

[Leaders](#) | The media and the message

Can you have a healthy democracy without a common set of facts?

America's presidential election is a test of that proposition



Image: chantal jahchan

The Economist, Dec 14th 2023

Journalists should not spend much of their time writing about journalism. The world is more interesting than the inky habits of the people who report on it. But this week we are making an exception, because the discovery and dissemination of information matters a lot to politics. Don't take our word for it: "A popular government," wrote James Madison in 1822, "without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both." Were Thomas Jefferson offered a choice between a government without newspapers and newspapers without a government, he said that he would choose the press (though that is probably going a bit far).

As the turmoil at America's elite universities over antisemitism shows, creating a political culture in which people can argue constructively, disagree and compromise is not something that happens spontaneously. In media, business models, technology and culture can work together to create those conditions. They can also pull in the opposite direction. Our analysis of over 600,000 pieces of written and television journalism shows that the language of the mainstream American media has drifted away from the political centre, towards the Democratic Party's preferred terminology and topics. That could lower the media's credibility among conservatives.

As the country braces for next year's election, it is worth thinking about the internal forces that

deepened this rift. You can take comfort from the fact that the industry has been buffeted time and again during its long history, yet somehow survived.

The worry is that today's lurch may prove worse than any before.

One of those forces is technological disruption. From printing to the mobile web, new media tend to disrupt authority. That is good news if you live in an autocracy. In America, though, technologies have often brought trouble. Father Charles Coughlin, a pioneering demagogue in the 1930s, used radio to reach a mass audience before Republicans and Democrats got the hang of it. Cable news helped foment a revolution in the Republican Party. It is hard to see how Donald Trump could have become the party's nominee in 2016 without the ability to speak directly to tens of millions of Americans in messages of 140 characters. Artificial intelligence (AI) will up-end media once again, for good or ill. It may feed mind-scrambling fakery to anyone who hankers after conspiracy. But, for anyone who wishes to know what is really going on, ai may put a greater premium on filtering out the nonsense.

Disruption powers fragmentation. The American media have passed through narrowcast ages and broadcast ages. In Madison's and Jefferson's day, narrowcasting was the norm: small-circulation partisan journals spoke to different factions of a small elite. Later, the spread of the telegraph and the penny press created mass media. Narrow partisanship was no longer good business. Advertisers wanted to reach as many people as

possible and scarce electromagnetic spectrum, which limited the numbers of radio and television stations, led to a system of regulation. All that favoured objectivity: journalists should try to put their opinions aside and stick to the facts.

Today, however, the smartphone has caused fragmentation and American media are back in a narrowcast age. As much of the advertising revenue that once paid for reporters has flowed to Google and Meta, this has created new business models. There is a lot to like about the subscription-based outfits that now rule: what better test of the quality of the work than whether people will pay for it? But such businesses can also be built on pandering to people's prejudices. Tucker Carlson was fired from Fox News only to create a new venture as a subscription-based, one-man broadcast company. This is closer to a business model the Founding Fathers would have recognised, but rather than creating content for curly-wigged merchants steeped in 18th-century learning, he wants to tear down such Enlightenment values.

This is not just happening on the fringes. Our package this week also contains an essay by James Bennet, our Lexington columnist, a former editorial-page editor of the *New York Times* who was fired for publishing a piece by a Republican senator that sparked a newsroom revolt. He argues that the *Times* increasingly affirms its readers' leftish bias even as it reassures them that it is independent. Unlike the right-wing media, the mainstream lot do not routinely peddle falsehoods or conspiracy theories. But their bias undermines their ability to put the record straight. They used to be like the best public broadcasters in other Western democracies,

establishing common facts and setting the boundaries for debate; today, less so.

Why does this matter? Although most Americans do not regularly read a newspaper or watch cable news, elites matter in democracies. When different political camps exist in separate information universes, they tend to demonise each other. If you are told Joe Biden is in the grip of a cabal of antisemitic socialists, then voting for Mr Trump makes perfect sense. If Trump supporters are anti-democratic racists, why bother trying to win them over? As a result, the parties will find it even harder to reach the compromises that are essential for sustained good government. If the elites cannot see the world as it is, they will make bad decisions.

