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A Rhetorical Criticism of “Bothsidesism” in Journalism

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COMM 460: Seminar in Digital Rhetoric

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Abstract

In recent years, a term called “bothsidesism” has come into public use as both a critique of journalists participating in false balance and as an expectation that journalists should cover all sides of an issue—no matter if a side’s claims are unfounded. I argue that bothsidesism is problematic because 1) bothsidesism is a fallacious rhetorical tactic that minimizes objective fact; 2) the term “bothsidesism” and the act of practicing it both reinforce bipartisan thought, which stymies political action; 3) false balance is at odds with the role of a journalist; and 4) false balance is perpetuated by comment sections. I offer alternative tactics for reporting and directions for future research. This project was sponsored by Dr. Emily Crosby for COMM 460: Seminar in Digital Rhetoric.

Keywords: Journalism, bothsidesism, false balance, objectivity, bipartisanship, whataboutism

About the Author

I am a senior at the University of Mary Washington double majoring in communication and digital studies and sociology with a minor in journalism. My academic and career focus is journalism, and I served as editor-in-chief of UMW’s independent student newspaper, *The Weekly Ringer*, for two years. Integrating sociology and journalism, my reporting largely focuses on social issues and inequalities. I have published two long-term investigative articles: one about white supremacist groups frequenting college campuses and another about how UMW adjudicates violent crimes on campus.

A Rhetorical Criticism of “Bothsidesism” in Journalism

In 2022, the Pew Research Center released a report detailing that journalists and the public disagree on how news should be reported (Forman-Katz & Jurkowitz). At the heart of the disagreement is the term “bothsidesism,” defined by Forman-Katz and Jurkowitz as “whether journalists should always strive to give equal coverage to all sides of an issue” when reporting. While the majority of U.S. journalists surveyed (55%) said that every side does not always deserve equal coverage, the vast majority of U.S. adults surveyed (76%) said that journalists should always strive to give every side equal coverage (Forman-Katz & Jurkowitz, 2022). This report signals a disconnect between the public’s expectations of journalists and journalists’ own expectations of their role in society.

Though the majority of Americans surveyed expect journalists to report all sides of every issue (Forman-Katz & Jurkowitz, 2022), practicing bothsidesism when reporting has been shown to have negative impacts when the articles are about important and factually uncontroversial topics such as vaccine safety and global warming. Specifically, bothsidesism can negatively impact the public’s opinion formation, give the impression of conflicting information and expert opinion when really there is a consensus, and affect agreement on topics where the evidence overwhelmingly supports one side (Schmid et al., 2020; Casara et al., 2019). In this analysis, I employ rhetorical criticism to argue that the practice of bothsidesism in journalism is problematic because it legitimizes baseless claims by elevating them to the same level as facts. Bothsidesism plays a role in whether important issues such as vaccine safety and climate change are viewed as controversial, and it must be replaced with reporting tactics that prioritize the clear presentation of fact rather than a falsely balanced portrayal of all sides.

I begin with an overview of objectivity as a major ethical principle of journalism, then briefly explain the recent reconceptualization of objectivity and how the weaponization of “fake news” impacts objectivity. Next, I introduce the concept of bothsidesism, more commonly known as false balance, and overview existing literature on its effects. I also briefly explain my chosen method, rhetorical criticism, and how I went through that process. Finally, I underscore why bothsidesism should be discontinued for issues where one side is overwhelmingly supported by fact, and I offer alternative methods of reporting, as well as directions for future research.

Literature Review

Today’s journalism is guided by several ethical principles, one of which is objectivity (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Objectivity is defined as a “lack of favoritism toward one side or another” and “freedom from bias” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). The principle guides journalists to report the truth impartially and has historically been regarded as “the gold standard of journalistic integrity” (Hond, 2022–2023). However, the way journalists should define and practice objectivity has been reevaluated in recent years. In 2022, a panel of journalists and scholars hosted by the Columbia Journalism School discussed how the traditional conceptualization of objectivity has historically silenced the perspectives of non-white groups and failed to explicitly report on sexist, racist, or otherwise harmful comments (Russell, 2022). At the panel, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Wesley Lowery called for the replacement of traditional objectivity, instead imploring journalists to practice “being fair and telling the truth, as best as one can, based on the given context and available facts” (Russell, 2022).

