

Mariam Kourabi

Hello everyone. My name is Mariam Kourabi from the JRP candidate team. Welcome to the first episode in our new series of research updates. We're going to revisit some of the research shared at last year's Between Ideals and Practices conference to see how it has evolved since May of 2023 joining me for this episode is Dr. Daniel Hallin, who many of you will know from his research on media systems. He was one of the conference's keynote speakers in this episode, we'll find out more of what's been happening with his research on political polarization and journalistic voices in the United States. Dr Hallin, it's a pleasure to have you on today.

Daniel Hallin

Thank you.

Mariam Kourabi

It's been over a year since the conference here at TMU. How did it impact your research or analysis in terms of the JRP study.

Daniel Hallin

Well, it was very valuable. This was the first time I had presented a particular argument that I was thinking about. It's an argument that I was thinking about all the time. We were doing the research, you know, we were doing the coding and and so on. And I was thinking about, what am I going to say about all of this eventually? So that was the first time I presented it, and now I have the draft of a chapter written based on that initial presentation. So yeah, and it was great to hear people's reactions to that work.

Mariam Kourabi

To discuss a little bit of that great work..the first point you discuss in the research is around the rise and possible fall of the objectivity norm. Can you tell us a little bit about what is this objectivity norm and how it has changed over the years from the conducted research?

Daniel Hallin

This is one of the things that's kind of distinctive about us journalism culture. There's very strong attachment to the objectivity norm, which is the idea that, you know, journalists should present the news in a way that is politically neutral, basically, without having political alignment, you know, that colors the way they present the news. It's evolved over the years, and this is something that developed around the middle of the 20th century, you know, undermining what previously had been a partisan culture in in journalism. So it became consolidated around that time, and in its early days, it had particularly, particularly, you could say naive and also rigid definition in a lot of cases, which is the idea of that you know, journalists present just the facts right, without interpretation, and so on. And then as time went on, journalists began to realize that that's not realistic. You can't actually present the news that way. You have to interpret. Audiences need you to interpret. And so they had more scope as time went on. But it's also something that's always been debated, right and and there have always been dissenters who believe that this commitment to objectivity undermined journalism in a lot of ways. I remember a particular kind of story that illustrates it well. When I was doing research about news coverage

of Central America in the 1980s and I was going to interview journalists who were covering this conflict. And there were European journalists there, and there were us journalists there, and it would be interesting to hear how they talked about one another. So the the Americans would say, the European journalists aren't really professionals because they always want to put their opinion in the news. And the European journalists would say, well, the American journalists aren't really professionals because they're so constrained by these ideas of objectivity and balance, which goes along with that, that they don't tell readers what they really think, and they're not honest in that sense. And so they would give the example of typical story that journalists would be covering in those days, that there would be a massacre right that was carried out by the army of El Salvador, which the US was supporting. And the journalists would all go out and they'd interview peasants, and they, you know, look for the graves and so on. And the Europeans would write a strong story that says, you know, a massacre happened here. And the American journalist would write a story that said, well, peasants claim that there was a massacre, but, you know, the army of El Salvador and the US Embassy says there was not right, and then they wouldn't draw their conclusion. So that kind of consequence of the objectivity Norm has always been a subject of debate, and that's kind of intensified in in recent years and then meanwhile. So within the profession of journalism, there's more and more debate about it. Meanwhile, of course, the other thing that's happened is that new forms of journalism have evolved that are absolutely not committed to objectivity, even though I would say one of the things about the US is that the objectivity norm is deep enough in the culture that often everybody pretends that they are objective. It's just the others that aren't right. So Fox News, when it first started out, had the slogan, fair and balanced, right? Which is absolutely not what Fox News is right. Fox News is its whole business model is based around the idea that you're targeting an audience based on political identity. And it has a very strong political identity, but it likes to justify itself by saying, everybody else is biased, except for us, we're objective.

Mariam Kourabi

You brought up these very complex, emotionally charged issues, which is where we're seeing that political polarization. Do you think traditional norms of objectivity can handle these complex issues, like in the research you talk about COVID, the racial justice protests, and then that super contentious election in 2020, and so is the objectivity norm possible when we are talking about topics like this?

