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The Driving Force Behind Media Skepticism

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Faith in the media is down across the board. A recent Gallup poll shows that 60% of people do not trust the media, including broadcast, print and online news sources, to report the news fairly, accurately and fully (Morales 2012). This poll, and other studies like it, also show that Republicans don’t trust the media with half the frequency Democrats do, with 58 percent of Democrats saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the news media, while only 28 percent of Republicans gave that response. This paper examines what role the media itself has in perpetuating the idea that the media is not to be trusted. If this is the case, there are significant consequences. Obviously, this could influence the opinion of the news media and lead to an under-informed populace, but more importantly, devoting news time to critiquing the media leaves little time to covering major issues.

This paper looked at news shows across the political spectrum to see if negative accusations towards the media are correlated with political affiliation. This paper separated negative comments toward the media into two categories: claims of bias and claims of inadequacy. The latter is considered less harmful to the media’s image, because it simply posits that the media did something wrong, rather than the former’s claim that the media is incapable of being honest and accurate, because they have some form of bias. Further defining these, this paper did not count individual comments, merely instances. So, when, for instance, Bill O’Reilly said, “But now the press is working in concert with the Obama administration. No longer do we have a skeptical media when it comes to confronting power,” for the purposes of the paper, that would count as one instance of claiming bias, despite him claiming it twice. However, if he launched a claim in two different segments, that would be two separate instances. This paper also examined whether the comments are about the media in general, or about a specific outlet, the latter of which is less harmful to the media’s image because it’s not necessarily representative of the media as a whole, whereas claims about the media in general are inherently meant to represent the media as a whole. Finally, this paper examined whether the comments are said by the host of a show or the guest of the show. Claims by a guest on a show don’t have the same weight as claims by the host of the show, because viewers trust the host more.
FAITH IN THE MEDIA IS DOWN ACROSS THE BOARD. A RECENT GALLOP POLL SHOWS THAT 60% OF PEOPLE DO NOT TRUST THE MEDIA, INCLUDING BROADCAST, PRINT AND ONLINE NEWS SOURCES, TO REPORT THE NEWS FAIRLY, ACCURATELY AND FULLY (MORALLES 2012). THIS POLL, AND OTHER STUDIES LIKE IT, ALSO SHOW THAT REPUBLICANS DON'T TRUST THE MEDIA WITH HALF THE FREQUENCY DEMOCRATS DO, WITH 58 PERCENT OF DEMOCRATS SAYING THEY HAVE A GREAT DEAL OR FAIR AMOUNT OF TRUST IN THE NEWS MEDIA, WHILE ONLY 28 PERCENT OF REPUBLICANS GAVE THAT RESPONSE.

THIS PAPER EXAMINES WHAT ROLE THE MEDIA ITSELF HAS IN PERPETUATING THE IDEA THAT THE MEDIA IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED. IF THIS IS THE CASE, THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT CONSEQUENCES. OBVIOUSLY, THIS COULD INFLUENCE THE OPINION OF THE NEWS MEDIA AND LEAD TO AN UNDER-INFORMED POPULACE, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, DEVOTING NEWS TIME TO CRITICIZING THE MEDIA LEAVES LITTLE TIME TO COVERING MAJOR ISSUES.


EXAMINED IN THIS PAPER ARE THE O’REILLY FACTOR WITH BILL O’REILLY, A CONSERVATIVE-LEANING POLITICAL NEWS SHOW, AND THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW WITH RACHEL MADDOW, A LIBERAL-LEANING POLITICAL NEWS SHOW. ADDITIONALLY, THIS PAPER COMPARED THE
findings from these two shows to The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer, an apolitical news show, to see if either a conservative or liberal news show varied too much from a neutral median on negative comments toward the media.

This paper examined the fourteen episodes of each show that directly follow the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, remembering that each minute the news shows spent disparaging the media is a minute they didn’t cover the important political aftermath and policy impact of the shooting. This paper examined the following fourteen episodes so each show would be equally represented in the paper.

**FINDINGS**

For The O’Reilly Factor, this paper found instances of negative comments about the media 17 times in the 14 episodes counted, compared to four in The Rachel Maddow Show and three on The Situation Room (Figure 1).

All across the board, The O’Reilly Factor led in the categories identified as most harmful to the media’s image, claims of bias and against the media in general.

Breaking down the results further, this paper found that more often than not, on The O’Reilly Factor, negative claims against the media were that of bias and about the media in general (Figures 2 & 3). Phrases such as “liberal media,” were used often, with more specific comments such as, “Obama’s pals in the news media,” even once referring to the media as the President’s “stenographers.” All of these fall into those two categories, as they claimed the media has a bias in favor of President Obama, and all theses claims didn’t name a specific organization or point to a specific instance.

Examining the other two shows, this paper found almost the opposite. Most negative claims against the media on The Rachel Maddow Show and The Situation Room were that of inadequacy (75% and 100%, respectively) – the media did something wrong, or didn’t cover something adequately enough.

