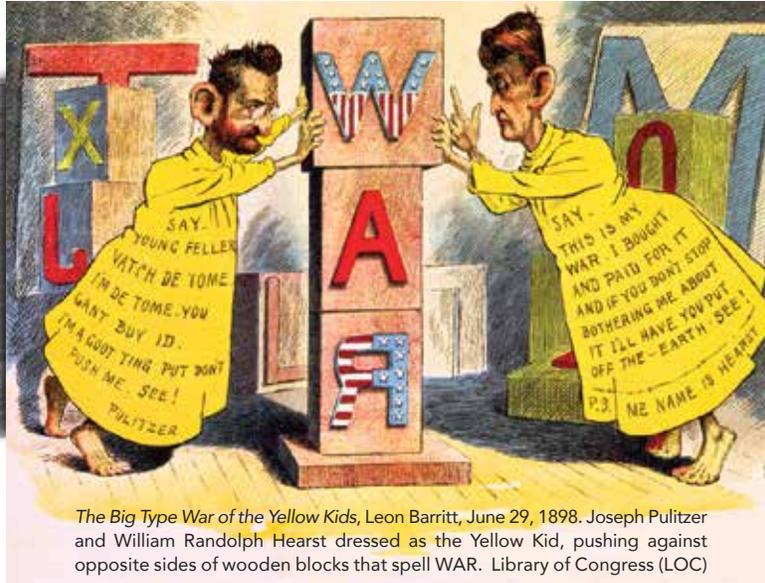




Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911). LOC



The Big Type War of the Yellow Kids, Leon Barritt, June 29, 1898. Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst dressed as the Yellow Kid, pushing against opposite sides of wooden blocks that spell WAR. Library of Congress (LOC)



William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951), Harris & Ewing. LOC

# HAVE I GOT A STORY FOR YOU!

The checkered past of  
“fair and balanced”  
news in America

PHILIP PATTERSON

**F**AKE NEWS. We hear the allegations all the time. If there's one thing a divided America can agree on, no matter which side you're on, it is this: the news generated by the *other* side is nothing but half-truths, misrepresentations, or downright lies.

Is there such a thing as objective journalism? Could an objective medium even survive in today's deeply partisan journalism? Does democracy require an objective press—whatever that means?

When we begin to examine the problem, whether the charge is “fake news,” “bias,” “clickbait,” or “mistrust of the media,” we realize that we've been here before, near the beginning of our republic. Perhaps a few lessons from history would be instructive.

## GOSSIP RUN AMOK

Not unlike cable news today, newspapers in early America were decidedly partisan and, at times, ugly. When President John Adams, a Federalist, found himself in a nation of Anti-Federalist newspapers, he proposed the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which made it a crime to criticize the president—at least until the law's sunset on Inauguration Day 1801. A handful of newspaper editors went to jail, along with ministers, college presidents, and minor political appointees, all victims of what has been called the “worst act ever passed through Congress.” Despite that early attack, the partisan press thrived.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, American journalism was a swamp of lies, sensationalism, and gross invasions of privacy. Two Boston lawyers, Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis (who would become the first Jewish U.S. Supreme Court Justice), had had enough of the snooping, prying Boston press, whose photographers had disrupted the society wedding of Warren's daughter. They aired their views in “The Right to Privacy,” an 1890 article in the *Harvard Law Review*, a respected publication read by the legal minds of the day. In a *20/20* segment on privacy, John Stossel of ABC News would later refer to the treatise as “perhaps the most influential

law review article of all time.” Warren and Brandeis proposed a basic constitutional right to privacy, a novel argument, for nowhere does the Constitution mention privacy. Their commentary on the public appetite for a gossip-mongering press is as relevant as if written in 2018.

Gossip is no longer the resource of the idle and of the vicious, but has become a trade, which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery . . . In this, as in other branches of commerce, the supply creates the demand. Each crop of unseemly gossip, thus harvested, becomes the seed of more . . . Even gossip apparently harmless, when widely and persistently circulated, is potent for evil. It both belittles and perverts. It belittles by inverting the relative importance of things, thus dwarfing the thoughts and aspirations of a people. When personal gossip attains the dignity of print, and crowds the space available for matters of real

interest to the community, what wonder that the ignorant and thoughtless mistake its relative importance. . . . No enthusiasm can flourish, no generous impulse can survive under its blighting influence.

### HAWKING THE HEADLINES

At the time of the Warren and Brandeis article, the average major city had at least two competing newspapers—William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer having the biggest chains—and often three or four papers. Hawked by “newsies,” a paper earned its readership daily in the shouted, sensational headlines. So powerful were the papers that modern history books still expound the theory that Hearst and Pulitzer bullied American politicians into the Spanish-American war to provide content for their pages. The truth is more complicated, but Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers certainly fueled public support for war.

