

**Scene on Radio: The News
Episode 4: What About Us
Transcript**

John Biewen, in interview: Wait a second, I gotta turn my camera on too.

Vanessa Otero: There we – yeah. Hi!

John Biewen, in interview: Here we are.

Vanessa Otero: Here we are. (Laughs)

John Biewen: I met Vanessa Otero on a video call ... but by then I'd been in touch with her staff for weeks.

Vanessa Otero: Yeah. I'm the founder and CEO of Ad Fontes Media.

John Biewen, in interview: Ad Fontes with a soft s, is that how you say it?

Vanessa Otero: Yes. It's Latin for "to the fountain," uh, or figuratively, to the source.

John Biewen: Otero is a former patent lawyer based in Colorado ... who decided in 2018 to launch a business that rates news and information outlets. She says the company's mission is to help people navigate this rapidly changing news landscape.

Vanessa Otero: There are so many different news sources out there, news and information sources, you know, tens of thousands of them. And that was not the case ten years ago, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago. We're in this stage where there's just this influx of information and we haven't quite caught up as a society in how to process it as individuals.

Music

John Biewen: Chenj. Let's just dive in, huh? As you heard, we went to the source.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. The source. In Latin! (Laughing.)

John Biewen: That makes it sound really serious, doesn't it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right.

John Biewen: So, we decided we couldn't spend all this time talking about journalistic bias and the trustworthiness of the news without, in some way, turning the lens directly on ourselves.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Indeed. So, as I understand it, this company, Ad Fontes, has rated thousands of organizations that produce news, or what they call "news-like content."

John Biewen: Yeah. So, everything from Joe Rogan to Jezebel to The Five on Fox News.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And we asked them to rate Scene on Radio.

John Biewen: Correct. That's their business. They are non-partisan, and they're known for their chart – the Media Bias Chart. Now, I don't know about you, but I've seen it on social media a few times over the years – it kinda makes the rounds.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: No, yeah, I've definitely seen it. But, all right. The suspense is killing me...

Theme music

John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 8: The News. Episode 4. I'm John Biewen.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika.

John Biewen: In this episode: This very podcast, and where we sit in the media landscape, at least according to one independent analysis.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: OK, John, you're saying this outfit looked at "us," but really it's *you* that's being interrogated here, mostly, I think.

John Biewen: Oh, come on, man. Since I'm the primary producer of this show?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah.

John Biewen: I work with collaborators like you, and our story editors, you know, who do a ton to make the show better. But yeah, OK.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Look, man, you choose the themes of the seasons, you take the lead in framing the questions and who to interview, you can make the ultimate decisions in the editing process. So, I mean, I feel like they looking at you.

John Biewen: Actually I want to blame you, Chenj, for some of the more provocative things that have been said on this show.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Absolutely, yes, it's my job to balance the careful, precise reporting with wild, reckless, baseless assertions! Leaps of logic! And Ideological rants. It's true. (laughing) OK. But I mean, listen. Anything I've ever said on Scene on Radio, the only reason folks heard it was because you decided to keep it in. Man, you got the delete button.

John Biewen: Well, you got me there. It does kinda start and end with me. But I don't make the show alone. It is a collaborative effort.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: We're in it together, man. And in fact, our story editor this season, Diane Hodson, had this idea, to have someone take an independent look at Scene on Radio's work, and assess it for – there's that word again – bias.

John Biewen: It was a great idea, and a bit scary. Heaven forbid we could be told we're not 100% "objective" in our journalism.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh man. Objectivity. When you said it, I felt chills throughout my body. It's an intense word, as we've discussed. We're gonna need to define some terms and sort through the weeds just to talk about what we mean by this.

John Biewen: Yeah. And I'm very glad you're here to help with that, Professor Kumanyika. Bringing that PhD in critical media studies to the table.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes. Finally using it for something other than the woke agenda. (Both laugh.) But actually, what I want to know is, who is this company again who's gonna be rating us, and, like, what are *their* qualifications?

John Biewen: We're gonna hear a lot more about Ad Fontes in a minute, but first...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, that Scene on Radio rating! Enough suspense, let's get to it. How'd we do?

John Biewen: All right, what the hell, let's just come out with it. Um, Ad Fontes ranks Scene on Radio as having a "strong left" bias.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hmm. John, when you saw that, how did it make you feel?

