

**Scene on Radio: The News**  
**Episode 3: About That Liberal Media**  
**Transcript**

**Sound:** Cafe hubbub

**John Biewen:** We opened the last episode here, at the Corner Cafe in Elizabethtown, North Carolina. But I have to tell you about one more thing that happened that morning.

**John Biewen, in audio:** Can I just ask sort of whoever wants to...

**John Biewen:** When I asked where they get their national news, the men who spoke up said they watch TV networks that they see as fair to President Trump and Republicans.

**David Settlemeyer:** I don't watch a lot of news, but what I watch, I watch NewsMax or Fox, and I feel like it's not as politically leaning.

**Ray Cross:** Don't believe a thing coming out, I mean, they're so, so biased and telling the untruths. But I'm, I essentially watch Fox.

**John Biewen:** I ask, is everyone here on the same page politically? Ray Cross, the retired dentist, says...

**Ray Cross:** The liberals quit coming. No. (Laughs)

**John Biewen:** The man sitting straight across from me hasn't said much. His name is Robin Summerlin. He's balding with a gray beard and mustache. As he gets up to leave...

**Robin Summerlin:** I'm gonna go to work.

**John Biewen:** ...Summerlin writes something on a small piece of paper and casually hands it to me. It's his name and a phone number. I want to know what's up, but we make eye contact and I decide not to ask. I slip the paper in my pocket.

Music

**David Settlemeier:** Take care, buddy.

**Robin Summerlin:** See y'all.

**John Biewen:** When I get home I call the number, and days later Summerlin and I meet at the small business he owns on the edge of Elizabethtown.

**John Biewen, in interview:** So, where are we, Robin?

**Robin Summerlin:** We're at the, uh, Front Porch Party Rental warehouse. This is where we're storing our inventory of tents, tables, chairs, and linens...

**John Biewen:** Robin's been in the party rental business for 25 years. He's in his late sixties. I ask him about what happened at the diner.

**John Biewen, in interview:** Sounds like you had a little something more you wanted to say to me. Tell me about that.

**Robin Summerlin:** Absolutely. I mean, seriously I had to go, but I also had to go because my friend right beside me just piped right in with 'I watch Fox News and Newsmax all the time.' I mean, I don't even think I would know how to find Newsmax. I might listen to Fox News twenty minutes here and twenty minutes there a week, uh, just to see what they're saying. My friends that we eat breakfast with all the time consider me a liberal, which I don't. I am to the left of them. But I consider myself in the middle. I am completely opposed to extremism in either direction. I am a CNN person. CNN, I believe, is calling him out correctly on almost everything.

**John Biewen:** "Him" being Donald Trump.

**Robin Summerlin:** I'm a complete anti-Trumper. I despise him. I think he is terrible for our country.

**John Biewen:** Summerlin says he voted for Kamala Harris, and hasn't voted for any Republican for thirty years. I ask him why he was eager to say all this publicly, for this podcast, but not in front of his friends.

**Robin Summerlin:** Um, well, we don't actually talk about politics much at breakfast, which is fine with me. You know, I mean, it's a good subject to stay away from. I know how they feel.

**John Biewen:** Near the end of our conversation, Robin says he appreciates that we're taking a look at the news media.

**Robin Summerlin:** I value good journalism. It's important to me, I think it's important to the country. I want somebody to talk truth to power. I want there to be questioning and fact checking and calling people out. I'm a little bit of a Stephen Colbert fan. He calls people out. Jimmy Kimmel is a tremendous anti-Trumper. Golly. He works him over.

Music

**John Biewen:** Hey, Chenj.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Hey John. Man, I just love hearing this. Because it's so interesting to me what Robin says about journalism, especially when he starts talking that talk about, you know, the job of journalism is to "call people out" and talk "truth to power." 'Cause that's definitely a big part of what I think is important. But then his first examples are late night comedians.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, which is very interesting. I suspect that has something to do with the fact that, how bluntly they can speak, right?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Right.

**John Biewen:** But yeah, then he also talks about a more traditional cable news organization, CNN, which he sees as accurate and fair.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yes. And you know, when I hear you say those words, and y'all started talking about that, I just feel something in my chest. Because anytime we start to have this conversation, about what's accurate and fair, I feel like we're stepping into a boiling hot issue.

Music

**John Biewen:** Yes we are. This is where, here in Episode 3, where we get into the whole question of bias in the media.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** That's the word. Bias. It's complicated, you know, and like, by complicated I mean it's just a mess.

**John Biewen:** You mean the debate is a mess, or the state of affairs in the media is a mess?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** You already know, man. Both.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, yeah.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** As we've said, a lot of people are unhappy with the news media and they feel like something's terribly wrong with it. And for a lot of people, so-called bias is the big issue. But I think we should ask ourselves, what are the problems we're *not* paying attention to when we're busy yelling about bias? But that's a question for another episode. For now, we've got to interrogate bias because people's ideas and beliefs about it really affect how they take in the news and how they see the world. So the stakes are huge.