Daniel Hallin

Well, you know, I think journalists, even today recognize that objectivity in the sort of literal sense of not having a point of view is not possible, right? And it never was, even when, you know, even when there, there wasn't that kind of political division and polarization. I mean, in some ways it was even worse then, because, like, people weren't aware of what were the biases that were built into their into their reporting. But you know, I think that one of the interesting things here is that the the there are elements of that that are built into the objectivity norm that probably are still viable and journalists are trying to sort out, you know, like, what parts of it work and what parts of it don't mean. You know, if you look at some of the, some of the critiques of the objectivity norm, if you look at them carefully, a lot of them are actually they're accepting a lot of it, right? They're accepting the idea that that you you have to be fair and

respectful of other points of view. And you know, of course, you're going to include multiple points of view in a story. So you're not going to be purely partisan, but they're advocating for greater consciousness about the stances that that you take right, greater openness about the or, let's say the term people often use a positionality, right, like, where are you coming from? Who are you in reporting this story? But they're not actually arguing for abandoning these are people within professional journalism who are debating about it, for abandoning everything about the objectivity norm.

Mariam Kourabi

You bring out the term media bias, which is a term that is used quite frequently and very often nowadays in the research, you highlight that Fox News is perceived as a highly partisan outlet. Now this characteristic of it isn't fully captured by the JRP data that studies its website, and that's mainly because it focuses on new stories and it excludes opinion content. How close do you think are those current methods of qualitative analysis or to understanding the nuances of media bias?

Daniel Hallin

Yeah, so the thing that I was that I was talking about here, was the fact that, you know, the JRP method for quantitative analysis has these measures of interventionism, which is supposed to reflect the presence of the journalist voice in the news. And there, we often assume that this should measure bias, right in in some sense. But what turned out in my data that foxnews.com which was part of our sample, had a very low level of this interventionist variable, so the voice of the journalist was not very present in the news. Now there's a couple of issues about how you interpret that number one of them is that it's part of the JRP methodology that we don't, we don't code opinion. We only code news, right? So right away, that excludes a lot of What's distinctive about Fox News, because it is, above all, an opinion medium, right? So this is partly why we didn't actually code Fox television in the in the study, because Fox Television has some programs that are sort of straight news programs, but the heart of it is really the opinion shows, right? So instead, we coded the fox website, right? Fox news.com which is more. More newsy, and so it fits better. We still had to. There's still a lot of opinion. There's like, clips of from the opinion shows, video clips that we excluded, but the actual news stories are mostly written in a very straight way, right following a lot of the, you know, really old fashioned routines of objective journalism, in a way, the thing of them is, though, that the selection of the sources and the agenda reflects a very strong political point of view. It's just that the journalist doesn't express that point of view. So and what a lot of these stories would look like actually, is that they would be stories that would just be reporting, what some conservative commentators said on Fox News, right? So they were written in a very straight way, but they were reporting. What some conservative commentator said.

Mariam Kourabi

Is that something that you saw in the research was that a trend where perhaps the website didn't voice the same level of interventionism as the actual news stream?

Daniel Hallin

It's something that I started as I was going along coding. It was kind of new to me, because I don't really, I'm not a part of the normal audience of Fox News, right? So I had never read Fox's website so commonly. And as I was going through it, I was thinking, Okay, well, you know, this is pretty interesting. I can tell that this is going to turn out very low on interventionism, because this is, like a super passive form of journalism that we're talking about here. And, you know, so Fox News is not a writerly medium, right? It's not a journalist centered medium, and that's not surprising to me. In fact, there's some tendency for that to be true of right wing media in a lot of parts of the world, you know, like British newspapers or something like that. I think that in a left wing medium, usually the journalist has more scope for their own analysis, that their own, some of their own expression to come out in the story, than in a more conservative medium.

Mariam Kourabi

There's a lot changing in the US media system and in the research, you use the liberal media model, and you break down those dramatic changes that we are seeing in the system. Can you tell me a little bit about the domains that you look at, and how do they explain the current state of the media in the US?

Daniel Hallin

Yeah, well, in comparing media systems, the book I wrote with Paolo Mancini, there are four domains that we use for comparison, which are the role of the state, journalistic professionalism, political parallelism, which is the extent to which the media reflect political divisions and have political alliances. You know, are affected by political logics, and then finally, the structure of the media markets. And most of those things have changed quite a bit. So, you know, there's some I was particularly in the presentation at the in the pre conference. I was referring to an article by Efrat najustai, who who makes an argument that the the liberal US media system, if you look at those dimensions, has been transformed into into something that's quite different, that she refers to as a as a polarized liberal system. And it's true that it's across most of those dimensions. It has changed. The one dimension where I'd say has not changed is the role of the state. The role of the state is, you know, so the liberal system is characterized by dominance of commercial media and not a strong role of the state, you know, in terms of intervention in media markets, regulation, providing public service, broadcasting and so on. And that's as true as ever in the in the US, maybe even more. So, you know, over the last 30 years, with deregulation of broadcasting and so on. But on the other, across the other dimensions, yeah, it's changed. So, you know, the structure of media markets has changed a lot with fragmentation of those media markets, right? So whereas you used to have these big, centralized media, you know, the three the three networks, and in the US, case, one dominant newspaper in each market, now you have this incredible fragmentation of the media markets. And media markets are also much weaker economically, right? The sort of the dominant media are are much weaker in terms of professionalization. You know, I think that so the liberal system is characterized by a very high level of. Professionalization generally. And I think you can make an argument that the level of professionalization has gone down, that it probably peaked around in the 1980s or something like that. And it's gone down because media are weaker economically, for one thing. So, you know, the journalists don't have this really strong position,