John Biewen: Well, it wasn't some big surprise. But listen, given the discourse around media bias that we just spent the last episode talking about, at first, I gotta say, it did hit me a little – sort of landed like an accusation.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I feel that. So much depends on what it means, though, right? But just looking at that assessment, "strong left," I guess Ad Fontes is saying that Scene on Radio has a skewed perspective, a left-wing agenda, and that makes us not really trustworthy as a source of information.

John Biewen: Actually, no. It turns out they are explicitly not saying that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika. Oh, all right. I'm confused.

John Biewen: See, Ad Fontes doesn't just rate news outlets for bias. They have a second metric: "reliability." And ... wait for it:

Vanessa Otero: So, uh, Scene on Radio rates high for reliability.

John Biewen: In particular, Vanessa told me, her analysts gave us a solid rating for reliability *given the kind of journalism we do*.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh, man. OK, I've got so many questions.

John Biewen: I'm sure you do.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Let me just get this straight. So the company said two things: first, Scene on Radio shows a "strong left" bias. And second, they gave the show high marks for reliability. To a lot of people, I bet that sounds like a contradiction.

John Biewen: You mean, based on the idea that being “unbiased,” or “objective,” is the same as reporting what’s true. So an analysis that says you’re strongly biased in one direction or the other would imply you’re not reporting the truth – you’re lying or distorting the facts.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. I mean, I think that’s how a lot of people think about it. So if that’s *not* the case, then that might indicate that, at least for Ad Fontes, those words, reliability and bias, mean something different than what most people think it means. And I feel like, if we want to understand what they’re saying about us, we’re gonna have to break that down a little bit.

John Biewen: Which we will. And, in fact, maybe this exercise is gonna shed some fresh light on that whole debate, and what people typically mean, and don’t mean, when we talk about journalistic “bias.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I mean, this is big, man. Because when people wield that accusation, it usually comes with some hostility, you know? Some feelings toward the outlet, and real challenges to people’s journalistic credibility. And it’s one of the things people complain about when they talk about news, a lot. But what happens when we look at how that term applies to us?

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John Biewen: OK, I’m gonna spend a few minutes here sharing more of my interview with Vanessa Otero about her company, Ad Fontes, and how they do what they do. Then we can discuss what to make of their assessment of Scene on Radio.

Vanessa Otero: Uh. we’ve rated 13,000 different news sources, and over a hundred thousand individual articles and episodes. So it refined, we’ve refined what that taxonomy is, and the methodology for placing the news sources on there...

John Biewen: When Otero talks about “placing sources on there,” she’s referring to the Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart. The free public version shows about 120 popular media sources arrayed across the graph. They include newspapers and magazines – like the Wall Street Journal and the Atlantic; TV and radio networks and some of their individual programs – 60 Minutes, Fox and Friends; online publications and podcasts – like HuffPost and the Megyn Kelly Show. The sources are plotted on the graph according to those two measures: political bias – that’s the left and right axis; and, on the vertical scale, reliability. Positioned on the graph, the logos of the sources form a distinct shape,

like a mountain peak or an upside-down V. You won't see Scene on Radio on the public chart, but we would sit on the left slope of the mountain, a little over halfway up.

Vanessa Otero: It looks like a normal distribution, like a bell curve, but it's not representing a bell curve.

John Biewen, in interview: Um, I think there's probably a tendency to think, well, what Ad Fontes is saying is that those ones at the top and the middle are the best, somehow. Is that the right way to see it?

Vanessa Otero: Not exactly. Top is, highest is best. But uh, middle is not necessarily best. So, bias and reliability are independent variables.

John Biewen: This is important, and maybe surprising. For Vanessa and her team, what they call reliability is a value judgment. You want a high reliability score. But for them, she says, the horizontal axis, the measure of left-or-right bias, is merely descriptive.

Vanessa Otero: So, where you can see that on the chart is, if you look right at the middle – we call it “middle” very purposely. We don't call it neutral and we don't call it unbiased, because there's really no such thing as unbiased.

John Biewen: Got that? There is some correlation between low bias and high reliability. All the outlets with the very highest reliability ratings also sit near the middle of the chart – essentially, it seems, because they mostly avoid expressing opinions. Folks at Ad Fontes explain that statements smacking of opinion, no matter how well founded, will lose you points for reliability. The highest-reliability outlet of all, on the public chart, is USA Facts, which simply packages and publishes government data, with little or no added reporting or analysis. Still, Otero says outlets near the center of the graph are not necessarily better sources of information than those that tilt to the right or left.