**John Biewen:** Somebody like Robin Summerlin really cares about good journalism that he considers factual. But we've also got vast numbers of people who just write off some of the most rigorous and professional journalism being done in the country. And that's not to say that it's perfect, but millions of people are essentially just sticking their fingers in their ears and yelling "fake news, fake news." Right? "If those lying liars in the media are saying it, it can't be true."

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** I mean, that's what the accusation of bias really does. And you know, I think that's really a shame. It reminds me of something that James Baldwin said, which is, and I quote here: "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced." And for me, that means, like, the work of democracy or improving the world, that means facing the news – *especially* when it's bad news. But this accusation of bias gives people permission to ignore the information that they really need to be hearing, especially if they're gonna make a real effort to, you know, run our society and solve all these problems that are in front of us.

**John Biewen:** So, we're gonna take a hard look at the bias thing and try to tease it apart. While we're at it, we might start to shed light on other structural problems that help to explain why our news media lets us down.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, let's talk about bias. And there's lots of scholarship, actually, around these questions.

**John Biewen:** And you know that stuff because you are, you got the PhD in critical media studies. And you're a working journalist and podcast creator.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, but I gotta say I haven't been working at the working journalist part of it as long as you have.

**John Biewen:** You calling me old?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** (Laughs,) Naw, naw.

**John Biewen:** Come on.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Maybe experienced. (Laughs)

**John Biewen:** Experienced. Seasoned. Yeah, Ronald Reagan was president when I stumbled out of college into a job as a cub public radio reporter. And I spent two or three decades in newsrooms and producing stuff for the public radio system.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** And then you made the move to become a podcaster and you started Scene on Radio. I don't think we ever talked about why.

**John Biewen:** A big part of it was, I wanted to break out of certain constraints that come with working in a conventional news organization. And I couldn't have said it this way at the time, but I think, you know, there was an uncomfortable tension that I felt between two things you're supposed to do as a journalist. On one hand, you're supposed to be unbiased, balanced, neutral – pick the word you like. And, at the same time, you're supposed to report what's true as best you can.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Mmm. Can you give me an example of a moment when you felt that tension?

**John Biewen:** Well, some of it, to be fair, was just, you know, time and format limitations. There was no space on broadcast public radio shows to do the kind of thing we do here. I couldn't do an 8- or 10- or 14-part series on some huge issue.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** No, you get six minutes.

**John Biewen:** Or less.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** If you're lucky. (Laughs)

**John Biewen:** But it would also be hard to get the go-ahead to do reporting that takes what would be considered a provocative position on something important. Well, that ventures into the Sphere of Deviance. Maybe folks will remember when we heard about Hallin's Spheres back in Season 4.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Ah yes, the Sphere of Deviance. So this refers to ideas that are considered too offensive or too radical to be taken seriously, at least according to the norms of mainstream journalism in a given time and place. So, for example, you did a season exploring the idea that capitalism is not working well for most folks on the planet, and has baked into it the exploitation of working people and the natural world.

**John Biewen:** And, by the way, that our commitment to it is driving us toward climate catastrophe.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** So you and your collaborators suggested, maybe we should consider other kinds of economic models that might work better? And to me, that's a reasonable premise and a fair question if you look around at the world and, and for that matter, if you look at some public opinion surveys on how people feel about our current economic system. I mean, that project was grounded in facts that are right in front of our faces – things we shouldn't be afraid to talk about.

**John Biewen:** Well, I think so. But in the mainstream media generally, I think it's fair to say that people would flinch at putting out something like that.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** I mean, if you really think about it, it's actually weird that there's a conflict between, on the one hand, asking questions and reporting the truth, and on the other, these conventions of journalistic "objectivity," which too often just gets translated to mean neutrality. And I think that's maybe a clue that something's really off in this conversation we have about journalistic bias.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, and the truth is, after all these years, as old as I am, I'm still kind of sorting through the nuances of this stuff and trying to get clear about it.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** In surveys, more than three-quarters of Americans say the mainstream media are biased.

**John Biewen:** That would include most of Robin Summerlin's friends.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** And this is another one of those asymmetries in U.S. politics, because Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to say the media is biased against their side.

**John Biewen:** Even some Democrats and liberals agree the media has a left-leaning bias. But ... is it true?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** I mean, maybe there are ways in which that claim is accurate. And there are also ways in which it's totally wrong.

Theme music

**John Biewen:** From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 8: The News. I'm John Biewen. That was Chenjerai Kumanyika, my co-host for this season. He's a journalism professor at NYU, and a podcaster and organizer. He'll be back later to help make sense of my reporting on this prickly subject.

**Spiro Agnew, Des Moines speech:** Tonight I want to discuss the importance of the television medium to the American people.

**John Biewen:** That is Spiro Agnew, the vice president of the United States, giving a speech in 1969.

**Spiro Agnew:** No nation depends more on the intelligent judgment of its citizens, and no medium has a more profound influence over public opinion...