As well as being a problem for politics and journalism, this is also a threat to core liberal ideas: that arguments need to be strength-tested, that insights can be found in unusual places and that encountering opposing views and uncomfortable facts is usually a good thing. These ideas will be challenged by newsrooms that see "objectivity" as a sleight of hand which privileged groups use to embed their own power. Old-style liberals may have to adapt to ai-powered business models that reward those who tell people everything they already think is true is true.

Breaking news

America progressed from narrowcast media and a limited franchise in the early days of the republic to broadcast media and universal suffrage. It has never had narrowcast media and universal suffrage at the same time. As a newspaper founded to promote classical liberalism, *The Economist* would like to think they can coexist happily. Next year's election will be the test.

How American journalism lets down readers and voters

The New York Times and other media increasingly speak to their own camps

The Economist, Dec 14th 2023

To heal the rifts in American politics in the lead-up to next year's crucial election, American journalism urgently needs renewal. Instead, in much of the mainstream media, journalism is in the grip of an illiberal bias. That includes the *New York Times*, which is best-placed of any of the country's newspapers to establish a common set of facts and frame of debate.

In an essay James Bennet, *The Economist's* Lexington columnist, and a former editorial-page editor of

the *New York Times*, argues that its pledge to pursue the news "without fear or favour" is no longer being honoured. Neither is the promise of the paper to "invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion". Instead, pressure from left-leaning journalists and commercial staff who "do not believe readers can be trusted with potentially dangerous ideas or facts" is undermining the *Times's* claims to independence.

20 For the *Times* to assert that it plays by the same rules
it always has “is to commit a hypocrisy that is
transparent to conservatives, dangerous to liberals
and bad for the country as a whole,” Mr Bennet
writes. “It makes the *Times* too easy for
25 conservatives to dismiss and too easy for
progressives to believe. The reality is that
the *Times* is becoming the publication through
which America’s progressive elite talks to itself
about an America that does not really exist.”

30 Mr Bennet’s article belongs to a package of stories
in *The Economist* this week that looks at the
American media in the run-up to next year’s election.
This includes a profile of the conservative media,
and a deep-dive data analysis of over 600,000 pieces
35 of tv and written journalism. This shows that the
language of the mainstream American media has
drifted away from the political centre and towards
the Democratic Party’s preferred terminology and
topics. That could lower the media’s credibility
40 among conservatives.

Mr Bennet was asked to resign from the *Times* in
2020, after his pages published an op-ed by Tom
Cotton, a senator from Arkansas, that caused a
newsroom revolt. America was reeling after George
45 Floyd, an African-American man, had been
murdered by a white policeman in Minneapolis.
Throughout the country, protesters were on the
march. Reform of the police seemed possible, but,
because of the violence and looting in some cities, so
50 did a political backlash.

Times Opinion had published pieces calling for the
abolition of the police and opposing the use of troops
to stop the violence, but Mr Cotton argued they were
needed to protect lives and businesses from rioters,
55 leading the journalists’ union to describe his op-ed
as “a clear threat to the health and safety of
journalists we represent”. After three days of
upheaval, The *Times* asked Mr Bennet to step down
and leave the paper.

60 In his essay, Mr Bennet chronicles how changes in
recruitment, training, newspapers’ business models
and intellectual fashion combined to change the *New
York Times*, as it is changing so many workplaces in
America. Amid the internal upheaval at the paper
65 before he left, he came to see “the ones who were

caught up in Slack or Twitter storms, as people who
had only recently discovered that they were white
and were still getting over the shock.”

He argues that A.G. Sulzberger, the newspaper’s
70 hereditary publisher, needs to stand up to that
faction. “Leaders of many workplaces and
boardrooms across America find that it is so much
easier to compromise than to confront—to give a
little ground today in the belief you can ultimately
75 bring people around”, he writes. “This is how
reasonable Republican leaders lost control of their
party to Trump and how liberal-minded college
presidents lost control of their campuses. And it is
why the leadership of the *New York Times* is losing
80 control of its principles.” Mr Sulzberger declined to
be interviewed.

