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# Journalistic Ethics and the Right-Wing Media

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Journalistic Ethics and the Right-Wing Media

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This paper will examine the development of modern media ethics and will show that this set of guidelines can and perhaps should be revised and improved to match the challenges of an economic and political system that has taken advantage of guidelines such as “objective reporting” by creating too many false equivalencies. This paper will end by providing a few reforms that can create a better media environment and keep the public better informed. As it was important for journalism to improve from partisan media to objective reporting in the past, it is important today that journalism improves its practices to address the right-wing media’s attack on journalism and avoid too many false equivalencies.

### **History of Journalistic Ethics**

It is important to look at the history of American journalism to understand how the foundational principles of ethical journalism were established. Professional journalist organizations and individual news organizations typically have established comprehensive ethics codes. Professional organizations’ codes emerged in the early 20th century. The American Society of Newspaper Editors outlined its ethical principles in 1923, but it was not until the 1970s when individual news organizations began establishing their own ethics codes (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2018).

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has adopted its own ethics code for journalists. The SPJ declares the following as the foundational principles of ethical journalism: “Seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The SPJ explains that journalists should take responsibility for the accuracy of their work and verify information and sources before releasing information. Journalists should show compassion to the victims of a story and balance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort. It is also important that

journalists avoid conflicts of interest, disclose unavoidable conflicts and refuse gifts, favors, and money that may compromise a journalist's impartiality or credibility. Lastly, journalists need to take responsibility for their work and explain their decisions to the public, and they must acknowledge and correct their mistakes (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

SPJ recommends that journalists remain impartial—an idea originating in the 17th century, when journalists began adopting objectivity/impartiality as a journalistic principle. The evolution of impartiality/objectivity has had major influence on journalism. In the early 20th century, journalists began adopting a more scientific model, focused on gathering and reporting facts. This approach became known as “objective journalism,” and was widely adopted by American news media. Objective journalism was intended to counter the previously dominant model of opinion journalism, wherein newspapers were controlled by political parties. Rather than providing an opinion, objective journalism purports to be neutral on the issues it reports, and objective journalists are supposed to seek and report opposing views on issues (Campbell et al., 2018).

The term “journalist” first appeared in the 18th century and referred to scholars who wrote in learned journals. The term was first recorded in 1712 in the early newspaper *The Spectator*, published by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, where a correspondent was referred to as a journalist. Early in the 18th century, a reporter was called a “newsgatherer.” As the century went on, the term “reporter” began to be used for a journalist who covered court cases, sessions of Parliament, and other important events (Ward, 2015). “Editor” originally referred to a person who prepared a new edition of an author's works, and was first applied to newspapers in the 18th century. Modern journalism began in the 17th century with weekly periodical

newsbooks; this is where the foundations of modern journalism ethics—including objectivity, factuality, and impartiality—were laid, (Ward, 2015).

The adoption of journalistic ethical standards in 17th-century England came during the intersection of three major cultural trends. One was the adoption of an enlightened culture of fact by the public, journalists, editors and publishers. Another was the social, economic and technological developments that played a major role in the creation of the first periodic press. Lastly, the rise of the news press increased the number of newsbooks created and sold to the public (Ward, 2015).

Impartiality began to emerge in journalism at the same time scientific and empirical objectivity became popular, in the early 1600s in Britain. Periodical editors used ethical language, such as impartiality and factuality, to justify their coverage of the British government and to gain credibility from publishers and the public. Periodic news journalism adopted a scientific model of journalism that included reporting objectively, impartially, and as a matter of fact. Journalists began reporting in a scientific way that included aspects of objective reporting, such as specifying the dates of events and providing descriptive analysis of social and natural facts (Ward, 2015).

During the 1620s and 1640s, the first English newsbooks, such as the *Mercury* and the *Intelligencer*, established their own ethical codes, which included publishing truth over misinformation and reporting factual, balanced and impartial information. The “truth” had been determined by the editors of these papers and political supporters, who often sought popular opinions rather than expert analysis. In a competitive market, these publishers and editors faced economic pressure to appeal to readers; sensational stories were popular, but could hurt the papers’ journalistic reputations. These factors affected how and what these publications

published, which led to a biased selection process when choosing stories to publish. Even though the news process was flawed, publishers and editors continued to claim their reporting was factual and impartial to enhance their public credibility (Ward, 2015).

### **Objective Journalism**

To understand the origins of journalistic ethics, it is important to understand the media environment in which the first English editors operated. Samuel Pecke is regarded as the godfather of objective journalism. In the early 1700s, Pecke built his paper, *A Perfect Diurnall*, into a mainstream establishment news organization that primarily covered parliamentary and military affairs in a neutral and impartial way that avoided offending anyone's political sensibilities, especially those of the elite class and political establishment (Ward, 2015).

The economic restrictions under a capitalist system heavily influenced Pecke, and other publishers of his time. The widespread adoption of the printing press created a market industry selling news, and as these editors and publishers rose into the socioeconomic elite, their class loyalties caused them to change the way they covered the news (Ward, 2015).

Newsbooks, English newspapers of the early 1700s, had a major influence on journalistic practices, standards and ethics—including journalistic objectivity. These newsbooks had to overcome economic and editorial problems, and the editors of these newsbooks needed to establish trust with their readers. Readers were aware that newsbooks' editorial decisions were influenced by political motives, so editors drafted rhetorical statements to convince the public their coverage was objective and unbiased. This rhetoric of objectivity — questioning sources for bias; providing dates, times and locations for all stories; and seeking credible testimony for reporting — became the foundation of today's objective journalism (Ward, 2015).

By the 18th century, market demand for news emerged and journalists began referring to readers as members of a public, and terms such as “public opinion” became commonly used. Factual and impartial reporting with an emphasis on informing the public became the foundation of the new journalistic ethics; but fierce partisanship and connections between journalists and politicians corrupted these publications’ coverage. By the late 18th century, public backlash to this partisanship created a more profitable model of objective reporting — coverage that would be useful and informative to any reader, regardless of his or her political beliefs (Ward, 2015).

With the American Revolution came a new model for journalism as a check on governmental power, and as an institution that served the public good. Publications began speaking to their readers as citizens who shared the political vision of these revolutionary journalists. The profession came to see itself as a servant to the public against an oppressive government (Campbell et al., 2018).

By the early 20th century, America’s journalistic practices — including independence, factuality and impartiality — were codified as “objectivity.” Objectivity was reporting “just the facts” and leaving opinions out of a story. By the 1930s, the U.S. popular press had become professionalized; journalism associations sprang up, each with codes of ethics and training programs. America’s newsrooms adopted an objective reporting model, and the popular press adopted the role of public educator, seeking to arm all classes with the information they needed to achieve a better democracy. Journalists reported only facts and allowed readers to make their own decisions, and readers expected journalists to be independent and detached from any partisan point of view. The popular press also turned news into a product to be sold to consumers, creating a competitive newspaper market. Editors and publishers, like those of the 17th century, touted their news as objective in order to gain public trust, even though economic

pressures influenced their publications. U.S. publications took advantage of the high profitability of providing objective news that would appeal to the largest number of citizens (Campbell et al., 2018).

A gap developed between journalistic practice and theory. Editors and reporters claimed to deliver only objective facts with no influence, but this ignored the reporting and editing decisions that occurred in the process of making the news. Editors chose to emphasize certain stories while ignoring others, and influenced how the stories were written by dictating tone and framing. The theory of journalistic objectivity was not an accurate representation of the reporting process (Ward, 2015).

By the 1920s, the journalism industry in the United States had become professionalized, and many journalism associations adopted objectivity as a principle. The American Society of News Editors (ASNE) and Sigma Delta Chi, later known as the Society of Professional Journalists, both recognized objectivity in their codes of journalistic ethics. Critics claimed that objective journalism tended to uncritically repeat official statements without providing any real context or explanation to the public. Professional journalism associations adopted objectivity as an ethic for journalists to follow regardless of this criticism, due to the prestige and popularity of scientific objectivity in the development of democracy in America (Ward, 2015).

Twentieth-century journalists in America accepted objective journalism as a standard practice and ethic because they believed it provided a necessary counter-balance to the sensational and partisan coverage in the popular press (Campbell et al., 2018). American journalism associations also accepted objective journalism because it was effective rhetoric - perceived objectivity of journalism - that publishers and journalists could use to gain credibility and professionalization to sell news to the public. The 17th century publishers and editors'

rhetoric that claimed matter-of-fact reporting was necessary to inform the public to make decisions had now been established in America's news media (Ward. 2015).

### **Objectivity and Systemic Constraints**

The objective model of journalism should be practiced in a way that reporting provides a wider context that includes an analysis of America's systems and institutions including its economic, political and media institutions. In "Piketty's Inequality Story in Six Charts," (2014) John Cassidy of *The New Yorker* writes about French economist Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. Piketty — along with his colleagues Emmanuel Saez and Anthony Atkinson — graphically illustrates the shares of overall income and wealth taken over time by different groups, including the top 10 percent and the top 1 percent. Piketty and his colleagues show the significant gains of income and wealth of those at the very top, especially compared to the gains of everyone else, and this means that the issues of politics and redistribution can't be avoided (Cassidy, 2014).

Piketty's research shows that since 1980, the share of overall income going to the top 1 percent has risen sharply in the United States, and the U.S. level of inequality is "probably higher than in any other society at any time in the past, anywhere in the world." His research shows that the U.S. elite have more concentrated wealth than European countries. In 2010, the American 1 percent held about one-third of all the world's wealth:

Piketty's theory suggests that capitalism has a "central contradiction": when the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of economic growth, inequality tends to rise. (That's because profits and other types of income from capital tend to grow faster than wage income, which is what most people rely on.) Piketty argues that "the growth rate will

most likely fall back below the rate of return, and the consequences for the long-term dynamics of the wealth distribution are potentially terrifying.” (Cassidy, 2014)

Piketty’s theory suggests that as a general rule, wealth grows faster than economic output, and there are no natural forces pushing against the steady concentration of wealth; therefore, only rapid growth from technological progress, rising population or “government intervention can be counted on to keep economies from returning to the ‘patrimonial capitalism’ that worried Karl Marx (The Economist, 2014).”

There are many problems with the U.S. capitalist system such as income inequality that affect the lives of Americans. If journalists truly wish to serve the public interest, they should report on public policy issues within this framework. Economist Richard Wolff says:

Over the last century, capitalism has repeatedly revealed its worst tendencies: instability and inequality. Instances of instability include the Great Depression (1929–1941) and the Great Recession since 2008, plus eleven “downturns” in the US between those two global collapses. Each time, millions lost jobs, misery soared, poverty worsened, and massive resources were wasted. Leaders promised that their “reforms” would prevent such instability from recurring. Those promises were not kept. Reforms did not work or did not endure. The system was, and remains, the problem. (Wolff, 2017)

In addition to reporting on whether or not immigrants are to blame for the loss of American jobs (Greenslade, 2015), media outlets should provide a wider context to discuss these issues that would include an analysis of the capitalist system itself to provide real solutions:

In contrast, system change means reorganizing the core human relationship inside the factories, offices and stores of an economy. That relationship connects all who participate in production and distribution of goods and services. It shapes (1) who produces what,

how and where; (2) how much surplus or profits are available; and (3) the disposition of the surplus or profits. System change entails the democratization of the workplace. The logic governing the economic system, then, would no longer be capital-centric (making decisions (1) through (3) in such a particular way that the capitalist employer-employee relationship in production is reproduced). The particular connecting relationship at the core of capitalism will have been superseded: rather like what happened earlier to the slave-centric core relationship (master-slave) and the feudal-centric core relationship (lord-serf). Instead, the post-capitalist core relationship will be democratically worker-centric, with the central type of workplace being the worker cooperative. Among the goals driving an economy based on democratic worker co-ops, job security, quality of workers' lives and reproduction of the worker co-op core relationship in production will weigh more heavily than enterprise profits. (Wolff, 2017)

It is important that journalists widen the lens when covering the complicated policy issues because providing individual-level coverage often leads to the audience blaming the individual, rather than understanding the broader context of one's situation. In "Complicating the Narratives" Amanda Ripley says:

Decades of research have shown that when journalists widen the lens like the Gloucester organizers did, the public reacts differently. Starting in the 1990s, Stanford political science professor Shanto Iyengar exposed people to two kinds of TV news stories: wider-lens stories (which he called "thematic" and which focused on broader trends or systemic issues—like, say, the causes of poverty) and narrow-lens stories (which he labeled "episodic" and which focused on one individual or event—say, for example, one welfare mother or homeless man). (Ripley, 2018)

Another example where journalism can improve its coverage of the economy is to include a more diverse set of economic indices that measure the status of the working class. Many mainstream media outlets when reporting on the status of the economy use the performance of the stock market, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the unemployment rate as indicators. These measurements describe the experiences of the affluent because a small minority of wealthy Americans own most stocks and the unemployment rate tells nothing about the type or pay of the jobs most Americans have (Leonhardt, 2018). When reporting on the economy the media should also include: “the overall share of working-age adults who are actually working; pay at different point on the income distribution; and the same sort of distribution for net worth (which includes stock holdings, home values and other assets and debts)” (Leonhardt, 2018). Including these numbers would provide the public with a more accurate description of the health of the economy.