**John Biewen:** Most Americans have heard a steady drumbeat from Republicans and conservatives for as long as we can remember, insisting the news media have a pronounced liberal bias. Media historians say Spiro Agnew was an important pioneer of this tradition. And this speech, in Des Moines, Iowa, was a kind of Pearl Harbor moment, a declaration of that long war. Agnew aimed his attack at the three major TV networks – ABC, CBS, and NBC.

Music

**Spiro Agnew:** For millions of Americans, the networks are the sole source of national and world news.

**John Biewen:** That was true in '69 – before cable TV was widely available, long before the Web became a thing. Even PBS and NPR didn't go on the air until 1970. Television had already overtaken newspapers as the most popular source of news for Americans, and on TV, the big three networks were it. Their evening news broadcasts were the fires that Americans

gathered around to learn about the day. The shows reported roughly the same things in roughly the same way.

**Walter Cronkite, 1981:** And that's the way it is – Friday. March 6th...

**John Biewen** To make his point that they were hostile to Republicans, Vice President Agnew highlighted the networks' coverage of a speech to the nation that his boss, President Nixon, gave just the week before, in which Nixon was trying to get the country on board with his Vietnam War policy.

**Spiro Agnew:** When the President completed his address -- an address, incidentally, that he spent weeks in the preparation of -- his words and policies were subjected to instant analysis and querulous criticism. The audience of 70 million Americans gathered to hear the President of the United States was inherited by a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he had to say.

**John Biewen:** Agnew then makes a move that will sound familiar. He asks, who are these people who wield this tremendous power, on screen and behind the scenes at the networks? He calls them "these men," which of course they were at the time.

**Spiro Agnew:** We do know that, to a man, these commentators and producers live and work in the geographical and intellectual confines of Washington D.C. or New York City. ... We can deduce that these men read the same newspapers. They draw their political and social views from the same sources. Worse, they talk constantly to one another, thereby providing artificial reinforcement to their shared viewpoints. (Audience laughter, applause)

**John Biewen:** He goes on to call the people shaping the TV news a "tiny enclosed fraternity of privileged men elected by no one."

**Spiro Agnew:** The views of a majority of this fraternity do not, and I repeat, *not* represent the views of America. (Loud applause)

Music

**John Biewen:** This wasn't just another complaint about unfriendly news coverage. Politicians from every party have voiced those at times. This was the sitting vice president launching a frontal attack on the legitimacy of the most powerful news organizations in the country. Lots of other people, overwhelmingly on the right, have followed in Agnew's footsteps ever since.

**Newt Gingrich, 1994:** Now I recognize, sadly, that the Washington press corps is all too often the Praetorian Guard of the left, but... (applause)

**Sarah Huckabee Sanders, White House press briefing, June 29, 2017:** The media's focus on priorities, they don't line up with the rest of America...

**Laura Ingraham, "The Ingraham Angle," Fox News, July 25:** No wonder people hate the media. Now at this point, neither the Democrats nor the press have a shred of cred....

**JD Vance, Fox and Friends, April 3, 2025:** No one doubts, not even the crazy left-wing media criticize the idea that we can deport this person...

Music

**John Biewen:** So, what about this claim of a liberal news media? First, we have to get clear on who and what we're talking about. Which media? There's general agreement about the meaning of the phrase, "mainstream" media today: The leading national newspapers: New York Times, Washington Post, Wall St. Journal. The big three broadcast TV networks that Spiro Agnew took to task. The major cable news networks – Fox, CNN, and MS Now, formerly known as MSNBC. Some would include PBS and NPR – I would. But fewer and fewer people get their news from these sources. That's why you increasingly hear them called the "legacy media" – which carries an insult. These outlets *used to be* dominant.

**Richard Fletcher, Reuters Institute:** So, let's dive in. So a key theme of this year's report is the growing evidence that traditional media is losing reach, is losing influence to an alternative ecosystem...

**John Biewen:** This is Richard Fletcher of the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford, in July 2025. He's presenting the results of an annual survey that his institute does across dozens of countries, including the United States. The survey found that in 2025, social and video networks – think Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram – for the first time, they passed television as the leading source of news for Americans. Not surprisingly, this is especially true for younger people. Fletcher said the researchers asked people in different age brackets about their main sources of news.

**Richard Fletcher, Reuters Institute:** And when we do this, we see that older people, yes, are still sticking with TV, but younger people are increasingly preferring to access news by social and video networks. So 54% of 18-to-24s say this is their main source of news, up 13 percentage points in just one year. So this is perhaps a sign of things to come.

**John Biewen:** As for print? In 2013, almost half of Americans read a newspaper regularly. In 2025, only 14 percent of us did. So, what about these fast-growing, “new media” sources? Do *they* exhibit liberal bias? In a 2025 study, Media Matters for America, a left-leaning media watchdog group, looked at more than 300 popular online shows – mostly podcasts and video shows that stream on platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and Rumble. Rumble is like YouTube with looser rules and lots of right-wing content.

**Kayla Gogarty:** And then we evaluated if they did in fact talk about news and politics and whether they did so with a right-leaning or left-leaning ideological bent.

