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Breaking News: Fox News and MSNBC in a Divided America

Winnie Lam

Introduction

Consider the plethora of available news sources that provide us with day-to-day information. Now imagine having only three: ABC, CBS, and NBC. Although that sounds absurd, the ‘Big Three’ networks dominated American television until the emergence of cable news stations in the late twentieth century.¹ These new channels challenged the status quo of traditional networks by taking advantage of narrowcasting and deregulation to compete with the ‘Big Three.’ The weakening of ABC, CBS, and NBC by the new competition paved the way for the age of cable news networks. Cable news stations like Fox News and MSNBC gained popularity in the late twentieth century because of an increasingly divisive political atmosphere. These political divisions fueled the demand for partisan news, while those news stations’ polarising content simultaneously widened the ideological gap between Americans. The result was an endless cycle of political polarization.

The partisan slant on cable news and the consumer demand for political commentary simultaneously reinforced the ideological divisions between political partisans, causing Democrats to become more liberal and Republicans more conservative. The factors which contributed to the emergence and explosive success of cable news channels like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC from the 1990s to the 2000s entrenched this cycle of polarization. The pervasive role of cable news is such that just a decade after the rise of Fox and MSNBC, over half of Americans confessed that the first thing that came to mind when they thought about news organizations was cable news, as opposed to network news, local news, newspapers, and the Internet.²

Fox News and MSNBC surpassed CNN in ratings after embracing conservative and liberal slants, respectively. They exemplified cable news channels on the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum as Fox brought on conservative pundits and MSNBC the opposite. The development of partisan punditry is closely tied to the pivotal events they were commenting on in the early twenty-first century. Content analysis of the tone of news coverage on Fox and MSNBC reveals that negative, politically charged news commentary made up most of the channels’ content during this period. Upon close analysis of cable news audiences, Fox and MSNBC became successful with their partisan slants because of the public’s desire to stay within their ideological echo chambers. With these factors in mind, cable news and partisan American audiences exacerbated an endless cycle of political polarization. These developments are not without consequences, and the negative impacts of increased political polarization since the 1990s has affected partisan antipathy and Congress. In contrast to historian Alan Abramowitz’s argument that polarization benefits society, this paper will argue that political divisiveness resulted in grave consequences that we should try to amend.³

Bad News for the “Big Three”

ABC, CBS, and NBC monopolized the television industry until the deregulation of cable news in the late twentieth century. Most of the television stations in the country were affiliated with one of the “Big Three” by the mid-twentieth century. Suddenly, a few decades later, the broadcast networks were disadvantaged because of the Fairness Doctrine, which required

contrasting viewpoints on important issues. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 catalyzed the rapid growth of cable television systems across the nation. The act aimed to deregulate cable networks, as demonstrated by one portion prohibiting cable operators from exercising editorial control over cable network content.⁴ Since operators could not regulate the cable television content as strictly as they could broadcast television, cable networks had the freedom to show unedited content at all hours of the day with no commercial breaks.⁵ Because of these new liberties, companies began to invest in commercial satellites and circulated cable nationwide. This surge of new cable networks on television led to highly successful channels, like CNN, HBO, and ESPN.

Narrowcasting also played a significant role in explaining the popularity of cable networks. Targeting information to niche audiences allowed the networks to connect with a loyal viewer base. Unlike the broadcast networks, which had to appeal to a broader audience to succeed, cable channels had the advantage of gearing their programming to groups with a particular ideological point of view.⁶ Audiences were more likely to keep watching programs that advanced their biases, making viewers more inclined to keep tuning into cable channels rather than broadcast network channels, which only provided a neutral outlook.

The redefining of journalistic standards solidified the cable networks' success in the television industry. According to a 1998 study from the Pew Research Center, the percentage of "straight news" in the media, news stories that simply described the events that occurred, dropped from 51.4% in 1977 to a mere 34.3% in 1997. On the other hand, news stories that featured scandals skyrocketed from 0.5% to 15.1% and the percentage of stories categorized as "bizarre" from 0.5% to 6.2%.⁷ The decline in "straight news" and the rise in sensational "infotainment" reflected the shift in newsworthiness. The general upward trend in infotainment suggested that cable networks became increasingly popular because they could air risqué programming absent from the broadcast networks.⁸

Economic and content deregulation, narrowcasting, and the rise of infotainment contributed to the emergence and success of cable network channels, which ultimately led to larger corporations' acquisition of each of the Big Three. By the end of the decade, nearly 53 million households subscribed to cable, and cable program networks increased from 28 in 1980 to 79 by 1989. Weakened by the new competition, the Big Three networks became victims of the merger mania of the 1980s, and all had new owners by the end of the decade. After being taken over by big corporations, the broadcast networks lost many viewers and faced budgetary cutbacks.⁹

CNN's 24-Hour News Cycle: Are Views More Important than News?