The media should also provide more substantive reporting on America’s political system (Cost, 2018). A BBC report notes:

The U.S. is dominated by a rich and powerful elite. So concludes a recent study by Princeton University Prof Martin Gilens and Northwestern University Prof Benjamin I Page. . . . [T]he wealthy few move policy, while the average American has little power. The two professors came to this conclusion after reviewing answers to 1,779 survey questions asked between 1981 and 2002 on public policy issues. They broke the responses down by income level, and then determined how often certain income levels and organized interest groups saw their policy preferences enacted. (BBC, 2014)

The study showed that when American citizens disagree with organized economic elites, American citizens lose on the policies they want because the elite’s policies are passed instead.

Even when large majorities of Americans favor a policy change, they also do not get the favored policy. Gilens and Page conclude:

Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to be a democratic society are seriously threatened. (Quoted in BBC, 2014)

The corruption in the U.S. political system that Jay Cost, at the Atlantic, writes about is also apparent when one looks at the policies that the majority of Americans want but do not get. In her article “Memo to Democrats: A progressive economic agenda is popular,” Helaine Olen, at *The Washington Post*, writes about a new report released by the Center for American Progress that makes a strong argument using polling data to show that Americans want progressive policies. “Voters — both colleges educated and working class, and of all races — are in favor of an economic agenda that would offer them broader protections whether it comes to work, sickness or retirement (Olen, 2018).” Polling shows that workers across race lines support similar views on economic policy issues, says David Madland, co-author of the report “The Working-Class Push for Progressive Economic Policies (Olen, 2018).” Most Americans, he says, “support a higher minimum wage, higher taxes on the wealthy, and more spending on healthcare and retirement. There is broad support among workers for progressive economic policy (Olen, 2018).”

But the majority of Americans do not get many of the policies they want due to unprecedented amounts of money that corrupt the American political system. In “40 charts that explain money in politics,” Andrew Prokop, at *Vox*, (2014) writes, “Total federal election

spending in 2012 was over \$6.2 billion — double the \$3 billion spent on the intensely competitive 2000 campaign. Federal lobbying spending has also doubled in the same period.” The *Huffington Post* reports that a 2012 PowerPoint presentation to new members of Congress from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee recommends, “When members are in D.C., they spend at least 4 hours a day on ‘call time’— phone calls with donors or potential donors — and another hour on strategic outreach, which can include fundraising breakfasts (Prokop, 2014).” To make matters worse, issue-oriented political action committees (so-called “super PACs”) can raise and spend unlimited amounts to advocate for issues, so long as they don’t coordinate with candidates. Certain nonprofits can raise unlimited amounts of secret money outside of traditional spending from a candidate or political power, and in 2012 this “outside money” totaled over \$1 billion. In addition, an increase of “dark money,” donations in which the donor is not disclosed, accumulated over \$310 million in 2012.

The fundraising never stops, even after politicians are elected. In addition to facing lobbying efforts on a daily basis, politicians must spend significant amounts of time fundraising for their next election campaigns. In “The Top 10 Things Every Voter Should Know About Money-In-Politics,” the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) writes:

Practically every day that Congress is in session, fundraisers are going on all over Washington — especially in and around Capitol Hill. Attending campaign affairs, to raise money for their next re-election campaign, is nearly as vital a part of the congressional calendar as showing up on the House or Senate floor to vote. Invitations to these fundraisers — along with “suggested” contribution levels—flood the fax machines and email inboxes of lobbyists, trade associations and the D.C. offices of hundreds of companies, unions and political action committees. There are so many of them that it’s

hard for anyone to keep track of them all, though there's now a website—

Politicalpartytime.org—that tries to, even if the list is less than complete. (CRP, n.d.)

The fundraising does not stop with fundraising events. It is illegal to raise campaign funds inside the Capitol, so members employ call centers to “dial for dollars,” which involves calling and asking donors for money for their next election campaigns:

Nobody likes the process, but everybody does it. They have to. When it costs an average of \$1.4 million to run a successful U.S. House campaign, and you’ve got just two years to raise that money, you don’t have much choice. Senators have six-year terms, so they’ve got more time to raise it—but their campaigns can cost more than six times the typical House race. (CRP, n.d.)

In addition to federal lobbying, there are powerful forces that are influencing state politics to further the pro-business agenda at the state level. *Moyers & Company* created a video titled “United States of ALEC,” which reports on the highly influential corporate-funded political force of — ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council. *Moyers & Company* say

A national consortium of state politicians and powerful corporations, ALEC presents itself as a “nonpartisan public-private partnership”. But behind that mantra lies a vast network of corporate lobbying and political action aimed to increase corporate profits at public expense without public knowledge.

ALEC has had a lot of success influencing state houses around the country to reshape the political culture of America state by state. *Moyers & Company* said Alec has successfully passed legislation throughout states including Wisconsin that “dilute collective bargaining rights, make it harder for some Americans to vote, and limit corporate liability for harm caused to consumers — each accomplished without the public ever knowing who’s behind it.”

Unfortunately, the major media outlets too often report money in politics in a way that normalizes it because these outlets are focused on reporting which candidate has raised the most money or is leading in the polls. In addition to “sport coverage” reporting which candidate has raised the most money, journalists should include the negative impact that money has on the political system and society (Shafer, 2019).

It is necessary to understand the systemic mechanisms that influence America’s media coverage that too often contributes to legitimizing and reinforcing a corrupt political system (Cost, 2018) and a capitalist system that has led to massive inequality (cited in R.A., 2014). America’s media outlets are owned by many of the same corporations and elite that control America’s capitalist system. In a piece entitled “These 15 Billionaires Own America’s News Media Companies,” Kate Vinton of *Forbes* writes:

Billionaires own part or all of several of American’s influential national newspapers, including *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, in addition to magazines, local papers and online publications. Several other billionaires, including Comcast CEO Brian Roberts and Liberty Media Chairman John Malone, own or control cable TV networks that are powerful but not primarily news focused. (Vinton, 2016)

Most mainstream, traditional media come from just six sources: Between them, General Electric (GE), Newscorp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS once owned approximately 90 percent of American media. With GE’s divestiture of its media holdings, that sixth company is now Comcast (Lutz, 2012).

The consolidation of the media by billionaires and corporations means the information Americans receive is being filtered and censored by a small group of elites. This concentration

of control over the media, along with economic factors such as advertising revenue and ratings, affects editorial decisions and newspaper content (Glasser, 1984).

The mass media serve as a system to amuse, entertain and inform, and to foster in the public the values, beliefs and codes of behavior that bind the citizenry to the institutional structures of the larger society (Media Education Foundation, 1997). In America's society of concentrated wealth and conflict of class, fulfilling this role requires systematic propaganda. In countries where media are controlled by the state, it is obvious that the media serve the interests of the elite. With private media, absent formal censorship, it is more difficult to notice propaganda at work. The media compete, sometimes expose corporate and governmental corruption, and constantly portray themselves as advocates of free speech and for the public (Media Education Foundation, 1997).

As Noam Chomsky (quoted in Media Education Foundation, 1997) notes, however, private media can function as propaganda, perpetuating and normalizing inequality of wealth and power through their decisions of what to cover — and how. Chomsky's propaganda model shows how money and power can determine which news is fit to print, marginalize dissent, and help the government and private interests to get their messages to the public. Key elements of the model include:

The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and

control mechanism. These elements interact with and reinforce one another. (Chomsky, quoted in Media Education Foundation, 1997)

The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue to be designated “fit to print.” These filters fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and these filters explain the basis and operations of what amounts to propaganda campaigns. Based on Chomsky’s research, it is necessary to view the media on macro and micro levels to fully understand this systemic manipulation and bias (Media Education Foundation, 1997).

The elite domination of the media that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that journalists — even those with good intentions — are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news “objectively” and on the basis of professional journalistic values (Chomsky, 1988). The propaganda model shows how the filters are so powerful, and so thoroughly integrated into the system, that a journalist may indeed be reporting “objectively”— but only insofar as the systemic limits allow.

### **Examples where Journalism should improve**

Understanding these systemic constraints provides an excellent framework to understanding the micro-level examples that occur daily where objective journalism and the mainstream media do not fulfill journalistic ethics. The macro-level, systemic constraints create a media environment that leads to false-balance reporting, horserace coverage and reinforcement of the status quo. Media passively and actively normalize a capitalist system that causes massive inequality (cited in R.A., 2014) and a corrupt political system (Cost, 2018) that is unrepresentative of most citizens.

In “Horse Race Coverage and the Political Spectacle,” Matthew Nisbet (2010) decries the pervasiveness of “horse race journalism,” which focuses on covering politics primarily in terms of which candidates are winning and which are losing. Such coverage also includes a focus on which candidate has raised the most money, which leads to those candidates getting more airtime to reach the American public. Nisbet says, “polling and public opinion surveys are a central feature of this political spectacle. In fact, they supply the ‘objective’ data for reporters to define who is winning while offering a news peg for offering attributions about the reasons for political success or failure.” Nisbet goes on by discussing an analysis of political news coverage by Pew and Harvard University. The first five months of coverage in 2007 finds that 63 percent of the campaign stories focused on political and tactical aspects compared to just 17 percent that focused on the personal backgrounds of the candidates, 15 percent that focused on the candidates' ideas and policy proposals and only 1 percent of stories that examined the candidates' records or past public performance (Nisbet, 2010). Nisbet concludes by saying horse race coverage of politics fails to provide context and background for audiences to adequately understand the policy issues that affect the public, and it frames the issues in a way that provides false balance (Nisbet, 2010).

In the name of objective journalism, media outlets attempt to find balance, but instead fail at presenting just the facts (vanden Heuvel, 2014). In “The distorting reality of ‘false balance’ in the Media,” Katrina vanden Heuvel writes, “Media outlets contort themselves to find ‘balance,’ and we’re left with segments like ‘— presented on the always reliable Fox News — which promised to ‘weigh the evidence on both sides of the divisive topic’” (vanden Heuvel, 2014). She explains that other mainstream outlets, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*, gave on average, the 3 percent of [climate change] doubters “over five times the amount of

representation [they have] in the scientific community.” The result, as Bill McKibben has said, is “a massive failure of journalism to communicate the idea to the public that the most dangerous thing that ever happened in the world is in the process of happening.” (vanden Heuvel, 2014)

In “False equivalence: how ‘balance’ makes the media dangerously dumb,” Bob Garfield (2013) also discusses how media outlets tend to draw false equivalencies on issues other than climate change. He states as an example, “In 2013, when congressional Republicans shut down the government over a health-care law that had been passed in Congress and upheld in the Supreme Court, many in the media continued to pretend that both sides were equally at fault” (Garfield, 2013) For example, a *Washington Post* editorial wrote:

Ultimately, the grown-ups in the room will have to do their jobs, which in a democracy with divided government means compromising for the common good. That means Mr. Boehner, his counterpart in the Senate, Harry M Reid (D-Nev), minority leaders Sen Mitch McConnell (R-Ky) and Rep Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif) and the president. Both sides are inordinately concerned with making sure that, if catastrophe comes, the other side takes the political hit. In truth, none of their reputations stands to benefit. (Quoted in Garfield, 2013)

Garfield explains that this narrative is wrong, because the shutdown is not due to a divide between Republicans and Democrats on Obamacare. Garfield states, “That issue has been legislated, ratified by two presidential elections, affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court and more than 40 times unrepealed by Congress.” He attributes the shutdown to

the divide between mainstream, center-right Republicans and Tea Party extremists. The latter are wrapped in suicide belts and perfectly willing to blow the GOP and the economy to kingdom come if they can: a) kill Obamacare (as if); or b) guarantee

campaign windfalls from likeminded anti-government crackpots. This is not gridlock. It is a hostage situation. (Garfield, 2013)