**John Biewen:** That's Kayla Gogarty of Media Matters, at a University of Delaware event in July, 2025. She says the researchers used publicly available data to assess the audience size of these various shows.

**Kayla Gogarty:** First and foremost, we found substantial asymmetry, with right-leaning shows having five times as many followers and subscribers across platforms as left leaning shows. As you can see from this chart here, the right-leaning shows are indicated by red...

Music

**John Biewen:** She's describing an infographic that went viral – you might have seen it. Against a white backdrop, there's a bunch of big red circles with names like Joe Rogan, Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson and Charlie Kirk. The red circles are interspersed with some blue ones, most of them much smaller. You may have to zoom in to see the names of the left-leaning shows: The Young Turks, the Breakfast Club, Meidas Touch podcast...

**Kayla Gogarty:** So this means there are more right-leaning popular shows online and that these shows have larger audiences. In fact we found that nine of the ten top shows with the largest followings were right-leaning. Only Trevor Noah's show, which was categorized as left-leaning, even breached the top ten.

**John Biewen:** Add to this that a relentlessly right-wing network, Fox News, is the #1 cable news channel in the country. That conservative media companies like Sinclair Broadcast Group and Salem Media Group own hundreds of local TV and radio stations between them. (Salem carried the Charlie Kirk show.) And that most of the top talk radio hosts are right wingers: Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, Dana Loesch, Hugh Hewitt, and many more.

**Chris Plante, on staticky radio:** All right, uh, we'll look into the New York mayoral race, uh, communists and, uh, the jihadis, the Islamists, you know, the Democrat Party in a nutshell...

**John Biewen:** That's Chris Plante, another popular radio host. I recorded him while driving in the Border Belt. With all this in mind I was tempted to say, well, so much for the claim about a "liberal news media." But not so fast. I talked to this expert, who said, first of all, don't write off the importance of the legacy media.

**Michael Massing:** There's no question that the whole ecosystem of news has shifted. Um, and so, does that mean that these top publications have lost their influence? I think they have not lost their influence.

**John Biewen:** Michael Massing is a longtime writer and former executive editor of the Columbia Journalism Review. He pointed out that most podcasters, Substackers, influencers, talk radio people – I would add cable news channels – are not sending out lots of journalists to do original reporting. Who is?

**Michael Massing:** Publications like the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, I'd put in The Financial Times, obviously not as widely read, but they, and then The Guardian – these are large news gathering operations. And I think that that is the critical thing. I think that they're putting out information that everybody else sort of then either feeds on or amplifies on or criticizes and the like.

**Jon Favreau, Pod Save America, July 18 2025:** All right Dan, here's, the Wall St. Journal story has published – I'm just reading this now for the first time...

**Nicolle Wallace, MSNBC, August 4:** The Washington Post has stunning new details today...

**Tomi Lahren, Fox News:** Well again, I don't know if the New York Times actually produced any real evidence of a so-called drug problem, but again...

**Jen Psaki, MS Now, April 17 2026:** ...and it's an explosive new story in the Atlantic that just posted. It cites dozens of FBI sources...

**John Biewen:** The same goes for the national news that reaches people through their local outlets – TV, radio, and newspapers. A great deal of the actual journalism flows from the legacy media. Massing says another reason to take “old media” seriously is its powerful influence among elites – at least, establishment liberals and centrists. The Times, the Post, the Journal and a few other outlets – the Atlantic and the New Republic: you could argue they *are* “the media” for lots of society's most powerful people, in government, business, education, the arts.

**Michael Massing:** All of these are dependent on these, these top publications for their information and their worldview.

Music

**John Biewen:** I'm persuaded. The “mainstream” media are far less dominant than they used to be, but they still matter. From Spiro Agnew to Donald Trump, those on the right who talk about liberal media bias – or “fake news,” in Trump's case – are usually talking about these influential, legacy news organizations. So, what *are* their biases?

[BREAK]

**John Biewen:** Remember, part of Spiro Agnew’s critique of the TV news networks was that their journalists and producers were almost all city types, living in New York and D.C., who shared a lot of perspectives on the world. Almost 60 years later, my conversations with media experts, including those who lean progressive, suggest Agnew had a point.

**John Biewen, in interview:** Hello. Hey.

**Peter Beinart:** Hi. How are you?

**John Biewen:** I asked Peter Beinart, the writer and professor of Journalism and Political Science at City University of New York: What’s the *best* argument for liberal bias in the legacy media?

**Peter Beinart:** I think the strongest argument for that would not be about coverage of economic policy or foreign policy. It would be that these institutions tend to have people who are of backgrounds that are more secular than most Americans, they’re gonna be more urban, they may be more young, uh, they will have come often out of particular kind of educational institutions. And that may incline them to a set of views about what we think of [as] cultural issues, whether it’s guns or LGBT issues or abortion or, uh, or perhaps even immigration, that would mean that they see those things quite differently than Americans who are more religious, more rural, maybe less likely to be college educated. Um, and so I think that there is a cultural divide there.