In New York City, a relatively unknown Benjamin Day lowered the

price of his *New York Sun* from a nickel to a penny—a price less than the cost of printing. Under Day’s plan, the advertiser would foot the bill, a complete flip of the economic model. Day was rewarded with a huge boost in circulation and enough eyeballs for ads to make the model work.

The “penny press” was a revolution: Sex sold. Crime sold. Celebrity sold. Poorly researched stories were legitimized by bold headlines. News staffs were stolen between papers, and syndicated works such as comic strips shifted ownership and readership regularly. One such comic strip character, the “Yellow Kid,” was so popular in New York that it ran simultaneously in Hearst’s *Journal* and Pulitzer’s *World*. The “Yellow Kid” would also provide the media era its name, “yellow journalism,” coined by *New York Press* editor Ervin Wardman. Of the sensational headlines and often faked news stories and interviews, Wardman pronounced a scathing judgment: “The ‘new journalism’ continues to think up a varied assortment of new lies.”



*The Yellow Press*, Louis M. Glackens, *Puck* magazine, © Oct. 12, 1910, by Keppler & Schwarzmann. Library of Congress. Depicts William Randolph Hearst tossing newspapers with headlines such as “Appeals to Passion, Venom, Sensationalism, Attacks on Honest Officials, Strife, Distorted News, Personal Grievance, and Misrepresentation.” Box contains excerpt from a letter by NYC Mayor William Jay Gaynor published in the *New York Evening Post*: “The time is at hand when these journalistic scoundrels have got to stop or get out, and I am ready now to do my share to that end. They are absolutely without souls. If decent people would refuse to look at such newspapers the whole thing would right itself at once. The journalism of New York City has been dragged to the lowest depths of degradation. The grossest rilleries and libels, instead of honest statements and fair discussion, have gone unchecked.”

## MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVITY

With the heretofore untried notion of “objectivity,” savvy newspaper owners sensed a way out of low public favor while also generating a greater profit. Why not release the paper from its partisan past, report all sides of an issue and let the public decide? Now readers of all political persuasions would buy the same paper. Then came the boldest idea: Call it an *ethical* decision. The objective newspaper was born.

The turn of the twentieth century provided the right intellectual climate for the objectivity experiment to thrive. The “Age of Enlightenment,” accepted in Europe for years, had come to America where it was also known as the “Age of Reason.” According to Enlightenment thinkers, truth was findable, knowable, and replicable. Enlightened humans would eventually solve major problems—including war and poverty. Social justice would rule. And what better institution to lead us to that enlightenment than an objective press?

Objectivity was nuanced, but minimally required that journalists divorce facts from opinion, refuse to allow individual bias to influence what they chose to report or how they reported it. All facts and people were regarded as equal and equally worthy of coverage. Opinion would be relegated to specific pages, apart from objective news. Citizens and publishers believed that objectivity was an attainable ideal. Credibility was established. Reputations began to rise so that, in the 1960s, a journalist—Walter Cronkite of CBS News—was the “most trusted man in America.”

The Enlightenment view of truth was readily compatible with democracy. People who could reason together could arrive at some shared “truth” of how they should govern themselves. Information was essential to good government, for it allowed informed citizens to scrutinize their prospective leaders and vote

accordingly. Information provided both the “glue” that held a society together as well as the “grease” that made it all run smoothly. As long as truth was ascertainable, government could function.

The notion that an objective media plays an important role in our democratic wellbeing became so ingrained that “fairness” was written into FCC law for more than half of the twentieth century. The Fairness Doctrine mandated that radio and television stations address “all sides” of matters of public interest in a fair and balanced way. The assumption was that open, robust debate was good for democracy—even when the debate was forced on the radio or television programmer. The FCC’s Fairness Doctrine was legally tested and upheld by the Supreme Court in 1969, only to be rescinded by Congress in 2011.

At its heyday, objectivity served the social contract as well. Citizens and government needed an unfettered flow of believable information to maintain and enjoy their lives. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were somehow more obtainable when shared truths were available. Objective journalism, and the notion that it corresponded with the truth, carried enormous promise.

Until it didn’t.

## TRUTH IS RELATIVE

Twentieth-century pragmatists challenged the Enlightenment view of truth. To pragmatist philosophers, the truth depended on who was doing the investigating and how it was being investigated. Borrowing from Einstein, pragmatists argued that truth, like matter, was relative. They proposed that reality varied, based on context. No journalist could be completely objective, thus casting doubt on the “truth” they discovered. While truth lost much of its universality under pragmatism, the movement was in remarkable agreement with the American value of democratic individualism. Soon pragmatism filtered through

literature, science, and other professions. Truth was whatever worked—and your truth could be different than mine.

No sooner had the journalistic profession embraced objectivity than the culture moved to a more pragmatic notion of truth. Pragmatism fueled new challenges to objectivity: If truth is subjective, is it best reported by an impassive, objective, detached reporter? Does such a reporter exist? Does an objective medium exist?