The lack of funding for the 'Big Three' paved the way for cable news networks to take their first steps towards success. The Cable News Network (CNN) emerged in 1980 and dedicated itself to solely being a news network.¹⁰ Ted Turner created the nation's first 24-hour news channel with the vision of changing how America saw the news. To achieve his goal, Turner and his associates adopted a news-as-entertainment philosophy, otherwise known as infotainment.¹¹ CNN aired breaking news, special reports headlines, and news features for twenty-one hours a day. In the early evening, the channel televised sports reports for an hour. Afterwards, CNN dedicated two hours of prime time to a full in-depth news roundup. CNN aired its most entertaining stories in the early evening and during prime time between 8 P.M. and 10 P.M. as a way of integrating itself as a form of entertainment into the dinnertime routine of its viewers.¹²

In addition to strategically timing its programming, the network also relied on infotainment to engage its audience. As CNN producer Bob Furnad argued, "We live in an

environment where people are watching a channel for three minutes and then pressing that clicker. We've got to get them watching and keep them watching."¹³ To get audiences watching and keep them watching, CNN offered constant news updates. When a newsworthy event occurred, CNN interrupted its current programming to feature that event immediately and run with it. CNN coined this tactic as "news in process." This phrase indicated the importance of broadcasting exciting events immediately instead of saving them for a news roundup later that day.¹⁴ The network also employed dramatic visuals for its "oomph value" rather than their importance in explaining the news story.¹⁵ Ultimately, CNN set a new standard for the immediacy of news and sensationalized news stories.

CNN did not have strong political biases when it first launched. Political partisanship did not define the network nearly as much as its focus on entertainment-as-news ethic did. However, during the 2007 presidential election, the network faced allegations of liberal bias. Research conducted at Harvard University found that "CNN programming studied tended to cast a negative light on Republican candidates—by a margin of three-to-one."¹⁶ Its reputation as a liberal channel continued in its coverage of the 2016 presidential election and into the network's critical reporting of the Trump Administration. Before the 2000s, however, strong partisan bias was not prevalent in the network. Despite its initial success, CNN became less popular after the rise of the Fox News Channel and MSNBC. Frustrated by CNN's reliance on infotainment, the creators of Fox News and MSNBC strived to launch cable news channels that televised unbiased news stories. However, the two new channels rose to popularity because the networks relied on their partisan slant that appealed to either liberal or conservative audiences.

This Just In: Fox News Ratings Rise Above and Beyond

CNN had already begun to change the landscape of television news, and the emergence of Fox News Channel in 1996 further transformed the way the American public received the news. When Rupert Murdoch, founder of Fox News, hired Republican political consultant Roger Ailes to become the CEO of his new 24-hour news channel, other cable networks, like CNN, had already been up and running for years.¹⁷ Ailes met with cable chiefs and offered to pay them approximately \$10 per subscriber to carry Fox News to compete with bigger news stations. Fox News entered into a carriage agreement with networks across the country, which meant that Fox would pay the network for the right to carry the signal and televise their program. Ailes was successful because he offered an exceedingly high amount for carriage, as cable stations usually only invested \$1.25 per subscriber.¹⁸ This high carriage investment allowed Fox News to get its foot in the door, but without a breaking news story, it was just another channel that viewers clicked past while flipping through the television remote.

In the early stages of the news channel, Murdoch and Ailes agreed that their goal was to create a channel that produced unbiased news and wanted the commentators and anchors to distinguish clearly between analysis and opinion.¹⁹ In an interview with print and television reporter Douglas Kennedy, Ailes recalled telling his staff, "when you walk into this newsroom, recognize your position or your bias and be fair to people who don't share that position."²⁰ The network's slogan, "fair and balanced," represented Murdoch's and Ailes' original vision for the network.²¹

Two years later, Fox News got its big break during the Monica Lewinsky scandal and President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial and gave their viewers a taste of how the network's editorial bent differed from its competitors. Fox News became the epicenter of the scandal, as it renewed the rumors of other women involved with President Clinton and provided the inside scoop on the cigar and blue dress.²² The network raced to bring on the man who broke

the story online, Matt Drudge, and even created a special segment where he updated viewers on new developments in the scandal. Soon after the story broke on Fox News, other news stations followed suit. Their production of commentary about the scandal solidified Fox News' status as an emerging leader in television news.²³

The network's partisan slant became even more prevalent with the divisive 2004 election. Fox News lent its support to presidential candidate George W. Bush and produced negative coverage of the Democratic candidates. In particular, Swift Boat ads overwhelmed most of Fox News' coverage of the election.²⁴ The ads on the channel claimed that Democratic candidate John Kerry lied about his actions in Vietnam that earned him his medals. The ads were highly detrimental to Kerry's campaign, as the general public became skeptical about his record as an American veteran. Since then, Fox News continued to appeal to a conservative audience through the 2000s.

