



Ted Koppel's Absurd Lament Over Media Bias

The latest outburst from a doyen of what's deservingly termed "lamestream media" is further proof of the senescence of "big three" television news. In fact, there was a strange sense of a circling of the wagons as Ted Koppel took to the pages of the Washington Post in a November 14 editorial. Koppel engaged in public handwringing over the absence of "objectivity" from cable news broadcasts — as if the memory of decades of liberal bias at ABC News and the Post would be washed away by one more invocation of the tired myth of unbiased journalism.



According to Koppel:

To witness Keith Olbermann — the most opinionated among MSNBC's left-leaning, Fox-baiting, money-generating hosts — suspended even briefly last week for making financial contributions to Democratic political candidates seemed like a whimsical, arcane holdover from a long-gone era of television journalism, when the networks considered the collection and dissemination of substantive and unbiased news to be a public trust.

Back then, a policy against political contributions would have aimed to avoid even the appearance of partisanship.

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It is hard to take Koppel's claims seriously. Consider the example of one of the icons of that "long-gone era": Walter Cronkite. [According to FBI documents released earlier this year](#) in response to a Freedom of Information Act request, Cronkite was far from "avoiding even the appearance of partisanship" when it came to anti-Vietnam War protests:

Legendary CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite allegedly collaborated with anti-Vietnam War activists in the 1960s, going so far as to offer advice on how to raise the public profile of protests and even pledging CBS News resources to help pull off events, according to FBI documents obtained by Yahoo! News.

The documents, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, say that in November 1969, Cronkite encouraged students at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., to invite Maine Sen. Edmund Muskie to address a protest they were planning near Cape Kennedy (now known as Cape Canaveral). Cronkite told the group's leader that Muskie would be nearby for a fundraiser on the day of the protest, and said that "CBS would rent [a] helicopter to take Muskie to and from site of rally," according to the documents.

Far from the alleged incident being an isolated one, media monitoring organizations have tracked the biases that have long been rampant. Scott Whitlock of the Media Research Center has also documented that Koppel's own record is far from avoiding "even the appearance of partisanship." As Whitlock wrote in a recent [BiasAlert](#):



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Yet, as the Media Research Center has documented through the years, Koppel was hardly an example of journalistic objectivity. In addition to slamming Rush Limbaugh for supposedly disparaging African Americans and being "not kind," he enthused in 2000 that Al Gore was "perhaps the most active Vice President in American history." ...

A few more examples:

On June 20, 1991, *Nightline* devoted a one-hour special resurrecting the October Surprise myth that Ronald Reagan's operatives delayed the release of American hostages in Iran. When congressional investigations again proved the theory a farce, a *Nightline* spokeswoman told us: "That is not a broadcast for *Nightline*. That's a headline. That's not a half-hour show."

On January 28, 1994, Koppel began an interview with Oliver North: "Mr. North is tough, smart, and extremely hard-working.... He is also an accomplished liar and a shameless self-promoter." Koppel never described Clinton this way, complaining instead on August 16, 1994 that "he is receiving little or no credit for his accomplishments."

So, when Koppel proclaims, "The need for clear, objective reporting in a world of rising religious fundamentalism, economic interdependence and global ecological problems is probably greater than it has ever been," perhaps he should be taken with a grain of salt.

Indeed. Media bias has been an ongoing fact of modern life since at least the days of "yellow journalism," which may claim at least partial credit for the [Spanish-American War](#). On any issue that is controversial enough to be important, readers and viewers must always be prepared to do their own research, and not simply assume that they can rely on what is served up for them by the press.

Astoundingly, Koppel actually claims, "The commercial success of both Fox News and MSNBC is a source of nonpartisan sadness for me." Why? It is absurd to turn any lack of profitability on the part of the old media into an assertion of virtue. Fox and MSNBC appeal to particular markets. There are people who desire to hear what each outlet has to say. In the main, their viewers are watching those networks because they identify with their underlying philosophies; it is the same motivation which draws individuals to various magazines, books, and websites.

But Koppel's odd op-ed seemed to take a darker turn when he elected to attack the freedom of those who choose to opt-out of "big three" news:

And so, among the many benefits we have come to believe the founding fathers intended for us, the latest is news we can choose. Beginning, perhaps, from the reasonable perspective that absolute objectivity is unattainable, Fox News and MSNBC no longer even attempt it. They show us the world not as it is, but as partisans (and loyal viewers) at either end of the political spectrum would like it to be.

So, Americans are to believe that they do not have a right to listen to people with whom they agree? Good heavens. But then, Koppel seems to have harbored a studied disinterest in allowing a variety of expression on the airwaves for some time. [As he declared in a 1987 speech at Duke University](#):

Because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human being trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In the place of Truth we have discovered facts; for moral absolutes we have substituted moral ambiguity. We now communicate with everyone and say absolutely nothing. We have reconstructed the Tower of Babel and it is a television antenna. A thousand voices producing a daily parody of democracy; in which everyone's



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opinion is afforded equal weight, regardless of substance or merit. Indeed, it can even be argued that opinions of real weight tend to sink with barely a trace of television's ocean banalities.

One might suppose that if the United States were burdened with an annual television license fee like the poor inhabitants of the United Kingdom, we could be treated to the likes of the extremely biased BBC — Koppel's current employer.

One may readily assent to part of Koppel's 1987 assertion: Humanity needs the Truth, and human beings need moral absolutes. But the media opted out of such pursuits long before the advent of Fox News and MSNBC — as Koppel's own words testify. At best, the news media provide a snapshot of a small range of daily events, viewed through the lenses of writers and editors. This is an inherent limitation of the entire journalistic endeavor, and seems less than honest to attribute that fundamental fact to some recent development.

Photo of Ted Koppel: AP Images



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