Journalists’ anxiety about being objective has risen since politicians like Donald Trump weaponized “fake news” (Russell 2022), transforming the term from its traditional meaning of “inaccurate news coverage” (Tong et al., 2020) to a new usage: People across the political

spectrum now use the term to “selectively amplify ingroup messages to claim the power to define falsehood and make group-serving blame attributions” (Li & Su, 2020). Thus, the use of “fake news” in this way allows for any news coverage to be deemed false or biased simply because they do not agree with it (Li & Su, 2020).

Similarly, Trump’s presidency ushered in another term that discredits journalism: “alternative facts” (Swaine, 2017). The term was infamously used in 2017 by senior White House aide Kellyanne Conway, who was defending the administration’s false claim that Trump’s inauguration had the largest audience of any presidential inauguration. Additionally, during his first briefing as White House press secretary, Sean Spicer shouted at journalists, claiming that they were ““deliberately false reporting”” on Trump’s inauguration, declaring: ““We’re going to hold the press accountable”” (Swaine, 2017). These accusations against journalists occurred despite photos and transit data disproving that Trump’s inauguration was the most well-attended presidential inauguration in history (Swaine, 2017). Use of the terms “fake news” and “alternative facts” discredit “evidence-based information in favour of misinformation forged to promote ideological beliefs and ‘common sense’ assertions” (Harrison & Luckett, 2019). The legitimization of false information and alternative truths by the Trump administration, as well as Trump’s declaration that the press is “the enemy of the American people” (Grynbaum, 2017), aimed to discredit the work of journalists.

With the weaponization of “fake news” and the claim that alternative facts exist, journalists’ concern that they would be branded as biased has contributed to overly careful reporting where journalists portray all sides of an issue rather than clearly reporting the facts (Russell, 2022). But objectivity does not always require journalists to report all sides of a situation (Gessen, 2020; Jones, 2009). According to Alex S. Jones, former director of Harvard’s

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. As he wrote in his book, *Losing the News* (2009), “he-said/she-said reporting, which just pits one voice against another, has become the discredited face of objectivity.” The phenomenon where journalists report what all sides are saying about an issue rather than reporting the truth when one side is clearly supported by facts has been termed false balance or, more recently, “bothsidesism.”

False balance is “a journalistic practice that presents, for the supposed sake of fairness, every perspective held on a topic” (Casara et al., 2019, p. 355). The phenomenon was especially relevant to journalism during Trump’s presidency, as he spread 30,573 false or misleading claims during his four years in office (Kessler et al., 2021). Because objective journalism largely relies on comments from expert, credible sources—which the president is traditionally regarded as—“when that democratically elected source routinely and unapologetically states untruths, or indeed lies, and then seeks to brand news organisations which report those untruths as ‘fake’ and ‘dishonest,’ conventionally objective journalism is in uncharted territory” (McNair, 2017, p. 1330). With typical journalism practices prioritizing expert opinion in news stories, journalists face a dilemma when elected officials make misleading comments: practice false balance by reporting baseless claims alongside relevant, factual information about a topic, or refuse to report elected officials’ false statements.