By January 2002, Fox News beat CNN in the ratings and took its spot as the No. 1 cable news channel. Fox News gained a loyal conservative viewership base by narrowcasting their content to audiences already critical of the Clinton Administration and supportive of George Bush. A former Fox News employee compared the loyalty of the network's audience to that of a sports team fan base:²⁵ "In the case of Fox News, the viewers are completely convinced that it is the one thing that stands between our tenuous grip on democracy and total chaos and dictatorship on the left." However, many accused Fox News of acting as a political operation disguising itself as a news organization.

Bill O'Reilly, Fox News' most popular prime-time host, and other Republicans quickly defended the network by denying that it possessed any conservative biases. On "The O'Reilly Factor," O'Reilly and the show's producers hoped to convince viewers that O'Reilly's tough interviews and blunt commentary cut through politicians' biases to reveal the truth. O'Reilly's show introduction, "Caution! You are about to enter, *the no-spin zone*. 'The Factor' begins *right now*," portrayed the show as a place where politicians could not spin their arguments.²⁶ Fox News also argued that the network only *appeared* ideologically conservative, citing the alleged liberal bias in other channels. Thus, Fox News believed it served as a neutral alternative to counteract the mainstream media, demonstrated by the channel's tagline, "Fair and Balanced."²⁷

Although the O'Reilly Factor was successful in that it became the country's most-watched cable news programs in 2001, the public still recognized Fox News' conservative bias. Americans viewed Fox News as the most ideologically partisan than other news networks, and this sentiment continued throughout the early 2000s. A 2009 study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 47% of the public believed that Fox News was "mostly conservative."²⁸

Due to Fox News' conservative coverage, the channel received criticism from other media outlets. The media portrayed Fox News negatively in the early 2000s, and this portrayal grew even worse over time. Critics accused the channel of being an extension of the Republican Party in the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2007.²⁹ The pessimistic coverage of Fox News worsened when a Republican columnist himself wrote in a *Los Angeles Times* article that Fox had become a right-leaning network that was akin to a tabloid-like network.³⁰ Social media also played a role in the unfavorable portrayal of the channel. In the 2010s, online news sites like *Vox* published various videos condemning Fox News' coverage. *Vox* accused the channel of breaking its own rules of unbiased coverage, going as far as to turn a blind eye when its television news personalities like Sean Hannity publicly endorsed Donald Trump in his presidential campaign.³¹ The accusations of Fox News' conservative-leaning content persevered throughout the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the success of Fox News

established the network as a reliable cable news source for the right. Simultaneously, MSNBC emerged as a critical news channel for left-leaning audiences.

Is MSNBC Bias-free?

MSNBC began broadcasting just a few months before Fox News and resulted from a collaboration between the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) and Microsoft. One of the most prominent figures involved in the creation of MSNBC was media executive Tom Rogers. Before launching MSNBC, Rogers had already been a part of the news media industry. He served as senior counsel in the U.S. House of Representatives Telecommunications, Consumer Protection and Finance Subcommittee, where he drafted media policy, such as the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984.³² Rogers became the first president of NBC Cable, where he eventually helped forge the NBC and Microsoft partnership as a business venture between the two companies.

Like Fox News, MSNBC aspired to become a 24-hour news channel that presented unbiased news to its audience.³³ The network's focus on technology set MSNBC apart from other cable news networks. MSNBC encouraged viewers to keep tuning in to the television and directed them to its website, which featured new interactive methods of content delivery.³⁴ As demonstrated by its use of technology and its first slogan, "It's Time to Get Connected," MSNBC targeted young, tech-savvy audiences. However, the network's efforts yielded disappointing results. Due to low ratings, it had to lay off 20% of its employees within a year and canceled one of its first programs.³⁵