Vanessa Otero: So something could be, uh, middle and low reliability. There's a news source called Inside the Magic. It is fake news about Disneyland. It's in the middle and it's low reliability. The Joe Rogan podcast is a little to the right, but middle-ish, and low reliability, because he has a lot of guests from, who are very left and, uh, slightly more that are very right. And a lot of it is opinion and analysis and some of it's not very high quality, so that sort of shakes out to middle-ish.

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John Biewen: That is, Rogan’s reliability gets dragged down by guests who say stuff that’s just untrue or is evidence-free opinion. Think Alex Jones, the far-right conspiracy theorist who’s been on the Rogan show several times ...

Alex Jones, Joe Rogan Experience, Oct 27, 2020: China wants us shut down, China admits to using the virus to keep us shut down...

John Biewen: ...or the “holocaust revisionist” guest, or the UFO experts. Alex Jones’s podcast, by the way, occupies *the* spot farthest out on the bottom right of the public Ad Fontes chart. As we’re recording this, the company rates Jones’s InfoWars show as having the most right-wing bias and the lowest reliability score among those popular sources. The late Charlie Kirk’s podcast fared only a little better. But, back to that left-right bias rating: A news outlet that strives for centrism might well land in the middle of the chart, but Otero says centrism is also a bias.

Vanessa Otero: I do not consider bias a bad word. It's a little too broad, unfortunately.

John Biewen: She admits she doesn’t really like the word bias because its exact meaning often isn’t clear.

Vanessa Otero: And unfortunately there are not a lot of great synonyms for it that would be more precise.

John Biewen: During our conversation, I drop an alternative.

John Biewen, in interview: ...to sort of discuss our own, our own positionality, if you like, to, maybe to use another word. (Laughing)

Vanessa Otero: Yes. That’s a good word. I actually like that, I might adopt it. Positionality. (Laughs)

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John Biewen: Some media watchdog groups are themselves openly aligned with a political agenda – the Media Research Center on the right, and on the left, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting and Media Matters for America. Ad Fontes calls itself non-partisan. Vanessa describes her own politics as left of center, but the company’s employees are politically diverse by design. So how does their rating process work?

Vanessa tells me the company employs about 45 trained analysts. They work part-time – many, she says, are former teachers, lawyers, librarians, and journalists.

Vanessa Otero: So, our analysts are all across the country, and these are the folks that are rating the news day in and day out, uh, from across the political spectrum, left, right, and center.

John Biewen: They work in teams of three – called pods – one person with right-leaning politics, one in the center, and one on the left, as determined by company surveys.

Vanessa Otero: And they're just rating stuff. They're reading it, they're scoring it. They use a content analysis rubric where they're really slowing down and looking for specific factors to inform their reliability score, to inform their bias score. And they have to have notes and citations to substantiate why they're scoring things. Then they look at each other's scores, uh, once they're all in...

Ad Fontes analyst, video: OK so let's look at the next one. We're going in here to The Guardian: Ron DeSantis issues Executive Order Banning Vaccine Passports in Florida. Let's look at our scores...

John Biewen: Ad Fontes created a demonstration video, posted on YouTube, that shows a team of analysts at work.

Ad Fontes analyst, video: Looks like we have, under reliability, a difference of 5 points, which is really good. And under bias we have a difference of 6 points, which is also very good.

John Biewen: The video also shows the team discussing an article from the right-wing Heritage Foundation.

Woman, "left" analyst: The headline got it for me. The headline was opinionated. So that brought down the score quite a bit for me.

Man, "center" analyst: There was some "yea for our side" kind of atmosphere to it, which, you know, that's partisan, but it's not extreme partisan.

John Biewen: Otero says, because the analysts are trained according to shared standards, they usually rate the news pieces similarly despite their differing politics.

Vanessa Otero: There's inherent subjectivity to this, to humans rating a thing that other humans create, and, uh, processes are just the best way to mitigate that.