Garfield also bemoans the willingness of the press to give a platform for lies and conspiracy theories:

As an institution, the American media seem to have decided that no superstition, stupidity, error in fact or Big Lie is too superstitious, stupid, wrong or evil to be disqualified from “balancing” an opposing ... waddyacallit? ... fact. Because, otherwise, the truth might be cited as evidence of liberal bias. Thus, do the US media aid and abet Swiftboaters, 9/11 “Truthers,” creationists and “Birthers,” whose bizarre charge that the president was born overseas required us to believe a conspiracy involving hospital employees and Honolulu newspapers dating to infant Barack Hussein Obama's first day on earth. Birthers are liars, morons, bigots or some combination of all three, yet, for four years, the press treated them as if they were worthy of consideration, dignifying their delusion by addressing it. Note the equivocating language from this Associated Press dispatch: So-called “birthers”—who claim Obama is ineligible to be president because, they argue, he was actually born outside the United States—have grown more vocal recently on blogs and television news shows. (Garfield, 2013)

Vanden Heuvel (2014) also argues that “no matter how ‘outlandish, illogical, or simply untrue,’ an argument may be, too many editors and journalists bind themselves to ‘an outdated commitment to the ideal of objectivity’.” She continues:

This approach has real consequences on the public’s understanding of society’s most pressing challenges—including the effects of global warming — Gallup’s 2014 poll on the environment found that 42 percent of Americans believe that “the seriousness of

global warming is generally exaggerated in the news.” Blinded by the veil of false equivalence, we believe global warming is happening, but that it won’t seriously affect us. As a result, we are not holding our elected leaders accountable for acting to curb the threat of climate change, which only grows more dangerous over time. (vanden Heuvel, 2014)

Even former members of the Republican party and nonpartisan political scientists are stating that Republicans are the problem. In their article “Let’s just say it: The Republicans are the problem,” Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2012) say:

We have been studying Washington politics and Congress for more than 40 years, and never have we seen them this dysfunctional. In our past writings, we have criticized both parties when we believed it was warranted. Today, however, we have no choice but to acknowledge that the core of the problem lies with the Republican Party. The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. (Mann and Ornstein, 2012)

Former senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska called his party “irresponsible” in an interview with the Financial and Mike Lofgren, a veteran Republican congressional staffer, ended his career in Washington D.C. after almost thirty years. Lofgren wrote, on the Truthout website, that “The Republican Party is becoming less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult, or one of the intensely ideological authoritarian parties of 20th century Europe” (Mann and Ornstein, 2012).

The Koch network has been a major reason why the Republican party has moved so far to the right and refuses to compromise because it spends millions every year donating to

Republicans. Grover Norquist admitted that groups funded by the Koch network successfully discouraged Republicans that were once willing to work with president Obama in 2008 (Mayer, 2010). It is important that journalists report when any political party is being unreasonable rather than drawing false equivalencies for the appearance of being objective.

Forcing balance where there is none, she argues, is not journalistically ethical; it is lazy journalism to simply repeat talking points: “If the scale tips in favor of the truth, that’s not imbalanced reporting. That’s journalism” (vanden Heuvel, 2014).

Another problem with the way objective journalism is practiced is when new organizations use unreliable sources that are funded by industry and billionaires in the attempt to find balance. It is important that news organizations know the difference between peer-reviewed research that was conducted by subject matter experts and distortions of research that are promoted by industry-funded contrarians (Negin, 2017). In his article “Unreliable Sources: How the Media Help the Kochs & ExxonMobil Spread Climate Disinformation,” Elliott Negin writes about the results of a study that shows eight mainstream media outlets that only 32 percent of the time did these outlets disclose the climate-change information they provided to the public was funded by the fossil fuel industry funded think tanks. NPR was one of these media outlets and its own ombudsman admitted NPR “often does a lousy job of identifying the background of think tanks or other groups when quoting their experts” (Negin, 2017).

Journalists should be more cautious when using think tanks as a source because think tanks, unlike academics at universities that have mechanisms such as peer-review and are expected to conduct their research first and draw their conclusions second, lack these mechanisms and often reverse the process to get desired results (Sebba, 2011). The most obvious reason journalists should be skeptical about right-wing think tanks is the Kochs agenda was to

alter the direction of America by influencing think tanks (Mayer, 2010). If it is necessary to use think tanks as sources, then it is important that journalists practice journalistic ethics and disclose the funders and agendas of think tanks. Providing this context is important so the public can make the most informed decisions with as much information as possible.

It is also important that journalists distinguish the differences among organizations that are funded by wealthy donors. In her article “After Last Week, There’s No Hope That the Media Will Ever Abandon False Equivalencies with the Far Right,” Natasha Lennard discusses the false equivalence that many news organizations engage in between George Soros and the Koch brothers (Lennard, 2018). Many conservatives complain when news organizations report on the Koch brother’s shadowy network of donors and advocacy groups and accuse the media of giving a pass to wealthy liberals like George Soros and Tom Steyer (Kroll, 2015). Workers’ unions and Tides Foundation, a longstanding liberal donor fund that provides money to nonprofits working on the environment, labor issues, immigrant rights, gay rights, women’s rights and human rights, have been used as examples by conservatives that claim these are the liberal counterparts to the Koch’s (Blumenthal, 2014).

These liberal groups agenda is not the moral equivalent to the Koch network’s agenda (Hawkins, 2014). These liberal groups fund with agenda to improve the environment and human and labor rights while the Koch network’s agenda that includes promoting distortions about climate change and supporting efforts that would allow their businesses to pollute the environment (Dickinson, 2014). Also, “the data shows, they’re (Kochs) the biggest outside money players in town. By a *long shot*. And these progressive groups tend to operate in the sunshine of public disclosure, unlike the Kochs’ semi-secret political empire” (Blumenthal, 2014). There is no network or organization supporting the Democratic Party in elections, while

not disclosing its donors, that spends even close to the Koch network (Blumenthal, 2014). Journalists should be transparent and disclose all organizations', despite political leanings, donors and agenda, but it is also important to distinguish the differences and avoid false equivalencies.

Matthew Pressman, a history Ph.D. candidate at Boston University and himself a former journalist, traces the declining state of the media to attacks from the right during the 1960s. Critics, led by then-Vice President Spiro Agnew, alleged that journalists' liberal biases had caused them to abandon objectivity. People within the profession began saying that objectivity was an outdated ideal, "mainly for the same reasons people cite today: that it muzzles journalists, leads to he-said-she-said coverage and favors the powerful/reinforces the status quo" (Bennett, 2015).

Although the press claims to be the watchdog of government and the powerful, objective reporting is biased in favor of the status quo because it encourages journalists to rely on the "managers of the status quo," such as government and corporate officials (Glasser, 1984). For example, many media outlets are owned by corporations and billionaires and their board of directors are the powerful and elite, or they hold close connections to the powerful and elite (Lutz, 2012). These boards of directors have connections to powerful business organizations, not with public interest groups or labor groups; they are connected to well-established think tanks, rather than their grassroots counterparts. This concentration of control over the media, along with economic factors such as advertising revenue and ratings, affects editorial decisions and newspaper content (Glasser, 1984).

One example where the media did not hold the government accountable is their reporting of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Judith Miller and The New York Times

reporting helped build the public's support for the invasion of Iraq, when later sources revealed that The Times's reporting lacked journalistic standards and was based on faulty intelligence. In his article "The Spirit of Judy Miller Is Alive and Well at the NYT, and It Does Great Damage," Glenn Greenwald (2015) writes:

[Miller] granted anonymity to government officials and then uncritically laundered their dubious claims in the *New York Times*. As the paper's own editors put it in their 2004 mea culpa about the role they played in selling the war: "We have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged." (Greenwald, 2015)

*The Times's* foreign policy reporting continues these poor journalism practices to gain access to government officials, which other news organizations accept as truth, Greenwald says:

All anyone in government must do is whisper something in its journalists' ears, demand anonymity for it, and instruct them to print it. Then they obey. Then other journalists treat it as Truth. Then it becomes fact, all over the world. This is the same process that enabled the *New York Times*, more than any other media outlet, to sell the Iraq War to the American public, and it's using the same methods to this day. But it's not just its shoddy journalism that drives this but the mentality of other "journalists" who instantly equate anonymous official claims as fact. The peak of the *Sunday Times's* humiliation was when its lead reporter, Tom Harper, went on CNN and expressly admitted that the paper did nothing other than mindlessly print anonymous government claims as fact without having any idea if they were true. (Greenwald, 2015)

America's media also often promotes the status quo that benefits the establishment elites in its reporting on the economy, taxes and other progressive policies. Even though Americans want more progressive policies, and many economists such as Piketty (cited in R.A., 2014) recommend that "governments step in and adopt a global tax on wealth, to prevent soaring inequality contributing to economic or political instability in the future," these ideas are framed as radical. It is difficult for any reasonable person to argue that higher taxes on the wealthy are a radical idea, considering the United States used to tax top earners at 90 percent, compared to 37 percent today (El-Sibaie, 2018).

For example, during an interview with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — a new congresswoman and a proponent of an ambitious progressive agenda, including universal health care, tuition-free public college, and a Green New Deal to combat climate change — she suggested 70 percent tax rates on the very rich to help pay for her proposals; *60 Minutes'* Anderson Cooper said Cortez's proposal "might be considered a 'radical agenda' (Stewart, 2019). In addition to Cooper's response lacking historical facts and perspective, Paul Krugman, an economist and New York *Times* columnist, argues Ocasio-Cortez is on the right track:

Ocasio-Cortez has advocated a tax rate of 70 to 80 percent on very high incomes, which Krugman says seems "crazy"— except to the world's leading expert on public finance, Peter Diamond, a Nobel laureate in economics and arguably the world's leading expert on public finance. It's a policy nobody has ever implemented, aside from ... the United States, for 35 years after World War II—including the most successful period of economic growth in our history. Diamond recommends "the optimal rate" for taxing the rich is 73 percent ... so AOC, far from showing her craziness, is fully in line with serious

economic research,” he writes. “She definitely knows more economics than almost everyone in the G.O.P. caucus. (Krugman, 2019)

Also, when politicians like Bernie Sanders suggest the (United States) implement a universal-type health care system, the coverage is often framed to suggest it is a radical idea, even though the U.S. government spends more per capita on health care than all but two other countries in the world, and many countries with a lower gross domestic product (GDP) than the U.S. can afford such a system. Writing for *Forbes*, Avik Roy asserts:

The reason why U.S. government health care is so big already, without achieving universal coverage, is that we heavily subsidize health coverage for Americans with high incomes, while leaving many Americans with low incomes unsubsidized. If we had a true safety net, in which we helped the poor and sick get coverage—while letting the wealthy buy health care in the free market—we’d spend a fraction of what we do today. (Roy, 2015)

The media portrays Sanders as “radical” and his ideas “unrealistic,” but most Western democracies have implemented some or all of his proposed policies (Cohn, 2015). Even countries with a significantly lower GDP than the U.S. — France and Taiwan, for example — have some variation on single-payer healthcare, and Slovenia and Brazil offer tuition-free college (Jilani, 2014).

Objective journalism purports to maintain neutrality, to present balanced coverage of societal issues; in so doing, though, it reinforces the status quo. The “neutral” tone of objective journalism often leads to false equivalencies. Too often, the facts and evidence clearly lie disproportionately on one side; but a journalist reports the issue in a “neutral and balanced” way that lends undue credibility to the opposing viewpoint. In so doing, the journalist fails to seek the

truth and inform the public and contributes to perpetuating the status quo and serving the interests of the establishment elite (vanden Heuvel, 2014).

### **History of the Right-Wing Media**

A major influencing factor that leads the mainstream media to seek false balance and draw false equivalencies is to avoid the right-wing media's attacks that the mainstream media is liberally biased. In "The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History," Hemmer (2014) writes:

The idea of "fair and balanced" partisan media has its roots in the 1940s and 1950s. *Human Events*, the right-wing newsweekly founded in 1944, was dedicated to publishing the "facts" other outlets overlooked. Yet while touting this fact-based approach, the editors were also dedicated to promoting a distinct point of view. By the early 1960s, *Human Events* arrived at this formulation of its mission: In reporting the news, *Human Events* is objective; it aims for accurate representation of the facts. But it is not impartial. It looks at events through eyes that are biased in favor of limited constitutional government, local self-government, private enterprise, and individual freedom. (Hemmer, 2014)

The editors of *Human Events* made a journalistic value of using bias and claims of objectivity in its reporting. In 1953, William F. Buckley Jr., recommended that Regnery Publishing "state that in your opinion an objective reading of the facts tends to make one conservative and Christian; that therefore your firm is both objective and partisan in behalf of these values." Claims of objectivity and partisanship became an established pillar of conservative media (Hemmer, 2014).

