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## Polarization and the Modern Media Landscape

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# Polarization and the Modern Media Landscape

## **Abstract**

**Overview:** This paper serves as an in-depth look into the partisan bias that exists in today's mainstream and social media outlets and platforms, and concludes that this lack of objectivity further divides, polarizes and radicalizes the American populace. The evidence gathered supports the general claim that the mainstream media is indeed politically and ideologically biased to a certain extent, as are numerous influential social media blogs and news sites. Both loyal Democrats and Republicans enclose themselves within these ideological echo-chambers of their own making, based upon the news outlets they choose to use, as well as the way they choose to receive such news (for example, TV vs. mobile phone). This phenomenon is something that has been shown to further radicalize already sympathetic partisans to more extreme views, leading one to be more involved in political activism and debate, thus further spreading their extreme views to larger sections of the public. All of these findings and conclusions amount to a troubling prognosis for the future of stable democratic institutions, such as free speech, and for the future of an open, objective, and free press.

**Author's Reflection:** I am a sophomore with a dual major in history and political science.

**Professor Rosenberry's Reflection:** What I liked best about this paper is the writer's strong, confident voice in staking out a claim and then showing extensive support for it. This support includes evidence drawn from both academic sources and news/trade sources. For a paper such as this on such a current topic, the combination of those two types of information is important to making an effective argument, and Mark manages the combination exceptionally well.

## **Keywords**

APA, American culture, Writing

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**Abstract**

This paper serves as an in-depth look into the partisan bias that exists in today's mainstream and social media outlets and platforms, and concludes that this lack of objectivity further divides, polarizes and radicalizes the American populace. The evidence gathered supports the general claim that the mainstream media is indeed politically and ideologically biased to a certain extent, as are numerous influential social media blogs and news sites. Both loyal Democrats and Republicans enclose themselves within these ideological echo-chambers of their own making, based upon the news outlets they choose to use, as well as the way they choose to receive such news (for example, TV vs. mobile phone). This phenomenon is something that has been shown to further radicalize already sympathetic partisans to more extreme views, leading one to be more involved in political activism and debate, thus further spreading their extreme views to larger sections of the public. All of these findings and conclusions amount to a troubling prognosis for the future of stable democratic institutions, such as free speech, and for the future of an open, objective, and free press.

### Polarization and the Modern Media Landscape

A heated public debate concerning the merits and dangers of mainstream and social media outlets, as well as their potential to carry, and perhaps deliberately conform to, ideological and partisan overtones, has erupted across the nation, with many politically and socially invested groups and individuals sparring passionately over the supposed bias and lack of objectivity shown across the media landscape. Such accusations of sensationalized bias and subjective reporting, mostly leveled against outlets supposedly sympathetic to one side of the aisle over the other, are among the most serious transgressions within the traditional media setting, and they demand immediate, rational and objective examination.

However, the painfully necessary national conversation concerning this issue has quickly devolved from a logical, empirical and objective investigation into a kind of unintelligible shouting match between partisans, ideologues and prominent cultural personalities, with both sides attempting to emerge from the fray as the lone, undisputed victor, facts and moderation be damned along the way. The advent, and subsequent utilization of, the internet and social media plainly increases the partisan and sensationalized aspect of this issue, as any casual visit to Twitter can demonstrate. Now, such uninformed and ideologically tilted debates and arguments, usually between completely random, impassioned users, can be posted and broadcast online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with the very real possibility of being seen and read by billions of different people across the

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globe at any given moment. Even worse is the partisan and sensationalized trend that has seemed to decay more traditional media outlets, including newspapers, magazines and television. A visit to Fox News, MSNBC, *The Washington Post* or *The New Yorker* will sometimes be just as disturbing and distressing as a trip to Twitter, especially when an opinion or “hot-takes” pundit takes to the page or airwaves.

It is thus in the paramount interest of anyone within, fond of, or even in need of a democracy, along with its most basic institutions, to look into the truth of these claims, and to drown out the ideological clamor that currently envelops them. This paper is one such attempt to accomplish that goal, and has so far found significant reason to believe that polarization, partisan bias and sensationalism in today’s media does indeed exist, and that this phenomenon can, and does, work to divide, misinform, or otherwise hinder the public’s ability to reach objective and fact-based conclusions about our nation’s most serious and controversial issues, thus crippling the effectiveness and validity of our democracy and its most treasured institutions.