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John Biewen: The “inherent subjectivity” of “humans rating a thing that other humans create.” Let’s keep that observation in mind. Vanessa also admits to the limitations of any two-dimensional rating system for ideas as complex as reliability and bias in news and information. But she wanted to create something useful and thinks her company has done that. She compares the Ad Fontes chart to movie ratings or nutrition labels on food products.

Vanessa Otero: You can still make the decisions on all those things yourself, but you want some general orientation where there's like, um, somebody has done that work, because otherwise to do it yourself would be, uh, would be too much.

John Biewen: So, back to Scene on Radio. The Ad Fontes team that rated our show listened to five episodes, of their choosing, from Seasons 3, 5, and 7, to try to capture a representative cross-section of our work. First, our “reliability” score. Vanessa explains that the company gives high marks to articles and episodes that display real journalistic effort – that are filled with facts and clear sourcing as opposed to a lot of untethered opinion. The Ad Fontes reliability score ranges from zero, at the bottom of the chart, to 64 at the very top, though the highest-rated sources that do original reporting only reach the upper 40s.

Vanessa Otero: So, the very top, you know, the, the scores, you know, basically 36 and above, we recommend because it's one of the types of high reliability news and/or analysis content. And where we have Scene on Radio is right about a 38.

John Biewen: Other sources with a similar reliability rating include the *Atlantic*, the *Washington Post*, *Fortune*, and *Wired*.

Vanessa Otero: That's a, that's a very high score for, uh, reliability for a show that does analysis and particularly historical analysis.

John Biewen: Notice the qualifier. It's a high score *for a show that does historical analysis*. Many of the sources with higher reliability scores than ours – like Reuters, the AP, ABC's World News Tonight – mainly report straight news without much historical

context or discussion about what it all means. The Scene on Radio episodes the Ad Fontes team examined all reached into history to tell stories and offer analysis.

Vanessa Otero: When it's historical analysis, you inherently have a lot of history to choose from. There's a whole world of history. So which one do you choose? Like, what facts do you choose? Those inherently, what you select, inherently creates a perspective. Again, nothing wrong with that, but somebody could form a historical analysis that's based on other historical facts to support a different conclusion.

John Biewen: As for bias: Based on the five episodes it analyzed, Ad Fontes gave Scene on Radio, as I said, a “strong left” rating – putting us in a neighborhood with outlets like Mother Jones, The Intercept, and Democracy Now. To explain why, Vanessa highlights one episode her team listened to, from Season 3, our MEN series – the episode called “Feminism in Black and White.”

Vanessa Otero: You know, race and feminism and, uh – race and sexism – are among one of many very polarizing topics today.

John Biewen: She says my co-host Celeste Headlee and I signaled our left-leaning positionality in our framing of the episode, and the series.

Vanessa Otero: One of the quotes from the episode about what it's about, is, “It's a season long look at sexism and male dominance...”

Celeste Headlee, Scene on Radio, MEN, Episode 4: It's a season-long look at sexism and male dominance, mainly in the United States. How patriarchy as we know it took shape, and how it really works.

Vanessa Otero: So the terminology that, 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. There's an entirely different conversation that happens in right-leaning spaces.

John Biewen: I didn't ask Vanessa to elaborate, but ... I get it. Folks on the right rarely use those words ... and usually reject the premise that racism and sexism are big problems today.

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John Biewen: All right. Time to bring Dr. Chenjerai back. Lots to dig into.

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[BREAK]

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, so, I really want to start where you left off with Vanessa Otero, and her comment that the use of certain words in a Scene on Radio episode is what signaled a left-wing bias.

John Biewen: Words like “patriarchy” and “White supremacy.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. Because, I mean, before we even get into their take on Scene on Radio, I’m just very interested in what that comment says about the company’s definition of bias. Because in the season on patriarchy, you and Celeste used those phrases in a straightforward way, taking it as a given that gender roles, racial hierarchies, gender hierarchies, like, racist images and symbols and language and laws are all actual forces in the world, not made-up stories. And that alone, Vanessa is saying, indicates a “strong left” bias.

John Biewen: Yes. That’s how I understand what she’s saying.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And it’s like that assessment is independent of any discussion about the reality of gender and power, or race and power, historically.

John Biewen: In other words, in this formulation, “bias” doesn’t say anything at all about the rigor or the accuracy of the reporting. It’s purely relative and kind of socially determined, right? Otero said explicitly in our interview that this is how she and Ad Fontes understand bias.