Even after these setbacks, MSNBC still clung to its goal of delivering neutral news and continued to stay away from partisan-leaning content. The channel featured several people who went on to fame in conservative *and* liberal media.³⁶ It was not until its ratings lagged behind Fox News and CNN in 2003 when it finally established its place as a liberal-leaning network in the cable news landscape with its hiring of Keith Olbermann. "Countdown with Keith Olbermann" proved highly successful when it premiered in 2003.³⁷ Initially, MSNBC executives discouraged Olbermann from continuing his rants about President Bush, arguing that the channel should not present opinionated commentary. However, the sentiment of these network executives changed when the show's ratings started to rise precisely at the time Olbermann began criticizing the Bush Administration. As a result, the network gained the popularity it needed to compete with other cable channels.³⁸

As the show's new host, Olbermann quickly gained recognition for his witty, fast-paced rhetoric that appealed to young viewers. Many regarded Olbermann as "the future of journalism" and praised him for his ability to interweave personal commentary and reports together cleverly. The show focused on the controversies behind U.S. intervention in Iraq, which attracted a left-leaning audience.³⁹ Olbermann criticized the Bush Administration and even directly called the President out. "I accuse you, Mr Bush, of leading this country into war," he said in 2003. "I accuse you of fabricating in the minds of your own people a false implied link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11."⁴⁰

"Countdown" quickly became MSNBC's most popular program. In March 2008, the show averaged 1,080,000 viewers, surpassing CNN's "Campbell Brown," which averaged 995,000 total viewers that month.⁴¹ The show and its partisan commentary contributed to MSNBC's success, and the network delivered its largest share of the cable news prime-time audience since August 2001. From mid-2007 to mid-2008, the channel's prime time viewing increased by 61 percent.⁴² Their success and decision to evolve into a liberal news channel were ultimately derived from their desperation to boost its ratings. Since Olbermann's liberal biases helped MSNBC gain more viewers, the channel pushed on with its partisan slant.

Because of its liberal branding, many regarded MSNBC as the antithesis of Fox News. The tension between the hosts on the two channels reflected this sentiment. Olbermann often referred to the conservative channel as "Fixed News," "Fox Noise," "Faux News," and "Fixed Noise." The feud between Olbermann and O'Reilly was also very publicized. Like the *Los Angeles Times*, other news outlets talked about the hosts as if they were direct rivals, claiming that their crossfire remarks created the "fiercest media feud of the decade."⁴³ The tensions between Olbermann and O'Reilly escalated until top executives from both channels met at an off-the-record summit in 2009 to arrange a cease-fire. Fox News and MSNBC acknowledged the toxic culture between the networks and promised to alleviate tensions, even though the feud increased views for both programs.⁴⁴

Shortly after, in 2010, MSNBC accepted its liberal-leaning reputation. Its tagline, "Lean Forward," fully embraced its progressive identity. MSNBC relied on ideologically left-leaning content for upward mobility and planned to take on Fox News after surpassing CNN. However, the network soon encountered criticism for being *too* partisan. It faced accusations of being biased towards Barack Obama during the 2008 election and because it failed to include a single conservative candidate in its panel on the night of the 2010 midterm election.⁴⁵ MSNBC's shows also received attacks, as the *LA Times* pointed out that "at least O'Reilly invites dissenters to his lair (if only to disembowel them), whereas 'Countdown' is more or less an echo chamber in which Olbermann and like-minded bobbleheads nod at each other."⁴⁶

MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, who hosted one of the most successful shows in the channel's history, "The Rachel Maddow Show," also met allegations of biased news coverage.⁴⁷ Maddow began as a substitute host on the channel and then landed her show that debuted in 2008. Maddow's program doubled the audience for MSNBC's 9 P.M. slot and received praise from the liberal media. However, as the show's initial success wore off, Maddow, like Olbermann, faced allegations of being too partisan, especially concerning her criticism of the Trump Administration. In the time of growing anxiety on the left in the Trump Administration, MSNBC depended even more heavily on stark partisan commentary that is nostalgic of Olbermann's, focusing on the President's ties to Russia and the possibility of impeachment. Critics accused Maddow of feeding the left's paranoia and diverting the American public from the truth.⁴⁸ They also accused her of pushing her liberal commentary solely for the ratings, as the network surged to the No.1 spot in prime-time television thanks to her monologues.⁴⁹ As a result, MSNBC surpassed its rivals for prime-time views on weeknights in the 25-to-54 age demographic, a 118% increase from 2016.⁵⁰

Despite its liberal stance, MSNBC defended their programming as fair and accurate coverage. Maddow justified MSNBC's journalistic practices in 2010 when she advocated, "I know everybody likes to say, 'Oh, that's cable news. It's all the same. Fox News and MSNBC mirror images of each other.' Let this lay that to rest forever...we are not a political operation. Fox is. We are a news operation."⁵¹ However, Maddow's defense of the channel as an unbiased news source seemed lackluster because of the allegations from other news outlets that MSNBC executives endorsed Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign.⁵² So despite Maddow's statement and other MSNBC employees' defense of their biased content, the channel's liberal slant did not go unnoticed, especially by other media outlets.

