribune Co.'s eight regional newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. Some in the media industry are asking whether they would use the papers to further a conservative agenda.

**Friedersdorf, Conor, "Steve Kroft's Softball Obama Interviews Diminish '60 Minutes,'" *The Atlantic*, Jan. 29, 2013, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/steve-krofts-softball-obama-interviews-diminish-60-minutes/272611](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/steve-krofts-softball-obama-interviews-diminish-60-minutes/272611).**

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### Reports and Studies

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The nonpartisan research group's annual study includes reports on how news consumers view the media's financial struggles, how the news landscape has changed in recent years, an analysis of the main media sectors and an essay on digital journalism.

# The Next Step:

## *Additional Articles from Current Periodicals*

### **Fact Checking**

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Schools are focusing more on teaching students how to identify misinformation found on the Internet and social media.

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Most journalists have a left-of-center political philosophy but it is unfair to say the media aided President Obama's re-election, says a columnist.

**Kelly, Jack, "The Media Flack for Obama,"** *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 27, 2012, p. B3, [www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/jack-kelly/the-media-flack-for-obama-637722/](http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/jack-kelly/the-media-flack-for-obama-637722/).

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Media watchdogs have praised a Federal Communications Commission proposal that would require commercial TV stations to disclose the corporate interests funding their newscasts.

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#### APA STYLE

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