**Validity of Media Bias Claim**

Much of the modern debate on journalism and the media revolves around one key, fundamental question: Does extensive partisan bias even exist in our mainstream and social media? The answer, it seems, especially nowadays, lies with your ideological identification: A modern Republican, for example, would be more inclined to say yes, while a Democrat would be more inclined to say no. Such partisan posturing often leaves little room for objective fact, however, making it especially easy for both of these sides to cherry pick, or perhaps even ignore, the topic’s crucial empirical and statistical data. Despite these obstacles, an objective answer does exist, and it

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is, after careful examination, clear: partisan bias does indeed exist within modern mainstream and social media.

To understand why, and subsequently, the degree to which outlets are polarized, however, one must first break down the kind of media people today are utilizing. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has, after all, introduced to the masses an incredible amount of technologies and products through which they, as individuals, can receive, and then send back out, news and opinions. Mathew A. Baum and Tim Groeling help to breakdown and sort these media platforms into understandable categories throughout their own examination of news bias (2008). Baum and Groeling visualized today's media landscape as divided into two camps: The Traditional and "New" camps. The Traditional camp consisted of outlets including *The Associated Press* and *Reuters*, long-standing news wires observed to be consistently and, to a degree, verifiably non-partisan. The New media, in contrast, consisted mainly of outlets that developed from, or alongside, the Internet, including blogs like The Huffington Post, Daily Kos and Free Republic, and cable news stations, such as Fox News. Baum and Groeling tracked the stories produced by both of these camps before, during, and after the 2006 midterm Congressional elections and conducted multiple examinations of the type of articles published, the topics of the articles, and their conclusion/analysis of the campaigns. The findings reinforce the conclusion that bias not only exists, but is far-reaching across the modern media landscape.

As far as traditional media is concerned, Baum and Groeling concluded:

“...we also find some evidence that the self-consciously non-partisan Associated Press prefers stories critical of Republicans, which may constitute evidence supporting the oft-cited conservative claim of liberal bias in the mainstream

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news media. Of course, it could also reflect the exceptionally anti-Republican mood in the nation in the run-up to the 2006 midterm election, a period in which the news was dominated by stories about domestic political scandals enveloping the Republican party and the perceived failure of the administration's policies in Iraq. Nonetheless, AP's anti-Republican skew persisted even when these alternative explanations were explicitly controlled in our models" (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

While British-based *Reuters* still remained mostly untainted by bias, *The Associated Press* was not so lucky, showing how pervasive some bias had become even over a decade ago, with online news distribution, as was being monitored in the study, still in its infancy. It thus isn't ridiculous now to see Republicans bemoan bias in 2018, a period of time in which anti-conservative sentiment is undoubtedly more widespread, knowing they did the same thing back in and around 2006, with some objective data from the time even proving that they, to a degree, were right. This conclusion only includes definitive data on one traditional source, however, making it pale in comparison to the findings of the New media, or as Baum and Goering also refer to it as, the "blogosphere".

"...our findings offer a striking validation for those who complain about one-sided coverage of politics in the so-called blogosphere. Daily Kos on the left and Free Republic and Fox News on the right demonstrate clear and strong preferences for news stories that benefit the party most closely associated with their own ideological orientations. While some evidence of such partisan selection emerged for AP, overall the news wires demonstrated far weaker tendencies to select news based on its implications for one or the other political party" (Baum & Goering, 2008).

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While traditional news-wires mostly dodged the bias bullet, here we see that the New, more modern approaches to journalism and media took it right to the chest. These blogs, which over the past ten years have grown considerably in size and influence, proved to have had among the largest audiences recorded by the researchers, and they thus undoubtedly fueled the flames of partisanship that were decried by leaders on both sides of the aisle as “dangerous” after the elections had concluded. Thus, these findings show that internet based outlets, as well as their closely linked cable news companions, prove to usually be the most stratified politically, and that they actively try to push or maintain the ideological status-quo among their readership by offering hardly any other viewpoints besides their usual partisan publications.

