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## **Will the Real News Reporters Please Stand Up?: A Study of Bias in the Media**

Hannah Claussen

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WILL THE REAL NEWS REPORTERS PLEASE STAND UP?:

A STUDY OF BIAS IN THE MEDIA

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts  
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction at  
Western Kentucky University

By

Hannah E. Claussen

May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of my project is to define what news media bias is and examine its history and the effects it currently has on our country and democracy. I will examine its electoral effects as well as how media bias has contributed to lower trust in the news media as a whole.

My project will consist of a general news story on the subject of media bias; a smaller news story focusing on the history of media bias and public perception of the press; an abbreviated research paper on newspaper endorsements and their efficacy in a modern news landscape; and a personal reflective essay.

My project will feature research papers, surveys from sources such as the Pew Research Center, Gallup and Poynter, interviews, and other news stories. This project is significant because it can help equip people to better understand the media and how they operate, how to recognize bias, and how to distinguish biased news from factual reporting.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the hard work and contribution of my advisor, Mac McKerral. Thank you for reading all my drafts, giving me great edits and feedback and for helping shape me as a young journalist going out into the world. Thank you to Joel Turner for being my second reader. You've been one of my favorite teachers I've had, and I will miss being your student.

Thank you to my family, specifically my mom and my husband, Josh, for reading my drafts, motivating me, and giving me emotional support through the whole process.

I love you all.

## VITA

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## MEDIA BIAS AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR AMERICANS

The media of all kinds play a daily role in the lives of Americans and for many, news media remains a staple in the daily routine. Whether a morning cup of coffee and a side of cable news, listening to a podcast on the drive to work or simply scrolling social media, many consume news — as much as eight hours a day on digital devices, four hours with television, 95 minutes with radio and another 17 minutes with newspapers and magazine, data gathered in 2020 by Statista shows.

But how much do we trust our news sources? How much should we trust them?

- When it comes to corporate media, media bias charts from sources such as the Poynter Institute show nearly every outlet slants to one side or the other.

- Eight out of every 10 Americans believe news outlets favor one side when covering political and social news, a share that has increased by seven points since 2019, Pew Research Center data from 2020 shows.

- From the same survey, a mere 20% of respondents said news media organizations fairly cover all sides.

- As of December 2021, 60% of Americans responding to a Pew survey said they have little to no confidence that journalists act in the best interests of the public.

Kelli Wagoner, 48, lives in Cadiz, Kentucky, and like many others who have lost faith in the mainstream news media, has difficulty choosing where to turn for information.



“I trust the local news, but not the mainstream media,” Wagoner said. “I think the mainstream media, like FOX, CNN, NBC, MSNBC, etc., are corrupt and politicized, giving opinions and talking points instead of actual news. I stopped trusting the corporate news about a decade ago when they refused to investigate allegations made against President Obama about his birthplace and the people he associated with.”

Lisa Meacham, 63, lives in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and consumes news every day from a variety of sources. She doesn’t trust the mainstream media, mostly because of politics. Instead, she prefers local radio and TV for news.

“It seems money and power is a large factor in producing what is relayed to viewers as news,” Meacham said. “It certainly is not always truthful.”

She prefers to research topics and discuss news with those knowledgeable about different subjects. Meacham added that she only reads news from websites that show where their information is obtained.

“I see news sources that contradict other news sources, all proclaiming they have the ‘inside story’ on something,” Meacham said. “Some sources I feel are more reliable than others.”

She gets her news from her locally-owned news stations as well as One America News Network.

As shown by polls and conversations with everyday Americans, many feel unheard and unrepresented by the media.

“The (news media) seem political and very biased against many Americans, including myself, who just want the news,” Wagoner said. “We can make our own

decisions, just give us the facts. We shouldn't be bullied into believing a certain way, or ostracized and censored for having a differing view.”

Wagoner, a nurse, focuses heavily on research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Health and other prominent scientists and epidemiologists. She also follows statistics and yearly trends.

“I take nothing at face value, and I research everything,” she said. “Someone’s life could depend on my knowledge.”

People on both sides of the political aisle can agree that a lack of trust in the media is an issue. News reporters have historically served an essential role in our democracy. British politician Edmund Burke was reported to have said that there were three estates in Parliament, “but in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth Estate more important far than them all.” The phrase ‘Fourth Estate’ now refers to the news media’s job as a government watchdog.

In her book “Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy” — described as an “ink-bound alarm bell” — Margaret Sullivan wrote extensively about the results of local journalism dying off in small communities throughout the country. The result is government corruption flourishing and government efficiency failing, she wrote. While her focus was on local news, a lack of a free press keeping tabs on elected officials is an issue at every level of government.

“I don’t think people really understand how journalism works and what responsible reporters do in order to make sure that their journalism is responsible and fair and accurate,” said Andie Tucher, the H. Gordon Garbedian Professor of Journalism and the director of the doctoral program at the Columbia Journalism School.

“It’s very easy for people to dismiss something as biased or wrong or stupid without understanding processes that journalists have gone through to get there.”

Tucher added that the idea that journalism should be plainly neutral and objective, one side and the other, is a misunderstanding of professional journalism.

“The idea was that you should approach fact finding in a way that is rigorous, that tests the facts against your assumptions, tests your assumptions against the facts, applies a scientific rigor to observing phenomena without applying your own preconceptions to it,” she said. “And it’s a method of testing and verification that is supposed to allow reporters to feel that they have seen the topic from various sides and have come to a reasoned conclusion. It doesn’t mean they can’t ever express opinion or they always have to have someone balancing the other side.”

Some journalists have renounced the objectivity standard, calling it outdated and opting for openly-biased reporting.

In his acceptance speech for the Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award in Journalism in 2021, NBC News anchor Lester Holt proclaimed “fairness is overrated” and providing a platform for “misinformation” is dangerous.

“The idea that we should always give two sides equal weight and merit does not reflect the world we find ourselves in,” he said during the speech. “That the sun sets in the west is a fact. Any contrary view does not deserve our time or attention.”

He’s not the only one. New York Times Magazine writer Nikole Hannah-Jones told CBS News, “All journalism is activism.”

Lauren Wolfe, a former freelance editor for the New York Times who was fired over a pro-Biden tweet, wrote an opinion piece in Washington Monthly in July titled,

“I’m a Biased Journalist and I’m Okay with That.” She said that “being fair and having (a) point of view aren’t incompatible” and journalists “shouldn’t have to disguise or suppress their views.”

She criticized news organizations with a “relentless need to find objective balance” in reporting and argued that has led to a “dangerous imbalance” where outlets give equal space to “lies” and facts.

"I’ve always believed it is better to be open about my views on the issues I cover, which for a long time have been war and international human rights,” Wolfe wrote. “And yes, I often do write with an agenda — with an eye toward creating change. So yes, I am biased, and consciously so when it comes to certain subjects — especially when I’m reporting on criminality. But I don’t see that as a bad thing."

DePaul University professor and media critic Jeffrey McCall believes "there has always been a prominent role for opinion in journalism, and the First Amendment surely allows for the media to engage in activism," as he told Fox News. “However, professional ethics in American journalism is to keep opinion and advocacy in a separate lane from the straightforward presentation of facts. We live in a dangerous time today, however, when professional journalists want to blend opinion and reporting into the same place."