you know, based on the good job market and so on, to kind of insist on their autonomy. But it's also weakened because the, you know, the professional journalists who are most strong in the legacy media, they're they now have to compete with all of these other kinds of communicators, and, you know, who operate by different logic. So there's not the kind of, not the same consensus about the professional ethics of journalism that there was before, and there are all these competing models, right? And then in terms but the biggest changes in terms of political parallelism, right? So where I mean the liberal system is in the form that it took in the US, in the period that we cover in our book, it was characterized by a very low level of political parallelism, right? In the sense that you have all of these media that are basically non aligned, or you could also say they're centrist media, I think, is probably a more accurate way to say it. And today now we have the RE emergence of partisan media, and we have lots of media that have different political orientations, right, and that target audiences by political identity or other kinds of identity, and we do have now pretty strong patterns where media use by audiences, right is varies by their politics. People with different political orientations follow different media, and that's something it's a big change from the past.

Mariam Kourabi

You highlight one marker that changed the practice of journalism was the decision by some legacy outlets to begin using the term lie, particularly started by the New York Times in 2017 I believe you reference when examining political figures. What do you think are some of the driving factors or stressors that led journalism to take that pivotal step and start embedding such a heavy word in their in their work.

Daniel Hallin

Yeah, I mean, I actually make the argument in in my chapter that that that practice is not actually a particularly dramatic break from either professionalism. I think that it is an evolution of professional norms, not a break from them, nor is it particularly a step in the direction of partisanship. But what is straining is the fact that we are in a situation in the United States now where there's this kind of an asymmetry in the in politics, right, where lies are no no longer something that you can assume that is kind of done equally by both parties, but There is one party that for which that is a sort of standard operating procedure, and that doesn't abide by the norms that you know you you don't, you don't do this in politics, and so that that's a big strain on the media. But you know, I think that well, and what pushed the journalists to take that step was the fact that that you know this was like a really unprecedented thing, that you had a major political leader who would routinely lie about things that you know are just verifiable facts, right where it's not like a mean politicians often exaggerate and spin and so on, and that's sort of normal, but usually this involves things that where it's not, it's not just it's something that can't be clearly verified right, where there's not a clear right or wrong answer. The particular case where the New York Times used the term for the first time, if I remember it right, was the story where, I think there were two, there were two particular stories. One of them was Trump's claim that he had won the popular vote in 2016 and the other one was the claim that his that the crowds at his inauguration were the biggest ever, right? And these are things that you know, they're just matters of of fact that are easily verifiable, and the fact that he would say these things and then persist in claiming that that this was true, even even when he's called out on it. And. And people

say, No, it's clearly not that pressed the journalist to, you know, go, go much further. But this is part of a trend that started, you know, I mentioned that in the early days of objectivity, there was this very narrow definition of it. And this is a trend that started in the 1960s or so. People started debating this issue in the 1950s at the time of the McCarthy era, you know? And McCarthy's lies, right? And gradually, journalists moved in the direction of being more assertive and and I think that was a part of the increase in professionalization that this is a continuation of.

Mariam Kourabi

I want to know how your research was relevant, or is relevant, in terms of the criticism of the media in this most recent US election, which almost felt like the entire world was really tuned into not just the US.

Daniel Hallin

Well, which criticism of the media. Are you thinking about?

Mariam Kourabi

I think a piece of criticism that was really echoed was that it felt like journalists had to be critical and harsh on both presidential candidates the same way. And so if a certain outlet was critical of Mr. Trump's performance during the debate, they had to be just as critical and just as stuff on Miss Harris's performance during that debate, probably an effort to not be called bias. They wanted to be tough on both almost the same. And I'm not sure if that goal was achieved. It looked like they were called biased regardless, right?