While Baum and Goering’s findings are crucial and important to understanding the fact that bias is a real, pervasive issue within the media, more recent examinations can better show how this bias manifests in today’s heated political and social climates. Jennifer Jerit and Jason Barabas, in their 2012 study, offer one such viewpoint. They primarily examined how the flow of information by modern media outlets is perceived by people loyal, or sympathetic, to one party over the other, with an emphasis on information considered to be politically controversial. They found that the vast majority of partisans exercised “perceptual bias”, in that they received all of the objective facts regarding a hot-button issue, but systematically ignored or discounted the objective information that was detrimental to their ideology. Interestingly enough, the more media coverage this topic got, the more stratified the partisans became in acknowledging, or even knowing, these basic facts (Jerit & Barabas, 2012). Today’s media climate, especially now that President Donald Trump is in power, is most certainly guilty of hyper-focusing on certain news stories and events, most notably when they

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have significant political ramifications; take the recent controversies surrounding Stormy Daniels, Robert Mueller's Russia investigation and acts of gun violence serve as some such examples.

Jerit and Barabas, through their study, point out that this extensive, almost non-stop coverage by the media lead many down highly partisan, and perhaps ignorant, paths, and this trend doesn't only help the outlets' ideological leanings. *Forbes* has pointed out in its most recent ratings reports that this partisan posturing, most notably by cable news pundits, has consistently been bringing in millions of viewers, and thus a considerable amount of money. MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*, on a Thursday in late March 2018, for example, brought in an audience of almost 3.2 million viewers (Joyella, 2018), a new peak in the network's record-setting ratings success that has seen them actively compete with, and in this case soundly defeat, the ratings of other ideologically founded programs, including those appearing on Fox News and CNN. Both of those other outlets continue to maintain a dedicated, and growing, audience as well, with *Forbes* still noting that The Fox News Channel managed to bring in a larger number of total viewers that Thursday night, despite Maddow's resounding success (Joyella, 2018). Perhaps most notably, however, are the contents of Maddow's record breaking show that Thursday, contents that are extensively revisited on her program and are sighted as a reason why her show is succeeding so spectacularly in 2018.

“Maddow, who has been focusing relentlessly on the investigation into possible collusion between Russia and the campaign of Donald Trump, often devoting long segments to methodically reviewing documents and timelines relating to the unfolding investigation that has shaken the White House and threatened Trump's presidency” (Joyella, 2018).

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These two pieces go hand in hand and help show just how relevant Jerit and Barabas' research remains today; Maddow, along with other ideologically-slanted pundits on cable television, including Chris Hayes, Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham, dominated the ratings across not just cable, but all of television that night, making each of their respective networks a good deal of money. All of them extensively cover similar, if not the same, stories every time they're on the air, and every time, those stories are approached and moderated by a partisan perspective. The trend is clear: Citizens, partisans or not, actively seek out these kinds of pundits by the millions, taking in news every night that is intrinsically slanted and, as Jerit and Barabas' study points out, "perceptually biased". Oftentimes the pundits will go through the mental gymnastics themselves and pass along their ideologically filtered conclusions to an audience who hangs ever more upon their every word. The study itself, back in 2012, ominously said as much, and concluded that the role the media and these partisan elites would have to play in sensationalism and perceptual bias would not be a good one if it continued down the same hyper-focused, blatantly partisan path. (Jerit & Barabas, 2012).

In all, the validity of the statement that the mainstream and social media outlets millions rely on today are indeed politically biased is, even just looking at these sources, a foregone conclusion. Thus, one can examine instead *why* this is the case, and see that the passionate ideological foundations held by those journalists and producers who create and distribute today's media is one such reason, with the fact that today's ever more polarized citizenry actively seek out and engage with such content being another. Ultimately, the partisan media and the partisan citizenry have created a kind of symbiotic relationship, with each, in their own twisted fashions, continuing to

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facilitate the other's existence. The media gets short-sighted validation and quick cash from the populace, and in return the populace gets a feeling of moral and philosophical superiority to others they deem as enemies, providing an emotional high that is hard to find anywhere else. Both seek short-term pleasure but wreak long-term havoc, and as further studies will detail, it can have a dangerous impact on them all in due time.

**Impact of Media Bias among the Citizenry**

With the validity of the media bias claim settled, one can move to its effects upon the populace. As noted earlier, many citizens now actively seek out sensationalized partisan content, be it through cable television or social media, and this frenzy for "hot-take" news and viral soundbites can lead to a radicalizing, and potentially de-stabilizing, effect upon those who succumb to it.