The problem with cable news shows is the majority of airtime is filled with speculation, analysis and opinion — not news, which may be confusing for viewers who are expecting news reporting, according to Rich Shumate, an assistant professor in Western Kentucky University’s School of Media.

This could contribute to a skewed view of the network.

“Whether you think it's justified or whether you think it's irrational, it exists,” Shumate said about media bias. His recently-published book, “Barry Goldwater, Distrust in Media, and Conservative Identity: The Perception of Liberal Bias in the News” examines one aspect of media bias.

“I think we saw on Jan. 6 what happens when people believe the media is biased and they don't trust the media. They begin to believe things that are demonstrably untrue. So the media was saying the election wasn't rigged. The results were fair, there's no proof of fraud, and millions of people just refuse to believe that because they'd sort of been primed to think that the media is biased. And so that was the kind of the deleterious effect it had.”

Media bias is a claim largely attributed to conservatives. However, polls show that news consumers across the political spectrum are losing faith in the news media. Numbers like four out of every five Americans, from Pew Research Center, believing news organizations covering political or social issues favor one side or the other does not come from one side of the aisle alone.

“I think the public perception of the media has been formed by the actions of the media,” said Cabot Phillips, an editor, writer and commentator with The Daily Wire, a conservative media company.

“There's a reason that there's record-low trust in media right now, and it's because people have seen with their own eyes the way the media treats stories and the way they cover stories and the way they inject their opinion. And I think, if you have a question of, ‘Does media bias exist?’ the answer is in the dropping ratings of these media outlets. The

answer is the number of alternative media outlets that's cropping up because people want something else. I think both sides are waking up to how bad it is.”

Tucher adds another viewpoint.

“It's so much easier to find the media that tell you what you want to hear, and then that feels like you are reading reporting,” Tucher said. “It feels like you're doing your research. But they're getting it from places that sometimes are highly opinionated and sometimes hide their opinionated approach, and it's sometimes difficult to know where that information came from, who is reporting it, who says it's reporting, how that information was gathered.”

A Pew Research Center poll showed that 83% of respondents believe news outlets tend to favor one side and base the “favoritism” on the news organizations, rather than the reporters. This tendency displays equally through both political parties. Two-thirds of those who blame the news outlets cite political views or agenda as the source of bias. Only 20% blame financial interests and 8% blame poor journalistic practices. A potential reason for this is that Americans typically think journalists can distance personal views from reporting, Pew research showed.

“There are many readers who say that objectivity, whatever they imagine that to mean, objectivity is dead,” Tucher said. ““It doesn't tell us what we need to know. Everybody has preconceptions and ideas, so we need to know what those are so that we can we can evaluate what those reporters are saying.’ I'm not sure that's really the answer. I'm not sure that more transparency about the reporters’ own preconceptions allows us to trust the reporter more. It's difficult.”

Local news stations are widely viewed as more trustworthy — 76% of respondents across the political spectrum have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in local television stations, a 2018 Poynter Institute survey showed.

As for local newspapers, 73% have confidence in their reporting — a sharp contrast to the 59% that expressed confidence in national newspapers.

The lack of trust in the media breeds the perfect environment for “opinionists” to flourish.

The popularity of news outlets such as The Daily Wire and talk shows such as “The Joe Rogan Experience” have taken off in recent years with no indication of slowing down. Mainstream media talk show hosts such as CNN’s Brian Stelter recognize that trust in their institutions is withering and conservative companies are taking over the top spot for consumers. On his show “Reliable Sources,” Stelter acknowledged that “figures like Rogan are trusted by people that don’t trust real newsrooms,” and because of that “we have tension, a problem that’s much bigger than Spotify, much bigger than any single platform.”

Many people are turning to opinion sources that match their beliefs because they believe they can trust them. CNN’s viewership dropped 90% overall in the first week of 2022, Nielsen ratings showed. The network averaged 548,000 viewers during the week of Jan. 3, whereas during that same week of 2021, they averaged 2.7 million.

“Mainstream outlets will complain, ‘Why are Americans going elsewhere? Why are Americans going to these opinionated people?’” said Phillips. “It’s because the establishment is driving them there. And if they were doing their job, then there wouldn’t be as much of a vacuum that’s being formed.”

Meanwhile, podcasts such as “The Joe Rogan Experience” average 11 million listeners per episode, Newsweek reported. The Daily Wire, a conservative media organization, has grown into a \$100 million a year company in only five years. Their “Morning Wire” podcast, a quick deep dive into the day’s top stories sans commentary, sits in the top five on Apple’s daily news podcasts chart.

“I think what's different now is that if you have a particular point of view you can choose media that caters to your point of view and you don't have to listen to anything else,” Shumate said. “That's different than it was before cable news and talk radio because before that, people were getting their news from the networks and mainstream media outlets that had these objectivity standards.”

For consumers, the trust gets broken down when outlets say “just the facts” then present what viewers construe as biased or slanted reporting.

“I think that if more media outlets were honest about who they are and what they are, then it would be easier for people to sift through what they can and can't trust,” Phillips said. “So, at The Daily Wire, we're very open about the fact that we're conservative. We say at the bottom of every news article, ‘We are the largest fastest growing conservative news outlet in America.’ We don't pretend to not have bias. We're picking our stories based on educating voters.”

With an increasing number of media consumers turning to alternative news sources, increased polarization is a natural byproduct. In turn, as a country we are more partisan and likely less informed, Shumate said.

“(Media bias has) played a role in increasing partisanship and increasing the division because it sort of creates this cycle of outrage and noise that people get caught



up in in their own world,” Shumate said. “I think there is evidence that we're more polarized than we used to be. And the polarization has sort of gone hand-in-hand with this rise of partisan media.”

Phillips believes many of the country’s issues are at least in part a result of media bias.

“It's the division that's growing,” he said. “It's people not trusting the media. It's people not trusting each other. And I think it's a problem when no one knows who or what they can trust. And I think if we talk about the breakdown of institutions, one of the institutions used to be the media, an institution in America that people felt like they could trust back when the news is just the news. And now it's opinion.”

Because viewers feel lied to from traditional news outlets, they tend to trust alternative media sources because they are open about their bias.

“I think not even anecdotally but logically speaking, there's evidence that, OK, people are told, ‘Media is objective, it's not lying to them,’” Phillips said. “Then they see with their own eyes, ‘OK, as I do my own research, it is not objective. And I am being lied to.’ And I think it creates resentment, where they think, ‘I'm going to go to the complete opposite of what you're giving me right now,’ which is a lot of times these super opinionated media outlets.”

The risk with turning solely to opinion sources for news is a lack of crosscutting information and exposure to other points of view. Though there are a variety of differing opinions within both parties, it can still create an echo chamber for consumers.

“If people are only seeing the information about their own side that they agree with, they're going to be less likely to change their mind,” Shumate said. “They're going to be more tied to that kind of partisan viewpoint, which I think drives us further apart.”