A spokeswoman said: “The *New York Times* believes
unequivocally in the principle of independence, as
has been demonstrated consistently by our
85 journalism.” She added that “in the case of the Tom
Cotton op-ed, the handling of such a sensitive piece,
specifically the decision to rush it into publication
without key leaders having read it because it was
‘newsy’, made it unusually vulnerable to attack.”

90 Mr Bennet calls for journalists and comment pages
to equip readers with the best information to form
their own judgments. “The journalist’s role [is] to be
a sworn witness; the readers’ role [is] to be judge
and jury,” he writes.

95 Mr Bennet thinks that opinion journalism also
benefits from giving readers a range of voices. “It
matters that conflicting views do not just appear
before different audiences in politically rivalrous
publications or cable news networks,” he writes,
100 “but instead in the same forum, before the same
readers, subject to the same standards for fact and
argumentation.”

Much more than the *New York Times* is at stake. Mr
Bennet argues that: “It is hard to imagine a path back
105 to saner American politics that does not traverse a
common ground of shared fact.”

And he issues a stern warning to his compatriots. As
long as Americans are afraid or unwilling to listen to
each other, “it is equally hard to imagine how
110 America’s diversity can continue to be a source of
strength, rather than become a fatal flaw.”

Donald Trump is the conservative media

No institution that enjoys the trust of Republican voters can successfully stand up to him

The Economist, Dec 14th 2023 | WASHINGTON, DC

Drake, a rapper, wanted to see his friend, the basketball superstar LeBron James, immediately after the Miami Heat won the 2013 nba Finals. But a security guard refused him entry into the 5 champagne-drenched celebration because he lacked press credentials. “I am media,” the Grammy winner reportedly responded. Three years later, Donald Trump successfully crashed a much bigger party: the Republican National Convention. Mr Trump, a 10 walking media institution, brushed aside early opposition from right-leaning news and opinion outlets and won the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. In the years since, conservative media either have conformed to his vision of politics or 15 tried and failed to persuade Republican voters to abandon it. This dynamic has accelerated as he pursues his party’s nomination for a third time.

For much of American history, the dominant media institutions were partisan or ideological. George 20 Washington even complained of being “buffitted in the public prints by a set of infamous scribblers”. But the media oligopolies that dominated much of the 20th century—big television and radio networks and print publications with enormous circulations— 25 claimed to bring Americans balanced, non-partisan, objective reporting. American conservatives were highly sceptical of the arrangement.

“There was no conservative media. It was basically a wasteland. And anything that even remotely 30 expressed any kind of conservative point of view was sort of relegated to a smattering of columnists,” says Laurence Jurdem, a historian at Fairfield University and Fordham College and author of a book on conservative media before Ronald Reagan. 35 “Everything sort of changed with *National Review*.”

Founded in 1955 by William F. Buckley junior, the magazine promoted a political philosophy that came to be known as fusionism. The new conservative coalition would fuse together economic libertarians, 40 social traditionalists and anti-communists. Buckley also served as a gatekeeper at times, denouncing the leader of the conspiratorial John Birch Society in editorials. Other conservative publications—*Commentary* magazine, the *Wall Street* 45 *Journal* editorial page, the *Washington Times*, *Human Events*, and more—influenced the

presidency of Reagan. Conservative media continued to grow after Reagan left the White House, and the fusionist consensus largely held together at 50 the end of the cold war, at least at first. That was owing in great part to three men who found a way to do what Buckley and other intellectuals never could: run highly profitable media businesses.

Together, Rush Limbaugh, Roger Ailes and Rupert 55 Murdoch challenged the old guard’s dominance by developing viable conservative alternatives in every medium. Limbaugh, a charismatic radio veteran, took his show national in 1988 and drew a weekly audience of some 20m listeners by the 1990s. He 60 also published books and would sometimes appear on Fox News. Mr Murdoch controls the network that Ailes led from its founding in 1996 until he resigned in 2016.