Vanessa Otero: What we mean by bias is, we’re trying to place how left or middle or right the media outlet is in comparison to our current, uh, left-right system in the United States.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, another way you could say this is that, I think for most people, when they hear the term bias, they think the individual or news organization has

like some kind of clouded lens that's not letting them see the whole truth. But what we just learned about the Ad Fontes model is that a "strong left" rating, or a "skews right" rating – which is another category on their chart – does not mean you're to the left or the right of *the truth*.

John Biewen: They're saying, your bias as a journalist is precisely as right, left, or center as a typical person in our society would assess it to be.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So that's what the folks in those Ad Fontes "pods," the people doing this analysis, are asked to determine for the bias rating. Not, are the claims in this piece backed up by evidence?

John Biewen: That would be relevant to the reliability score.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But for the bias rating, the question is, for them: How will this piece of journalism land with folks reading or listening if they're conservative or progressive or, you know, whatever?

John Biewen: There's a circularity to it, isn't there. We assign you x amount of bias because we predict that people listening will perceive x amount of bias. And that kind of circularity has another layer in the Ad Fontes process, which I looked at very closely. I mentioned the company uses a survey to classify its analysts as left, right, or center, so there's one of each in every three-person group doing the ratings. That internal Political Assessment, as they call it, asks the employee about a list of issues, from abortion to immigration to gun policy to reparations. But it doesn't ask for the person's policy positions. It just asks them to classify their own views on each issue – from "decidedly" or "moderately" left, to "centrist or undecided," to moderately or decidedly right.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: OK. So, let's try a thought experiment.

John Biewen: Go ahead, Chenj.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Let's say, hypothetically, that the political center of gravity in this country is shaped by profound biases. It's really pro-Capitalist, so, hard to think about anything critical about capitalism. Pro-American Empire, so real challenges to see the reach of America, you know, across the world as something other than good. And, due to, like, this long history of systemic racism and sexism, there's a lot of comfortability with that, still, just, in the culture. Right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Then, if that was the case – I mean, just hypothetically.

John Biewen: Yeah. You're spitballing now.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: (Chuckling.) If that were the case, then being “left” of that “center” would be exactly what's required to make independent, *factual* observations about the world as it is.

John Biewen: What if reality – at least in some very important ways – does have a liberal bias, as the saying goes, as the joke goes. And of course, what you just described is essentially what we've spent the last decade documenting on this show, with lots of receipts all along the way. For example, Season 2, *Seeing White*, in which you and I spent 14 episodes saying, essentially: Here's what the historical record says about White supremacy, and how it came into the world and evolved, and eventually shaped the formation and development of the United States. And yes, folks have fought against White supremacy and brought about enormous positive change, but here's how we live with racism up to the present day.

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Chenjerai Kumanyika: And that season also said – and showed historically, with tons of empirical evidence, by the way – Here are the many ways in which the dominant culture in America normalizes and fails to acknowledge White supremacy, including the news media.

John Biewen: And for us – I'll speak for myself, as a White American who grew up in a small town in the Midwest – a project like *Seeing White* is not about some preconceived, lefty, “hate America” agenda. It was about looking at the evidence as honestly as possible and coming to, frankly, reluctant, uncomfortable conclusions about what happened in the past and what's happening now.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So what exactly does “bias” mean in that case? Part of what it means – back to that word, is positionality. It means you've arrived at a position based on careful study of the evidence. And that position happens to sit to the left of what passes for the “center” in America at this point in history.

John Biewen: And, by the way, I asked you to work with me on that series because I recognized limitations in my perspective. I was a White dude trying to make sense of whiteness. And I felt like I needed someone who's lived their life as a Black or Brown

person in this country, who would have a, honestly, a more reliable perspective on how whiteness functions than I ever could.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Look, to be – you chose me, you know what I’m saying?
(Laughs)

John Biewen: And I’m so glad I did.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You could have chosen to have those conversations with a conservative person, who was Black or White, who would have challenged you from the other direction. You know? I mean, a lot of people would say that would have been more “balanced.”