Daniel Hallin

So this is what people refer to as false balance, right? And yes, I think it's true that, that you know so that the study, that the JRP study, went through 2020, right? And this was a period when the journalists moved to, particularly in the period with with COVID and with Trump's effort to overturn the election results, I think the journalists became more aggressive in in certain ways, and and accusations of partisanship were certainly strong in in that period. And I do think that when Trump left office, the a lot of the legacy media, and particularly like the owners and the top executives were really, really wanted to get back to normalcy, right, and to move away from any and, you know, some of the media like CNN had really moved much more strongly in the direction of being partisan media. And it's very documented that the, you know, ownership of CNN wanted to move away from that and to move back more toward the center. And so, yes, I think that there was a strong push within the legacy media to start saying, let's go back to just normal balance, right? And I think there was a strong effort to show that they were going to be just as tough on Biden as they ever were on on Trump right. And yes, I think that that did carry over into the current election campaign, and very often media were criticized for normalizing Trump right for and for being overly negative toward Harris as a, you know, as a way of showing that they were not partisan. Now, you know, I think that I wouldn't go too far. I think the idea that if the mainstream media had only been really tough on Trump, he wouldn't have won, I think it's nonsense. It's not it's not reality. They don't have that power. And and I think that there's a there are actual limits, you know, to what it would be an illusion to imagine that if only journalists were like free to tell the real truth, and everything would be okay, because it's not, I mean, and that's

kind of not how institutions work in in the real world there, the structure of power is also always going to influence them. They're never going to be sort of outside of it.

Mariam Kourabi

Was there a piece of criticism that you saw come up this election that perhaps was a little bit surprising or something that we hadn't seen in previous elections?

Daniel Hallin

Well, no, not really. I mean, I think that this, this argument about the false balance argument, has been around for a long, long time.

Mariam Kourabi

The US media system is experiencing, and I quote, a complex period of change and continuity, there's new journalistic subcultures emerging alongside, as you highlighted, the traditional forms of journalism. Journalists have a huge task and challenge ahead with this. But what about consumers of the news?

Daniel Hallin

Yeah, so I think. That for audiences, there is an incredible array of choices, right? And the flood of information that comes at them is a big challenge. I mean, it used to be that you had, you know, these limited sources of information, and everybody trusted them, and it was simple, and in that sense, unless you happen to be one of those people who was really, you know, kind of outside of the center that dominated that right? And today, there's so many choices, and I think it's very difficult for consumers to judge which ones are reliable and which ones aren't. And, you know, I think that it's all of this is exacerbated by problems. It's not just a problem of media, but it's also a problem of political leadership, right? So, because it used to be that there were, you know, this, as we talk about the kind of consensus on norms and journalism, there used to be much more consensus on norms in politics, right? And this is partly what I was saying about, you know, Trump lying like that. I mean, it used to be that if you told lies like that, you would get called out, and you couldn't count on like your camp to rally around you and claim that it's really true when you're telling an obvious lie like that. And so that this, and so I think that the problem for consumers of information is not only a media problem, but it's also a problem of politics and culture more generally, it's, you know, it's kind of a move in the direction of communication becoming more and more instrumental, right? So you have the idea that there's not really a norms of any norms in communication. It's war, right? And whatever tactic you can use to for your side to win is okay, and so that creates an information environment that's very difficult for for consumers and for journalists, the upcoming journalists.

Mariam Kourabi

The next generation of journalists that are to cover the next few elections. What's the lesson that they can take from your research to hone in with their work?

Daniel Hallin

Well, yeah, I mean, that's, I mean, it's an interesting question. What advice to give journalists? I

mean, you know, I think that they they should be as honest as possible with their audiences, right? And try not to be influenced by the political pressures on them, that's for sure. But I also, you know, as I say, I kind of, I recognize that that's not always going to be possible. They're not always going to be allowed to do that, you know, by their bosses. And I think that they have to, as everybody in these kind of difficult times, they have to kind of take a historical perspective on it and keep fighting for the, you know the professional norms and principles that they believe in, and understand that it you know, there may be periods when it's difficult to put them into practice, and then there may be other periods when things turn around and, you know, like The polarization diminishes and and so on, the degree of polarization, you know, it's, it makes it very difficult for journalists. There's, there's no question about that, and it's a historical fact of a particular conjuncture in in our history that journalists just have to live with you know, and and staff does.

Mariam Kourabi

Everybody does, they'll continue to be evolving challenges in journalism as things change, technologically, politically and socially. Professor, thank you so much for joining me today to talk about your research. I really appreciate it.

Daniel Hallin

Okay. Thank you. Bye.