The media magnate found ways to make the written 65 word profitable through his acquisition of the *Journal* and several publishing houses. But Fox News was special. It overtook CNN in ratings in 2002, and in 2022 it marked 20 consecutive years with more daytime and prime-time viewers than any 70 other network. Perhaps because of its dominance, it is easy to overlook that it serves a niche: 74m Americans voted for Mr Trump in 2020. Fox News’s prime-time audience is below 2m (its digital reach is wider).

75 Limbaugh, Ailes and Mr Murdoch could have disagreements but shared fundamental conservative instincts. For decades Fox News and Limbaugh, alongside publications like *National Review*, kept Republican Party politicians in line 80 with free markets, hawkish internationalism and fiscal and social conservatism. They did not always succeed in swaying powerful Republicans. Yet a dissenting or unsavoury figure had little way to get his message to a large audience of conservatives if he 85 was banished from Fox News, talk radio or the pages of a few print publications.

Then came the internet. Blogs, podcasts and social media provided a way for a conservative journalist or pundit to become influential outside the 90 established ecosystem. Mr Trump relied on conservative media to reach Republican voters in

the 2016 primary, as all candidates did, but he alone could reset the newscycle with a tweet.

In early 2016, as Mr Trump's winning the 95 nomination appeared increasingly likely, *National Review* devoted an issue to opposing his candidacy. The cover simply read: "Against Trump", and the magazine's editors commissioned a range of conservative intellectuals to make the case. Mr 100 Trump, naturally, responded with a tweetstorm about "the dying National Review". Six months later he became the Republican nominee. Fusionism had been challenged by a conservatism that wanted to cut taxes, maintain entitlement programmes for the 105 elderly, was preoccupied by illegal immigration, fairly relaxed about gay marriage—and had built a cult around the leader. Call it confusionism.

Gone are the gatekeepers

"He'll be influenced occasionally by things people 110 say, or ideas that are out there, but it's Trump who lays down the line. And then everyone else follows," says Rich Lowry, editor-in-chief of *National Review*. "He is the conservative media." Mr Trump may call someone after seeing him on Fox News, and he 115 closely studies headlines. But, Mr Lowry adds, "it just doesn't seem to matter what anyone says about him. He's just a phenomenon."

The sheer variety of options available to consumers of conservative media has diluted the power of the 120 old gatekeepers. After Tucker Carlson was fired from Fox News, he began publishing videos on Twitter, now called X, that reflected his increasingly isolationist take on international affairs. They can draw millions of viewers. This week Mr Carlson 125 launched a subscription service.

In 2015 a longtime conservative pundit, Ben Shapiro, co-founded the Daily Wire. Mr Shapiro has many fusionist fans, but the Daily Wire is a big tent. "He also has Candace Owens," who has been critical 130 of Israel, notes Matthew Continetti of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank based in Washington, dc. "And he has Jordan Peterson, who has been sceptical of aid to Ukraine. Even within that institution, there's a variety of perspectives." The 135 company earned around \$200m in revenue in 2022. The Daily Wire was the seventh-largest podcast publisher in America in November, according to Podtrac, which keeps count.

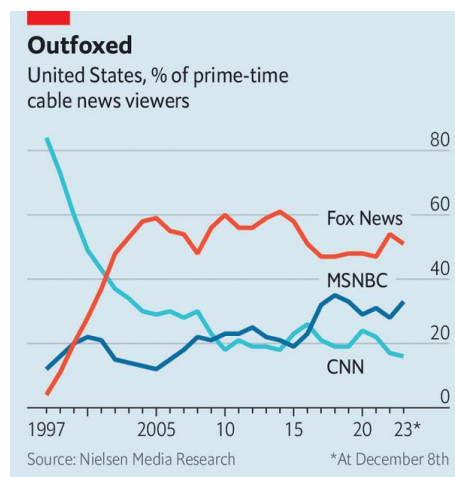


image: the

140 economist

The upstarts cannot act as gatekeepers either. Mr Shapiro was supportive of Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, entering the 2024 presidential primary. Other conservative intellectuals and 145 pundits lined up behind Mr DeSantis, who has relied heavily on friendly conservative media for cover from Mr Trump and the mainstream media alike. So far, it hasn't worked. Mr Trump's lead over Mr DeSantis in our average of polls is just over 50 150 points.