The phenomenon of false balance has been shown to have negative consequences on public perception of important issues such as vaccine safety (Casara et al., 2019; Dixon & Clarke, 2013) and global warming (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Schmid et al., 2020). Casara et al. (2019)’s four-part study demonstrated that falsely balanced coverage of vaccines affects readers’ opinion formation and gives the impression of conflicting info and expert opinion on vaccine safety and effectiveness. The study also found that for women who had not received the human

papillomavirus vaccination, exposure to comments questioning the vaccine influenced their attitudes toward receiving the vaccine (Casara et al., 2019). Dixon & Clarke (2013) examined the effects of falsely balanced news articles about the discredited link between vaccines and autism. The researchers randomly assigned some participants to read news articles that contained both information about the vaccine-autism link and scientifically supported information about vaccine safety, while other participants read articles that did not include the unfounded claim that vaccines are linked to autism. Results indicated that those who read the falsely balanced article were “less certain that vaccines are safe, more likely to believe experts were less certain that vaccines are safe and less likely to have their future children vaccinated” (Dixon & Clarke, 2013, p. 352). By giving people the impression that a topic is less clear-cut and supported by fact than it truly is, false balance obscures the truth about an issue, which makes readers less able to make accurately informed decisions for themselves. When people are reluctant to receive vaccines, this can have far-reaching, negative impacts on health and wellness, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Danchin & Buttery, 2021).

Similarly, Boykoff & Boykoff (2004) examined the portrayal of global warming by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The authors found that the news outlets’ coverage of global warming did not accurately reflect the scientific community’s perspective on climate change due to the presentation of information from both scientists and climate change skeptics. Though telling both sides of the story “may on the surface be an obvious journalistic tendency... balanced reporting is actually problematic in practice when discussing the human contribution to global warming and resulting calls for action to combat it” (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, p. 134). They conclude that presenting scientifically supported evidence along with science-denying arguments gives both equal weight, allowing the

U.S. government to “shirk responsibility and delay action regarding global warming” (p. 134), for scientific uncertainty is often used to inspire inaction. Overall, research has demonstrated that false balance affects opinion formation, gives the impression of conflicting information and expert opinion, and affects agreement on topics where the evidence overwhelmingly supports one side (Schmid et al., 2020; Casara et al., 2019).

Beginning in 2018, a new term for false balance rose in usage: “bothsidesism” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the context of journalism, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines bothsidesing as “the media or public figures giving credence to the other side of a cause, action, or idea to seem fair or only for the sake of argument when the credibility of that side may be unmerited.” The term has been used to critique journalists’ work as giving “extra credence to a cause, action, or idea that on the surface seems objectionable, thereby establishing a sort of moral equivalence that allows said cause, action, or idea to be weighed seriously” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Throughout the remainder of this paper, I will refer to bothsidesism and false balance interchangeably.

Methods

I will be using rhetorical criticism to examine false balance. As communication scholar Sonja K. Foss explains in “Doing rhetorical criticism,” a chapter from her book, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice* (2004), to perform rhetorical criticism, one should select an artifact to examine, formulate a research question about the artifact, and analyze the artifact. I chose to examine bothsidesism with the following question guiding my research: What are the implications of bothsidesism on journalists and their audiences? To analyze the artifact, I utilized existing literature on false balance, examined the word “bothsidesism,” and analyzed news outlets’ public comment sections to see whether bothsidesism was occurring there. Employing

rhetorical criticism allowed me to closely examine bothsidesism and build from existing research to craft my own interpretation of false balance, as well as offer alternative methods of reporting.

Findings

After examining existing literature on false balance and analyzing the term “bothsidesism,” I argue that false balance is problematic for the following reasons: First, false balance is a fallacious rhetorical tactic that minimizes objective fact. Second, the term “bothsidesism” reinforces bipartisan thought, which stymies political action. Third, false balance is at odds with the role of a journalist. Finally, false balance is perpetuated by comment sections.

Bothsidesism as a Rhetorical Tactic

Bothsidesism functions both as a critique of journalists for participating in false balance and as an expectation that journalists should cover all sides of an issue equally. Those who use the term to criticize journalists’ use of false balance argue against bothsidesism (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), while those who expect journalists to equally report on all sides of a story—such as those who argue for it in the 2022 Pew Research Center report—argue for bothsidesism and view it in a positive light. These two applications of the term, therefore, are contradictory in nature.