Most consumers put a lot of stock in the credibility of news organizations and reporters, which influences how much the consumer believes what they report. However, thoughts of credibility seem to go out the window where social media is concerned. People tend to repeat or share what they read on their news feeds without fact checking with even a simple Google search. Considering all such information to be journalism can be damaging.

“What social media does is it allows a lot of really unvetted material to be put out there that people sort of take as news,” Shumate said. “One thing I always tell my students is, ‘You should not be getting your news from Twitter. Twitter is not a verified news source.’ But a lot of people do. And I think it has allowed unverified, and in some cases, demonstrably false information to circulate in a way that it didn't circulate before. And that certainly has made everything worse.”

A survey by Gallup and the Knight Foundation showed that 84% of respondents believe the news media is to blame for our divided country. An even larger number, 86%, believe media outlets lean to one side or the other. Notably, this is not divided by party lines but occurs on both sides.

Americans also believe the media is deliberately pushing an agenda; 74% are concerned media company owners are influencing news coverage, up five points since 2017, Gallup reported.

“(Media bias is) a huge problem, because I think it it leads to more division in the country, when you have entire outlets who are trying to mislead people into thinking things that just aren't true,” Phillips said. “Whether it's about COVID, or whether it's about any issue in America right now, the media has an incentive to push lies because it's what gets them more money, it gets them more clicks and it gets them more views. Their incentive is not to tell the truth, their incentive is to get people riled up.”

According to a Gallup poll, 54% believe reporters misrepresent the facts, and 28% believe reporters make up the facts entirely.

The widespread belief that the news media is unreliable has larger implications than news consumers being more critical of what they hear or turning to opinion sources for their news.

The effects show up at the ballot boxes.

Coverage of the discovery of a laptop that possibly belonged to Hunter Biden rested solely with the New York Post, owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., which was promptly banned by major social media companies, like Facebook and Twitter, and its official Twitter account was suspended until they deleted the tweet, according to Business Insider. The findings on the laptop, which came out right before the 2020 election, raised questions of President Joe Biden’s involvement with his son’s foreign business deals — including Burisma, a Ukrainian natural gas company linked to corruption, the Post reported.

Days after the report, CNN called it “dubious” and the New York Times used anonymous sources to discount the story. The Daily Beast ran a headline that stated, “Russian State Media Is Desperately Trying to Keep the Hunter Biden Story Alive” and

another, “FBI Examining Hunter’s Laptop As Foreign Op, Contradicting Trump’s Intel Czar.”

Taxpayer-funded NPR tweeted that it would not be covering the laptop story.

“We don’t want to waste our time on stories that are not really stories, and we don’t want to waste the listeners’ and readers’ time on stories that are just pure distractions,” it announced.

Hunter Biden never denied that the laptop was his. He said it “certainly” could be his in an interview with CBS “Sunday Morning.”

“After the campaign, there's plenty of polling that showed if people knew what had happened with the Hunter Biden laptop scandal it may have influenced the way they voted,” Phillips said. “That's a direct example of how the only reason they didn't know is because the media didn't cover it.”

In March 2022, the New York Times published a story with the headline, “Hunter Biden Paid Tax Bill, but Broad Federal Investigation Continues.” In the story, the Times reported in paragraph 24 that the laptop in question was confirmed to be Hunter Biden’s.

In June 2021, shortly before the Virginia gubernatorial election, The Daily Wire broke the story of a girl who was raped in the girls’ bathroom of a Loudon County public school by a boy who was allegedly “gender-fluid” and wearing a skirt, the victim’s parents said. A public records request confirmed a police report with “Offense: Forcible Sodomy [and] Sexual Battery” exists with matching date and time, The Daily Wire reported. The school said it wanted to handle the matter “in-house” and did not contact the police. Police were involved by the victim’s father. The Loudon County Sheriff’s

Office reported that the same boy sexually assaulted another girl four months prior and was transferred to a different school in the same district.

After The Daily Wire released the story, mainstream outlets like the Washington Post, the New York Times and CNN began covering it.

“If you actually looked at the polling data before that story came out, people were listing immigration, inflation, things like that as their number one motivating factor and then by the end of the campaign education was the number one issue for voters,” Phillips said. “So I think that if that story hadn’t happened, if the media hadn’t covered it, people probably wouldn’t have voted the way they did.”

During summer 2020, Black Lives Matter protests and riots occurred throughout the country. A CNN reporter covering a protest in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in August 2020, stood in front of a building engulfed in flames. The “crawl” on the screen stated, “FIERY BUT MOSTLY PEACEFUL PROTESTS AFTER POLICE SHOOTING.”

Left-leaning media aren’t the only skewed ones. Vox compiled a diagram comparing Fox News’ coverage of prominent news stories during the Trump administration with parallel coverage from MSNBC and CNN. Vox found that Fox News covered “mainstream media and fake news” significantly more than the other channels, as well as Hillary Clinton and tax cuts. However, they gave significantly less coverage to the Robert Mueller and Russia investigation, Donald Trump (in general) and almost no coverage to Stormy Daniels’ allegations that she had an affair with the president in 2006.

During the Capitol siege on Jan. 6, 2021, multiple Fox News hosts — including Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham and Brian Kilmeade — sent texts to White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows urging the president to make a statement and to tell people to go

home. Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyoming, revealed the texts during a House committee hearing not aired on Fox News. The texts were also not discussed on Fox that day, even during Hannity's show with Meadows as his guest.

In a study titled, "Character Endorsements and Electoral Endorsements," authors Archishman Chakraborty and Parikshit Ghosh explore whether and how media bias affects electoral outcomes.

Their election model assumes the media and voters agree that candidates should be honest, fair, intelligent and ethical. However, the two groups diverge on policy issues. This divergence could be interpreted as ideological bias on the part of the media and the gulf between the opinion of the "media elites" and the general public, as demonstrated by a survey of the two groups conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations.

Studies show news consumers are aware of editorial slant in news coverage and account for it, so it may be a non-issue. The problem, at least in the authors' model, is that the media possess crucial information about candidates that consumers don't. The public has easy access to candidates' policy positions, but the media is responsible for reporting their background and record. The news media, particularly those run by "media elites," may not be motivated to paint an honest picture of the candidates they disagree with and instead play up the candidates they like — which is where media bias comes into play, per the study. This dynamic fosters a tug of war between knowledge and authority — the media has the knowledge of the candidates' character while the public has the authority to elect representatives.

"Parties face a tension between opposing temptations of pandering to the voter and courting the media," authors state. "Adopting slightly more elitist policies than the

rival induces a slightly higher probability of endorsement and electoral victory — a phenomenon we call elitism creep.”

Therefore, in the model, politicians are incentivized to pander to the “media elites” for more flattering coverage, rather than pandering to voters. The public interprets good coverage as an indication of their character, though in reality the media simply prefers their policies. Electoral outcomes then favor the elites because candidates pander to them and the media boosts the candidate with favorable coverage, the study found. However, if a candidate goes too far to please “media elites,” the other candidate might try to take advantage of that by going to the opposite end of the spectrum and renouncing the elites in a “flight to populism,” authors state. Though the candidate will be burned by the media, the research shows that voters may like an exotic candidate that doesn’t take the typical elite position.