**John Biewen:** So, Beinart says, legacy media lean liberal on social questions. But what about other core issues, like the economy and foreign policy? To help make his point, Beinart distinguishes between terms like “liberal,” or “left of center,” and stronger language like “left wing” – never mind “far left”.

**Donald Trump, Pittsburgh rally, 2018:** The far left media has spread terrible lies and stories about the Trump Administration...

**Peter Beinart:** Depends what one means by left wing, you know? I mean, one kind of longstanding or kind of simple way of thinking about what left wing means is that it involves some fundamental critique of capitalism, right? And connected perhaps in foreign policy, a critique of imperialism, right?

**John Biewen:** Peter says you'd be hard pressed to find a sustained critique of capitalism coming from, say, the New York Times, CNN, or the broadcast networks.

**Peter Beinart:** None of those are places that actually regularly platform socialist voices, for instance. Right? I mean...

**John Biewen:** In fact, let's look at some legacy media coverage of a self-described democratic socialist. A truly "left wing" media would celebrate that politician, right? But as left-leaning media watchers pointed out, mainstream coverage of Zohran Mamdani, as a candidate for mayor of New York, was often alarmist or condescending. Before Mamdani won the Democratic primary in the summer of 2025, the New York Times Editorial Board practically pleaded with New Yorkers not to choose him, calling his agenda "uniquely unsuited to the city's challenges." Before the November election, a Washington Post editorial dismissed his ideas, such as free childcare, free buses and a rent freeze, with this line:

**Voiceover, WaPo Editorial Board, Nov 3, 2025:** He suggests rerunning a long list of failed policy experiments more worthy of a late-night bull session at Bowdoin College than a serious political platform.

**John Biewen:** At the same time, the legacy media take it as given that a rising stock market, an always-expanding gross domestic product, and the exuberant buying of stuff by everyone are uncomplicated social goods – never mind the long-term ecological costs.

**Rick Santelli, CNBC, July 30 2025:** On the consumption side, up 1.4, very close to estimates. 1.4 would be the best since the last quarter of '24...

**John Biewen:** Again, Peter Beinart:

**Peter Beinart:** The center of gravity I think is generally of the idea that America, American capitalism is generally a force for good but needs to be managed and regulated in particular kinds of ways, you know? Um, which I think is actually a, a view that's pretty consistent with what a lot of people in positions of, of, you know, in high positions in the economy and in finance would actually say.

**John Biewen:** In a buzzed-about incident in 2017, James Bennett, then editorial page editor at the New York Times, declared to his colleagues in a closed-door meeting that the paper is “pro-capitalism.” A recording of the meeting was leaked to the Huffington Post. Don’t forget, Beinart says, most leading news organizations in the U.S. are themselves profit-making corporations.

**Peter Beinart:** So they're participating in the capitalist system and they themselves are subject, subject to corporate pressure. So to me, it just shows the degradation of language to call these institutions left wing. If you wanted to call The Nation left wing or Jacobin left wing, okay, I think then you could have a reasonable conversation about that, the use of that term.

Music

**John Biewen:** Some might also make a case that this podcast is left wing. We’ll explore that in the next episode. Beinart also mentioned imperialism, the long-running American project of “overseas domination,” as he puts it. People on the left often oppose and criticize the country’s foreign adventures, as do some on the right. What about the legacy media and its approach to international affairs?

**Sound:** People chanting in Arabic...

**Wolf Blitzer, CNN:** Saddam. It means, “He who confronts.” (Sound of explosion)

**John Biewen:** This is from a CNN special report in September 2002, during the leadup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq the following March.

**President George W. Bush, State of the Union, 1/29/02:** States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil.

**Wolf Blitzer, CNN, 9/22:** The case against Saddam, the publicly available evidence, is largely circumstantial, but troubling...

**John Biewen:** Most Americans now see the Iraq War as a mistake, a war not worth fighting – some would say, a foreign policy disaster. The Bush Administration, with Congressional approval, launched the invasion of Iraq based on claims that turned out to be false – that the government of Saddam Hussein was building weapons of mass destruction. Afterwards, some in the mainstream media apologized for their role in backing the administration's claims. Michael Massing wrote a book about the episode. He highlights a New York Times article in September 2002 with the front page headline: "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts." In the piece, reporters Judith Miller and Michael Gordon chose an ominous image, writing that some in the administration worried, quote: "the first sign of a 'smoking gun' may be a mushroom cloud."

**Michael Massing:** It was the idea that, uh, the smoking gun of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction could end up being a nuclear bomb going off. And it got picked up by the Bush administration officials.

**John Biewen:** Condoleezza Rice, Bush's National Security Advisor, was soon quoted by other news organizations using the very image the Times reporters had coined. "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," she said. Massing says the Times and other major outlets downplayed the more skeptical voices within the U.S. government about the claims of an Iraqi nuclear program.

**Michael Massing:** And, uh, the country paid a price. Again, I don't want to overstate, I mean, the Bush administration is obviously the entity that is responsible. But the news media played a supporting role, uh, led by the Times.