The media outlets that criticized MSNBC primarily focused on becoming more liberal and more biased in favor of the Democratic Party. In 2007, *The New York Times* published an article that acknowledged how MSNBC leaned farther left as their ratings signaled that liberal content increased viewers.⁵³ Later, in 2011, *Salon*, an online newspaper, commented that progressive politics overran MSNBC's prime-time lineup, and *Politico* also recognized the

channel's left-leaning commentary.⁵⁴ The negative media portrayal of MSNBC hit a high point in 2019 when other news sources ridiculed the channel for its coverage of the 2020 presidential election. In its list of 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, MSNBC left out candidate Andrew Yang. It received backlash from *The Inquisitr*, *Politico*, and many other new sites for being biased to some candidates over others.⁵⁵ Thus, as the partisanship of MSNBC increased, the media portrayal of the channel became more pessimistic.

Partisanship on Demand: News Consumer Preferences

The existing polarization and consumer demand for political commentary drove the increasing partisanship of Fox News and MSNBC throughout the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. As the ideological gap between Republicans and Democrats widened, these news channels invested in partisan content to attract views, which exacerbated the cycle of political polarization. To understand why the partisan slants on cable television became so successful, we must examine Americans' news preferences that might have caused a surge in demand for politically charged news commentary.

One possible explanation for the increased demand for partisan news was the changing "nature of the times," as Pew Research Center's Michael J. Robinson stated.⁵⁶ Compared to the 90s, the 2000s sparked more news interest in Americans because of pivotal events in American history. In 2007, Robinson synthesized 165 national surveys about Americans' preference for news topics. Although there were no dramatic changes in news tastes, the study indicated that the overall interest in news increased from the 1990s to the 2000s. From 1990 to 1999, 23% of adult Americans reported that they followed the news "very closely", while in the years 2000 to 2006, 30% of Americans followed the news closely.⁵⁷ In political scientist Alan Abramowitz's research, he acknowledged the relationship between political engagement and partisan-ideological polarization.⁵⁸ Citizens who were more engaged politically tended to possess more partisan views.

Robinson explained that the increase in news interest could have stemmed from the 90s era of relative peace and economic stability under the Clinton Administration. Even the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal failed to engage news consumers, as Americans were unmoved by the prospect of Clinton's and Lewinsky's grand jury testimony.⁵⁹ By 1998, the public was generally forgiving towards the president. The percentage of Americans following the scandal very closely dropped by ten percent in the eight months after the scandal broke out.⁶⁰ By contrast, the 2000s saw significant shocking events, including 9/11 and the Iraq War, which sparked partisan debate throughout the Bush Administration. The news category that attracted the most attention were stories involving U.S. linked war and terrorism. 43% of all Americans followed the topic "very closely" in the early 2000s, compared to the 36% in the 90s.⁶¹ The Iraq War sparked partisan controversy, polarizing Americans more than in previous major U.S. conflicts.⁶² This was likely due to the increase in party loyalty in the early twenty-first century, combined with echoes of the failed Vietnam War. As a result, Americans likely turned to partisan news to keep themselves updated on the information and affirm their biases.

A survey of news consumers with respect to party identification in 2006, when the Iraq War garnered some of its most heavy criticisms, revealed that partisans were more likely to prefer news that shared their point of view than Independents.⁶³ 34% of Conservative Republicans and 24% of Liberal Democrats preferred getting news aligned with their perspectives. In contrast, only 16% of Independents said the same. Because of the partisan attention on pivotal events in the 2000s, cable news channels sought to appeal to viewers on either side of the ideological spectrum when providing commentary on polarizing topics such as the Iraq War.⁶⁴ Due to the increased demand for politically charged news by partisans,

appealing to partisan audiences benefited cable news channels because they could tailor their reporting to a narrow range of Americans who they knew would keep tuning in.