The authors conclude that voters in their model would fare better without the media if their coverage shifts political debate too much because candidates would stick to issues voters value, though candidates of low integrity might fool voters more easily without anyone to dig into them.

The dynamic between voters and the news media is more complicated in real-world elections — some people don’t perceive media bias, some are selective about the media they consume and some get their news from social media. There is concern that what Facebook chooses to show consumers could affect opinions because they suppress conservative news, reported Gizmodo, a science and technology publication, or that Google’s algorithm could affect an election, Wired reported. The study highlights key

problems voters face: The media holds the information concerning candidates' character but they aren't always motivated to fully and accurately report it.

So, where does the media go from here?

"If somebody doesn't trust the media, there's nothing the media can do to make them trust the media," Shumate said. "And so since that's lost, and since that thread's lost, I'm not really sure how we get it back. And I think the media sometimes does things that aggravate the situation. There's a lot of very superficial coverage."

A motivating factor for all corporations, media included, is profit. Phillips believes the media will not change until they have a financial incentive.

"I think people have gotten sick and tired of it and they stopped watching," Phillips said. "At a certain point they have to say, 'OK, what are we doing wrong? This is not sustainable, we're not going to be able to survive.' And that's when they start to say, 'Alright, let's give objective news coverage a try, let's see if that's gonna make people want to watch us again.' So I trust the market to alleviate a lot of the problems."

But for that to work, consumers have to use their purchasing power to influence the market. It would seem they have already begun. Nielsen ratings show that cable news networks saw sizable drops in viewership in 2021. CNN's viewership dropped 34%. Fox News Channel's dropped 34%. And MSNBC dropped 25%.

A survey by Gallup and the Knight Foundation showed that 84% of respondents believe the news media is to blame for the division in our country, and the same percentage believe the media could serve as a healing force.

"I hope there is an understanding among people of goodwill that this is an untenable situation and that there are ways each of us can approach our media



consumption that don't contribute to the polarization and the bias that we see,” Tucher said. “A lot of it is simply each of us getting up in the morning and deciding, ‘I’m going to be responsible in what I read. I’m going to be responsible in what I tell other people that I’ve read. I’m going to evaluate what I see.’”

## HOW CONSERVATIVES DEVELOPED A PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF LIBERAL NEWS BIAS

News media bias remains a prominent topic in public discourse, particularly since Donald Trump began running for president and harping on “fake news.”

But media became a mainstream issue long before Trump arrived on the public’s radar.

People have opinions on everything, particularly politics and journalists are no exception. The lens of bias inevitably affects the journalistic process, and journalists often get accused of slanted reporting.

But a more serious problem occurs when journalists report unethically — select stories with an agenda, ask slanted or leading questions, choose facts or quotes to fit a personal premise or invent information.

Writer Joan Didion wrote an essay in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1968 called “Alicia and the Underground Press,” lamenting issues facing American newspapers.

She wrote: “Their particular virtue is to be devoid of conventional press postures, so many of which rests on a quite facetious objectivity. Do not misread me. I admire objectivity very much indeed. But I fail to see how it can be achieved, if the reader does not understand the writer’s particular bias.”

Amber Roessner, associate professor at the University of Tennessee’s School of Journalism & Electronic Media, said everyone wears subjective lenses.

“I think it's telling, (Didion's) perspective about this notion of facetious objectivity at this particular juncture in history,” Roessner said. “And that's because, of course, when the objective mode had kind of come into being in the early 20th century, it was already under critique. And what do I mean by that? What I really mean is that, while it is possible to practice an objective mode — that is to be detached in your storytelling and to be transparent about your source selection, etc., and to attempt to be fair and balanced — all of that is quite possible. As Didion suggests here, we all have a subjective bias.”

Americans acknowledge that the news media is vital for democracy (81%), but almost half of Americans believe the media is biased, respondents to a Gallup and Knight Foundation study showed. In the same study, 52% believe reporters misrepresent facts and 28% believe reporters deliberately make up the “facts.”

“There have been several different cycles of declining trust,” said Andie Tucher, the H. Gordon Garbedian Professor of Journalism and the director of the doctoral program at the Columbia Journalism School. “Many journalists in the very beginning of the 20th century really made an effort to be more professional, to be more transparent, to verify facts according to understood rules, to have codes of ethics that they would live up to, it was a real effort to make journalism more credible and responsible and professional.”

She said journalism's challenge surfaced with the propaganda surrounding World War I.

“Journalism declined in the (19)20s and (19)30s but had sort of a bounce back to some extent during World War II, because people really needed to understand and trust

what was going on,” Tucher said. “They believed the government. They believed the military were doing the best. The (19)60s then challenged that again, with all of the growth of protest and defiance and sort of valuing of subjectivity.”

During the Vietnam era, journalists for a long time simply repeated the government’s position on the war, causing trust in journalism to falter from its 68-72% trust level among respondents in the early 1970s, a Gallup poll showed. Trust levels got a jump during the Watergate era, but not enough. By 2016, Gallup polls showed public trust had fallen to 32%.

“A lot of the reporting on Vietnam was really hard,” Tucher said. “You know the story of the My Lai massacre, that a platoon of young soldiers could open fire and indiscriminately kill more than 500 civilians in a small town was a horrifying story. It was a very important story, but it was so hard for people to believe that they blamed the press rather than then grappling with what the story meant.”

Conservative alternatives to media outlets, publishing houses and broadcasts began springing up in the 1950s. Nicole Hemmer, a research associate at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center and the U.S. Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, wrote in a piece for *The Atlantic* that two events in the early 1960s caused conservatives to believe that creating news outlets wasn’t enough. They needed to discredit current media.

Conservatives were convinced the government contributed to the liberal bias in the news media through the Federal Communications Commission, mostly through the Fairness Doctrine.

The Fairness Doctrine required FCC-licensed TV and radio stations to (a) devote airtime to controversial issues of public importance and (b) air opposing views on those issues. Translation: a broadcast station cannot present a hot-button issue from one side of the debate. The rule also instructed broadcasters to warn anyone subject to a personal attack in their programming and allow them a chance to rebut. Similarly, if broadcasters endorsed a political candidate, they must invite other candidates to respond.

Multiple legal challenges over the years culminated in *Red Lion Broadcasting Co., Inc. v. Federal Communications Commission* (1969) in which the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that, while broadcasters have free speech rights under the First Amendment, their medium is owned by the government and merely leased to broadcasters, giving the FCC the right to regulate news content. However, jurisprudence on the First Amendment that followed *Red Lion* granted broadcasters expanded free speech rights, sparking questions of the Fairness Doctrine's constitutionality.

"I think the Fairness Doctrine was a noble attempt," Tucher said. "The way I look at the Fairness Doctrine, it was a really good idea to try to get people to look at issues from complicated points of view. The main purpose of the Fairness Doctrine was to have contentious issues reported on at all. That important issues should be reported so that people can understand them. So that the government would not be seen as taking sides, the idea was you had to present a rounded, balanced picture of controversial issues. But you needed to get the controversial issues out there so people would understand them."