An interesting study conducted by Mathew S. Levendusky portrays one way in which partisan media can affect those who are exposed to it. In his research, Levendusky (2013) discovered that it was a smaller portion of the population that was a dedicated and extremely active audience to partisan writers and pundits. This small group was much more inclined to tune in every single night without fail, and actively talk politics amongst their friend and family circles. He points out a fact consistent with other elements of this kind of research, that

"...The over-time data suggest that the audience for partisan media programs has grown dramatically in recent years. While it is true that the audience for partisan media shows is smaller than the audience for the nightly network news, the audience for

partisan shows is growing while the broadcast audience is shrinking...” (Levendusky, 2013).

What Levendusky managed to conclude about the group’s relationship with partisan programming, however, is far less innocent than simple passive conversation or observation. He found that these viewers consistently became more and more enamored with their ideology or partisan bias over time, and often to more extreme ends. These effects would last multiple days after viewing a single program, unaffected and unaltered, and most terrifyingly, they were observed most commonly within the most informed and engaged of the group, turning people who would otherwise be impartial, objective and educated into ideological extremists. Levendusky illustrates this disturbing reality with a blunt statement to wrap up his observations: “Like-minded media take subjects who are already extreme and make them even more extreme” (Levendusky, 2013). Levendusky further concludes that these media hosts actively work, consciously or not, to splinter and divide this vast amount of people into strict partisan camps; in fact, the observational findings, both in regard to the viewers and the pundits, were so startling that they constituted for him a real split from past research on more traditional forms of media (Levendusky, 2013). Political hosts are put squarely in the crosshairs here, and Levendusky points out how his subjects latched on tightly to their conclusions and influence, becoming, over time, even more extreme in their views and opinions. The New media, (a callback to Baum & Goering’s findings) he essentially concludes, is a tool that is radicalizing and propagating extreme views across the populace at a rate that we just haven’t seen before. The effectiveness of online and television personalities to trap viewers in ideological bubbles, keep them there, and then further radicalize them is a phenomenon that is, up to this day and age,

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unprecedented, and it can be shown even in 2018 with our ever-divided citizenry turning and distrusting more of itself every day.

The Pew Research Center further analyzed how consistently liberal and consistently conservative partisans behave with their media choices, and how they go out and express their views in the meantime. For example, consistent conservatives are more likely to stick to a small number of trusted sources, indicating that there are few places a consistent conservative can go to find an outlet that suits their ideological tastes. They, therefore, express significant distrust of the media, and on social media are more likely to follow and friend people who have similar political leanings. Consistent liberals, on the other hand, rely on a vast number of different sources, indicating they have many places to find ideological shelter across the media landscape. They, in turn, overwhelmingly trust many different news sources, and are more likely to follow groups and organizations than their right-leaning counterparts. Interestingly, liberals showed a large tendency to consistently block, unfriend or argue with those online, or in their families, about politics (Mitchell et al., 2014). Such trends, no doubt inflamed by the phenomenons observed by Levendusky and other previous researchers, show a populace that is becoming incredibly stratified based simply upon media consumption. In turn, their actions, becoming all the more radical and tribal, innately pit them against one another, leading them ever deeper into the black hole of ideology. Such effects are clear: media consumption, a diet increasingly focusing on partisan opinion, is driving average and sympathetic partisans down a polarized, sensationalist slope, one that brings about trends in each side that directly conflict with the other.

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This expanded use of polarizing media is not a new trend, however. Hyun Jee Oh, Jongmin Park and Wayne Wanta reviewed survey data taken between 2000 and 2007 to determine a phenomenon known as HMP, or Hostile Media Perception, in Democrats and Republicans. Hostile Media Perception is a trend seen in partisans and members of the populace who view media and subsequently harbor suspicion or distrust for it. Conversely, a trend known as Biased Assimilation is a trend in which partisans or members of the populace view media and find it to be partial or favorable to their predisposed beliefs, and thus trust it more (Oh, et al., 2011). Particular emphasis was placed on the Presidential campaigns and electoral cycles, and much like Baum and Groeling (2008) found, the increase in media consumption around those times had significant effects upon the population. "...HMP existed among Republicans and Democrats both in 2000 and 2007. However, only Republicans had HMP towards news on the web in 2007, while Democrats showed more Biased Assimilation than HMP. Interestingly, when compared within party identifications, Republicans had more HMP than Democrats, and Democrats had more Biased Assimilation than Republicans. This trend was more apparent in 2007" (Oh et al., 2011).