When the media did something wrong, the claims would be directed at the specific outlet. This was the case, many argued, when The Journal News, a small newspaper in suburban New York, published the names and addresses of all the gun owners in the area. Because the gun control debate was very heated at the time of publication, this story stirred up a lot of controversy – and news coverage. The O’Reilly Factor covered this in two segments in two episodes, amounting to four negative claims against the media, including two claims of bias and two claims of inadequacy. The
All across the board, The O’Reilly Factor led in the categories identified as most harmful to the media’s image, claims of bias and against the media in general. Although nine of the 17 negative comments about the media on The O’Reilly Factor were said by a guest, the eight said by the host Bill O’Reilly still lead both shows by a large margin. Rachel Maddow only gave one accusation, which was against a specific outlet, and Wolf Blitzer gave zero. When you compare The Rachel Maddow Show with The Situation Room, this paper’s neutral median, The Rachel Maddow Show only deviates from that median in two out of the six categories, and only by one instance for each. So, generally speaking, The Rachel Maddow Show stayed on par with the neutral media outlet (Figure 4). The O’Reilly Factor always had well more negative claims about the media than The Situation Room, as few as four more and as most as ten more in certain categories (Figure 4). Not only did The O’Reilly Factor lead the charge against the media, it did so incomparably.
Researching where the public gets negative ideas about the media is a difficult task; it can’t be proven why someone thinks what they think.

DISCUSSION
To the benefit of The O’Reilly Factor, part of the “Be Accountible” section of the Society of Professional Journalists code encourages the sort of content this paper found in The Factor. The code reads “[e]xpose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.” Although this can apply to The Factor’s coverage of The Journal News’ gun map, as they brought a discussion, about the ethics of such a story, it does not apply to the majority of their accusations. This part of the code applies best to claims of inadequacy. As discussed previously, most of the negative claims made about the media in The O’Reilly Factor were about the media in general, and only two out of the five negative claims about a specific outlet were paired with an actual event. This is not exposing unethical practices; it is leveling accusations. The SPJ code reads, “[d]iligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.” Although The O’Reilly Factor did seek out the editor of The Journal News (who refused an interview), the show made no attempt to seek out any members of the “liberal” or “mainstream” media when it leveled the fifteen other negative claims at them. These issues are highlighted best by The O’Reilly Factor, but even the few undefended accusations that fell into the more harmful categories on The Rachel Maddow Show and The Situation Room are too many and violate the SPJ code.

Negative claims against the media could easily be motivated by economic concerns. The O’Reilly Factor, and other media outlets, such as Republican talk radio, set themselves up as alternative to the “mainstream media,” further creating a competition between the two outlets. A recent Public Policy Poll shows that Fox News, the network on which The O’Reilly Factor airs, is the most trusted news network (Polling 2010). According to their press kit, Fox News is routinely placed in the top ten in terms of viewership (Fox News Corporate Info 2012). So it seems The O’Reilly Factor is winning the competition it created, and that is correlated with a high number of negative claims toward the media. However, the right of the public to receive information is at stake in these cases, The O’Reilly Factor and otherwise. In the Journal News example, the public has a right to know of examples of poor journalism. However, when there are no actual events, no examples of the media doing wrong, they are just accusations. These not only don’t foster the public’s right to know because they don’t give any information, they also fail to foster the public’s right to know because the news networks aren’t covering the more important issues when they devote time to accusations.

This paper found the conservative-leaning show led the liberal-leaning show and the neutral show in number of negative claims against the media by a large margin. Researching where the public gets negative ideas about the media is a difficult task; it can’t be proven why someone thinks what they think. However, there has been a lot of correlative research on the topic. A study by Jonathan S. Morris called “Slanted Objectivity? Perceived Media Bias, Cable News Exposure, and Political Attitudes,”
found that people who perceive bias in the mainstream media (a direct relation to this paper’s “claims of bias” findings) use Fox News as their main source of news (Morris 2007). Also, the study found that people who have “low opinions of the news media as an institution” (a close relation to this paper’s “claims of inadequacy” findings) use Fox News as their main source of news. This study found no correlation between people who use CNN, the network that airs The Situation Room, or MSNBC, the network that airs The Rachel Maddow Show, with people who perceive media bias or inadequacy. The findings from Morris are consistent with the findings of this paper, but they are admittedly slightly different. This paper looked at what ideas news shows present to the viewers, whereas Morris’ study looked at where people with certain ideas go for news. Still, there is a correlation between people who view Fox News and people who believe that the media is either bias or inadequate, and The O’Reilly Factor had the greatest number of negative claims against the media by far. These findings together suggest a correlation between the amount negative claims against the media by a news show and the ideas the viewers of that show hold.

CONCLUSION

This paper found that comments most harmful to the media’s image were mostly said on The O’Reilly Factor, a conservative-leaning political news show. When compared to a neutral mean, MSNBC’s The Rachel Maddow Show was not far off, with only one instance more than The Situation Room, and only more than the mean by one in three categories. The O’Reilly Factor was not comparable to the neutral mean, beating it in every category, especially those most harmful to the media’s image.

That media skepticism is found most frequently in viewers of Fox News only bolsters this paper’s findings (Morris 2007). There is a negative correlation, then, between how often negative claims about the media are made on a news show and how likely viewers of that show are to trust the media. These attitudes toward the mainstream media are very dangerous to democracy, as the press plays such a pivotal role in a well-informed electorate, and The O’Reilly Factor is perpetuating those attitudes at a rate unmatched in liberal-leaning or neutral news shows.

REFERENCES