With Mr Trump likely to win the Republican nomination, where does that leave conservative media? Alienating Mr Trump also risks alienating consumers of conservative media. Fully embracing 155 the former president's worst tendencies brings its own risks. Many outlets now balance trying to keep their audiences from fleeing to a growing number of smaller outlets without completely giving in to Mr Trump.

160 After the 2020 election, some Fox News employees embraced stolen-election conspiracy-mongering similar to what other networks and many conservative influencers were offering on social media. Such recklessness resulted in a \$787.5m 165 settlement with Dominion Voting Systems to squash a defamation lawsuit. Mr Trump called Fox News a "hostile network" in June after tough questioning from its chief political anchor, but conservative prime-time hosts like Sean Hannity still throw 170 softballs to the former president. (Mr Hannity recently asked Mr Trump to reassure people that he would not abuse his power in office. "Only on day 1," Mr Trump replied.)

There are still responsible conservative publications 175 and pundits drawing audiences and forming sustainable businesses. They are far from regaining their past prominence. Mr Lowry is right. For now, Mr Trump is the conservative media.

American journalism sounds much more Democratic than Republican

Whether this reflects bias or reality is in the eye of the beholder

The Economist Dec 14th 2023

Public trust in American media has plummeted since the 1990s. Most of this decline is among conservatives, spurred by Republican charges of liberal bias from avowedly non-partisan outlets.

5 Such claims are hard to assess fairly: stories viewed by one party as following the facts are often seen by the other as ideological.

Most public estimates of news sources' partisan leanings rely on subjective ratings. Political
10 scientists seeking an objective approach have used the language in politicians' speeches to set a baseline and compared stories with that. However, most studies in this vein look at the period before 2016; do not discriminate between politics and other
15 topics; and focus on either tv or written journalism, but not both.

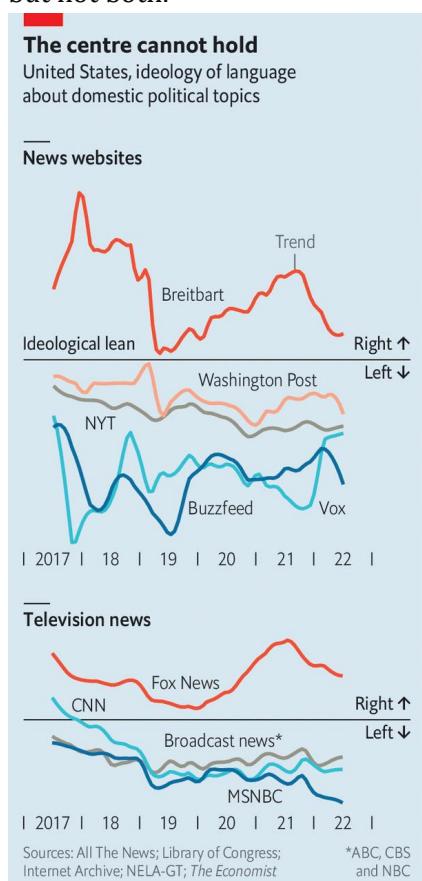


image: the

economist

In an effort to provide a measure of partisan slant
20 that is comprehensive, impartial and up-to-date, we have applied this academic approach to the output in recent years of a wide range of news sources. We find that there is indeed an affinity between the

media and the left, because journalists tend to prefer
25 the language used by Democratic lawmakers. Moreover, this disparity has grown since the start of Donald Trump's presidency. As a result, the number of media sources covering politics in balanced language has dwindled.