When used in journalism and in public argument, bothsidesism is a fallacious rhetorical tactic that elevates factual and baseless claims to the same level (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Articles that commit bothsidesism make false equivalences between well-supported facts and unfounded claims, falsely giving the impression that an issue is less certain than it truly is, and that multiple sides of an argument—even those unsupported by fact—have equal merit. This legitimizes “alternative” facts, which minimizes objective facts and makes the truth less clear.

Bothsidesism has similar attributes to whataboutism, defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) as “the rhetorical tactic of defending against an accusation by alerting others to a different accusation against an opponent.” Whataboutism is a deflection strategy that defends against criticism by changing the subject and criticizing something else instead (Dykstra, 2020). This tactic aims to “stall and/or appall” the opposing side, which reframes the issue and allows a speaker to deflect rather than directly answer a question or address the opponent’s criticism (Dykstra, 2020). Whataboutism and bothsidesism are both logical fallacies that make false equivalences, but bothsidesism minimizes objective facts rather than diverting attention from them. Bothsidesism is especially difficult to combat because it operates under the guise of journalistic objectivity and fairness.

The “Both” in Bothsidesism

The term “bothsidesism” itself reflects the bipartisan nature of public thought in the U.S., as the two sides of an argument are often presented as Democrats versus Republicans, and the term highlights “both” sides, not “all” sides. While bipartisanship is often praised as a virtue of American politics and the idea of both sides working together is idealized, the nation’s political polarization makes action on important issues such as climate change more difficult to enact. Climate change was a mostly nonpartisan issue until the 1970s, when “the U.S. conservative movement began to see environmentalism as a threat to laissez-faire government and free enterprise, and became aggressively anti-environmental (Clark et al., 2020, p. 721). Since then, Republican skepticism about climate change has persisted, which has stymied the U.S.’s ability to enact legislation to combat its effects. Though the existence of climate change has been documented time and time again, falsely balanced portrayals of climate change portray the issue

as less clear, legitimizing Republican skepticism and affecting public consensus (Schmid et al., 2020; Casara et al., 2019).

False Balance at Odds with Journalism

While reporting all sides of an issue may remain a fair journalistic practice for issues where there is no definite truth, participating in false balance for issues where the facts are clear-cut is harmful. False balance elevates baseless claims, giving them the same weight as evidence-based ones, which distorts the truth by giving the impression that evidence and experts are divided (Koehler, 2016). This makes it harder for people to form opinions on important issues, instead reinforcing divided perspectives on a topic, which directly contradicts the intention of journalism. According to the American Press Institute (n.d.), journalism's purpose is "to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments." The role of a journalist, therefore, is to weed out all of the unnecessary, confusing, and conflicting arguments and provide the public with the best information possible for them to make an informed decision. As *The New Yorker* journalist Susan Gessen wrote in 2020, "not every argument has two sides: some have more, and some statements should not be the subject of argument. There cannot be arguments about facts." By equally presenting founded and unfounded arguments for the sake of false balance, journalists are arguing objective facts—an action that is inherently at odds with journalists' responsibility and negatively influences readers.

Bothsidesism in Comments

Many news outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Fox News*, allow comments on articles, which are moderated to varying degrees (Etim, 2017; Wash Post PR, 2022; Fox News Team, n.d.). Despite this moderation, comments allow for bothsidesism to

occur. A comment by DanSmith23434 on a *Fox News* article about a United Nations climate change report (Elkind, 2023) denies the severity of global warming and says it is “great campaign material, it’s wonderful fundraising fodder, and plenty of people are making lots of money off of fear.” A reply to that comment says that “it’s one long hoax with a hidden agenda,” and another reply says that “climate change is all about money and control.” While one user replied to this thread asking, “Are you absolutely sure you’re getting your information from the right sources? Because your kids and your grandkids are going to suffer from your decisions,” that comment was disliked and criticized by multiple users. One reply to that comment says, “I’d much rather my children and grandchildren ‘suffer’ from my decisions rather than them suffering under the overbearing dictatorship that you want to impose on them.” This comment falsely equates climate change action and dictatorship and was liked by two users.