But some believe the FCC stunted controversial reporting, partially because broadcasters didn't want to hand out free airtime. Conservatives believed they were silenced through the lack of reporting on controversy.

“What that ended up meaning is that broadcasters didn't broadcast anything at all that was controversial, because they didn't want to have to find another side or they felt that they were being told what to report, and that's always something that journalists resist,” Tucher said. “So it was another in a long line of real, well-meaning efforts to improve journalism that I think ended up not helping.”

On July 26, 1963, the FCC released a public notice that they would look at “substance rather than to label or form” when evaluating a station’s Fairness Doctrine compliance. “It is immaterial whether a particular program is presented under the label of ‘Americanism,’ ‘anti-communism’ or ‘states’ rights,’” the notice stated.

Hemmer said the FCC and conservatives knew these labels belonged to conservative ideas. She believes the FCC targeted conservatives because they challenged the status quo of reporting.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalists held fast to the idea of objectivity. Opinion and analysis remained detached from news. But conservative reporting, she says, “is opinion by nature.” The FCC wanted partisan broadcasters to give airtime to opponents for a rebuttal.

Conservative broadcasters saw themselves as the response to the liberal bias masked by “objectivity” that dominated mainstream news media. Hemmer said they believed the FCC dedicated its government sway to propping up the liberal bias in the media and suppressing opposition.

After reconsidering the rule (following a Congressional resolution to do so), the FCC revoked the doctrine in 1987, leading to a red wave of conservative talk show hosts

in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Rush Limbaugh's national radio show in 1988.

Limbaugh's show, abrasively combining news and opinion, became popular similarly to the way President Donald Trump did. Limbaugh's message struck a nerve with an under-represented, blue-collar portion of the population. Limbaugh's success inspired many to abandon the objectivity standard in mainstream news reporting.

“(When it was repealed) a lot of opinion swamped the airwaves in ways that it had never been able to do before,” Tucher said. “And when you have opinion swamping fact and opinion swamping reporting, that suggests people use journalism differently.”

The 1960s saw a rise of conservatism as a movement, resulting in Barry Goldwater's failed presidential bid against President Lyndon B. Johnson.

“I traced (media bias) to the early 1960s, which was when the conservatism really started coming to the fore as a political movement, and that was the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign,” said Rich Shumate, an assistant professor in Western Kentucky University's School of Media who wrote “Barry Goldwater, Distrust in the Media, and Conservative Identity: The Perception of Liberal Bias in the News.”

“And that was really where conservatives started to complain about this, and then it sort of took off from there. There are instances of it before that, but I think that was kind of where it started. And that was also around the time that television took off.”

Prior to Goldwater's campaign, the conservative movement was largely in the middle, and he took it further to the right, Shumate said. Many political analysts believe Goldwater's campaign was one of the worst in American history.

“The coverage of his campaign was brutal, but largely because he ran a really bad campaign,” Shumate said. “Conservatives took away from that that the media was dumping on Barry Goldwater, and that’s really sort of when this started.”

Conservative columnist Morrie Ryskind wrote that the campaign coverage was so pro-Johnson that “I’m surprised when ‘TILT’ doesn’t flash across the screen to the accompaniment of a warning red light.”

Goldwater was the first person who really identified as a conservative — the Republican Party were more centrist up until that point, and he moved it toward the right, Hemmer said.

“And then the next Republican candidate was Richard Nixon, who sort of took that, once he realized that worked, sort of took the ball and ran with it and really got aggressive against the media,” Shumate said. “And then when Watergate happened, you know, that was really combative with the media. So I think that’s sort of how it started.”

Conservatives argued that the media was secretly liberal — an argument Nixon happily adopted. Shumate noted that 1965 was when “liberal bias” starting creeping into the lexicon.

“If you take this notion of claims of ideological news bias you really saw and particularly this notion of a ‘liberal news bias,’ you really see that critique start to emerge within our country in the 60s,” Roessner said. “And you really see it come to an apex in the Nixon administration. And you see it manifest, for instance, in Spiro Agnew’s critique of an elite, liberal news media. Now, that said, at the same existing period there were individuals at the New York Times, who were critiquing this notion of objectivity and critiquing elite news media circles. And it is still very true even today, that many of



the news reporters at our top upper echelon legacy news media outlets come from elite backgrounds, and I think that that's a very fair critique.”

The concept of “fair and balanced” reporting did not begin with Fox News — its roots go back to the 1940s.

Human Events, a conservative newsweekly founded in 1944, aimed to uncover facts other news sources ignored. By the early 1960s, its mission was clearly stated: “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.”

Human Events allowed “bias” to morph into an appropriate newsroom value not distinct from objectivity by distinguishing it from impartiality.

In 1968, TV Guide writer Edith Efron analyzed hours of news coverage from CBS, NBC and ABC covering the last few weeks of the 1968 presidential election between Hubert Humphrey and incumbent Richard Nixon, making note of every favorable and unfavorable word spoken about each candidate. Her analysis showed close to half of what was said of Humphrey was positive. For Nixon, however, only 8.7% was positive. Efron published “The News Twisters,” detailing her findings and concluding that “the elitist-liberal-left line in all controversies.”

However, she was the sole arbiter of what constituted negative or positive coverage.

“This notion of ‘the media’ or ‘the news media’ really started to emerge in the 1970s, and you really saw it emerge as a part of the political rhetoric of the Nixon

administration,” Roessner said. “But there really is no one unified ‘news media.’ Instead, what you have is multiple news organizations across the across state, across a region across a country and across the globe. And within each of those news organizations you have, you know, anywhere from a dozen to hundreds of individuals working to produce news content in a variety of modes.”

By the 1980s, conservatives were adamant that the only trustworthy news sources were conservative ones because the rest were slanted toward the left. They convinced more than their own party. Some 44% of respondents to a 2014 Gallup poll came to the same conclusion.

Fox News jumped on the trend when it entered the airwaves in 1996. Fox topped CNN’s ratings just five years after its inception. By its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the network averaged almost 2 million viewers a night. Fox changed the broadcast game — spicing up graphics, hiring attractive on-air journalists and making them news “personalities” and making news “entertainment.”

Fox filled the need for cultural and political debate from a conservative perspective post-Watergate. Part of its success has been the choosing and framing of stories from a conservative perspective. However, Fox critics quickly point out that the network isn’t as eager to cover anything that runs counter to the conservative image.

Then came the internet: undoubtedly the single-biggest factor in the modern transformation of the news business. The internet garnered the majority of newspapers’ cash flow: advertising. Why buy an ad in print when you can put it online for cheaper? Craigslist and eBay provided more exposure for less money. Since the advent of the internet, newspaper revenue has lived in a perpetual state of decline. With this came news

conglomerates like the Gannett Co. and the formation of news deserts — communities void of news sources to keep tabs on government, among other things. As social media grew, journalists had to compete in a sensationalized culture.

“You cannot overstate the significance of social media” in the decline of trust in media, as Rachel Moran, who works for University of Washington’s Center for an Informed Public, told the Washington Post. Social media is “optimized for attention rather than quality,” she said.

Over time, cable news became more sensationalized and began to look more like entertainment, rather than a news program. News anchors blend commentary with news reporting, making it difficult to distinguish between the two. This contributes to a biased view of the news media, broadcast news in particular.

