

THE NEWS WE DESIRE: ARE PARTISAN NEWS OUTLETS GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY?

As allegations concerning whether President Donald Trump unethically sought foreign aid from Ukrainian officials in his election bid quickly morphed into a long series of hearings, confused and curious Americans turned to one of the only sources they hoped could grant them clarity: Cable TV news. By November of 2019, over 70 million viewers had tuned in to coverage of the House Intelligence Committee's ongoing impeachment inquiry. On November 13, 13 million people watched as U.S. Diplomat to Ukraine, George Kent testified in the first public hearing (Battaglio, 2019). Two networks in particular dominated the cable news coverage of the impeachment hearings: of the 13 million viewers, Fox News gained the attention of 2.9 million and MSNBC claimed 2.7 million (Patten, 2014). Just as attitudes to this controversy among political officials split largely across partisan lines, so too were the narratives broadcasted by America's most-watched stations. On the night of that first November 13 hearing, MSNBC's Rachel Maddow began her popular program discussing what was "a double-barreled problem for the President," claiming that he was "caught doing something illegal," sacrificing the country's national interest for that of his own personal interest (Grynbaum, 2019). Simultaneously, streaming only two blocks over from MSNBC's New York headquarters, Fox News' Sean Hannity described what was "a great day for the United States, for the country, for the President" but "a lousy day for the corrupt, do-nothing-for-three-years, radical, extreme, socialist Democrats and their top allies known as the media mob" (Grynbaum, 2019). Days later, MSNBC host Christ Hayes told viewers that "Today, the American people got a fuller picture of the corrupt abuse of power by the President of the United States," while Fox News host Tucker Carlson called the same testimony "pointless and tiresome," which "made you realize that Democrats really have no master plan for impeachment" (Grynbaum, 2019). According to *New York Times* correspondent Michael M. Grynbaum, this startling gap in narratives between Fox and MSNBC reflects today's "choose-your-own-news media environment," which he describes as "a far cry from the era when Americans experienced major events through the same television hearth" (Grynbaum, 2019). Longtime journalist Tom Rosenstiel has described these nationally viewed yet highly controversial stations like Fox and MSNBC as "birthing centers for polarizing rhetoric" (Sullivan, 2019). Like Rosenstiel, many experts believe the success of these national cable giants could be tied to the reality that controversy sells, even in the news media. Unlike the local news stations that have seen a sharp decline in viewership over the past ten years, for example, partisan media monopolies like Fox, CNN, and MSNBC have steadily increased their revenue for the last two decades, representing a \$5 billion industry today





(Pew Research Center, 2019).

Partisan angles have long been the lifeline of networks like MSNBC and Fox. In 1996, Robert Murdoch founded The Fox News Channel to be what was characterized as a refreshing solution to offset the overwhelming and problematic liberal biases he observed in the media with “fair and balanced” coverage where “We Report. You Decide” (Ray, 2020). That same year, Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Channel teamed up to launch MSNBC, but it wasn’t until 2007—the year that the network began to make its liberal approach to reporting more explicit—that MSNBC’s viewership and ratings began to soar (Weprin, 2012).

Despite the networks’ early intentions to simply *provide* information to Americans, cable news is now greatly *influencing* the political reality millions of Americans will come to perceive via their media intake. In Tom Rosenstiel’s and Bill Kovach’s book, *The Elements of Journalism*, they note that telling the truth is the primary obligation journalists have towards honoring their first loyalty: serving their fellow citizens. If such standards are the basic principles to ethical journalism, how is it possible that partisan cable news channels like Fox and MSNBC can convey two completely opposing realities that prefer two different audiences (Kovach & Rosenthal, 2007)? Does this imply that either one or both of the channels are practicing unethical journalism in failing to convey the truth, or does it point out the challenge in assuming that news only exists to convey *the* truth? Cable news clearly features more commentary than other forms of journalism, employing “more argumentative language, more personal and subjective exposition of topics, more use of opinion and personal interaction, and more-dogmatic positions for and against specific positions” in recent years (Owen, 2019). This increase in opinionated news could be explained by a relatively low creation cost, the ability to stand out from mainstream reporting, and a response to growing demands from consumers that their perspectives and opinions be heard. Beyond the need to attract and retain audiences, this shift toward partisan perspectives and commentary might also be a response to the need to fill a 24-hour news cycle with content (Meltzer, 2020). One problem that arises concerns differentiating news and commentary on the news: in 2018, the Pew Research Center found that “the basic task of differentiating between factual and opinion news statements presents somewhat of a challenge to Americans” (Desilver, 2018). As Americans are increasingly exposed to more and more partisan perspectives in their news, the issue of whether or not these audiences are being fairly and accurately informed arises.