Here, the increase in partisan media is shown to have two significant effects: Republicans largely began, over the seven years analyzed, to distrust mainstream media coverage and, notably, online media coverage, evidently forcing many to hunker down on the few channels, sites and publications they still felt they could trust. Democrats, on the other hand, while still expressing some HMP towards the few outlets still frequented by Republicans, began to better assimilate online and over the airwaves to multiple different outlets, showing an increase in partisan comfort and ideological connection. Thus, in short, as the digital age progressed, the media became more liberal,

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and left-wing partisans spread out and flocked to it, while conservatives retreated to the ideological bunkers they felt still represented them fairly.

This same attitude and general feeling among both parties is still very prevalent, and by seeing possible origins of the phenomenon, particularly the birth of the Internet as a partisan tool, one in the present can understand why such partisan radicalization, as is rampant across the nation today, is so dangerous. Seeing and analyzing the extremist leanings of the media today, and how popular it is currently becoming, can help one understand how to best combat its inevitable attack upon the foundations of our democracy.

**Impact of Polarization and Partisan Media upon Democracy and Journalism**

The nature of the partisan media and its subsequent effects upon the nation's citizenry is extremely concerning, especially when looking upon our democratic ideals. The ramping up of social tension and political challenges is forcing average people, now more than ever, to choose a side in the black and white battle, one in which subjective moral and ideological thought dominates, and seemingly prevails over, objective, logical and empirical reason. That is the day democracy dies, and the shadow of that coming collapse of democratic patience, respect and compromise can be seen today all across the media landscape.

Take for example this analysis done by Jeffery Gottfried, Michael Bennett and Amy Mitchell for the Pew Research Center (2017). Completed in the wake of Donald Trump's presidential victory and approaching his inauguration, the researchers compiled data and survey results to find out what outlets Trump and Clinton supporters predominantly used throughout the presidential race. For

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Trump supporters, there should be no real surprise with the overwhelming majority choosing Fox News as their main source. The interesting section comes with Clinton. Throughout the race, many Democrats remained widely split on main news outlets, something some would argue as a positive thing. However, when the race got tighter with Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton both vying for the nomination, a significant difference, if not fracture, began to emerge.

“The study also suggests that Democrats who backed Bernie Sanders or another Democratic candidate in the primaries prioritized, to some extent, different types of news media than those who supported Clinton – even once the general election had begun. There were fewer differences between those who did and did not support Trump in the Republican primaries.” (Gottfried et. al, 2017).

The split in the Democratic party over Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton is well known and documented, yet its effects haven't been discussed nearly as much. Even more revealing aspects of the analysis help to better paint this media picture; according to the researchers, when asked what their main source of information was, Clinton supporters named outlets such as MSNBC, the local news and Fox News at higher rates than those who had sided with Bernie Sanders. These outlets are considered by many to be conventional, if not traditional, ways of hearing the news. Sanders supporters, in contrast, more consistently named outlets such as Reddit and Facebook as their main sources for news. These platforms are distinct from the other conventional sources in that they exist exclusively online and are much easier to access and engage with through new technology, such as smartphones, laptops and tablets (Gottfried, et al., 2017). As displayed by the Pew Research Center's data, the majority of Bernie supporters flocked to completely different news and social media outlets

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than Clinton supporters, and as detailed earlier in this paper, the sources to which Sanders supporters frequented are much more susceptible to partisan and polarized content. It thus makes sense that so many young Democrats rejected Hillary as a nominated candidate, and why so many remained on the social media/online sources even after Bernie bowed out: they maintained an ideological status quo that, with the election of Donald Trump, suddenly became relevant again. With much of the nation not a fan of Trump's job performance as of late, per the latest approval poll, how can we entrust the election of our next leader to a party that, despite widespread sympathy and support, can't stop fracturing and fighting amongst itself? The success of a democracy is founded in its ability to unite its citizens around a common goal, and in this way, media is hurting the institution of democracy. The never-ending stream of ideological fanfare across television, magazines, and most crucially, especially for younger voters, social media, is splitting apart two of our nation's most influential political organizations. This ideological battle is demonstrated again by another Pew Research Center data collection survey, showing how the increasingly radical online arena of media publication has quickly caught on with many voters across the aisle.

“As a platform that links to content from many different sources, Facebook draws about twice as many political news consumers among web users as the aggregation sites Yahoo News (24% in the past week) or Google News (22%). And Facebook far surpasses other social media sites, such as YouTube and Twitter, as a source for news about politics and government. Just 14% say they got political news in the past week from YouTube, 9% from Twitter, 6% from Google Plus and 3% from LinkedIn” (Mitchell, 2014).

