

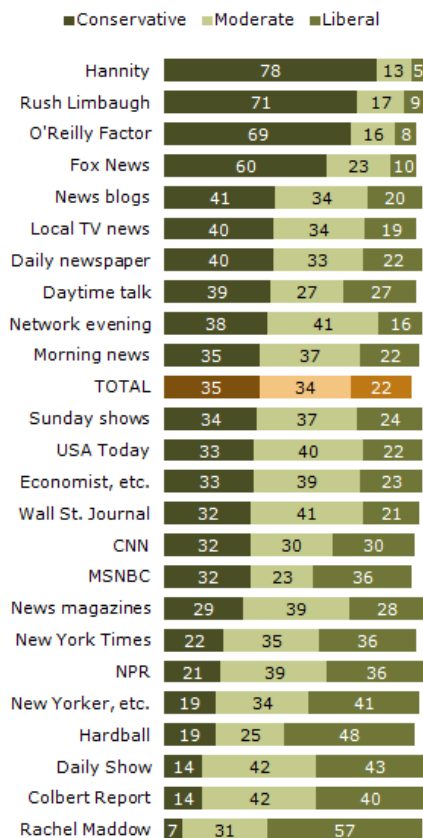
American Media: Objectivity, Control and Depth

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A common refrain these days is that the news media is biased. Complaints come from both conservatives and liberals—about the media in general or specific outlets or commentators. It’s not hard to find a study that appears to confirm bias—in either direction.

There is little doubt that control over the media is concentrated. In the US, just six companies are said to control 90% of what we read, watch, or listen to: Comcast, News Corporation, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner and CBS.¹ However, this does not include most daily newspapers, where control is much more diverse. Gannet (USA Today and several other dailies) has the largest circulation at 14% of daily readers. No other newspaper company is in double figures. The New York Times reaches only 4% of daily readers. However, News Corporation (9% of daily readers) is a major player through the Wall Street Journal, which has the largest circulation of any paper.²

While the media does much notable in-depth research, in day-to-day reporting they seldom go beyond repeating what was said or done to analyze the effects or the truthfulness of what they report. This has given rise to many policy foundations that attempt to look at the larger impact of stories appearing in the news. There is also the now ubiquitous Politifact (a product of the Tampa Bay Times), which tracks the truthfulness of statements appearing in the news. However, this analysis usually comes some time after the news is reported and often is lost as the news cycle moves on to new topics.



The chart at the left is based on a Pew Research Center survey that asked viewers of different media sources to identify themselves as conservative, moderate or liberal. For example 60% of the people who watch Fox News consider themselves to be conservative, with only 33% moderate or liberal. For CNN, viewership was split more evenly among the three groups.

Robert Samuelson notes: “Newspapers try to maximize readership and profits. Newspapers are commercial enterprises that respond to economic signals and incentives. Editors, producers and reporters sense what appeals to their readers and try to satisfy these tastes.

Applied to cable news channels and the Internet, these same forces polarize politics. This is most apparent on cable, where MSNBC and Fox News have staked out liberal and conservative turf. Similar pressures affect the Internet: Conservatives favor the Drudge Report; liberals, the Huffington Post. By contrast, the shrinking mainstream media (newspapers, network television, newsmagazines) competed for more centrist audiences. Today, technology contributes to political polarization.”³

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6>

² <http://www.stateofthedia.org/media-ownership/newspapers/?srt=3&so=-1&compare=>

³ [Robert Samuelson--Media Bias Explained](#)