While the proliferation of media choices is often overwhelming for both journalists and their audiences, if there’s any one ideology that unites Americans nationally, it’s the concept of freedom – to live one’s life as one chooses. From Fox News, to CNN, to MSNBC, reaching from far-right to far-left or meeting somewhere in between, Americans may now choose not only when, where, and how to receive their news, but from what specific angle. For communities who feel their perspectives are often underrepresented in the media, a diversity in coverage can be empowering. Murdoch, for example, was justified in noting a lack of conservative representation in America’s news when he founded Fox in 1996. In 1971, almost 26% of reporters identified as Republican, but that number shrank to only 7% in 2013 whereas 28% of journalists identified as Democrat and the rest as Independents (Gold, 2014). This lack of representation may be to blame for the increased skepticism in which conservatives have expressed towards the press. In 2018, only 6% of Republicans reported having “a great deal” of trust in national network news (Lakshmanan, 2018). A conservatively slanted channel like Fox could be precisely what American conservatives need to feel heard, valued, and informed by the country’s press today.



As polarization among Republican and Democrat supporters has reached an all-time high, an increasingly partisan news media may likely be adding fuel to the fire. At present, most Americans find little variation in the ideas and beliefs expressed through the news they consume. According to the theory of selective exposure, humans are more likely to consume news that reflects their own views, and in turn, ignore messages which challenge their pre-existing opinions in order to “avoid psychological conflict known as *cognitive dissonance*” (Bobok, 2016; also see Stroud, 2011). An innate desire for establishing harmony between one’s personal beliefs and facts reflected by the outside world often presents itself in personalized environments known as echo chambers, “in which somebody encounters only opinions and beliefs similar to their own, and does not have to consider alternatives” (Oxford Dictionary). Perhaps counterintuitively, some researchers have argued that this natural urge to separate into homogenous groups isn’t necessarily negative, because echo chambers can actually enhance information retrieval and produce meaningful communication within homogenous groups (Jann & Schottmuller, 2018). When polarization is present, the segregation of individuals into like-minded echo chambers may be an effective response. That being said, however, those same researchers have found polarization to lower the overall welfare of a society. Segregation into echo chambers, according to researchers from the University of Cologne and Oxford, often “mitigates the corrosive effects of polarization” and thus serve as “society’s countermeasure against it” (Jann & Schottmuller, 2018). Although separation may prove meaningful for conversation *within* opposing groups, this high polarization can lead to “informational breakdown” *between* groups. Many experts worry what this dissonance, specifically among political parties, could mean for the nationwide discourse. Despite possibilities for positive consequences, many Americans still worry about the larger negative implications of polarization in the news and among news viewers. Some contend that echo chambers may even impact the state of American democracy itself since the government’s functionality rests on the willingness of its citizens to set aside their differences and collectively pursue the country’s good.

Actively seeking to escape these echo chambers and fight against polarization in one’s newsfeed could be an efficient response. According to political scientist Dalibor Bobok, those who expose themselves to a diverse array of news are more likely to display an increased tolerance towards others, show a better understanding of their own and others’ arguments, and report a greater capacity to address political conflict (Bobok, 2016). However, these attitudes may not form if Americans consume news only from channels like Fox or MSNBC. In fact, Americans who regularly view content from these networks show a lessened desire towards matters of unity, peace, and understanding with those they disagree (Bobok, 2016). The tendency towards selective exposure over a diversified news feed may likely result in “issue-based polarization,” which may cause news consumers to “increase the distance among groups of society and embrace the false consensus,” which is when those in the minority falsely believe their opinions and ideologies predominate in the world around them (Bobok, 2016). This false consensus ideal perpetuated by news stations largely opposed in their political slant could lead to misinformation. For example, an individual who tuned in solely to Maddow’s primetime coverage of the impeachment hearings on MSNBC may perceive the cause for Donald Trump’s impeachment to be just and expect to see him removed from office. This individual, however, would be likely perplexed as to how and why Trump was acquitted by the Senate in February of 2020, despite the fact that almost half of Americans found the President blameless. The underlying problem, perhaps, is that American news consumers do not reflect these idealistic preferences for a diversified news diet. Because consumers have been shown to prefer more politicized messages over that of the neutral time and time again, Matt Grossman believes partisan media may one day completely replace the country’s traditional journalistic model. According to Grossman, “the



dominance of independent, trusted, putatively impartial media is not a natural state of affairs.” Impartial media is what Grossman describes “a twentieth-century phenomenon that is not guaranteed to survive” (Grossman 2019).