**William Youmans:** There's a lot of research going back for decades on these structural biases that happen within U.S. news media coverage on foreign policy. And the predominant theory there is that, uh, the range of debate, of the kind of acceptable views, really track on to what's happening in Congress and among the political elite.

**John Biewen:** William Youmans is a Professor of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. Given this documented tendency by mainstream media to mirror the perspectives of the Washington establishment, Youmans launched a study of his own after the October 7th attack by Hamas against Israelis. The Palestinian militants murdered an estimated 1200 people, most of them Jewish civilians, and took another 250 hostage. Israel, with U.S. support and weaponry, responded with a brutal assault that has killed more than 70-thousand Palestinians and reduced most of Gaza to rubble. In those first weeks, in the fall of 2023, Youmans wondered how legacy media in the U.S. would cover the conflict.

**William Youmans:** And so I started to look at what I thought was the most politically influential shows, the Sunday news talk shows. Although they're not as popular as they used to be, they're not as influential as they used to be, they still attract the largest audiences on television, and they still matter a lot in Washington D.C.

**Theme Music, Margaret Brennan, CBS:** I'm Margaret Brennan in Washington, and this week on Face the Nation: From the Middle East to the Pacific Rim, America's influence is being tested around the world...

**John Biewen:** The Sunday shows. Face the Nation from CBS, NBC's Meet the Press, and This Week on ABC. Youmans also looked at Fox News Sunday, which is on the Fox broadcast network, not the cable channel. Talk about "legacy" media: Especially on the big three networks, these shows scream old school. In fact, Meet the Press went on the air in 1947. It's the longest-running show in TV history. But the programs still draw millions of viewers and are closely tracked by elites, especially in the political class. The guests are mostly Washington insiders.

**Margaret Brennan:** We go now to the Republican Chair of the House Intelligence Committee, Mike Turner. Good to have you back with us, sir...

**Kristen Welker, Meet the Press:** Secretary Blinken, welcome back to Meet the Press.  
**Antony Blinken:** Good morning, Kristin. Good to be with you.

**John Biewen:** In his study of the Sunday shows in the first three months after October 7th, William Youmans gathered data on the 140 guests that appeared across the four programs.

He used content analysis to rank their remarks as pro-Israel, pro-Palestinian, or neutral. For example, he considered comments about Israel's blockade of food, water and medicine as sympathetic to Palestinians, and remarks about Israel's right to defend itself as pro-Israeli. This is Antony Blinken, President Biden's Secretary of State, on Meet the Press, in late October 2023.

**Antony Blinken:** The attack of October 7th, the slaughtering of men, women, children ... no country could accept that. And so Israel has not only the right, as we've said, but the obligation to defend itself. Um, we are not in the business of second guessing what, uh, what they're doing. We are talking to them on a regular...

**John Biewen:** Even in those first weeks of the war, U.S. public opinion was almost evenly divided between those who approved and disapproved of Israel's actions in Gaza – and, by extension, America's pivotal support of its close ally. But Youmans found that across the four networks, only one Palestinian guest appeared, compared with 10 Israelis – including Prime Minister Netanyahu and others in his government. Youmans found most of the guests were American, current and former government officials. At least 60% of those American guests expressed pro-Israel positions. Less than 25-percent made comments sympathetic to Palestinians.

**William Youmans:** The pro-Israel bias that I found, which was overwhelming, was really driven by American guests – American officials, sort of mainstream journalists, uh, and political commentators. And they really were not willing to go off the, uh, the path of US foreign policy. And this is kind of a unique thing, because in a lot of other policy realms, there's really rich debate and there's a wider range of views that are permitted. When it comes to domestic politics or domestic policies there's a lot more room for voice that's critical of the president, for example. But on foreign policy, there just tends to be this rally-around-the-flag dynamic where people are afraid to sort of challenge the dominant foreign policy in Washington.

Music

**John Biewen:** A lot of experts have made this observation: That on international issues, the legacy media are generally more conservative and more in sync with the U.S. government's

policy establishment than they are on domestic issues. When it comes to party politics, of course, some of the major media diverge sharply from one another.

**Sound: Theme music. Sean Hannity, June 30 2025:** And welcome to Hannity, and we begin this Monday night with a Fox News alert. Tonight, President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill is poised to pass...

**John Biewen:** Fox News, launched in 1996 by Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes, was created explicitly as an answer to what they saw as a left-leaning news media. Murdoch's NewsCorp also owns newspapers including the Wall Street Journal, New York Post, and the Sun and the Times in the UK. Murdoch has claimed that, "Fox and our papers are the only faintly conservative voices against the monolithic liberal media." Many have described Fox News as, effectively, a house organ for the Republican Party.

**Sean Hannity:** Now this would be a monumental achievement for the president, and another huge promise made and huge promise kept...

**John Biewen:** MSNBC, now called MS Now, was founded the same year as Fox. It started as a joint venture of NBC and Microsoft, though it's now independent of both. It can be counted on to back the Dems and hammer the GOP.