30 The first step in our analysis was compiling a partisan "dictionary". We took all speeches in Congress in 2009-22 and broke them up into two-word phrases. We then filtered this list to terms used by large shares of one party's lawmakers, but rarely
35 by the other's. The result was a collection of 428 phrases that reliably distinguish Democratic and Republican speeches, such as "unborn baby" versus "reproductive care" or "illegal alien" versus "undocumented immigrant".

40 Next, we collected 242,000 articles from news websites in 2016-22, and transcripts of 397,000 prime-time tv segments from 2009-22. We calculated an ideological score for each one by comparing the frequencies of terms on our list. For
45 example, a story in which 0.1% of distinct phrases are Republican and 0.05% are Democratic has a conservative slant of 0.05 percentage points, or five per 10,000 phrases.

To avoid counting incidental uses of such phrases in
50 stories unrelated to politics, we also identified the mix of subjects present in each piece, using a machine-learning algorithm that identifies clusters of words that tend to appear together. Finally, we calculated the average partisan leaning of each news
55 source's coverage, weighting each story by the share of its content about domestic politics.

To test whether this method accurately reflected partisanship, we compared our rankings with estimates from AllSides and Media Bias Fact Check,
60 ratings websites that rely on human coders. Overall, it yielded a close match: conservative outlets like Breitbart and Fox News used disproportionately Republican terms, whereas left-leaning ones such as Vox and BuzzFeed published mainly Democratic
65 ones. (Because our study focused on American media, we did not include *The Economist*. Applied to our own coverage, this approach produces scores very close to the centre.)

However, our method has two advantages. Not only is it free of subjectivity, it also measures ideology in absolute terms, providing answers to questions that mere rankings cannot resolve. Are conservatives right to see the media as a whole, rather than just specific outlets, as hostile terrain? Our results suggest so. Of the 20 most-read news websites with available data, 17 use Democratic-linked terms more than Republican-linked ones. The same is true of America's six leading news sources on tv, of which Fox is the only one where conservative language predominates.

This Democratic slant has grown over time, driven mainly by changes in once-centrist outlets. In 2017 *cnn* used more Republican terms than Democratic ones, while *msnbc* and the evening news on *abc*, *cbs* and *nbc* had only modestly left-leaning scores of around 1.5 phrases per 10,000. By 2022, the broadcast channels and *cnn* had Democratic leanings of near 2.5, and *msnbc* had reached 5.5, putting it twice as far from the centre as Fox.

In written journalism the shift has been smaller but in the same direction. In 2017 the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *cnn*'s website all had mild Democratic leanings: around 1.5. This put them a bit closer to conservative sources like Fox News's website, whose average Republican slant in 2017-22 was two, than to left-wing sites like Vox, whose average Democratic leaning in those years was seven. By 2022 these sites' left-of-centre slants had grown to four, three and three, leaving them much closer to lefty alternatives.

In theory, this trend could result from changes either in subject matter—moving from Republicans' favourite topics, like border security, to those Democrats prefer, such as health care—or in the language used about each topic. The data make clear that most of the shift stems not from what is being talked about, but how.



image: the

economist

In three "mainstream" websites—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *cnn*—coverage moved left from 2017-18 to 2021-22 on 25 of 29 domestic political topics. Articles about race and school shootings were already among the most left-leaning in 2017-2018, but have also seen the largest leftward shifts since then. By contrast, pieces on health care and immigration, which used lots of Democratic terms in 2017-18 thanks to Mr Trump's unpopular policies, have inched to the right.

Our analysis has important limits. First, our dataset, compiled from academic sources, contains only a fraction of the media's full output. It had little content from prominent sources like the *Wall Street Journal*, and none from radio or social media.

Second, our scoring method cannot distinguish between media bias and asymmetric polarisation. Is journalism more left-wing, or have Republicans just sailed further from reality than Democrats? Either could raise the share of Democratic language in media—and in the case of stories describing Mr Trump's false claims of electoral fraud as "the big lie", for example, both have probably played a part. Yet journalists can still say that one party's views are closer to the truth than the other's without relying on partisan language.