Throughout the 1950s, conservatives continued to establish more media outlets, such as the *National Review*, publishing houses such as Regnery and Devin-Adair, and broadcast shows

such as the *Manion Forum* and the *Dan Smoot Report*. Hemmer (2014) explained that conservatives began working to discredit the existing media in the early 1960s because they did not believe creating a conservative media network alone would achieve what conservatives defined as “media balance.”

The first event that convinced the conservative media to begin discrediting the existing media and the government was the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)’s adoption of the Fairness Doctrine — a broadcast standard meant to regulate coverage of controversial issues on radio and television:

Conservatives felt the Fairness Doctrine unfairly tilted the playing field against them.

Though devised to encourage controversial broadcasting, in practice the doctrine often led broadcasters to avoid controversy so they wouldn’t have to give away free airtime. To conservatives, avoiding controversy inevitably meant silencing right-wing voices.

(Hemmer, 2014)

Conservatives felt that the FCC singled them out, but this is because conservatives repeatedly challenged assumptions that the FCC — and indeed most Americans — held about journalism. Objectivity was seen as a journalistic ideal, and opinion and analysis were considered separate from the news. Conservative broadcasts, though, were centered around opinion, which required broadcasters to provide equal airtime for opposing opinions in order to comply with the Fairness Doctrine. Conservatives believed the FCC’s enforcement of “objectivity” perpetuated what they saw as a liberal bias in American media (Hemmer, 2014).

It is important to put this “liberal media bias” in its proper context. Even if one accepts the assumption that most journalists have a liberal bias, it exists only on a very narrow spectrum.

Noam Chomsky writes in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) that the Democratic and Republican parties are two virtually indistinguishable factions of what he calls “the business party”:

So, in the last election, for example, if you had interchanged Dole and Clinton, nobody would have noticed the difference. There are marginal differences between them. True, they have somewhat different constituencies. And that sometimes shows up in small policy decisions. But they basically reflect the same system of power. So, if it turned out that 80% of journalists were part of one faction of the business party rather than another faction of the business party, would that tell you anything? (Chomsky & Herman, 1988)

In a later interview, Chomsky elaborated: “The liberal media bias claim is just a false narrative put out by the owners of industry, so they can use it to attack and discredit the media and if its reporting is critical in any way of the power structures” (Chomsky, 1988).

After the mainstream media’s coverage of Barry Goldwater’s failed presidential campaign, conservatives felt there was liberal bias within the political establishment. The Nixon administration acknowledged this conservative discontent in 1969; Spiro Agnew, then the U.S. vice president, regularly attacked the media for their liberal bias; Agnew skewered the “closed fraternity of privileged men” who ran television news. Agnew argued that the media in their choice of stories and framing of the commentary that “these anchors, producers, and pundits served up not objective analysis, but the liberal pap of the New York-Washington echo chamber, and every night, 40 million Americans tuned in, imbibing bias and mistaking it for neutrality.” (Hemmer, 2014)

In 1968, Edith Efron, a writer for *TV Guide*, analyzed network coverage over the final weeks of the 1968 election. She plucked out 100,000 words on Nixon and Humphrey from each of “the Big Three’s” (ABC, CBS and NBC) nightly newscasts. Crunching the numbers, she

found about half of all words spoken about Humphrey were positive. For Nixon, the figure was a paltry 8.7 percent. Her book *The News Twisters* concluded network news followed “the elitist-liberal-left line in all controversies.” Even though Efron’s methodology had the veneer of science, she was the only arbiter of whether coverage was positive or negative (Hemmer, 2014). President Nixon’s administration ordered Special Counsel Charles Colson to get the book on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Colson ferreted out which stores’ sales were used to determine the list and bought up every copy they had. After this, Efron’s book became a *New York Times* bestseller (Hemmer, 2014).

The combined forces of the administration and its conservative media-research wing had an effect. By 1971, CBS Radio had launched *Spectrum*, a debate show featuring conservatives, *60 Minutes* pitted conservatives against liberals, and even *The New York Times* editorial page admitted the rising presence of conservative opinion in established media outlets (Hemmer, 2014). These allegations of bias in the mainstream media, and conservative efforts find alternatives, prepared the ground for the rise of Fox News (Hemmer, 2014).

Rupert Murdoch, creator of Fox News, established a television empire around sports. He had the idea of creating a news show that would compete with *60 Minutes* on CBS. In 1995, Murdoch brought British executive Andrew Neil to New York to help guide the creation of Fox News. Neil was uncomfortable with Murdoch’s consultant Roger Ailes — former political strategist for presidents Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush, executive producer of a TV show starring Rush Limbaugh, and one-time head of financial news channel CNBC — whom Murdoch had hired to create a niche news network that would reach an audience who felt the mainstream press was too liberal (Folkenflik, 2013).

Fox News does an excellent job at choosing a story that other outlets do not cover, then making it the primary story of the day. This strategy has also been effective at forcing other news outlets to pay attention to the stories that Fox chooses to cover. Fox News seeks stories that will stoke a sense of grievance among cultural conservatives against coastal elites, and it chooses guests that the audience can root for or against (Folkenflik, 2013).

One example of Fox News coverage is that “a push for new EPA rules might strike the *Washington Post* or CBS News as a story about the debate over cleaner water. Fox might frame the same story around small business owners struggling to keep pace with red tape from Washington,” says Folkenflik (2013).

Ailes was effective at making good television because he understood what viewers wanted to watch. Ailes staffed the network with enough liberals to ensure on-air ideological clashes, and made resentment toward other news organizations a major feature of Fox News:

The fair and balanced slogan alone was an increasingly explicit assertion that mainstream press organizations were not fair or balanced. “We report. You decide,” provoked the same reaction in viewers and the competition. On Fox, the news programs served to get out the mission statement: the other news organizations look down on you and your beliefs. Here, you’re home. (Folkenflik, 2013)

Today, Fox News does an excellent job of covering issues in a way that implies that other networks’ coverage is opposed to the country’s well-being. For example, in 2000, Fox News covered a story involving the Middle East using the term “homicide bomber” instead of “suicide bomber” to keep the emphasis on the death of innocents, not the perpetrators (Folkenflik, 2013).

Another historical key to understanding the rise of the right-wing narrative, media and policies is the Powell Memo. In 1971, Lewis Powell—a well-connected lawyer in Virginia who

sat on the boards of 11 major corporations, including the tobacco company Phillip Morris — wrote a memorandum to Eugene Sydnor Jr., then-chairman of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce education committee and head of the now-defunct Southern Department Stores chain. The memo was titled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System” and was, as writer Steven Higgs noted in a 2012 article published by *CounterPunch*, “A Call to Arms for Class War: From the Top Down” (cited by Blum, 2017).

Powell and other business leaders believed American capitalism was under attack because a liberal Congress had forced the Nixon administration to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). On top of this, consumers began to make progress against corporate abuse, African-Americans began to make gains in civil rights, and the anti-war movement began to scare the corporate elite. Powell wrote:

No thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack. There always have been some who opposed the American system, and preferred socialism or some form of statism (communism or fascism). But now what concerns us is quite new in the history of America. We are not dealing with sporadic or isolated attacks from a relatively few extremists or even from the minority socialist cadre. Rather, the assault on the enterprise system is broadly based and consistently pursued. It is gaining momentum and converts. (Quoted in Blum, 2016)

Powell argued in order to prevent the weakening or destruction of the American capitalist system, capitalists and corporate management leaders needed to unify resources to gain “the political power available only through united action and national organizations” (Quoted in Blum, 2016).

Powell told the Chamber of Commerce and other business leaders to place their resources and efforts into recruiting the best lawyers to represent business interests before the Supreme Court. He said, “Under our constitutional system . . . the judiciary may be the most important instrument for social, economic and political change” (Quoted in Blum, 2016).

In October of 1971, Nixon nominated Powell to the Supreme Court; he was confirmed in January 1972. Powell was instrumental in helping to orchestrate the court’s pro-corporate interpretation of the First Amendment in the area of campaign finance law, which culminated years later in the 2010 *Citizens United* decision. He joined the court’s seminal 1976 ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo*, which equated money in the form of campaign expenditures with political speech. He was the author of the 1978 majority opinion in *First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti*, which held that corporations have a First Amendment right to support state ballot initiatives (Blum, 2016).

One of the lasting effects of Powell’s secret memo was its catalyst for the formation in 1972 of the Business Roundtable, the highly influential lobbying organization that within five years expanded its exclusive membership to include 113 of the top *Fortune* 200 corporations. Combined, those 113 companies accounted for nearly half the output of the American economy (Blum, 2016).

Following the Roundtable came the creation of political think tanks and right-wing public interest law firms, including the “Heritage, Charles Koch, Castle Rock, Scaife, Lynde and Harry Bradley, and Olin foundations, among many others, as well as the Pacific Legal Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Federalist Society and, above all, the Chamber of Commerce National Litigation Center” (Blum, 2016). With the combined forces of the Chamber’s Litigation Center, which (according to the Center for Constitutional Accountability) has won 69 percent of its cases

before the Supreme Court since 2006, these policy shops “have helped to make the Roberts Court the most pro-business high tribunal since the 1930s” (Blum, 2016).

The Powell Memo may have established a vision for the right-wing corporate elites to fight back against “the greatest threat to free enterprise,” including “respectable elements of society”—intellectuals, journalists and scientists — but two fossil-fuel billionaires, the brothers Charles and David Koch, have fulfilled Powell’s pro-corporate vision (Mayer, 2010). In her article “Covert Operations,” *The New Yorker*’s Jane Mayer writes:

In 1977, the Kochs provided the funds to launch the nation’s first libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute. According to the Center for Public Integrity, between 1986 and 1993 the Koch family gave eleven million dollars to the institute. Today, Cato has more than a hundred full-time employees, and its experts and policy papers are widely quoted and respected by the mainstream media. It describes itself as nonpartisan, and its scholars have at times been critical of both parties. But it has consistently pushed for corporate tax cuts, reductions in social services, and laissez-faire environmental policies. (Mayer, 2010)

In addition to establishing right-wing think tanks to formulate and promote policies beneficial to corporations and the rich, the Koch brothers began to endow universities with millions of dollars to set up think tanks. One of these is the Mercatus Center—affiliated with George Mason University, and now a non-profit in its own right—which promotes itself as “the world’s premier university source for market-oriented ideas—bridging the gap between academic ideas and real-world problems” (Mayer, 2010). “It’s ground zero for deregulation policy in Washington,” Rob Stein, a Democratic strategist,” said. “It is an unusual arrangement, George Mason is a public

university, and receives public funds,” Stein noted. “Virginia is hosting an institution that the Koch’s practically control” (Mayer, 2010).

The founder of the Mercatus Center is Richard Fink, a former economist and head of the Koch Industries’ lobbying operation in Washington. Fink is also the president of the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation and a director and co-founder of the Americans for Prosperity Foundation. As Mayer (2010) writes, “Fink, with his many titles, has become the central nervous system of the Kochtopus.”

The *Wall Street Journal* has called the Mercatus Center “the most important think tank you’ve never heard of” (Mayer, 2010). It also reported that 14 of the 23 regulations that President George W. Bush placed on a “hit list” had been suggested by Mercatus scholars. Mayer writes:

Thomas McGarity, a law professor at the University of Texas, who specializes in environmental issues, told me that “Koch has been constantly in trouble with the E.P.A., and Mercatus has constantly hammered on the agency.” An environmental lawyer who has clashed with the Mercatus Center called it “a means of laundering economic aims.” The lawyer explained the strategy: “You take corporate money and give it to a neutral-sounding think tank,” which “hires people with pedigrees and academic degrees who put out credible-seeming studies. But they all coincide perfectly with the economic interests of their funders.” (Mayer, 2010)

The Koch brothers wanted to affect more direct change than the think-tank model of Cato and Mercatus allowed. To that end, the brothers began funding organizations to attract direct public support. In 1984, David Koch and Richard Fink created the organization Citizens for a Sound Economy. This sounded like a grassroots movement, but Mayer writes:

According to the Center for Public Integrity it was sponsored principally by the Kochs, who provided \$7.9 million between 1986 and 1993. Its mission, Kibbe said, “was to take these heavy ideas and translate them for mass America . . . We read the same literature Obama did about nonviolent revolutions—Saul Alinsky, Gandhi, Martin Luther King. We studied the idea of the Boston Tea Party as an example of nonviolent social change. We learned we needed boots on the ground to sell ideas, not candidates.