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As most Americans know by now, Facebook and other social media sites have issues with spreading false, or fake, news stories. As beat to death as it is already, its harm cannot be understated: Fake news, especially when sent out by other nations to divide the populace and undermine our media institutions, is an incredible danger to the health and vitality of our democracy. With so many Americans relying on Facebook, mobile devices, and social media to get their news, how safe can one be in avoiding what's fake?

Remember, as well, the study conducted on “perceptual bias”. A partisan may know the whole, objective story, but in many instances will push out from their minds unfavorable information, and anything that might pop up on a Facebook feed that could validate such ignorance is prone to further radicalize an otherwise thoughtful citizen. This thought in particular is what drove Tae Lee, Youngju Kim and Kevin Coe to conduct research into partisanship and the spread of extremist and fake news (Lee et. al, 2018). The research utilized the Hostile Media Perception phenomenon as well, and discovered interesting, and disturbing, results.

“First, our results clearly illustrate that who shares a news article on Twitter can lead to HME [Hostile Media Effect]. Consistent with our expectations, both Republicans and Democrats perceived more bias in an article when it was shared by someone of the opposing party. At the most basic level, this finding helps reinforce HME as an intergroup phenomenon...” (Lee et. al, 2018).

One should also notice the degree to which this paranoid association can affect those under its influence. At one point, Lee and his team noticed how an objective story, reported by the relatively neutral *Associated Press*, was immediately branded as biased and dangerous due simply to what was

perceived as a “partisan cue”, no doubt a simple term, idea or concept seen by one side as a hallmark of the other. Thus, Lee and his fellow researchers issue their final conclusion on the matter.

“It appears that on social media there is the potential for the “source” of the content to be imagined as both its creator and its sharer. Just as people believe that a message created by an outgroup would be more biased against their own position, so do they believe that a message shared by an outgroup would be” (Lee et. al, 2018).

This finding further solidifies modern partisan hostility towards any idea perceived to be biased from the other side of the aisle, which could include objective facts that are not favorable to their chosen party. The partisan ultimately ceases to be an individual within this complex; they exist instead as a part of the group, and with the group they must go and think and act, and, especially these days, anything less than that is perceived to be a moral and societal failure. The media institution and those who operate within it continue to perpetrate this notion by catering to such groups, all while ignoring the individual in desperate need of purpose and objective knowledge.

Along this vein, it’s worth considering the impacts that could be wrought upon the journalistic institution in the midst of the media controversy. At the moment, the prognosis is not very good. If subjective pundits didn’t already drive a knife in its back, popular opinion might, as demonstrated by another Pew Research Poll.

“Today, in the early days of the Trump administration, roughly nine-in-ten Democrats (89%) say news media criticism keeps leaders in line (sometimes called the news media’s “watchdog role”), while only about four-in-ten Republicans (42%) say the same. That is a 47-percentage-point gap, according to a new online survey

conducted March 13-27, 2017...The gap stands in sharp contrast to January-February 2016...Then, in the midst of the presidential primary season, nearly the same share of Democrats (74%) and Republicans (77%) supported the watchdog role” (Barthel & Mitchell, 2017).

Evidently, an entire swathe of the nation is currently disregarding the work of journalists as watchdogs for the powerful, due undoubtedly to the justifiable anger of bias. It is summed up well by Barthel and Mitchell at the end, when they match up current partisan attitudes towards journalists and the media outlets they help run. “This partisan split is found in other attitudes about the news media, though none in so dramatic a fashion as with the watchdog role. Compared with 2016, Democrats and Republicans are more divided on whether the press favors one side in its political coverage, on how much trust they have in national news media, and on how good a job national news organizations are doing in keeping them informed” (Barthel & Mitchell, 2017). Many Americans feel completely disenfranchised by the majority of journalists today, an extremely troubling trend that comes from many different places, ideological positioning included. For a democracy to function properly, its media and journalists must work and act with objective integrity. This way, the people stay completely informed, and are able to express their thoughts, opinions and concerns to the rest of the nation. But with an entire half of the country ready to turn its back on such a premise, a structural core of democracy could be destroyed.