If It Bleeds, It Leads: News Becomes More Negative

A content analysis demonstrated that Fox News and MSNBC's news coverage was generally partisan and pessimistic. A 2011 paper published by Rebecca Chalif at Georgetown University revealed that cable news content was typically more politically charged than neutral, and its tone was more negative than positive.⁶⁵ Chalif analyzed the content on both of the channels' popular shows. She examined 'The O'Reilly Factor' and 'The Sean Hannity Show' for Fox News, and on MSNBC, she analyzed 'Hardball with Chris Matthews' and 'The Rachel Maddow Show.'

In her analysis of the content's tone, Chalif found that the overall tone of Fox News was 92% negative, 8% neutral, and 0% positive. Similarly, the tone on MSNBC was 90% negative, 5% neutral, and 5% positive.⁶⁶ The channels' overwhelming negativity could be explained by the claim that viewers gravitate more towards negative commentary than positive commentary. This caused cable news channels to report a majority of their stories in a negative tone. They exaggerated the dramatic details, which contributed to the sensationalism of news reporting.⁶⁷ Negative information alerted viewers and made them afraid and angry. As a result, the channels' viewer base kept watching because it wanted to learn more, thus increasing its ratings.

Both Fox News and MSNBC strayed far from their original intentions of presenting unbiased news. Both networks relied on partisan reporting by inviting politically biased pundits who offered partisan commentary to keep their viewers from changing the channel instead of inviting experts who testified to the facts. Chalif found that 77% of the guests featured on Fox News and 90% on MSNBC advocated politically partisan perspectives.⁶⁸ These pundits used the cable news channels to preach to their choir, which turned Fox News and MSNBC into platforms for politicians to push their views instead of presenting factual news. This partisanship attracted more viewers because the general public wanted to watch guests who gave heavily opinionated remarks.

In addition to bringing political pundits onto their network, Fox and MSNBC also presented partisan tones throughout their general reporting. According to Chalif, there was an apparent pro-Republican slant on Fox News and a pro-Democratic slant on MSNBC. Since Fox News and MSNBC shifted towards the right and left, respectively, we would expect the former to favor Republicans and the latter to favor Democrats. Fox News spent 37.5% of its time portraying Republicans positively, and MSNBC transmitted positive reports about Democrats 69% of the time.⁶⁹ Shockingly, Fox News and MSNBC spent *more* time describing the opposition party negatively than reporting positively on the party they supported. Fox News reported 81% negative towards Democrats, and MSNBC broadcasted 85% negative towards Republicans.⁷⁰ So not only were these two channels' content mainly composed of negative news stories but these stories and commentaries specifically targeted the opposing political party by exaggerating their negative aspects. Fox News and MSNBC attacked their political opponents more frequently than they supported their political allies, leaving viewers with the notion that individuals who belonged to a party other than theirs should be feared and ultimately defeated. Based on the data gathered from this study, Fox News and MSNBC did not seem very reliable in reporting the straight facts, so who was still watching?

Warning: Viewer Discretion is Advised

Cable news has heavily integrated itself into American culture since the late twentieth century. In 2011, the Pew Research Center found that for 63% of Americans, the first thing that came to mind when thinking about news organizations was cable news, instead of network news, local news, newspapers, and online news.⁷¹ The study also found that Americans trusted the press more than they trusted the government and businesses. Although local news was rated 10% more trustworthy than national news networks, this data revealed how heavily the public relied on national news organizations, like cable news, to get information. Ironically, although Americans trusted news organizations, public perception of the press grew more negative throughout the years. From 1985 to 2011, the percentage of Americans that believed that news stories were often inaccurate, tended to favor one side and were influenced by powerful people and organizations rose by approximately 25%.⁷²

Analyzing the audience of Fox News and MSNBC provided insight into those watching cable news and why they kept watching. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2010 demonstrated that there was a linear trend of higher exposure to cable news among older Americans (51-70), those who earned higher incomes (150k or more), and individuals who had a higher level of education (post-graduate degrees).⁷³ Not only did these demographic groups watch the most cable news, but they also had the highest voter turnout, meaning that cable news significantly influenced the most politically active Americans.⁷⁴