**Jen Psaki, MSNBC, July 2, 2025:** I want to start tonight with the historic unpopularity of this absolutely vile bill...

Music

**John Biewen:** A central complaint on the right these days is that the legacy media are relentlessly anti-Trump. Not just MS Now but other mainstream outlets – the Times, the Post, CNN and the broadcast TV networks – do plenty of reporting on the negative impact of Trump's policies and on his violations of laws and democratic norms. But isn't that just normal, fact-based, journalism, considering how extreme Trump's actions are by any historical measure? Some critics on the left get just as frustrated by what they see as normalization and both-sidesism – the media's failure to sound the alarm *more* loudly about Trump's autocratic ambitions.

## Music

**John Biewen:** So, Chenjerai. What do you think?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Whew. Yeah man, it's a lot. But you know, let's look at it. First, somebody like Peter Beinart is saying, yeah, the legacy media lean somewhat liberal on some *social issues*. So if you're conservative, White, evangelical Christian, the fact that folks in the mainstream media are basically comfortable with queer folks, or they talk about abortion without condemning it, that might feel alienating, like the people doing that kind of reporting don't reflect your values. And if you look at it like that, I mean, I get it. That's a fair description of the legacy media and why some folks complain about a "liberal" bias. But if we're going to say that what has the liberal bias is "mainstream" journalism "mainstream," then we've got to talk about who's actually out of touch with the "mainstream" in this picture.

**John Biewen:** Yeah, this country was founded on the separation of church and state, and has often celebrated the expansion of civil rights to groups of people that were previously mistreated or marginalized. The U.S. has a long tradition of welcoming immigrants – and yes, of not welcoming immigrants. But the more tolerant or quote-unquote liberal positions on these issues are not necessarily "out of touch" or "un-American" or outside the mainstream, however you want to define that, just because lots of people feel otherwise at the moment.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** And let's be clear about this, too: Even on social issues, the mainstream media are certainly not "left wing." I mean, take trans rights. Try asking some trans folks how they feel about the coverage by the New York Times, for example. I mean, they've done a stream of articles highlighting the purported dangers of medical treatment for trans kids or, you know, coverage of trans girls in sports.

**John Biewen:** The Times seems to give at least equal weight to a more conservative take on the issue that actually goes against the scientific consensus. That kind of coverage is certainly not wildly "left."

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** And I think what we've seen in this episode really shows that the major media are reliably pro-establishment and pro-status quo. But there's something I think

that causes confusion in this whole discussion. And that's the research that shows most journalists are themselves on the liberal side and tend to vote for Democrats.

**John Biewen:** So for example, the Newhouse School of journalism at Syracuse University did a survey in 2022. 36% of journalists said they identified with the Democratic Party compared with only 3.4% who called themselves Republicans. More than half of the journalists in that survey called themselves independents. But between us, Chenj, I bet more of those self-described Independents vote for Democrats than for Republicans.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** See, look at you, admitting it. A woke journalist admits the truth!  
(Laughing)

**John Biewen:** Yes.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** But the thing is, the way journalists vote or whatever is not the smoking gun some folks think it is. First of all, there's no contradiction between saying a journalist votes for Democrats and is pro-establishment. Those things aren't mutually exclusive.

**John Biewen:** (Laughing) Because being a mainline Democrat is the establishment.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** And let's be clear about something else: Being anti-Trump makes you anti-Trump. It doesn't make you part of "the left." Think about MS Now, which for a decade now has pretty much existed to attack Donald Trump 24/7. A bunch of its marquee people were longtime Republicans – like actual GOP politicians and party operatives: Nicolle Wallace, Joe Scarborough, Michael Steele, regular guests like George Conway or Tim Miller.

**John Biewen:** Those people are very much against Trump, which these days is all it takes to get labeled a Radical Left Lunatic by Trump and the right. But that's a long way from being *for*, say, the Green New Deal or a government-run healthcare system.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** I mean, look, you show me a left where Michael Steele and Joe Scarborough are part of the left? (Laughing.) And I mean, you're not gonna see that list of people critiquing American empire. It's the same with all the major networks and

publications. And there isn't some big mystery about why that is. Because there's a lot more at play in this besides a reporter's personal views on the issues.

**John Biewen:** Uh, you're saying there are other incentives at work. So why do journalists with corporate media companies stay within a certain careful range in the opinions that they're gonna take seriously in their work?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** A basic answer is job security. Professional advancement. I mean, somebody like Trump can talk about a "radical left" media all he wants, but if a reporter at the New York Times or CNN actually tried to report sympathetically on radical left ideas on a consistent basis, you and I both know, man, they'd be looking for a new job.

**John Biewen:** There's a legendary exchange from about thirty years ago, uh, on this theme between Noam Chomsky and a BBC reporter, Andrew Marr. I think you know what I'm talking about, Chenj.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Uh. yeah. I assume this was before Chomsky started hanging around with Jeffrey Epstein?