The comments on this article present multiple differing opinions on climate change, none of which provide information supporting their claims. Nevertheless, prior research has demonstrated that mere exposure to comments questioning a vaccine influenced participants’ attitudes toward getting the immunization (Casara et al., 2019), and the same can likely be said for attitudes towards climate change. The bothsidesism in these comments presents climate change as an issue that is still factually uncertain, which can impair people’s ability to form a clear opinion on the matter and ultimately impact people’s agreement, despite overwhelming evidence that climate change exists (Schmid et al., 2020; Casara et al., 2019).

Discussion

This analysis of false balance highlights a flaw of the traditional concept of objectivity that is so foundational to modern-day journalism: “sometimes, when both sides are treated fairly and equally, neither ends up shown in a true light” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When it comes to

issues like vaccine safety and climate change—issues where one side of the argument is clearly supported by fact—allowing unfounded claims to have the same weight causes the public to misinterpret these issues as unclear or debatable. When uncertainty abounds in public thought, “unwelcome news is automatically rebranded fake news. Inconvenient evidence from independent sources—say, about climate breakdown and fossil fuels, or air pollution and diesel emissions—is labeled junk science and countered with rigged studies claiming to be sound” (Lawrence, 2020, p. 28). This contributes to the discrediting of science, expert opinion, and fact in the public eye, extending beyond climate change denial—any time there is doubt about an issue, the public’s uncertainty can be weaponized. An uncertain, fact- and journalism-averse public may be more susceptible to demagoguery, allowing those in power to more easily persuade followers by inspiring baseless fear. When any information can simply be disregarded for the sake of supporting one’s side, information loses value. As reporters of information, journalists lose value, too.

To combat the discrediting of objective facts, journalists should discontinue false balance when reporting on issues with evidence that overwhelmingly supports one side. Two strategies can be employed instead: weight-of-evidence and moral clarity. According to Schmid et al. (2020), weight-of-evidence strategies “lend weight to each position that is equivalent to the amount of evidence that supports the position” (p. 1) and have been effective in combating an audience’s existing beliefs that were formed through falsely balanced presentation of an issue. Rather than have journalists decide and conclude what is true, weight-of-evidence allows journalists to report evidence based on the amount that exists for each side (Schmid et al, 2020).

Moral clarity is defined by philosopher Susan Neiman as “looking at each particular case, looking at all the facts, looking at all the context, and working out your answers” (Gessen, 2020).

Moral clarity should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, as the “actual position of moral clarity is always complicated and specific to the circumstances” (Gessen, 2020). Rather than instructing journalists to set aside their values when reporting, as traditional objectivity does, moral clarity encourages journalists to consider the moral implications of an issue (Gessen, 2020). Both weight-of-evidence and moral clarity allow journalists to simply state what is known to be true—that climate change is real, that vaccines are safe and effective, that the 2020 election was not stolen, or whatever issue is at hand. The “clear presentation of data, sources, and transparency will better aid the public in understanding what can be highlighted on the news” (Foreign Press Correspondents USA, 2022), which will work to combat the public’s unknowingly harmful call for bothsidesism.

Future research should continue to examine the effects of false balance in journalism on various topics. An interesting case study would be exploring whether false balance played a role in vaccine and masking hesitancy in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people’s willingness to receive the vaccine and wear a mask have been shown to vary demographically (Nguyen et al., 2022). Future research could also explore whether paywalls and subscriptions to news outlets impact the public’s depth of understanding about important issues and whether or not people’s feelings of themselves as media consumers influence their call for bothsidesism.

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