When asked what type of political news source they preferred, 72% of the survey participants indicated that they wanted to get news from sources that did not have a particular political point of view, with 28% admitting that they liked to get their news from sources that shared their political perspectives.⁷⁵ The majority of the general public said it wanted neutral news. Yet, the survey also revealed that most Americans turned to Fox News and MSNBC, partisan news channels, as their primary source of the latest news and headlines. The data exposed the widespread confusion about partisan slants that existed in Fox News and MSNBC. Only 47% of the respondents perceived Fox News as ‘mostly conservative,’ while 53% could not identify its ideological bias. Just 36% of respondents recognized that MSNBC was ‘mostly liberal,’ while 64% of Americans did not notice its partisan slant.⁷⁶ These striking results explained why the general public still relied on those cable news channels for ‘neutral news’ despite the channels’ apparent biases. The misconception that Fox News and MSNBC televised unbiased news led to their popularity because viewers on either side of the ideological gap kept watching news channels that supported their political points of view while mistakenly believing that they were consuming unbiased news. The public, in general, trapped themselves in ideological echo chambers because of this confusion. In a 2011 survey, the Pew Research Center found that the American public offered better evaluations of the news sources they used. They said that news organizations, in general, were inaccurate and tended to favor one side, while the news sources they used themselves were accurate and dealt fairly with all sides of the story.⁷⁷

Mind the Gap!

The demand for partisan news and the cable channels’ consistent appeal towards partisans reinforced the deep divisiveness between the two major political parties. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center study, the ideological gap between median, or average, Democrats and Republicans widened dramatically between 1994 and 2017. In 1994, before the launch of Fox News and MSNBC, 64% of Republicans identified themselves as more consistently conservative than the median Democrat, but that percentage skyrocketed to 95% in 2017.⁷⁸ Likewise, 70% of Democrats classified themselves as more consistently liberal than median

Republicans in 1994, compared to 97% in 2017.⁷⁹ Democrats and Republicans grew more ideologically divided than in the past as the former became more liberal; the latter, more conservative. Political divisiveness did not only occur in the Democrat and Republican parties. The percentage of Americans with a mix of liberal and conservative political views decreased by 10% from 1994 to 2014 despite the growing number of Americans who self-identified as Independents. This disparity could be explained by the increased fragmentation within Independents, as the number of Democratic-leading independents and Republican-leaning independents has risen steadily since 2000.⁸⁰

Partisanship in cable news media explained the growing gap between Democrats and Republicans. The correlation between one's exposure to Fox News and MSNBC and their party identification demonstrated the widening ideological gap between the members of the nation's two largest political parties. Participants were asked to rate how frequently they watch either news channel by choosing between 'never,' 'hardly ever,' 'sometimes,' and 'regularly.' Significantly, results of the survey demonstrated that 63.2% of Democrats never or hardly ever watched Fox News. In comparison, 50% of them watched MSNBC sometimes or regularly.⁸¹ On the other hand, 71.4% of Republicans watched Fox News sometimes or regularly, and 70.4% never watched MSNBC.⁸² As Democrats and Republicans reinforced their own biases and ignored opposing viewpoints, they became more polarized.

Polarization ultimately resulted in strong partisan antipathy, thus damaging the relationship between Americans with differing political views. The Pew Research Center found that very conservative or very liberal Americans remained more likely to have close friends who shared their political perspectives. Consistent conservatives and liberals also discussed government and politics more frequently than those with mixed ideologies, thus reinforcing their political biases with close social circles. 57% of Republicans reported that most of their close friends belonged to the same party as they did, and 55% of them had just a few or no friends in the opposing party. Likewise, 67% of Democrats remained friends with other Democrats, and 65% of them had just a few or no Republican friends.⁸³ Democrats and Republicans also said that they felt strong antipathy towards members of the opposing party. They wanted to surround themselves with individuals who shared their political views and avoid those who did not.⁸⁴ The increasingly partisan content from Fox News and MSNBC pushed partisans against each other.

As their exposure to cable news increased, partisan Americans created ideological echo chambers in which they ignored people or ideas that did not align with theirs. By choosing to tune into politically biased cable news networks like FOX News and MSNBC, consumers used media as a tool to reaffirm their own political biases, thus pushing them farther left or right. Political polarization caused the media to present more partisan commentary because Americans used it as a tool to reaffirm their beliefs and stay in their ideological echo chambers. Because consumers regularly tuned into partisan news channels that emphasized their ideologies and further alienated others who did not share similar views, cable news channels gained popularity. Since these cable news networks wanted to boost viewership, they continued to air polarizing commentary, thus facilitating a dangerous cycle of political media selectivity.

Bad News Travels Fast

Political bias on cable news channels did not only polarize the American public. The effects of partisan slants also trickled into Congress starting in the late 1990s with the spread of Fox News Channel across congressional districts. After the launch of Fox News in 1996, congressional members in districts with access to Fox News became slightly more opposed to

President Clinton than representatives who belonged to districts without the news channel. Between 1998 and 2000, Clinton's approval ratings fell even lower, primarily due to the channel's critical coverage of the sex scandal and impeachment trial.⁸⁵ By this time, there was a direct correlation between the number of Fox News subscribers in a particular district and the support for the president by that district's elected officials. As the number of subscribers increased by 1%, support for Clinton decreased by 11%.⁸⁶ Thus, this data demonstrated that Fox News' partisan content had a polarizing effect on congressional behavior.