**John Biewen:** Ouch.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Yeah, well, anyway. Marr was interviewing Chomsky about his view of the mainstream media. And Chomsky – like Peter Beinart, who we heard in this episode – said that the major media represent the liberal establishment. But he said those news organizations also set definite boundaries on what can and can't be said – nothing too far left or anti-establishment.

**John Biewen:** In this clip you can hear that Andrew Marr, the BBC guy, is bristling at this.

**Andrew Marr:** I was brought up, like a lot of people, probably post-Watergate film, and so on, to believe journalism was a crusading craft and that there were a lot of disputatious, stropky, difficult people in journalism. And I have to say, I think I know some of them.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Chomsky responds that yeah, most journalists do like that self-image.

**Noam Chomsky:** ... adversarial, we stand up against power, a very self-serving view...

**John Biewen:** But in reality, he says, reporters with the major media have been well trained. Without anyone having to really tell them directly, they know they can only go so far left, and no further.

**Andrew Marr:** How can you, how can you know that I'm self-censoring? How can you know...

**Noam Chomsky:** I don't say you're self-censoring. I'm sure you believe everything you're saying. But what I'm saying is that if you believed something different, you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** So, it might sound like we're saying the fix is in, ideologically, and that's the whole story. Corporations control the media, so the bosses in newsrooms make sure the reporting stays pro-capitalist, pro-empire, and so on. And look, there's something to that! (Chuckles.) But there are also more mundane factors.

**John Biewen:** Like, a lot of people who think about media, and work in the media, will say the biggest "bias" in the business is really not right or left. It's about attracting eyeballs. And, increasingly, media companies want our data, right?

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Especially social media sites, like Facebook, where a lot of people get their news now. They make a lot of their money by selling personal information about you to other companies that want to sell you stuff.

**John Biewen:** And that's why they design their algorithms to keep you scrolling and clicking. The business model is all about getting and holding your attention.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Which works on me, I'm sad to say. (Laughs.)

**John Biewen:** (Laughs.) Oh man, me too, too often. But that need to grab our attention applies to more traditional news sites, too.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** That’s why, for example, the news is constantly jumping from one story to the next, ignoring the most important issues just to chase whatever’s new. I mean, that’s why it’s called the “news,” right?

**John Biewen:** What’s new is more important than what’s important.

Music

**John Biewen:** Somebody did a mind-blowing study a few years ago that I came across when I was doing research for this season. Remember, Queen Elizabeth dies in 2022. And I actually remember, for days afterwards, reading the New York Times, each page with more articles on the queen and her legacy and whatnot. A media blog called *The Column* analyzed major American TV news networks – the broadcast networks and CNN. And, to be clear, this is the *American* media, not the British media. Those networks did more stories on the queen’s death in *two weeks* than they’d done on climate change in the previous *two years*.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** Damn. That is really bad. And yeah, attracting viewers is about profits. But another part of making profits is that news organizations have a big incentive to do journalism as cheaply as possible. That’s why the cable channels don’t do much real reporting anymore. It’s a lot cheaper to put together a panel of talking heads and let them debate the news that’s really reported by the Times and the Post and so on.

Music

**John Biewen:** We’ve covered a lot of ground. And there could be a number of takeaways, but here’s one, I think. We started this season by pointing to those polls that show trust in the media at a historic low. And, you know, I think we agree there are some good reasons for that. But a lot of the loathing and mistrust of the mainstream media, on the grounds that it’s “biased” and therefore unreliable, is out of proportion, let’s say. And honestly, it’s manufactured.

**Chenjerai Kumanyika:** When I hear people say a particular piece of news is biased, I feel like they’re trying to think critically about the news, and that’s good! You know what I’m saying? I think thinking critically about the news is good. But what I tell my students is, use that as a hypothesis. Because if you really want to know what to do that with information, you have

to go further. What does that bias actually do? What are the facts, and then how did the bias affect it? But unfortunately, I feel like that's not mostly what's happening. That drumbeat about the illegitimate, biased, "left-wing" media, ever since Spiro Agnew's time, has had its intended effect. It's been a very successful campaign. It's caused millions of people to just tune out – or go looking for "news" from sources that align with their ideology. Which, if you think about it, it's kind of like looking for news that aligns with your biases.

Music

**John Biewen:** Next time:

**Vanessa Otero:** So the terminology that you all used in the episode – "patriarchy," "white supremacy," uh, "intersectionality," "male dominance" – these are terms that folks on the left use a lot more than folks on the right.

**John Biewen:** We turn the lens on ourselves. How about Scene on Radio? How reliable, and how biased, are we?

Credits:

The News was created and produced by me, John Biewen, with story editor Diane Hodson and co-host Chenjerai Kumanyika. Assistant producer, Arlene Arevalo. Fact checking by Anna Pujol Mazzini. Music by Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band, Michelle Osis, Lili Haydn, Alex Weston, James Nathan Jones, and Jason Hill. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. We post transcripts for each episode at our website, [sceneonradio.org](http://sceneonradio.org). The show is distributed by PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.