Within a few years, the group had mobilized fifty paid field workers, in twenty-six states, to rally voters behind the Kochs’ agenda. David and Charles, according to one participant, were “very controlling, very top down. You can’t build an organization with them. *They* run it.” (Mayer, 2010)

It is important for journalists to be aware of these powerful forces that shape policy and public opinion, because these efforts have been very effective. For example, after President Obama’s speech about global warming being “beyond dispute,” the Cato Institute bought a full-page ad in the New York *Times* to contradict Obama’s claim. Cato scholars have also promoted the so-called “Climate-gate scandal,” a leak of private emails between climate scientists at the British University of East Anglia which appeared to suggest a willingness to falsify data in order to buttress the idea that global warming is real. In the two weeks after the emails went public, one Cato scholar gave more than 20 media interviews trumpeting the alleged scandal; however, five independent inquiries have since exonerated the researchers, and nothing was found in their emails or data to discredit the scientific consensus on global warming (Mayer, 2010).

Cato’s efforts, however, have been successful at spreading skepticism about climate change. Although the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued a report concluding that the evidence for global warming is unequivocal, more Americans are convinced

than at any time since 1997 that scientists have exaggerated the seriousness of global warming, according to Gallup's 2014 poll on the environment (Mayer, 2010). The Kochs promote this statistic on their company's website, but the site does not mention the role that their funding played in fostering such doubt (Mayer, 2010).

Even Republican political consultants such as Frank Luntz admit the effectiveness of this right-wing propaganda. In a 2002 memo, Luntz wrote that so long as "voters believe there is no consensus about global warming within the scientific community," the status quo would prevail (Mayer, 2010). The key for opponents of environmental reform, he said, was to question the science — a public-relations strategy that the tobacco industry used effectively for years to forestall regulation (Mayer, 2010).

The Kochs have funded and cultivated much of this prevalent environmental skepticism. The Heritage Foundation has argued that "scientific facts gathered in the past 10 years do not support the notion of catastrophic human-made warming" (Mayer, 2010). The Kochs also have given to "more obscure groups, too, such as the Independent Women's Forum, which opposes the presentation of global warming as a scientific fact in American public schools" (Mayer, 2010).

In addition to the *Times* publishing an article by the Cato Institute to refute the science behind climate change and President Obama's speech claiming climate change was "beyond dispute," many mainstream American news outlets have provided a platform for these right-wing talking points proven wrong by science. Even the middle-of-the-road news organizations like National Public Radio (NPR) give a platform to these experts funded by the right wing. In a 2018 piece entitled "Morning Edition's Think Tank Sources Lean to the Right," Jordan Holycross and Olivia Riggio write:

In a study of NPR's Morning Edition from February to July 2018, FAIR found that sources from left-of-center think tanks were underrepresented, with right-leaning think tank sources appearing almost twice as often. Out of 129 episodes aired Monday through Friday over the course of six months, researchers and fellows representing think tanks were quoted 144 times. Centrist think tanks were most commonly heard on Morning Edition, with 63 interviews (44 percent of citations). Fifty-one (35 percent) of the show's interviews were with conservative or center-right groups, while 28 (19 percent) involved progressive or center-left groups. (Holycross & Riggio, 2018)

Those 63 right-leaning interviews included representatives from the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute and Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Holycross and Riggio state NPR's own Ethics Handbook employs a cautionary tone regarding the sourcing of think tanks. It stresses NPR reporters' responsibility to be aware of such organizations' conflicts of interest. But contrary to its code of ethics, NPR rarely if ever discloses the financial supporters of think tanks. For example, one of its most-cited think tanks, the conservative Center for Strategic and International Studies, receives funding from weapons manufacturers like Boeing and Lockheed Martin. This was not mentioned during a segment airing in July 2018, on arms control negotiations between Russia and the U.S., even though NPR cited two different representatives from the think tank (Holycross and Riggio, 2018).

This study found that NPR's coverage was dominated by center and right-wing think tank representatives, and viewpoints from non-corporate ends were mostly left out, with progressive analysts accounting for only 8 percent of the total. This is disappointing, because NPR was founded to provide an alternative to corporate-sponsored media. This is also unfortunate because NPR's coverage does not seem to be consistent with its audience; according to a Pew Research

study, NPR's audience is generally left of center, with 41 percent found to be "consistently liberal" and another 26 percent being "mostly liberal" (Holycross and Riggio, 2018).

These examples show that the objective model of journalism to which many news outlets subscribe provides a platform for right-wing talking points funded by corporate leaders, capitalists and billionaire elites (Mayer, 2010). In following this model, many American news outlets give disproportionate time to right-wing organizations and the corporate establishment, and fail at their stated goals of seeking the truth and informing the people (Holycross and Riggio, 2018). Even worse, this approach creates false equivalencies between issues and gives undeserved credibility to right-wing propaganda and outlandish conspiracy theories (Garfield, 2013).

### **Current State of Right-Wing Media**

Today, the right-wing media have evolved from saying the media have a liberal bias to claiming the mainstream media peddles "fake news." The right-wing media have also made it a priority to spread false information and claim that facts lie on a spectrum that can be countered with "alternative facts" (Graham, 2017). For example, spreading the rhetoric that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) would lead to "death panels," which became known as PolitiFact's lie of the year in 2009 (Holan, 2009). In addition to alternative facts, the right-wing media is spreading lies, Williamson (2018) writes about how Infowars and Alex Jones lied to their audience by claiming the tragedy at Sandy Hook was "an event staged by the government as part of an effort to confiscate Americans' firearms, and that the parents of the children killed were 'crisis actors'."

President Donald Trump has had a major impact on the right-wing media by claiming that news coverage that is not favorable to him is "fake," and by attacking the media as the

“enemy of the people.” Unfortunately, this “enemy of the people” rhetoric towards the media has been very effective because 43 percent of Republicans want to give Trump the power to shut down the media (Stein, 2018). In “The Rise of the Pro-Trump Media Machine,” Fischer (2018) writes, “Pro-Trump media is spreading across the U.S., disseminating Trumpian rhetoric about fake news and mainstream media bias through every medium. We see this trend in every medium.” Executives at Salem Radio, the parent company of some of the most popular conservative talk shows, pressure radio hosts to cover Trump more positively, according to emails obtained by CNNMoney (Fisher, 2018).

Sinclair Broadcasting, the largest single owner of local TV stations, mandated that its local anchors recite pro-Trump talking points. Timothy Burke, the video director at Deadspin, tracked down the stations that aired the script provided by Sinclair which he says is a “forced read,” according to a *New York Times* article by Jacey Fortin and Jonah Engel Bromwich (2018). Burke compiled the various broadcasts that show multiple on-air personalities echoing Sinclair’s script, which aligns with the Trump administration’s anti-media rhetoric: “The sharing of biased and false news has become all too common on social media. Some members of the media use their platforms to push their own personal bias. This is extremely dangerous to our democracy” (Fortin and Bromwich, 2018). Fortin and Bromwich write:

Peter Chernin, a media investor and longtime president of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, called it “insidious.” David E. Price, a Democratic North Carolina congressman, called the video “pro-Trump propaganda” on Monday. Dave Twedell of the International Cinematographers Guild, who is a business representative for photojournalists (but not anchors) at KOMO in Seattle and KATU in Portland, Ore., said

Sinclair told journalists at those stations not to discuss the company with outside news media. (Fortin & Bromwich, 2018)

Although it is the country's largest broadcaster, Sinclair is not a household name, and viewers may be unaware of who owns their local news station. Critics have accused the company of using its stations to advance a mostly right-leaning agenda. Sinclair regularly sends video segments to the stations it owns. These are referred to as "must-runs," and they can include content like terrorism news updates, commentators speaking in support of President Trump or speeches from company executives like the one from Mr. Livingston last year (Fischer, 2018).

Fox News's Sean Hannity speaks to Trump on a regular basis and provides positive coverage of him and his administration, while attacking stories critical of Trump (Fischer, 2018).

Fischer also writes:

A handful of local news sites, like "Tennessee Star" and the "Arizona Monitor," are popping up, with headlines supporting GOP candidates that are then sometimes featured for GOP election ads, Politico reports. These sites are intentionally framed to look like real news websites, as outwardly conservative sites, like the Daily Caller and Breitbart. (Fischer, 2018)

Considering the wide-reaching capability of the right-wing media, one must examine specific examples of how the right-wing media have influenced public opinion. One excellent example is climate change. Right-wing talk radio commentators such as Rush Limbaugh regularly attack climate change experts as "environmental wackos" (Limbaugh, 2017). Fox News has also spread propaganda to the public through its reporters and commentators, including Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity — all of whom frequently call climate change a conspiracy. The conservative media's assault on climate science occurs in print outlets, as well, including *The*

*Wall Street Journal, New York Post, Washington Times, the Weekly Standard, National Review* and *The American Spectator* (Dryzek, Norgaard, & Schlosberg, 2011).

The conservative media present contrarian scientists who work for conservative think tanks funded by the fossil fuel industry as objective experts, while claiming that scientists who believe in climate change are biased (Dryzek et al., 2011). The conservative media have also reached into the blogosphere, where they continue to spread climate denial propaganda. Many of the figures whom the conservative media use to spread climate denial rhetoric are not climate experts. One such example is Marc Morano, who has a B.A. in political science and a history of working as a Republican political operative. While debating state senator Michael Barrett at the UN Climate Talks, he compared carbon pricing to the Salem witch trials: “Carbon pricing harkens back to the idea, you know, that Massachusetts had to deal with, is the witchcraft trials. The idea that witches change the weather. Now they’re claiming SUVs and our coal plants are changing the weather” (Jervey, 2017).

There has been extensive research documenting the misleading and false information by the right-wing media. In “Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics,” written by Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts explain that the right-wing news outlets exist in an ecosystem that promotes “disinformation, lies and half-truths.” “Network Propaganda” is academic work at the crossroads of law, sociology, and media studies that analyzed data from millions of online stories, tweets, and Facebook (Toobin, 2018). In his article “A New Book Details the Damage Done by the Right-Wing Media in 2016,” Jeffrey Toobin (2018) writes about the false equivalence of assuming the polarized left and right both live in twisted realities. Toobin (2018) says:

The two sides are not, in fact, equal when it comes to evaluating “news” stories, or even in how they view reality. Liberals want facts; conservatives want their biases reinforced. Liberals embrace journalism; conservatives believe propaganda. In the more measured but still emphatic words of the authors, “the right-wing media ecosystem differs categorically from the rest of the media environment,” and has been much more susceptible to “disinformation, lies and half-truths.” (Toobin, 2018).

After analyzing the data, the authors conclude that “something very different was happening in right-wing media than in centrist, center-left and left-wing media,” so they wrote the book “to shine a light on the right-wing media ecosystem itself as the primary culprit in sowing confusion and distrust in the broader American ecosystem” (Toobin, 2018). Toobin (2018) explains that:

False stories are launched on a series of extreme Web sites, such as InfoWars (the home of Alex Jones), none of which claim to follow the norms or processes of professional journalistic objectivity. Those stories are then transmitted to outlets such as Fox News and the Daily Caller, which, according to the authors, “do claim to follow journalistic norms,” but often fail in that function when it comes to tales from the Web sites. Notably, the authors write, “this pattern is not mirrored on the left wing.” (Toobin, 2018)

Toobin ends his article by saying that the “the feedback loop of right-wing quasi-journalism” had the most impact on the 2016 U.S. presidential election, not Russian and Cambridge Analytica propaganda on Facebook (Toobin, 2018).

This powerful, pervasive and multifaceted media apparatus has been extremely effective at influencing public opinion regarding climate change, even though the overwhelming majority of climate change experts agree that climate change is occurring (Dryzek et al., 2011). In this climate change debate example, it is necessary to provide the audience with the right amount of

context, including a discussion about the unqualified “experts” that are funded by the fossil fuel industry, rather than just reporting equal experts on both sides.