### **The Possible Merits of a Partisan Press**

Some argue that a partisan press is a lie; it is fake news, and a rumor devised to further de-legitimize honest outlets. To an extreme that is absolutely true; however, to argue that the modern

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media lacks bias is to completely disregard objective, empirical fact. That much has already been established. However, once one accepts this reality, another argument surfaces: perhaps a partisan press is a good thing. A necessary thing, even; in the age of Trump one needs constant battles between left and right to expose the other side as the fraud it is. Thus has been born the contemporary debate over objectivity in the media as *not* a foundational virtue of journalism, but rather, its most pathological vice.

Take, for example, an article published by Politico, boldly entitled “Goodbye Nonpartisan Journalism. And Good Riddance.” Written by Mitchell Stephens mere months after Donald Trump’s shocking presidential victory, the work serves first as a recap of the mainstream media’s handling of the 2016 presidential campaign. He notes that, in response to the outlandishly false claims leveled by Trump towards political enemies and, oftentimes, the media itself, journalists themselves became more and more publicly opposed to his party and platform. What were his thoughts?

“Is this the end of all that is good and decent in American journalism? Nah. I say good for them. An abandonment of the pretense to “objectivity”—in many ways a return to American journalism’s roots—is long overdue” (Stephens, 2017).

His historical claim of bias in American media is hardly false, and he lets the reader know by spending over half of the article rehashing the history of journalism in the United States, from the Federalist Papers all the way to Watergate. His dip into the unfortunate era of Lowell Thomas, and the birth of America’s objective press, however, is where he hopes to end the predominant feelings of romanticized nostalgia. As Stephens sees it, the proliferation of an objective press neutered journalism’s ability to make voices heard:

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“Given the fear of being caught possessing an opinion, pussyfooting abounded. And with so many journalism organizations clustered near “the middle,” the range of available viewpoints necessarily narrowed. On the seesaws reporters were so intent upon balancing, plenty of perspectives were denied seats: nonwhite and nonmale voices, anti-anti-Communist or anti-war opinions” (Stephens, 2017).

Stephens also notes that the notion of objective journalism contributing to a more balanced society is false, as demonstrated in the 60s and 70s.

“One last point about the more temperate journalism of the late 20th century: It did not lead to a more temperate country. On the contrary, the 1960s and 1970s—near the height of American journalism’s infatuation with impartiality—were a time of protest marches, civil disobedience, assassinations and urban riots. Indeed, by failing to offer more diverse and radical voices access to its columns and microphones, mainstream 20th-century journalism may have compelled them to express themselves in the streets” (Stephens, 2017).

The rest of his argument maintains that our media today is now, interestingly enough, actually pretty biased, a surprising admission from someone who, at least from the tone and tenor of the article, is a liberal, or at least a heavy sympathizer for liberal ideas, and that due to this media revolution, journalists across the nation should now refuse the “straightjacket” (and quote) of objective reporting. On this point, Stephens only really defends this position with one piece of evidence: that renowned publications and outlets, such as *The New York Times* and CNN, now openly report the fact that President Trump is lying, by publishing words such as “lie” in their stories and headlines. That is, of course, to ignore the objective fact that Trump, when covered by these outlets, is indeed

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actually lying, showing that despite Stephens' giddy wishes, these outlets were still reporting, in their news sections, completely objective truths that were free from partisan sway and influence. The stronger language, it seems, is his only evidence for the existence of a modern-day media revolution he describes as returning the institution of journalism back to its proper, objectivity-rejecting, 18<sup>th</sup> century roots.

His other claims, that objective journalism has oppressed more than it has enlightened, can also be critiqued and historically dismantled with relative ease. His first claim, that the "down the middle" press of the 20<sup>th</sup> century closed off marginalized groups and ideologies from having their ideas equally distributed, does indeed have some general truth to it, in that the objective sources had wider and more national audiences; however, that would be to completely disregard the plethora of popular African-American publicans, including the *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Bee*, *Roanoke Tribune*, and the *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder*, women's and feminist publications such as *Ms. Magazine*, *Amazon Quarterly*, *Lesbian Tide*, and *Off our Backs*, and the massive anti-war and anti-anti-communist, if not outright pro-communist, waves of protests and social movements that erupted across American cities and university campuses during this time. These publications and protests unquestionably found their audiences, both at the time and even still today. Stephens, it seems, is just dissatisfied with their lack of mainstream appeal at the time, which seems counter to the fact that the radical revolutions of the 60s and 70s happened, in part, because of publications and ideas such as these finally sparking the undercurrents of America's long disturbed social order and shoving these unpleasantries directly into, ironically enough, the mainstream.