In their book *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*, Jefferey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj further this point by discussing how “talk designed to provoke emotional responses in the audience (anger, fear or moral indignation, for instance) through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, inaccurate information and ad hominem attacks,” has become an increasingly popular tool for news companies. This form of communication, also known as “outrage,” is especially present on TV, where networks are looking to engage and profit from their desensitized audiences (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). Rosenstiel argues that partisan news pundits, like MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow or Fox’s Sean Hannity, have “built an audience on outrage” where “people go to get their anger on” (Sullivan, 2019). Of all the cable news channels analyzed by the authors of *The Outrage Industry*, Fox and MSNBC were rated as using some of the most intense broadcasting forms of outrage almost every-other-minute. Thus, Berry and Sobieraj suggest that this trend towards placing entertainment values above informing the American public could be the next biggest “threat to some of our most vital democratic practices” (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). With an increased emphasis on outrage, the question of whether or not these cable TV news channels are accurately informing their audiences arises. In 2015, Politifact found that 60% of statements made on Fox News were “mostly false or worse,” while 44% of claims on MSNBC received the exact same ratings (Politifact, 2015). Just when access to reliable information became most important during Trump’s impeachment hearings, so were Americans most confused. As the impeachment hearings began to be broadcasted to the nation from its most-watched stations at Fox and MSNBC, 47% of respondents from a national poll said deciphering whether the information they received was true or not was “somewhat/very difficult” (Tavernise & Gardiner, 2019). Worse than being swayed to believe something false is the reality that many viewers are starting to believe nothing at all. *New York Times* journalists reported that Americans felt bombarded by a constant flow of confusing, often misleading, and contradictory political news regarding President Trump’s impeachment. Whether viewing Fox, MSNBC, or anything in between, University of Minnesota professor Benjamin J. Toff says news consumers “had to be skeptical of everything out there” but “didn’t have time to spend hours to make sense of it” (Tavernise & Gardiner, 2019). *The Elements of Journalism* authors, Kovach and Rosenstiel, set out eight functions of journalism that the new news consumer should require in their more recent work *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload*. One of those eight functions is serving as a sense-maker, “to put information into context and to look for connections so that, as consumers, we can decide what the news means to us” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). As information becomes increasingly accessible, journalists are needed not to provide misleading commentary but “finding facts and information that, as good sense making does, makes the tumblers click” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). While partisan stations like Fox and MSNBC may have been fruitful in additional commentary and analyses, if unable to make clear and defensible assertions concerning the state of Trump’s presidency, these stations may likely have essentially failed their constituents during the impeachment hearings.

Just as the Senate’s final decision to acquit President Trump of impeachment split almost perfectly between party lines, American citizens were equally at odds, with 46% calling on Trump to leave office and 49% maintaining that he did nothing wrong (Murray, 2020). Although no one news entity can be held responsible for the creation of an individual’s political perception, for many everyday citizens, cable news channels like MSNBC and Fox have long served as a trusted guide when seeking insight to complex political



processes. In the end, whether or not these channels are doing more to help or harm American democracy by propounding alternative political realities proves a multifaceted and divisive debate. Perhaps only a rise or fall in civic engagement and perceived political representation of citizens may measure the impact partisan cable news holds in a nation's state of democracy.

Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical responsibilities do cable newsrooms hold as truth seeking institutions? How are partisan news channels like MSNBC and Fox fulfilling these responsibilities? How might they be failing?
2. Are there truly two sides to every story, as with President Trump's impeachment? Is it ethical for cable news to choose only one side to tell?
3. How might the press balance efforts to entertain and also inform? Is utilizing outrage to get viewers' attention ever okay, even if it's what the American people want?
4. How could watching differently positioned news channels like MSNBC or Fox help American democracy? How could this hurt it?

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