These attacks on the media and the rise of right-wing media have divided Americans and contributed to a lack of trust in the media as a whole. Americans’ trust of the media has been declining for years, but in 2016, American’s trust fell more sharply. Art Swift, in an article entitled “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low,” writes:

Republicans who say they have trust in the media has plummeted to 14% from 32% a year ago. This is easily the lowest confidence among Republicans in 20 years. It is also possible that Republicans think less of the media as a result of Trump's sharp criticisms of the press. . . . Over the past 20 years, Democrats have generally expressed more trust than Republicans in the media, although in 2000, the two parties were most closely aligned, with 53% of Democrats and 47% of Republicans professing trust. (Swift, 2016)

### **Violations of Journalistic Ethics**

In *The Ethical Journalist: Making Responsible Decisions in the Digital Age*, Foreman (2010) said, “Journalists are observers, not players.” Journalists are the bridge between information and the communities they serve, so it is vital that they not allow their coverage to be influenced by outside pressures. Fox News and other right-wing news organizations have violated the ideal of journalistic independence and impartiality by maintaining inappropriate relationships with President Trump, maintaining ties to right-wing political operatives, and accepting funds from the fossil fuel industry (Foreman, 2010). The right-wing media’s climate change coverage also violates the SPJ’s ethics code, which encourages journalists to conduct accurate reporting (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

### **Improvements to Objectivity**

Objective journalism established certain guiding principles for ethical journalism, including reporting the facts in an unbiased way, but many journalists initially were critical of the existing journalism professional standards and guiding principles. Journalists believed it was evident that their work should serve the public interest, and people in the profession did not make it a priority to express their professional beliefs. In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2000) attempted to define journalism's purpose: to provide citizens with the information they need to govern themselves.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2000) contributed to the journalism profession by establishing ten essential principles and practices of journalism:

1. Journalism has an obligation to the truth;
2. Journalism's primary loyalty should be to the citizens;
3. Journalism is a discipline of verification;
4. Journalists must maintain their independence from those they cover;
5. Journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power;
6. Journalists must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise;
7. Journalism must strive to keep the significant interesting and relevant;
8. Journalism must keep the news comprehensive and proportional;
9. Journalism's practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience; and
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.

Reporting the facts in an objective manner and remaining neutral were improvements over the opinion journalism that dominated American reporting in the 19th century, but many journalists were critical of the discipline. Tom Wicker, a former *New York Times* columnist, argued that in the early 1960s, the news media lacked nuanced coverage of the news because it

only reported the facts. Many experts and professionals in various fields, including the journalism profession, began to question the effectiveness of the objective journalism model (cited in Campbell et al., 2018).

The combination of objective journalism and neutrally reporting the facts is a better approach to delivering the news than outright opinion journalism, but it does not provide the public with sufficient context and information to make informed decisions. An approach called pragmatic objectivity has been proposed to provide the audience with scientific, investigative reporting that also questions and checks what officials say, rather than merely reporting their statements verbatim. This approach also attempts to provide context and information, so the audience can make informed decisions on the issues that affect them. Ward (2015) proposes pragmatic objectivity as an alternative to the traditional conception of objectivity as “just the facts”:

Traditional objectivity is an incorrect theory of journalism that characterizes reporting as passively empirical. Traditional objectivity presupposes epistemic dualisms of fact/value and fact/interpretation that distort our understanding of how we know, interpret and value. Traditional objectivity claims that it is based on absolute facts reported by neutral journalists with no perspective. In practice, traditional objectivity lacks the ethical force to guide journalists because criticisms of objectivity have cast doubt over the ideal. Also, there is little relevance of this old ideal of objective reporting to today’s journalism environment. Journalists on all platforms including radio, newspapers, online and mainstream TV broadcasting journalists provide interpretive, interactive and storytelling (p. 281).

Pragmatic objectivity is a journalistic approach that encompasses objectivity, fact, value and practical interests. It does not require journalists to be detached from their values and perspectives; rather, it requires them to test their interpretations, evaluations, and adoption of perspectives, because pragmatic objectivity is an instrument of rational restraint within the pragmatic activity of journalism:

Pragmatic objectivity is a theory of journalism that includes the imperfect procedures and standards that point in the direction of truth because in practice journalism reports are based on limited data, imperfect methods, conflicting values and changing conditions. Pragmatic objectivity presupposes a view of inquiry that is motivated to explore, understand, and control phenomena as it navigates a perilous natural and social environment. Both theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom are outcomes of that exploration (Ward, 2015, p. 284).

Pragmatic objectivity still requires journalists to gather and verify facts, but it recognizes that facts are only a small part of the journalism process. Journalism requires journalists and editors to make value judgments; pragmatic objectivity provides standards for journalists to follow when making decisions influenced by their biases. Journalists are allowed to have a point of view, as long as they disclose that point of view and it is not blatant bias, rhetoric or propaganda.

Pragmatic objectivity also requires journalists to serve the public at large, including marginalized communities, from an independent perspective and without agenda (Ward, 2015).

Ward also suggests the following advice and guidelines for journalists:

Instead of dividing journalism into objective reports and subjective opinion, it is better to see it as a continuum. At one end of the continuum are accounts that stay close to the facts, such as reports about car accidents, fires, and petty crime. Those in the middle

contain more context and assessment about the significance of events, such as protest, government decision, and social issues. At the other end are stories about highly complex topics such as civil wars and foreign lands. Moving across the continuum, we encounter accounts with increasing distance from known facts, increasing amounts of interpretation, and decreasing degrees of objectivity. Pragmatic objectivity can apply to more types of journalism because it provides standards by which people can judge reports that contain differing amounts of context, interpretation and value. (Ward, 2015)

### **New Journalistic Ethics, Procedures and Rules**

Many journalism experts have advocated for new journalistic rules that are more appropriate in the age of digital journalism. Journalists have emphasized fact-checking to counter the increasing amount of false and misleading information available on the Internet. Journalists who act as fact-checkers have the advantage of providing context and explaining to readers misleading and/or false statements politicians make. Politicians often take things out of context, improperly assign blame or credit, conflate matters, assert cause or effect, cherry-pick information and dodge questions. As a result, they successfully avoid answering questions or being held accountable for any lies and misleading statements they make. Fact-checking is an effective strategy for providing the public with accurate information in the digital age of journalism (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2018).

Journalism experts also advocate for news organizations to engage in more community collaboration due to the emergence of social media. The Internet and social media have made it possible for the public to communicate directly with news organizations, so it is necessary for news organizations to understand what the community wants. McBride and Rosenstiel (2018) state, "If journalism can accomplish this transformation into a service that creates and supports

the community, rather than one that creates news products, this could be our best investment in survival” (pp. 66–67). Journalists must adapt to new technology and learn to collaborate with their audiences during all stages of the news gathering and reporting process in the digital age (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2018).

Ward (2018) proposes that journalism adopt new digital journalistic ethics that create a dialogue with the public on all platforms because journalism is for the public— not journalists, publishers and editors. Also, this dialogue needs to offer the public enough information to promote a functioning democracy. These new digital journalism ethics need to encourage citizens to come together and discuss societal issues, and the news media need to encourage this conversation:

Journalism ethics belong to the public, so responsible journalists must formulate principles that meet the “media needs” of citizens in self-governing democracies. There are at least six such needs: 1. Informational need—wide and deep; 2. Explanatory needs; 3. Perspectival enrichment needs; 4. Advocational and reform needs; 5. Participatory needs; and 6. Dialogic needs. (Ward, 2018, p. 371)

Ward also proposes that new digital journalism ethics include a global perspective because news media are global. Technological advances have allowed news media to gather and report news from all over the world on topics like migration, climate change, world trade policies and international security. Ward says, “Journalism ethics and norms need to be sensitive to the diverse traditions, religions, traditions, ethnic groups, values, political agenda, and social ideals if it wants to effectively report on these issues” (2018, p. 373).

### **Reforms for Journalism**

Although the right-wing media have been effective at shaping public opinion with misleading information, there is hope that journalists can reach people and give them accurate information. The democratization of the media has created an environment that encourages vigorous debate, and many excellent news organizations have been formed because the Internet makes starting a news organization so simple. The Internet has made it easier for journalists, editors and publishers to reach the public, and it has lowered the costs of starting a news organization. The number of independent media and news watchdog organizations that do not have ties to corporations and billionaires has increased significantly, and they have been effective at informing the public of the right-wing media's unethical journalistic behavior (McChesney, 2004).

Better media literacy is necessary for the public to be able to identify false information, and there should be public policies aimed at improving the public's media literacy by teaching the subject in schools. Damaso Reyes, Director of Community Partnerships and Engagement at the News Literacy Project, agreed: "There is a cure—or, perhaps better put, there's a vaccine—to fake news. That vaccine actually is news literacy education" (Stringer, 2018). Only about half of children from ages 10 to 18 could tell the difference between a fake and real story, according to the results of a 2017 Common Sense Media survey (Stringer, 2018). Reyes proposes that media literacy be taught across the curriculum. Critical thinking needs to be taught, and the subject can be integrated into computer science, social studies, and science history classes (Stringer, 2018).

It is essential that all news organizations serve the public interest by providing the public with accurate information on the issues that concern them. To ensure news organizations are not misleading the public, the Fairness Doctrine should be reinstated and enforced by the FCC.

Federal Communications Commission. In “Everything You Need to Know About the Fairness Doctrine in One Post,” Matthews (2011) wrote, “The Fairness Doctrine required TV and radio stations holding FCC-issued broadcast licenses to (a) devote some of their programming to controversial issues of public importance and (b) allow the airing of opposing views on those issues.” The Fairness Doctrine should also apply to online news organizations, which would require news organizations with political programs to include coverage of opposing opinions on issues. Additionally, the rule requires news organizations to inform public figures of any attacks made on them on the organization’s program, and then provide the attacked party a chance to respond. The rule also requires broadcasters that endorse political candidates to invite other candidates to respond. Enforcing the Fairness Doctrine would ensure that audiences receive a spectrum of perspectives on issues, allowing them to make more informed decisions. Enforcing this rule does not infringe on free speech rights, making it a reasonable rule to implement.

Enforcing the Fairness Doctrine is a reasonable course of action because it was a policy with which American media had to comply in the past. The Fairness Doctrine was created for good reasons through congressional legislation of the Radio Act of 1927. Congress mandated that the FCC should only issue broadcast licenses in service of the public interest. Unfortunately, the FCC began to reconsider the rule in the mid-1980s, and President Reagan vetoed a bill that would codify the Fairness Doctrine in law (Pagano, 1987). A significant increase in the number of conservative talk radio shows began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Fairness Doctrine was finally removed as a rule from the FCC books in 2011 (Matthews, 2018).

Repealing of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 would help to break up media consolidation and create a media environment that fosters diverse reporting and benefits the public. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was “essentially bought and paid for by corporate

media lobbies,” as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) described it, and it radically “opened the floodgates on mergers” (Corcoran, 2016). The act reduced FCC regulations on cross ownership and allowed corporations to buy thousands of media outlets across the U.S., which increased the monopoly of information that Americans and the world received (Corcoran, 2016).

Media reform affects all other issues, and the aftermath of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 has shown that democracy suffers when nearly all media are owned by a few large corporations. Passing legislation that allows the FCC to more effectively regulate the media would help create a media landscape where the information is more democratized (Corcoran, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the development of modern media ethics and has shown a set of guidelines that can and perhaps should be revised and improved to match the challenges of an economic and political system that has taken advantage of guidelines such as “objective reporting” by creating too many false equivalencies. This paper has provided examples of reforms that can create a better media environment and keep the public better informed. As it was important for journalism to improve from partisan media to objective reporting in the past, it is important today that journalism improves its practices to address the right-wing media’s attack on journalism and avoid too many false equivalencies.

### **Interviews**

Disclaimer- I attempted to get a conservative opinion, but both Fox News and Breitbart News declined to be interviewed.

To test the ideas in this paper I contacted several professional journalists from networks such as NPR, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET), The Young Turks (TYT), The New York Times and the Chicago Tribune. There was general consensus among the interviewees

that objective journalism should avoid drawing false equivalencies and they supported the concept of pragmatic objectivity and providing the proper context.

Ana Kasparian, at TYT, was a little more critical of the media by saying that the media too often mistakes objectivity with neutrality. She also said the media was not effective at addressing the right-wing media's attacks on journalism. I found it interesting that Ana said the following: "During a recent off-the-record conversation with one journalist who has worked in the mainstream media for decades, I was told that the right wing often viciously attacks the news outlet if it's revealed that someone on the right wing is being dishonest. I was told that liberals and progressives are far less likely to lash out in this way. As a result, the mainstream media will avoid uncovering the truth when those on the conservative side of the political spectrum are being dishonest because they don't want to alienate their conservative audience."