Postmodernism took these questions to their logical extension, suggesting that the concept of truth was devoid of meaning, that context was literally everything, and that meaning could not exist apart from context. All truth was subjective, intrinsically bound with the searcher. All this directly opposed fact-based, objective journalism which assumed that facts were facts, regardless of context.

## CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

Technology added another level of complexity. With the information explosion, “facts” raced around the globe before they could be verified. Today, the internet allows anyone to be a journalist through an array of new mediums (think blogs, Twitter, and Facebook Live). These developments blur the lines of journalism in a way that could never have been predicted, even two decades ago.

In a 500-channel universe, objectivity, which required massive audiences to survive, declined. “Broadcasting” for huge audiences was replaced by “narrowcasting,” where small audiences could find a niche medium that reinforced their pragmatic view of the world. Once again it became financially viable, if not outright preferable, to operate a partisan press. While objective reporting remained *one* standard, it was not the *only* standard, and the financial success of outlets such as MSNBC and FOX News indicated that a partisan press could be made profitable.

For years, the debate over which media were partisan and which media were objective was largely subjective. It is no surprise that, as America became an increasingly divided nation, we



couldn't agree on when an outlet was "playing it straight" with their viewers or readers. "Fair and balanced" claims notwithstanding, there was no yardstick to measure objectivity.

## READERS' CHOICE

Twenty-first century innovations are changing media—and our understanding of how it works—in new ways. Developments in database tools are eye-opening in their ability to predict media bias. In their study "What Drives Media Slant?" economists Matthew Gentzkow of Stanford University and Jesse Shapiro of Brown University found that the political leanings of newspapers can be analyzed using word tendencies. To prove it, the two researchers entered and searched the content of 433 newspapers, looking for the frequency of 1,000 politically charged phrases in the pages of each newspaper.

As an example, during the 2011 debate over inheritance tax reform, *The Washington Post* used the words "estate tax" 13.7 times more frequently than "death tax," while the more conservative *Washington Times* used the two descriptors equally. Other phrases like "war on terrorism" and "universal health care" were studied as well.

The findings of Gentzkow and Shapiro, reported initially in economics journals like *Econometrica*, got widespread attention in *Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us about Who We Are* by former Google analytics scientist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz (HarperCollins, 2017). Based on their research, Gentzkow and Shapiro named the *Philadelphia Daily News* the most liberal newspaper in America and the *Billings Gazette* the least liberal. Using zip code analysis of community voting patterns and their findings on word choice, the researchers showed that "right-wing newspapers circulate relatively more in zip codes with a higher proportion of Republicans . . . Left-wing newspapers show the opposite pattern."



LEFT: Newsies in Bank Alley waiting for afternoon papers, Syracuse, NY, Feb. 1910. RIGHT: Charlie Scott, 9 years old, is a truant newsboy. Said: "I dunno where school is." Oklahoma City, March 15, 1917. Photos by Lewis W. Hine for National Child Labor Committee. Library of Congress

Gentzkow and Shapiro further found that the correlation between word choice and the political leanings of ownership proved to be statistically insignificant. What *did* correlate significantly were the political leanings of readers: "Readers have an economically significant preference for like-minded news."

This new and compelling granular-level research disputes the long-held assumption that political leanings in the media come from the bias of ownership. Instead, it places the presence of biased language squarely on the shoulders of the consumer who prefers it that way. The study disposes the myth of modern day successors to Pulitzer and Hearst (such as Rupert Murdoch) imposing their will on news pages. Instead, it is readers who steer media bias as they seek a medium that "tells it like it is" and remain faithful to that choice—and media owners reap the profits of those choices.

With money to be made in partisanship, objectivity takes a walk. We've come full circle. The two economists conclude: "There is no grand conspiracy. There is just capitalism."

## ANGLING FOR AUDIENCE

Was the notion of objective journalism ever a noble one? Or was it always market-driven? Will it ever return? Like other questions about truth, the answer is not simple. Objectivity certainly has a noble ring and has undoubtedly advanced democracy. But when the entire history

of American journalism is examined, the experiment with objectivity lasted for only a few decades and only when it made economic sense. Otherwise, as we have done since our nation's founding, most of us seek confirmation for and reassurance of our existing beliefs in the media we choose. Media owners, ever aware of which way the political winds blow, supply partisan content when it is profitable and objective content when the market requires that.

Is it "fake news"? That depends on the angle from which you view it.

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### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "U.S. Diplomacy and Yellow Journalism, 1895-1898," Office of the Historian, U.S. Dept. of State. Discusses the origins of yellow journalism and dueling headlines between the *New York Journal* and the *New York World* that fueled anti-Spanish sentiments and public support for the Spanish-American war.
- "The Yellow Kid on the Paper Stage." Online exhibit compiled by Mary Wood, University of Virginia, detailing the history, political themes, and journalistic era of the Yellow Kid character that helped establish comic pages in the newspaper industry.