Elected officials appeared to change their public position based on the media environment in their district because of the delineating effects of cable news on the general public. When partisan channels like Fox News emerged in a congressional district, voters used the channel's biased commentary to reinforce their perspectives, thus pushing themselves away from opposing ideologies. Since polarized viewers were more likely to participate in politics, it made sense that they would want to elect congressional representatives who leaned more strongly towards their political ideology than politically moderate candidates. Thus, congressional members who belonged to districts where Fox News was popular ultimately decreased their support for Clinton to show voters that they also agreed with Fox News.

Cable news channels also had a significant impact on election outcomes. The channels discussed candidates' platforms, vetted their credentials, conducted interviews, and televised snippets of their speeches. The candidates with the most airtime built up the momentum needed in their campaigns to do well in primaries and caucuses, leading to politicians' reliance on media coverage.⁸⁷ As the popularity of biased commentary rose, candidates became even more ideologically partisan to appeal to the channels and receive more airtime. As demonstrated, the dangerous cycle of political polarization between cable news and the public also affected Congress.

Conclusion - Moving Forward: All is Not Lost

Since the emergence of partisan cable news channels like Fox News and MSNBC, the political landscape has become increasingly polarized. This divisiveness ultimately led to the radicalization of opposing viewpoints and a lack of mutual understanding between liberals and conservatives. Because of the rising political partisanship since the 1990s, however, the trajectories of Fox News and MSNBC were predictable. To compete with the mainstream news networks, the two channels had to have a competitive partisan edge to draw viewers into their programming, thus making them more and more one-sided as time went on. However, the advent of new media probably caught cable news channels off guard. New media was able to be even more niche and biased, which drove Fox News and MSNBC even farther right and left, respectively, to appeal to their audience. However, we should not entirely blame cable news for this political fragmentation. Many other factors, such as the end of the Cold War, gerrymandering, economic inequality, and party pressures, exacerbated political polarization.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the dismal correlation between cable news channels and political polarization generates a very pessimistic view of the nation's media landscape.

On the other hand, all is not lost. Positive aspects of our high choice media environment still exist today. Since the creation of cable news channels, Americans have had a wide variety of news source options. Instead of consuming news from only three television networks, people can now access information with perspectives from all across the ideological spectrum via countless mediums other than television. Unfortunately, the vast array of news sources could also be viewed negatively. In the twenty-first century, the habit of consuming news from social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, became increasingly common. To some, new media meant that the American public would become even more

trapped in their ideological echo chambers because there were even more media options to reinforce their views.⁸⁹

Moving forward, however, consumers and news outlets can take steps to break the vicious cycle of media-induced polarization. Cable news consumers can improve their media literacy by becoming more aware of the political biases of news channels. Doing so would clear up the confusion about neutral news versus partisan commentary. The viewers who *are* aware of political biases ignore news sources that do not reinforce their preferences, so consumers should make a better effort to expose themselves to different perspectives. Suppose the general public actively sought out opposing viewpoints and tried to understand varying political ideologies. In that case, it could reach a mutual understanding of others and break free from their ideological echo chambers.⁹⁰

Breaking the polarization cycle is more difficult for cable news channels. Fundamentally, news channels do not have a strong incentive to present unbiased information because doing so would mean lower ratings. It would be unrealistic to expect cable news channels only to air neutral programming. However, Fox News and MSNBC still have a responsibility to inform their viewers of their partisan commentary. This disclosure has not happened yet. In 2017 Fox News changed its slogan from ‘Fair and Balanced’ to ‘We Report, You Decide.’⁹¹ Although the channel parted ways with its rally cry of being neutral, its new slogan deflects its responsibility to distinguish between fact and opinion. Instead, it told its audience that the channel would stay the same, and viewers should simply decide for themselves. MSNBC acted similarly when it changed its slogan from ‘Lean Forward’ to ‘This is who we are.’⁹² Its new slogan had a ‘take it or leave it’ tone which recognized its biases but pushed the blame on the audience. Cable news channels must make more effort to clearly distinguish between the facts and their opinions so that viewers are aware of the partisan slant.⁹³ By doing so, cable news channels can keep their partisan commentary for high ratings while also alleviating concerns about widening the ideological gap.

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