Mark Memmott—NPR Standards & Practices Editor- take was a little different from Anna's because he was less critical of the way objective journalism is practiced today. He said, "I don't know how effectively the objective journalism model counters the attacks on journalism, but I subscribe to the belief that all we can do is to do our job. That means digging through the facts in the search of the truth—doing that in a fair way that is as transparent as possible, presenting our findings, and making our case—and we'll be judged by how well we do that." Mark Memmott liked the concept of pragmatic objectivity, and he said NPR allows their journalists to report "earned conclusions." He said, "we allow our journalists to have earned conclusions when they have done this, and David Folkenflik is one of our reporters that is a good example of doing the research then reporting his earned conclusion."

Dennis Kellog—News Director NET- had a unique perspective that was not concerned with the agenda of a source but rather the substance of what the source was saying is the most

important aspect to consider. Kellogg also placed an emphasis on the fact that truth is under attack from the left and the right. He said, “I think journalists should provide the proper context that is balanced and accurately represents accurately all sides of an issue is great for a journalist to do. If an interviewee is representing an organization that is funded by certain interests with a political agenda, despite it being liberal or conservative, then the journalist should provide that context and disclose that to the audience.”

Kurt Gessler-Chicago Tribune journalist-had a different take from the other interviewees because his response focused on fighting back against the attacks on journalism. He said, “. The solution I’d adopt is as above: Fight back. Tell your own story. Invite the public into the newsroom and into the process. Marketing. Don’t just let your journalism speak for itself; Speak on its behalf. Spell out the value proposition in the work you’re doing. The answer to rise of partisan national media isn’t necessarily more partisan journalism. In most cases, it’s transparency and outreach.” Kurt also like the concept of pragmatic objectivity. He said, “I’m a supporter of pragmatic objectivity in the right cases. Certainly, in all forms of journalism, disclosing connections and relationships is already standard. I also deeply appreciate when subject-matter experts write on their topics, a bias but a fully disclosed one.”

Phil Corbett—New York Times journalist-has a similar take on the importance of journalistic ethics like the other interviewees. He said, “I think we should be careful not to confuse “objective” (or, my preferred description, “impartial”) journalism with simplistic notions of “balance,” and certainly not with false balance or false equivalence. In advocating “impartial” journalism, I really just mean that news reporters and editors should make an honest, professional commitment to put aside their personal views and preconceptions in their work; should make a good-faith effort to represent a range of perspectives on debatable issues; and

indeed, should actively seek out evidence that might go against the reporter's own preconceptions.”

Generally, most of the interviewees agree that journalism should avoid false equivalencies and find an effective way to address attacks against journalism

### **Appendix-Interview Transcript**

#### **Mark Memmott—NPR Standards & Practices Editor**

**Jason McCoy:** The Knight Foundation published a survey that found that most Americans believe that the media have an important role to play in our democracy — yet they don't see that role being fulfilled, and that trust in news and information is dropping. There are unique new problems that the old ethics/model such as objective journalism doesn't give journalists the tools to counter the right-wing media's attack that the rest of the media is liberal, “fake news,” and “the enemy of the people.” How do journalists and these outlets under attack effectively inform the public of these inaccurate depictions? Do we need new tactics/ethics?

**Mark Memmott:** I don't know how effectively the objective journalism model counters the attacks on journalism, but I subscribe to the belief that all we can do is to do our job. That means digging through the facts in the search of the truth—doing that in a fair way that is as transparent as possible, presenting our findings, and making our case—and we'll be judged by how well we do that. Over the long run, I believe that is what we should do, always have tried to do, and has done the most good for journalism over time. A plethora of different types of media outlets is not necessarily a bad thing, but I wish schools taught media literacy more so young folks could differentiate as they come up. I would make the case this isn't brand new, but the scale may be different now. I'm a believer that we need to double down on what we should do and have tried to do all along, and in some ways, you can make the case that this current

environment is good for us because it has reminded us that sticking to the facts, challenging assumptions and challenging authority is important.

**Jason McCoy:** Dr. Stephen Ward, internationally recognized media ethicist and journalism professor, proposes what he calls “pragmatic objectivity,” which provides more context, allows journalists to disclose their bias, perspective and opinion, as long as they also provide all of the information to the audience to make the best decision possible, and include a justification for why the journalist has that opinion and as long as that perspective is based on the evidence. He believes pragmatic objectivity will more effectively explain the complex issues that usually lie on a spectrum and requires a nuanced understanding and an explanation that balances the relative positive and negative aspects of each issue and the range of solutions. This approach would also avoid false equivalencies and counter fake information so the audience understands the difference, then can make an informed decision. Your opinion?

**Mark Memmott:** It’s OK to report an impartial, fact-based conclusion if the reporter has done the necessary amount of research and has challenged his or her own bias and is open to new evidence. We allow our journalists to have earned conclusions when they have done this, and David Folkenflik is one of our reporters that is a good example of doing the research then reporting his earned conclusion.

#### **Dennis Kellog—News Director NET**

**Jason McCoy:** The Knight Foundation published a survey that found that most Americans believe that the media have an important role to play in our democracy—yet they don’t see that role being fulfilled, and that trust in news and information is dropping. There are unique new problems that the old ethics/model of objective journalism doesn’t give journalists the tools to counter the right-wing media’s attack that the rest of the media is liberal, “fake

news,” and the enemy of the people. How do journalists and these outlets under attack effectively inform the public of these inaccurate depictions? Do we need new tactics/ethics? EX: Boston Globe coordinated with many other news organizations about fake news. Is this new, since old journalism was competitive and had little of this type of coordination?

**Dennis Kellog:** There are criticisms on journalism from liberals and conservatives, and I think what journalists need to focus on is the truth. I think it is dead wrong for journalism organizations to have a political agenda. I think that news organizations that engage in opinionated analysis rather than focusing on reporting fact-based news has hurt journalism, regardless of which side of the political spectrum one may come from. Opinionated analysis has confused the consumers of news because it is difficult to differentiate between a journalist that provides news with his or her opinion. I think the lines are blurred, on both sides (political spectrum-liberal and conservative), between “real” fact-based journalism and opinion that reports the news and allows the people to decide. I think there is room for collaboration in journalism, we do it, and if in the end the consumer of journalism gets a better understanding of the issues by news organization pooling resources, so it is one way to address the attacks if it is done correctly.

**Jason McCoy:** How does objective journalism counter the right-wing rhetoric and propaganda that is funded by billionaires including think tanks such as Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation established and funded by Koch brothers and their network of billionaires and millionaires to influence public policy, then lobby for those policies that benefit industry and the wealthy often times at the expense of the public, consumers and workers and the poor. The right-wing media like Fox News, Breitbart, and talk radio use these experts and policies to convince the public to support them, which leads to the public being misinformed and voting

against their own interest. Does objective journalism that gives both perspectives right vs. left on the issues adequately inform the public? Jane Mayer's research explains this network of dark money. EX: Climate change, false equivalencies drawn when attempting to be objective by balancing both sides of the issue.

**Dennis Kellog:** Ninety-eight percent of climate change scientists believe climate change exists. When the evidence lies overwhelmingly on one side of an argument, then a journalist should provide that context to the audience. If one is arguing against 98 percent of climate change scientists, the journalist should push back on that with the facts. But it is also important that the critics of climate change, or any other issue, be given a chance to express their concerns in an attempt to understand that point of view in the attempt as a journalist to seek the truth. A journalist organization should stay in the middle and report objective, fact-based information providing all the sides of an issue, and any news organization that distorts facts is wrong. This distortion occurs on both sides and regardless of which side is doing it, that it wrong. It may be true that on the issue of climate change the distortion may be coming from one group of conservatives, but there may be other issues that are being distorted by the other extreme and that is also wrong. There should be no right or left wing of journalism; there should just be journalism that reports the facts. I think journalists should seek and report the truth despite the politics, and journalists should always be questioning the information from all sides to find the truth.

**Jason McCoy:** Dr. Stephen Ward, internationally recognized media ethicist and journalism professor proposes what he calls pragmatic objectivity that provides more context, allows journalists to disclose their bias, perspective and opinion as long as they also provide all of the information to the audience to make the best decision possible, and include a justification

for why the journalist has that opinion and as long as that perspective is based on the evidence. He believes pragmatic objectivity will more effectively explain the complex issues that usually lie on a spectrum and requires a nuanced understanding and an explanation that balances the relative positive and negative aspects of each issue and the range of solutions. This approach would also avoid false equivalencies and counter fake information so the audience understands the difference, then can make an informed decision. Your opinion?

**Dennis Kellogg:** I think journalists should provide the proper context that is balanced and accurately represents accurately all sides of an issue is great for a journalist to do. If an interviewee is representing an organization that is funded by certain interests with a political agenda, despite it being liberal or conservative, then the journalist should provide that context and disclose that to the audience. The journalist should push back on any statement with the facts and provide the proper context to the audience, and all sides of an issue should be expressed to reach a balance.

**Jason McCoy:** Does objective journalism effectively counter the right-wing media's rhetoric of alternative facts, journalists are the enemy of the people and spreading real fake-news and false information?

**Dennis Kellogg:** Every presidential administration has attempted to spin and frame their point of view, so Trump does not have any corner on that market. I disagree with your perspective that these attacks on the media are new, but absolutely I agree that journalism is facing attacks that are harder than they have been. Journalism is under attack because the truth is under attack from both sides, and both sides are equally wrong. I don't know if I have an answer of how journalism should address these attacks, but we are doing our job as well as we can. Our job is to report what is accurate, fair while representing all sides, and if one twists the facts to

serve a political agenda, then that is wrong and it hurts journalism, our country and our democracy.

### **Ana Kasparian—The Young Turks (TYT)**

**Jason McCoy:** The Knight Foundation published a survey that found that most Americans believe that the media have an important role to play in our democracy—yet they don't see that role being fulfilled, and that trust in news and information is dropping. There are unique new problems that the old ethics/model such as objective journalism doesn't give journalists the tools to counter the right-wing media's attack that the rest of the media is liberal, fake-news, and the enemy of the people. How do journalists and these outlets under attack effectively inform the public of these inaccurate depictions? Do we need new tactics/ethics? EX: Boston Globe coordinated with many other news organizations about fake news is this new because old journalism was competitive and there has been little of this type of coordination. Is this coordination one solution to the attack on journalism?

**Ana Kasparian:** The underlying problem with how news outlets tackle their coverage is that often they mistake objectivity with neutrality. The notion of remaining fair and objective is important because it pressures journalists to put their biases or personal opinions aside in order to stick to the facts of the story — regardless of how those facts counter their preconceived notions. However, in an effort to appear as objective as possible, journalists have made the mistake of treating all sides of a given conflict equally at all times. The climate of neutrality is problematic when one side is clearly lying. There is also a fear amongst journalists when it comes to revealing the fact that one side is being dishonest. During a recent off-the-record conversation with one journalist who has worked in the mainstream media for decades, I was told that the right wing often viciously attacks the news outlet if it's revealed that someone on the right wing

is being dishonest. I was told that liberals and progressives are far less likely to lash out in this way. As a result, the mainstream media will avoid uncovering the truth when those on the conservative side of the political spectrum are being dishonest because they don't want to alienate their conservative audience.

**Jason McCoy:** Does objective journalism effectively counter the right-wing media's rhetoric of alternative facts and spreading real fake-news and false information? What are some solutions outlets can adopt to effectively combat these attacks?

**Ana Kasparian:** Traditional journalism is incredibly weak in countering the right wing's rhetoric of alternative facts because they consistently give those who have no interest in being honest a platform to spread their misinformation. In an effort to appear "fair" various news outlets will allow dishonest actors to appear on their news shows to spew their lies. Often the hosts or reporters will not fact-check the claims made by the person who clearly has a political agenda and is clearly lying. This allows for the spread of misinformation and propaganda. News outlets should adopt a policy of not allowing dishonest actors to appear on their shows. Print journalists should avoid interviewing individuals who clearly have no interest in telling the truth. The number one call to action is to stop giving dishonest actors platforms to spread propaganda. The second call to action is to fearlessly fact-check someone when they're being dishonest. It is not up to the news consumer to uncover the truth—it's up to the journalist to do his or her job and identify the lies and misinformation.

