

Perspective—Not Objective: The Role of the Media in U.S. Electoral Politics

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I deplore...the putrid state into which our newspapers have passed...

- Thomas Jefferson

Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

-Thomas Jefferson

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again;  
there is nothing new under the sun.

-Ecclesiastes 1:9

Despite near-universal acceptance of the idea that a free press is essential to democracy, levels of distrust with respect to the news media are alarmingly high. Polling from the Pew Research Center shows that roughly half of Americans believe that news media falls short of reporting different positions on political issues fairly.<sup>1</sup> In a free society, a populace that doesn't trust its news is troublesome. However, perhaps the problem lies in the presumption that the media's role is to be "fair." How can there be an objective standard of fairness in journalism? How would it be measured? Who would be the arbiter of media objectivity? A better view of the role of the media in our political process is to acknowledge that a free media provides unique contributions of information. The various perspective of the media function as an essential support system for an informed citizenry.

As illustrated by founding father Thomas Jefferson's frequent diatribes against the press, the perception that the media cannot be trusted to deliver "the truth" is a worry that is as old as the nation itself. Indeed, in the history of United States elections, the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates are perhaps just as noteworthy for spurring a national conversation about the influence of the media as they are for their effect of vaulting Lincoln to the national stage and inspiring generations of high school forensics competitions. At the time, Republican-leaning publications like *Chicago Press and Tribune* made sure to publish Lincoln's remarks correctly, but it was less careful when printing Douglas's words. The inverse was true with the pro-Democratic *Chicago Times*. The accuracy of the statements of the candidates varied depending on what newspaper you read. The media served a prominent role in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, but it was not one of neutral factfinder.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, Amy, et al. "People Around World Want Unbiased News." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project*, Pew Research Center, 30 May 2020, [www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/01/11/publics-globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver/](http://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/01/11/publics-globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver/).

Certainly, the public should demand accuracy in the reporting of facts, and it is unfortunate that Illinois's prominent media outlets of 1858 are not reliable historical sources of the actual text of the debates. However, we should stop short of demanding that the media be "neutral." Neutrality bias is a well-documented phenomenon in which objective untruths are conflated with facts in an attempt to demonstrate that the speaker is providing an unbiased viewpoint.<sup>2</sup> Neutrality bias dilutes the truth, and the full scope of America's unparalleled freedom of press is harmed when the public demands "neutrality." Moreover, the public benefits from the perspective of a well-informed speaker. This is, after all, why editorial pages have long held sway in American discourse. At its best, the media provides essential framing and valuable context regarding important public issues.

Of course, lies should be labelled as such and roundly condemned by all legitimate media sources. However, the occasional printed untruth is an unfortunate consequence of a free press. Fortunately, another principle inherent in the concept of a free press provides an essential counterbalance. Philosopher John Milton, whose influence upon the Framers was profound, described a Marketplace of Ideas, positing that the fullest truth would become apparent when ideas could be circulated without restraint. In other words, a free and diverse press can help the people uncover the truth. Indeed, this idea held true during The Great Debates of 1858. While reporting varied from newspaper to newspaper, it is apparent that the public was ultimately well-served by the widespread coverage of the issues being addressed by Lincoln and Douglas as the nation barreled toward an ideological crossroad.

In tumultuous times, it is tempting to dismiss all news media as either biased or inaccurate. But the voting public can take comfort in knowing that these problems have been in existence throughout history and that the media has ultimately served to benefit this country's democratic processes. It is also encouraging to note that our most beloved political thinkers have considered the difficulties of a free press and have, at the end of day, embraced a free press as the *sine qua non* of our democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville, famous student of American politics, at times despised the newspapers.

The spirit of the journalist is to appeal crudely, directly, and artlessly to the passions of the people he is addressing, forsaking principles in order to portray individuals, pursue

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<sup>2</sup> Bednar, Peter, and Christine Welch. "Bias Misinformation and the Paradox of Neutrality." *Proceedings of the 2008 InSITE Conference*, 2008, doi:10.28945/3277.

them into their private lives, and lay bare their weaknesses and vices. Such abuse of thought can only be deplored.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Tocqueville recognized the absolute necessity of free press in a democracy.

The more I consider the chief effects of the independence of the press, the more convinced I am that. . . . [a] people that wants to remain free therefore has the right to insist that the independence of the press is the most important, indeed the essential, ingredient of liberty.<sup>4</sup>

The upcoming Presidential Debate at Belmont is an important example of the value media provides to the voting public. A debate presents a composite view of the issues and provides equal ground to the perspectives of the candidates. The voters observe the candidates, and their ideas and impressions are shaped both by the questions themselves—which should be developed and presented by a skilled journalist—and the accompanying commentary, which should be provided by educated and knowledgeable contributors. At its best, the role of the media is to lead a voter to an informed choice.

In examining the appropriate role of the media, however, it is important not to overlook the accompanying role of the citizen. The Marketplace of Ideas requires that different publications present differing views, but this also presupposes a citizenry that will do its part by thoughtfully consuming news. If the media owes the public honesty with respect to its subjectivity, then the public owes itself an honest attempt to be good consumers in the marketplace. Voters do the country a disservice when they seek out only media that validates their previously-held opinions, and they do themselves a disservice by creating barriers to their own enlightenment as to “the truth.” Media that embraces the purpose of providing nuance and commentary on public issues furthers public awareness and fills its essential role in democracy. That is how “fairness” can be achieved, and that is how the media best contributes to a fair electoral process.

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<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis de, et al. *Democracy in America*. J. & H.G. Langley, 1840

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