“I hate to say that we are waiting for some other awful event to shock people into understanding things will change, but I do think that there are these spirals of sensationalism and melodrama and bias and opinion that hit a point that they have to fall, they have to go down, they can't keep going up,” Tucher said.

“We're at a turning point. I don't know which way we'll turn, and I'm not even sure which way I hope (we will turn).”

## NEWSPAPER ENDORSEMENTS AND ELECTORAL EFFECTS

For decades, newspapers have endorsed candidates in races from city council to the White House. Despite being an election season trademark, does the endorsement have a significant effect on voters?

The consensus seems to be that presidential endorsements don't have significant effect. However, endorsements in local races can hold some weight, as the research will show.

Abraham Lincoln was so desperate for newspaper endorsements in the 1860 election, he bought the Illinois Staats-Anzeiger newspaper to get its endorsement of the Republican Party, reported The Hill. Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump garnered an all-time low of editorial board endorsements from national newspapers, compared with his opponent's nearly 500 endorsements in the 2016 election. Yet he still pulled out a victory, reported The Hill.

Are editorial boards shouting into the void?

It is important to understand that most endorsements are not made by those reporting the news but by a separate entity known as an editorial board. Editorial boards decide as a group which candidates to support and why, independent from those who cover and write the news. Newspapers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries simply printed their publishers' opinions, reported the Houston Chronicle.

New printing technologies that allow mass distribution as well as wire services that quickly delivered fact-based news altered the opinion-driven business model into an

information provider. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, editorial opinions were condensed into its own page as it remains today, reported the Houston Chronicle.

Readers' confusion with the difference between the news and opinion sections is enough for some papers to stop endorsements. Such was the case for USA Today's Editorial Page Editor Bill Sternberg. The confusion is understandable — most papers use ambiguous phrases such as “We endorse...” or “Our newspaper supports...” which makes it unclear who exactly is doing the supporting. The whole staff? A few people? The publisher? For The New York Times, it's a board of 16. Some boards require a unanimous decision like the Tennessean, who refrained from endorsing a candidate for the first time since 1836 because their board of five couldn't agree to support Hillary Clinton.

Some editorial boards don't have any staffers in common with their newsroom, the Times being one of them. CBS “This Morning” grilled the Times' Executive Editor Dean Baquet for merely observing the meeting. “I couldn't resist,” he admitted. The Tennessean's executive editor and news director participate on their editorial board.

Scott Gillespie, the editorial page editor and vice president at The Star Tribune in Minneapolis, told the Poynter Institute that its board publishes more than 400 editorials, and they take their leadership role seriously (Tompkins).

“It would be an abdication of that leadership role to sit out elections,” Gillespie said. He added that the endorsements generate readership as well as healthy debate.

The Boston Globe's editorial page editor, Bina Venkataraman, told Poynter that the Globe endorses candidates to clarify key issues and inform readers on who is aligned with their editorial board's values (Tompkins). Venkataraman noted they put the most

legwork into evaluating down-ballot (local) races and ballot questions where candidates' information is not as readily available.

“The board comes to a collective decision in an endorsement, which is something that requires balancing various points of view, not just advancing one person's opinion,” Venkataraman said. “For some readers and voters, that carries some weight.”

The Orlando Sentinel's opinions editor, Mike Lafferty, told Poynter its editorials express institutional opinions about policies that affect people (Tompkins).

“It seems natural that we would also express institutional opinions about the people who are running to make those laws and create those policies.”

A 2011 study published in *The Review of Economic Studies*, *Media Bias and Influence: Evidence from Newspaper Endorsements*, by Chun-Fang Chiang and Brian Knight, found that voters are more likely to support an endorsed candidate. However, the degree of influence depends on the interpreted credibility of the endorsement.

For example, if a left-leaning paper endorsed a Democrat candidate, it wouldn't be very influential. However, if a neutral or right-leaning paper endorsed the same candidate, the endorsement would carry some weight. A 2008 Brown University study confirmed this finding.

However, Pew Research Center found that 70% of respondents didn't feel influenced by endorsements (Gottfried). The rest were divided on whether a newspaper endorsement would affect their choice.

In 2020, the historically right-leaning *Union Leader* in Manchester, New Hampshire, caused quite a shock wave when its editorial board endorsed Joe Biden for president. National outlets covered the endorsement like it was a story in and of itself —

CNN's Jake Tapper posted a GIF of hell freezing over. USA Today's Susan Page tweeted asking when the paper last endorsed a democrat — possibly 1912, according to its former publisher Joe McQuaid. USA Today, which has never endorsed a candidate, endorsed Joe Biden in the 2020 election. The Scientific American said it “felt compelled” to endorse Biden, despite never before giving an endorsement.

But how do we measure the success of an endorsement?

“I’m often perplexed by news articles and columns about endorsements because they assume that organizations like ours endorse candidates for one reason: to sway votes,” Chicago Tribune Editorial Page Editor John McCormick explained to the Columbia Journalism Review (Funt). “If that’s the metric, then your verdict will be easy to reach: ‘But people don’t pay any attention, it’s irrelevant, half of the people you endorse don’t win.’ Those clichés are the hardiest of perennials. Swaying votes is only one reason for endorsing, and arguably not the most important. Every few years, endorsements bring a publication to full stop. They explain to the world what that publication is, what it advocates, how it thinks, what principles it holds dear.”

If relevance means influence, then newspaper endorsements may as well be relics (Funt). If Trump could be castrated by the vast majority of editorial boards across the country but sweep the Electoral College, editorialists likely don’t have the sway they once did.

But editorial endorsements do not equate to advertising, as they are treated while attempting to be quantified. Endorsements and their effects on readers are much more complex. Some endorsements are passionate articulations of a candidate’s qualifications for office. Others hold their nose and give a reluctant endorsement. Some use tactics to

sway the undecided voters. Others neglect policy debates altogether. Such a diverse set of endorsements are difficult to quantify how they affect people when there is a plethora of factors involved in their decisions. As CJR puts it, “The ripples of a compelling argument don’t appear reducible to a stat” (Funt).

As far as presidential races are concerned, information on candidates is readily available and easily found. Once you hit the general election, candidate information is downright inescapable, and most voters already have their minds made up. A newspaper endorsement, statistically, is not going to swing a voter that can’t make up their mind. However, newspaper endorsements find their time in the spotlight during local races.

Down ballot races (any non-presidential race) are historically murky from an out-of-the-loop voter point of view. The average person doesn’t keep up with agricultural commissioner candidates, nor are they familiar with everyone running in the city council race. On gubernatorial and state races, a number of sources offer a plethora of information.

However, local papers are among the few, and sometimes the only, media outlets covering the races for elected officials like city council, county commissioners, district judges, state representatives, county clerks, sheriffs and so on. These low-information races are for the offices that shape local communities.

Enter: newspaper endorsements.

On a smaller scale like state and local races, newspaper editorial boards are the only ones able to interview and thoroughly research candidates to give their readers an idea of to whom they should pledge their vote. As the Columbia Journalism Review stated, “Fewer Americans may clip out endorsements from the paper to bring to the polls, but for



down-ballot races, there simply are no other media willing to interrogate potential property appraisers for 90 minutes” (Funt).