**Jason McCoy:** How does objective journalism counter the right-wing rhetoric and propaganda that is funded by billionaires including think tanks such as Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation established and funded by Koch brothers and their network of billionaires and millionaires to influence public policy, then lobby for those policies that benefit industry and

the wealthy often times at the expense of the public, consumers and workers and the poor. The right-wing media like Fox News, Breitbart, and talk radio use these experts and policies to convince the public to support them, which leads to the public being misinformed and voting against their own interest. Does objective journalism which gives both perspectives right vs left on the issues adequately seek the truth then inform the public of the truth? EX: Jane Mayer's research explains this network of dark money. EX: Climate change, false equivalencies drawn when attempting to be objective by balancing both sides of the issue.

**Ana Kasparian:** Journalists have moved away from interviewing actual experts and have instead focused their energies on non-experts who are funded by corporate interests. Part of the issue here is that mainstream media itself has its own corporate advertisers and sponsors. As a result, there's a well-documented corporate bias on the airwaves and even in print. If BP is a major advertiser on your network, you're much more willing to draw false equivalencies between climate scientists and deniers. You're also more willing to interview a Koch-funded climate denier as if he or she is a credible source for the debate. This behavior is NOT an example of practicing objective journalism. The way journalism is funded is incredibly important. TYT is mostly supported by its paid subscriber base—meaning that the audience pays a monthly fee for the content. That allows TYT to reject any corporate sponsor that insists on editorial control. News outlets should serve their consumers rather than their sponsors.

**Jason McCoy:** Dr. Stephen Ward, internationally recognized media ethicist and journalism professor proposes what he calls pragmatic objectivity that provides more context, allows journalists to disclose their bias, perspective and opinion as long as they also provide all of the information to the audience to make the best decision possible, and include a justification for why the journalist has that opinion and as long as that perspective is based on the evidence.

He believes pragmatic objectivity will more effectively explain the complex issues that usually lie on a spectrum and requires a nuanced understanding and an explanation that balances the relative positive and negative aspects of each issue and the range of solutions. This approach would also avoid false equivalencies and counter fake information so the audience understands the difference, then it can make an informed decision. Would you agree journalism needs to adopt more of a “pragmatic objective” model that provides the audience with context and information that allows the audience to make the most informed decisions on the issues?

**Ana Kasparian:** I agree with Dr. Ward’s suggestion of pragmatic objectivity. It leads to more honesty between the journalist and the audience, and it also forces the journalist to provide evidence for why he or she has reached a certain conclusion. The disclosure of opinions can be beneficial to the audience because it gives them a sense of where the journalist is coming from. But it also forces the journalist to get the bottom of the truth rather than pretend both sides of a given conflict are equal.

**Kurt Gessler—Journalist at the *Chicago Tribune***

**Jason McCoy:** The Knight Foundation published a survey that found that most Americans believe that the media have an important role to play in our democracy—yet they don’t see that role being fulfilled, and that trust in news and information is dropping. There are unique new problems that the old ethics/model such as objective journalism doesn’t give journalists the tools to counter the right-wing media’s attack that the rest of the media is liberal, fake-news, and the enemy of the people. How do journalists and these outlets under attack effectively inform the public of these inaccurate depictions? Do we need new tactics/ethics? EX: Boston Globe coordinated with many other news organizations about fake news is this new because old

journalism was competitive and there has been little of this type of coordination. Is this coordination one solution to the attack on journalism?

**Kurt Gessler:** I like this. This is the right question to ask, in my mind. Trust in the media is shrinking because of direct and indirect attacks on the media. The real issue isn't The New York *Times*' ability to defend its White House press corps or op ed pieces. They have the resources. The challenge is the collateral damage that occurs when a casual reader conflates "journalism" solely with coverage of national politics. There are thousands of journalists at small TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, magazines and websites that, as an imperative, must practice objective journalism. They must be fair and unbiased, give both sides the opportunity to speak, listen to them and then digest all arguments before writing as part of their daily jobs. They're not covering the White House, but rather a housing development, but those jobs are every bit as important. But when a party/group/individual can attack journalism at large, it's those local reporters who suffer, those local reporters who aren't even the targets of that ire, but also who have no easy means to defend themselves. The companies that own these outlets tend not to be invested in the quality of local journalism, let alone refuting these attacks. And finances are tight. So, what are journalists and these outlets — outlets not in NYC or D.C. — doing? Honestly, nothing. And that's the problem. It's would be an easy defense to separate their "journalists" from the White House press corps and the "fake news" label. But in most places, the resources aren't being dedicated to doing so. It's time to start making a case to the public for the work that is being done at that level. And honestly, the *NYT*, *CNN*, and *WaPo* have plenty of resources to survive and thrive in 2019.

**Jason McCoy:** Does objective journalism effectively counter the right-wing media's rhetoric of alternative facts and spreading real fake-news and false information? What are some

solutions outlets can adopt to effectively combat these attacks? How does objective journalism counter the right-wing rhetoric and propaganda that is funded by billionaires including think tanks such as Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation established and funded by Koch brothers and their network of billionaires and millionaires to influence public policy, then lobby for those policies that benefit industry and the wealthy often times at the expense of the public, consumers and workers and the poor. The right-wing media like Fox News, Breitbart, and talk radio use these experts and policies to convince the public to support them, which leads to the public being misinformed and voting against their own interest. Does objective journalism which gives both perspectives right vs left on the issues adequately seek the truth then inform the public of the truth? EX: Jane Mayer's research explains this network of dark money. EX: Climate change, false equivalencies drawn when attempting to be objective by balancing both sides of the issue.

**Kurt Gessler:** Again, we're talking about objective journalism in too narrow of a scope. First and foremost, without doubt most journalism should be objective. I wouldn't fundamentally change journalism to deal with a small group's (White House press corps) relationship with a single president. The solution I'd adopt is as above: Fight back. Tell your own story. Invite the public into the newsroom and into the process. Marketing. Don't just let your journalism speak for itself; Speak on its behalf. Spell out the value proposition in the work you're doing. The answer to rise of partisan national media isn't necessarily more partisan journalism. In most cases, it's transparency and outreach.

**Jason McCoy:** Dr. Stephen Ward, internationally recognized media ethicist and journalism professor proposes what he calls pragmatic objectivity that provides more context, allows journalists to disclose their bias, perspective and opinion as long as they also provide all of the information to the audience to make the best decision possible, and include a justification

for why the journalist has that opinion and as long as that perspective is based on the evidence. He believes pragmatic objectivity will more effectively explain the complex issues that usually lie on a spectrum and requires a nuanced understanding and an explanation that balances the relative positive and negative aspects of each issue and the range of solutions. This approach would also avoid false equivalencies and counter fake information so the audience understands the difference, then it can make an informed decision. Would you agree journalism needs to adopt more of a “pragmatic objective” model that provides the audience with context and information that allows the audience to make the most informed decisions on the issues?

**Kurt Gessler:** I’m a supporter of pragmatic objectivity in the right cases. Certainly, in all forms of journalism, disclosing connections and relationships is already standard. I also deeply appreciate when subject-matter experts write on their topics, a bias but a fully disclosed one. NatGeo is built upon this. But how does this fit into most daily coverage? To me, pragmatic objectivity doesn’t fit most journalism. How should journalism be biased? Toward transparency, toward truth, toward a free exchange of ideas, toward the powerless, against injustice, and toward an informed citizenry and better communities. Everything else is spin and window dressing.

**Phil Corbett—New York Times**

**Jason McCoy:** The Knight Foundation published a survey that found that most Americans believe that the media have an important role to play in our democracy—yet they don’t see that role being fulfilled, and that trust in news and information is dropping. There are unique new problems that the old ethics/model such as objective journalism doesn’t give journalists the tools to counter the right-wing media’s attack that the rest of the media is liberal, fake-news, and the enemy of the people. How do journalists and these outlets under attack

effectively inform the public of these inaccurate depictions? Do we need new tactics/ethics? EX: Boston Globe coordinated with many other news organizations about fake news is this new because old journalism was competitive and there has been little of this type of coordination. Is this coordination one solution to the attack on journalism?

Does objective journalism effectively counter the right-wing media's rhetoric of alternative facts and spreading real fake-news and false information? What are some solutions outlets can adopt to effectively combat these attacks?

How does objective journalism counter the right-wing rhetoric and propaganda that is funded by billionaires including think tanks such as Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation established and funded by Koch brothers and their network of billionaires and millionaires to influence public policy, then lobby for those policies that benefit industry and the wealthy often times at the expense of the public, consumers and workers and the poor. The right-wing media like Fox News, Breitbart, and talk radio use these experts and policies to convince the public to support them, which leads to the public being misinformed and voting against their own interest. Does objective journalism which gives both perspectives right vs left on the issues adequately seek the truth then inform the public of the truth? EX: Jane Mayer's research explains this network of dark money. EX: Climate change, false equivalencies drawn when attempting to be objective by balancing both sides of the issue.

Dr. Stephen Ward, internationally recognized media ethicist and journalism professor proposes what he calls pragmatic objectivity that provides more context, allows journalists to disclose their bias, perspective and opinion as long as they also provide all of the information to the audience to make the best decision possible, and include a justification for why the journalist has that opinion and as long as that perspective is based on the evidence. He believes pragmatic

objectivity will more effectively explain the complex issues that usually lie on a spectrum and requires a nuanced understanding and an explanation that balances the relative positive and negative aspects of each issue and the range of solutions. This approach would also avoid false equivalencies and counter fake information so the audience understands the difference, then it can make an informed decision. Would you agree journalism needs to adopt more of a “pragmatic objective” model that provides the audience with context and information that allows the audience to make the most informed decisions on the issues?

**Phil Corbett:** Thanks for your note. Unfortunately, I’m not sure I’ll be able to be too much help. You raise many valid issues, but your approach seems to frame this largely as a political or ideological issue, and I’m not going to venture into that discussion.

I’ll offer just a couple of observations, for what they’re worth. (Note that I am discussing only news reporting of the kind our newsroom does; advocacy journalism, or opinion writing, is a different category and I don’t deal with that area at *The Times*.)

Honestly, I don’t at all agree with your premise that “objective” journalism has failed. (As just one example, *The New York Times* has far more readers, and far more paying subscribers, than ever before in its history. Presumably that larger-than-ever audience believes it is getting value from such an “objective” news outlet and is better informed because of it. If people who read *Breitbart* but *don’t* read *The Times* end up ill-informed, I don’t think that’s a failure by *The Times*.)

I think we should be careful not to confuse “objective” (or, my preferred description, “impartial”) journalism with simplistic notions of “balance,” and certainly not with false balance or false equivalence. For example, if a news outlet writes, “Some people think the earth is warming, and some people don’t think so”—that’s not “objective” or “impartial” journalism,

that's just bad journalism. Being objective doesn't mean giving false or dubious assertions the same weight as accurate or well-documented assertions. Sure, journalists sometimes fall into that error, but that's a failure of execution, not a flaw in the model. It has been a long time since the *Times* treated climate change, for example, as an on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand topic.

I think we should be careful not to confuse “objective” (or, my preferred description, “impartial”) journalism with simplistic notions of “balance,” and certainly not with false balance or false equivalence. In advocating “impartial” journalism, I really just mean that news reporters and editors should make an honest, professional commitment to put aside their personal views and preconceptions in their work; should make a good-faith effort to represent a range of perspectives on debatable issues; and indeed, should actively seek out evidence that might go against the reporter's own preconceptions.

Based on years of experience in hearing reader complaints and reading criticism of our journalism, I am extremely dubious of the suggestion that news reporters would enhance their credibility with readers overall by publicly declaring their personal political views. That might possibly bolster their credibility (or at least their popularity) with readers who already share those views, but it will almost certainly lessen or erase their credibility with readers who hold different views, or even with readers who are on the fence. Again, look at *Breitbart*: They make their political stance quite clear. This may increase their popularity with a small target audience, but I would contend that it severely undercuts their credibility with everyone else.

I think there are a number of things traditional news organizations like The Times can do to defend our work and enhance our credibility. We are already doing many of these things, but should do more; for example:

- Relentless fact-checking, both as a separate function and within traditional stories.

- Being more transparent and explaining to readers what went into our reporting.
- Focusing as much as possible on deep, substantive reporting, without being distracted by noisy and superficial controversies.
- Doing more, not less, to preserve our reputation for impartiality and to avoid giving the impression that our journalists take sides or bring their own political views into their reporting.

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