This leads into Stephens's other claim: that the objective press didn't lead to a calm and balanced society, if anything it helped undermine it, as evidenced by the turbulence of the 60s and

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70s, and that this proves the uselessness, and perhaps even danger, of the system in the modern day. First off, however, why does Stephens believe it is the responsibility of an objective press to be fostering a balanced, peaceful society? An objective press is, at its core, simply a way of delivering information untainted by personal or ideological bias. It is not a way to maintain societal harmony; that task lies within other jurisdictions. Whether unbiased information leads to a peaceful or chaotic society is, to this degree, irrelevant; people deserve to hear the truth as it is, and as it happened, and if that means some social or political discontent, then so be it. Is this virtue not a fundamental pillar of journalism itself? Did the objective reporting of the Watergate scandal and the Pentagon papers, as Stephens himself describes, not contribute to social and political unrest? Everyone agrees, however, that the breaking of those stories in that way served the country, and its citizens, well.

An even better rebuttal to this conclusion, however, lies within an otherwise obvious historical fact. Stephens makes clear that the objective press, by oppressing marginalized voices, led, or at the very least heavily contributed to, the social and political upheaval of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the golden age of American journalism, as Stephens makes clear, occurred in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Was this not also the same time period as the American Civil War, the bloodiest and most catastrophic social and political conflict this nation has ever seen? And was this not also the height of the partisan press in America, a time Stephens pushes a return towards?

The objective press is not perfect in this regard, certainly, but as explained above, it has no obligation to be: it is simply a means thorough which a journalist should report the news. Stephens even concedes in his article that the objective press did have one monumental advantage the subjective press didn't: widespread trust, in which Republicans and Democrats could seek out the same anchors or papers to get the same, factual news (Stephens, 2017). This trust never dispelled

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division or ideological differences, but it did unite Americans in the information they knew to be legitimate and honest. That dynamic obviously didn't exist in 1861, simply because Americans all looked to a seemingly infinite amount of different, plainly biased papers that reported facts and events through the tints of ideology and partisan loyalty, leaving no place for the nation as a whole to come together and agree on certain, intrinsic truths.

Stephens, it seems, is advocating here for a subjective press simply because he likes the ideological direction it's going, a common trend among modern liberals who, for the most part, don't even bother admitting the bias exists in the first place. His entire article, even objectively speaking, reeks of bias and partisan sympathies. If the tables were turned, and it was instead conservatives who heavily influenced mainstream reporting, one can imagine Stephens writing a very different article. And that is precisely the problem. Without objective journalism, this nation and its populace has no objective, universal truth; no objective set of facts, or even values, upon which we can all agree. It is shattered, fragmented, and pit against itself as ideologies, parties and value systems all try to claim the facts of a situation for their own, with varying degrees of honesty to each of their claims. That's certainly how America looks today, due in no small part to the partisan media. Objective truth must stay objective, and it is the journalist's job to maintain and defend this principle as a foundation not just for the preservation of their institution, but for the preservation of our democracy itself.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, today's modern media landscape, including mainstream and social media, do indeed exhibit, to a certain degree, political bias. The impacts and influence of this fact are disturbing

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and require immediate action, both by the average citizen and the institution of journalism itself. It remains in danger of selling its soul to polarization and sensationalism, a decision that would disenfranchise millions more and destabilize the very fabric of our democracy.

The bias present in today's media varies based upon where it originates. As described, more traditional sources, such as network news and news wires, remain the least biased sources around, though even today some in those ranks have proven susceptible to partisanship. The greatest danger lies online and on cable television, with an endless number of blogs, websites, opinion pundits and charismatic personalities pitching and selling sound-bites, anger and the moral high ground. The nature of the echo-chamber that develops in its wake blinds and deafens the individual to criticism of said ideology, further radicalizing not only them but also those around them. As a result, democracy itself remains exposed and vulnerable to radicalization, extremism and intense division, a terrifying prospect for all who know and appreciate the freedoms of speech and the press we have enjoyed for so long.

Overall, it is key to realize that, more than likely, the news you're reading or watching has some degree of bias within it. All it takes is for an individual to spot it, understand the message it's trying to send, and put it aside as you analyze the objective facts. This critical thinking can help put partisanship behind us, and help many escape the ideological bubbles they themselves have found themselves in.

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