Allen Johnson, editorial page editor at the News & Record paper in Greensboro, North Carolina, told Poynter that midsize papers like his have the most clout in smaller races (Tompkins).

“We’ll explain, ‘Here’s what this person does and here’s why you ought to care.’ Then we make an argument for who we think is best,” Johnson said. “We’ve had readers call and say, ‘When are your judicial endorsements coming? We need some guidance.’”

Some even use these endorsements to know who not to vote for, Johnson added.

The News & Record endorsements have lost their diversity as consolidation has swept the newspaper landscape, Johnson said. This looks to be the case across the nation as newspaper conglomerates continue to buy up newspapers big and small.

In 1983, there were 50 media companies in charge of nearly all the nation’s news sources. As of 2012, only six corporations control 90% of what consumers watch, read and listen to, reported Business Insider.

News Corp alone owns the top newspaper on three continents. The top 25 companies that own the most newspapers control nearly a third of all daily newspapers and a quarter of all weeklies (The Expanding News Desert). The problem for the local communities whose papers have been bought out by massive corporations is that the people in control of their local news are not the same people that have a vested interest in that community. Where newspaper endorsements can do the most good is the same place from which they are most likely to vanish.

Despite changing newspaper readership and the rise of digital media, newspapers still reach 69% of the U.S. population each month, shows a Nielsen Scarborough study. Howard Scarrow and Steve Borman conducted a case study on the efficacy of newspaper endorsements in the 1977 Suffolk County, New York, county district attorney race.

The local newspaper, Suffolk Life, endorsed incumbent Henry O'Brien over his opponent, Patrick Henry. Scarrow and Borman's study found that by two methods of analysis, the conclusion is "inescapable" that Suffolk Life's endorsement of O'Brien made a difference with the researchers concluding that the endorsement accounted for more than 20% of O'Brien's vote totals.

Journalist Sarah Kellogg conducted an analysis into the relevance of newspaper endorsements, throughout which she interviewed several newspaper editors around the country. Tod Robberson, editorial section editor for the St. Louis Post Dispatch, said his experience is at odds with the current consensus that endorsements don't matter like they had in the past, as his paper is "inundated" with requests from candidates to meet with them. Steve Booher, news director for the St. Joseph News Press Gazette, told Kellogg that candidates frequently ask for endorsements.

Hank Water III, editorial writer and former owner of The Columbia Tribune in Columbia, Missouri, told Kellogg that the candidate's party affects their desire for an endorsement, echoing earlier cited studies.

"If they think that I have the reputation as a liberal and they're very conservative, they're not going to be as interested in it," Waters said. "But in our particular case we've always tried to be objective, and we will agree with one side or the other."

From a different perspective, political consultant Jonathan Ratliff, who also spoke with Kellogg, doesn't seem to place much weight on newspaper endorsements to boost his candidates. "I would say it doesn't matter a lot to me because most of the time newspapers don't endorse my candidate, but I still win," Ratliff said. Kellogg said in her study that most of the politicians she interviewed believe the endorsements are at least somewhat helpful in their campaigns. Missouri House Representative Pat Conway said he has watched the value of endorsements decrease in his 30 years in politics from what he believes is the relatively new ability to get news from sources other than the local newspaper.

Kellogg said the consensus from her interviewees is that smaller, down-ballot races benefit the most from newspaper endorsements. Dr. James Endersby, a University of Missouri political science professor, believes newspaper endorsements affect little in presidential races, but could make a difference in local elections. This is especially the case, Endersby said, in nonpartisan races. Many voters use political party affiliation as an information shortcut in partisan races. "When you don't have a party label on the ballot, if you don't have a recognized incumbent or something, the campaign needs to show that there is a real viable candidate behind there, and that's where they may have a greater impact," Endersby said in his interview with Kellogg.

If newspaper endorsements effects are waning, why does the practice continue?

Many editors believe it is their duty to readers to keep them informed. After spending so much time following and watching the candidates, at times even interviewing them, some editors believe it is part of their job to share what they have

learned. Such is the opinion of New Hampshire's The Concord Monitor's editor Felice Belman.

"We have such a rare opportunity as residents but also as journalists to listen to these candidates," Belman told the Poynter Institute (Tompkins). "Why wouldn't we give readers the opportunity to tell them what we've learned?" In November 2008, when her interview was published by Poynter, Belman said all the Monitor's endorsed candidates for the Concord, N.H., school board won their races.

The Los Angeles Times gave up endorsements after its 1972 endorsement of Richard Nixon got them in hot water (Allsop). In 2008, the paper returned to the endorsement game, reasoning that editorial boards take stands on political issues every day. Stopping endorsements seemed odd or even irresponsible, the editorial board said. The Chicago Tribune made a similar statement in 2012. One of the Halifax papers, The Press Democrat in Sonoma County, California, was sold to local owners then immediately resumed endorsing candidates (Allsop).

"Disengaging from local elections makes a community newspaper less relevant," publisher Bruce Kyle wrote for the Times.

However, some disagree.

Such as Allen Neuharth, founder of USA Today. He wrote in a 2004 USA Today column, "Don't let anyone tell you how to mark your ballot. ... Many newspaper editors and owners still cling to the old-fashioned idea that they know better than you how you should vote."

In such a polarizing time in political history, many worry about alienating half their audience. Though the editorial board responsible for endorsements are separate from

the news department, many don't understand that. They just see that "the paper" endorsed a candidate. For this reason, many editors see a risk to credibility. The Green Bay Press Gazette announced in 2014, ahead of the general election, that its editorial board would not be endorsing any candidates.

"In the polarized political world today, we want to be an independent voice amid the growing clamor of voices espousing hyper-partisan views."

The article continued, stating their paper has frequently been identified as having bias toward whatever candidate they endorsed because many readers perceive an endorsement as an admission of bias, despite pointing out they are merely "offering food for thought," not trying to tell anyone who to vote for. The article stated it would continue to offer information on down-ballot races for consumer use.

The Press Gazette isn't the only one.

In 2012, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel announced they were getting out of "the political endorsement business" (Clark). USA Today and the Wall Street Journal made similar announcements. These are just a few out of many papers across the nation discontinuing their political endorsements of at least presidential candidates because of perceived bias.

The San Diego Tribune endorsed a Democrat for the first time in its 148-year existence. Shortly thereafter they were down 209 subscribers. The Cincinnati Enquirer lost several hundred for supporting Clinton.

The Arizona Republic endorsed Clinton in 2016 but promised readers its conservative leanings are still solid. Should editorial boards be so upfront about their biases?

Is bias the same reason many have lost faith in their editorial boards?

Editorial Page Editor at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel David Haynes certainly thinks so. He wrote in 2012 that readers “confuse our political news coverage with our editorial recommendations... This loss of credibility is a high price to pay to conjure a ghost of newspapering past that we have come to believe is of little value today.”

Many editorial boards, regardless of whether they endorse candidates, are making their candidate interviews more transparent.

