Introduction to Media Bias: At Issue

Media Bias, 2011

In November 2010 American broadcast journalist Ted Koppel wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* entitled "Olbermann, O'Reilly and the Death of Real News." In it he criticized cable news outlets, in particular MSNBC and Fox News, for abandoning the mission of collecting and disseminating "substantive and unbiased news." Koppel, who served for 25 years as host of ABC's *Nightline* news program, was writing in response to MSNBC's brief suspension of Keith Olbermann, host of *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, for making unauthorized donations to three Democratic political candidates. In suspending Olbermann, MSNBC explained that the donations violated their news policy, and jeopardized Olbermann's standing as an impartial journalist. Koppel suggested that MSNBC's dismissal of Olbermann was disingenuous because it created a misleading picture of MSNBC's true journalistic values. "When Olbermann draws more than 1 million like-minded viewers to his program every night precisely because he is avowedly, unabashedly and monotonously partisan, it is not clear what misdemeanor his donations constituted," Koppel stated. "Consistency?"

The questions Koppel raised are part of an ongoing conversation about the role of journalism in society and about the professional values of journalists. The conversation is taking place in an electronic media environment that has undergone enormous changes in recent years, including the growth of cable news outlets and the movement of all news organizations into the online environment.

Koppel believes that MSNBC, Fox News, and others have abandoned key journalistic values of the past. News anchors like Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Frank Reynolds, and Howard K. Smith once provided "relatively unbiased accounts of information that their respective news organizations believed the public needed to know," Koppel stated in his *Washington Post* piece. They delivered the news in a way that promoted "shared perceptions and even the possibility of compromise among those who disagreed." According to Koppel, the networks supported this kind of programming, even at a financial loss, out of a belief that they were obligated to work in the public interest.

Today, however, networks and cable news providers require their news divisions to be profitable, and according to Koppel it is the relentless quest for profits that has fueled the drive toward partisanship, supported the rise of hyper-opinionated news personalities, and encouraged the embrace of their biased approach to news gathering. In pursuing this path, Koppel believes they have violated a public trust. "The need for clear, objective reporting in a world of rising religious fundamentalism, economic interdependence and global ecological problems is probably greater than it has ever been," he says. "But we are no longer a national audience receiving news from a handful of trusted gatekeepers; we're now a million or more clusters of consumers ..." In the fragmented digital news market consumers occupy multiple, highly differentiated niches. They "harvest ... information from like-minded providers" who tell them what they want to hear.

Koppel's comments elicited a spirited response from Keith Olbermann, who devoted a lengthy "Special Comment" on his November 15, 2010 show to respond to issues raised by Koppel. Much of Olbermann's comment focused on Walter Cronkite and another early television journalist, Edward R. Murrow. Olbermann noted that when Walter Cronkite died in 2009, he was widely praised for his objectivity and his impartiality. Paradoxically, however, the segments that were selected by multiple news outlets to illustrate Cronkite's greatness were actually moments when he made passionate and informed judgments about major news stories and then argued in their defense. Olbermann cited a fourteen-minute report on the Watergate affair, a
break-in at the Democratic National Party headquarters that "devastated the Nixon Administration" and a show on the Vietnam War in which Cronkite argued passionately that stalemate was the best result that could be hoped for, and that the United States should find an honorable way to exit the conflict.

The conclusion Olbermann drew from Cronkite's obituaries was that "deserved and heartfelt sadness at the loss of a great journalist and a great man had been turned into a metaphor for the loss of a style of utterly uninvolved, neutral, quote 'objective' reporting yet most of the highlights of the man's career had been of those moments when he correctly and fearlessly threw off those shackles and said what was true, and not merely what was factual."

Olbermann drew a similar conclusion about the work of Edward R. Murrow, whose reporting of the London Blitz of 1940 during World War II was instrumental in building support for the U.S. entry into the war, and whose later reports at length on the career of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, called attention to a particularly dark period in the history of U.S. politics.

"These were not glorified stenographers," Olbermann said. "These were not neutral men. These were men who did in their day what the best of journalists still try to do in this one. Evaluate, analyze, unscramble, assess—put together a coherent picture, or a challenging question—using only the facts as they can best be discerned, plus their own honesty and conscience."

James Poniewozik, blogging for Time a day later, concurred with Olbermann's analysis: "What journalists ... generally call 'objectivity' is not actual objectivity, but something more like 'neutrality' ... Objectivity does not mean having no opinion, taking no side or expressing no point of view. It means seeking, acknowledging and interpreting objective evidence, even when it conflicts with your preconceptions or with what you wish to be true. You can have subjective beliefs—because we all do—and yet subordinate them to objective evidence." According to Poniewozik, journalists often find themselves "distorting truth in the interests of balance." This is a significant problem which Poniewozik believes Olbermann and others are seeking to correct.

Is objectivity an essential characteristic of good journalism, or does the attempt to achieve "balance" sometimes result in the distortion of truth? Is it better for journalists to be transparent about their biases than to conceal them? Is television news today really more biased and less objective than it was in the past? These are some of the questions that are explored in At Issue: Media Bias.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


• Kamna Bohra "Media Bias Degrades Legitimate Content," *Technique* (Georgia Tech University), November 5, 2010.


• Jeffrey A. Dvorkin "Is Liberal Bias What NPR Listeners Secretly Want?" *NPR*, June 28, 2005.


• Jeff Jarvis "Objectivity Is a Lie, So the Truth Requires Real Citizen Journalism," *Guardian UK*, November 1, 2010.


• Peter McKnight "What We Need Here Is a Bias in Favor of the Truth," *Vancouver Sun*, May 5, 2007.


• *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* "Ethics and Bias: Journalists Have More Than Their Share," February 7, 2005.


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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|EJ3010330115