In 2014, MLive.com, an umbrella outlet for the eight Michigan newspapers owned by Advance, partnered with Michigan Radio and The Center for Michigan to host a “2014 Ballot Bash” for their endorsements of state candidates. This series of live events to stage editorial interviews with candidates for governor, attorney general, and U.S. Senate, hope to encourage public engagement and transparency (Funt). Many boards are videoing their interviews and posting them online for public consumption. Kellogg’s research concluded that many voters are using social media as an alternative to traditional media outlets, though that is hardly shocking. There has been much ado following the 2016 election over Facebook’s influence in the election. Netflix’s 2020 documentary, “The Social Dilemma,” thoroughly documented Cambridge Analytica’s exploitation of social media for electoral gain, from Barack Obama’s first presidential term to Donald Trump’s 2016 run.

Political campaigns and administrations have taken note of social media’s efficacy in influencing voters and many use it as a runaround to corporate media outlets. Some officials and candidates, including Missouri’s governor, use Facebook Live to make announcements, rather than calling a traditional press conference. President Trump

famously used Twitter to directly communicate to his base and make announcements. Reiter and Matthes studied the long-term correlation between the use of mainstream media, the use of alternative digital media (such as social media) and the erosion of political interest and knowledge.

They found that alternative digital media use is “positively related” to political interest, which they said confirmed the mobilizing nature of social media. One can observe this from social media’s role in organizing protests and riots in recent times. Reiter and Matthes continue, stating that audiences of mainstream media may become gradually disinterested in politics when exposed to alternative digital media in large amounts. According to their study, use of both mainstream and digital alternative media were unrelated to political knowledge, yet political interest was positively related to political knowledge over time.

Many voters are losing trust in the traditional corporate media, and one reason may be a detection of media bias.

Former Tupperware Chief Executive Warren L. Batts put it eloquently when he said, “Any company has to sell the credibility of its product, but a media company has nothing else to sell.” Studies show voters are sophisticated enough to filter out media bias and reduce their reliance on biased reporting when deciding who to vote for (Chiang and Knight). An early 2010s survey data showed over 40% of respondents have “hardly any confidence in the media,” as opposed to “a great deal of confidence” or “some confidence.” According to a 2005 Pew Research Center survey, the fragment of voters who distrust the media has more than doubled over the past three decades. This number has continued to rise since that data was captured. As of 2020, Pew reported that 52% of

U.S. adults have little to no confidence that journalists act in the best interests of the public.

Studies show that journalists in large media organizations lean liberal (Dennis, 1996, 1997; Lichter et al., 1986; Lichter & Rothman, 1981; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). However, a link between their personal politics and their reporting has not been strongly established in research as of 2010. Domke and Watts (1999) argue that conservatives have convinced consumers and even some journalists of the legitimacy of a liberally biased media. The findings of T. Lee (2005) suggest media bias is an issue of the public's perception influenced by their own ideological biases.

TT Lee's study found the more someone trusts the government and the more liberal they are, the greater likelihood they will view the news media as fair. However, how they evaluate the economy has no bearing on their view of the news media. Lee's research supported his first two hypotheses: the more liberal you are the more you trust the news media and the less politically cynical you are the more likely you trust the news media. However, his hypothesis that the less personally cynical someone is the more likely they trust the media, was rejected.

The electoral effect of media bias has been widely examined for decades, but is fascinating, nonetheless. The biggest challenge in observing casual media influence is that consumers tend to choose news outlets that reflect their political perspective.

DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) studied the "Fox News Effect" on voting behavior in a town-level analysis. Their findings showed that Fox News convinced 3% to 28% of its viewers to vote Republican. On the other end of the political spectrum, Gerber, Karlan and Bergan (2009) conducted a field experiment in the 2005 Virginia gubernatorial



election. Their research showed that Washington Post subscriptions increased the probability of voting for a Democrat by eight percentage points. As for endorsements, Chiang and Knight concluded they are most effective among moderates. These relationships clearly suggest a strong connection between political and/or biased reporting with the electoral behavior of the American public.

Intentionally or not, the fourth estate plays a big role in political perceptions. There's little doubt that the media we watch, read, and listen to affect how we think about the world. It's part of the socialization process. Journalists can quite easily affect viewers' political views in several ways, starting with choosing which stories to cover or not.

For example, during the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election, education was a central issue, including a school bathroom policy in Loudoun County that allowed boys into girls' bathrooms and vice versa, as reported by The Daily Wire, a conservative news organization. Investigative journalists at The Daily Wire discovered school officials tried to cover up the rape of a young girl in a school bathroom by a boy wearing a skirt (who was previously accused of sexual assault at a different school). Most mainstream media outlets ignored the story. Some, like the Washington Post, buried the headline by including the central detail — that the boy claimed to be “gender-fluid” and that the rape occurred in the girls' bathroom — as a footnote deep into the story.

The media can also perpetuate narratives that boil complex people or issues into over-simplified talking points in their scripts. A popular election-coverage script is the “horse race” narrative. The mainstream media tend to see elections through the lens of sport-like competition, as decades of research shows.

Visuals carry even more weight in the minds of most voters, carrying notions of emotions, realism and credibility — forming a lasting impression in voters' (School of Journalism and Communication). The photos news organizations choose to publish, how the subject is positioned or framed, along with factors like size and layout, can reveal bias and influence perceptions (School of Journalism and Communication).

The media's role in elections is hardly diminishing but rather growing and affecting electoral behavior on a greater scale. As political polarization grows, the bias of mainstream media outlets grows with it, perpetuating a cycle of one-sided information and half-baked opinions. To truly grow past the tendency of demonizing the other side of the aisle, we must learn to seek out the facts beyond the commentary on cable news shows.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

The journey to the completion of my capstone experience project has been a long one, and it was not without its difficulties. My passion for my chosen topic of media bias and the plague it has been in the news media has kept me going. I'm never content just knowing that something *is*, I must know *why* it is the way it is and how it got that way. I need the full story. I find this trait to be a blessing because it led me to this career path.

The research I have done for this project has been eye-opening, and I've learned that the problem is bigger than I initially realized. One of the biggest things I've learned is that the distrust for the media goes back much further than I realized. Through my news stories I was able to learn so much about some of the big factors in the formation of our current perception of the news media. I was also able to hone my skills of organizing very long stories to give them a smooth flow and keep them engaging to readers. I was also able to get more practice interviewing sources and forming thought-provoking questions.

Researching for my scholarly paper turned up some interesting research papers. I was intrigued by the scholarly research perspective on topics I've spent the past six or so years observing. With my research paper focusing on newspaper endorsements, I was able to dive into a topic I was fairly unfamiliar with. I learned about the history of endorsements and I was able to get a variety of perspectives on the efficacy of the practice.

I have put hours and hours of work and intense dedication and discipline into this project, and it is something I am very proud of. My first news story is competing for a Hearst Journalism Award and I'm very excited to see what happens in that competition. I'm so thankful for the help of all my advisors and the people who took the time to let me interview them. It's finally together.

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## APPENDIX



Presenting during the WKU Research Conference March 26, 2022.





Interviewing Cabot Phillips in Downing Student Union on Feb. 18, 2022.