John Biewen: A lot of people would say that. And, looked at one way, I get that. But I thought I needed you for “balance,” to sort of check my work and keep me honest. Throughout that season we were referring throughout that season to the more traditional view of things, the kind of consensus view among the dominant White culture in this country, which we were clearly challenging, with help from the historians and experts we talked to. So, would a conservative co-host have gotten me closer to the truth of the matter? I didn’t think so, and I still don’t. Obviously, that’s a choice, among thousands of other choices, that are all aimed at saying something – not something “down the middle,” but as factual as possible based on the evidence.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, man. Like for some reason people still think like the middle is the place of truth. It’s almost like, what if I said, what if I was like, yo, I’m as good of a basketball player as LeBron James. (Biewen laughs.) Is the truth. Chenj, you’re half as good of a basketball player? That is not the truth. You know what I mean? It’s in the middle – not the truth, you know what I’m saying? (Laughter.) So it feels like a real limitation of the rating system we’ve looked at, from Ad Fontes. You know what I mean Or at least, everybody looking at that chart really needs understand what this is actually saying. Right? That the bias ratings, left, right, or center, really just reflect a kind of median, collective understanding of what those things mean in a particular time and place – the United States in the 2020s.

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John Biewen: I’m just a little worried that we might sound defensive, like our feelings were hurt by that “strong left” bias rating and we’re trying to justify ourselves. But, believe it or not, that’s not it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, now that I understand what they're actually describing, you know, which is, you sort of attend to realities of history in your reporting? By that description, "strong left" doesn't hurt my feelings at all!

John Biewen: The point is to get clear about what it does and doesn't mean.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But there's something else that makes me uneasy about the Ad Fontes process. Vanessa Otero said some things that I think are smart and important. She says "there's no such thing as unbiased." And she says the news sources with the lowest bias ratings, the ones in the middle of her company's chart, are not necessarily "better" than the ones to the left or the right side of the graph. I like that. That's good. But I have to ask: Are most of the people looking at that chart going to understand that? You know, the hegemony of, like, people just thinking that the middle is the place, and then you see that chart visually, it just, I feel like the chart might be communicating something different than what their methodology says this means.

John Biewen: Yeah, because that is such a dominant idea, that "unbiased" journalism, news that goes "down the middle," as people say – that's what journalists should aspire to.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: As she said, centrism is really just another kind of bias. But my question is, with its rating system and its chart, is Ad Fontes sending a different message? Is it actually reinforcing and re-encoding the idea that the best journalism is quote-unquote "unbiased" journalism?

John Biewen: Yeah, so let's look at the chart. And we'll put a link to Ad Fontes in our show notes. As I said, on the public chart that shows only a smaller number of popular news and information sources, the logos of the outlets are arrayed in the shape of a mountain peak, roughly, right? Think the shape of Mount Fuji. OK? Now, wouldn't most people look at that and think that the sources at the top of the mountain – they're highest on reliability and also in the middle on bias – wouldn't most people think they're being held up as the cream of the crop?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And it's not just the mountaintop shape. You've got to talk about the dotted lines on the chart. They send signals, too.

John Biewen: Yes. There are dotted lines on this graph. They're red, yellow, and green – the familiar colors of a traffic light, right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, what are we supposed to think when we see those colors? Like, stop, proceed with caution, or full speed ahead.

John Biewen: Yeah. So, I'm gonna describe the lines, and folks, stay with us. Picture a red line that runs left to right across the graph, near the bottom – right? Down low. It's on the axis that measures reliability. Only a few shows fall below the red line, and most are on the far right – Alex Jones, the Tim Pool and Candace Owens podcasts. The chart says those shows contain “misleading,” “inaccurate” or “fabricated” information. Above, a little ways above the red line is a yellow one, again running horizontally. You've got to have a pretty low reliability score to land below the yellow line: Chapo Trap House and Meidas Touch on the left, Glenn Beck and One America News on the right. Finally, much higher on the chart, there's the green line. But, unlike the others, the green line doesn't run all the way across the chart. It forms a box.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: In the middle section of the chart, the green line runs horizontally, along the reliability axis, indicating that the really reliable stuff is above that level. But instead of going all the way across, at a certain point on each side, the green line turns vertical, onto the axis that measures bias. So, like you said, it forms a box at the top and the middle of the chart.

John Biewen: Whether or not the listeners have been able to stay with us on the visuals, the upshot of this design is that Ad Fontes has decided you can only be tagged with so much bias and still stay inside the green zone, no matter how high your reliability score. Scene on Radio's reliability rating would put us above the green line – if that line ran horizontally all the way across the graph, as the other lines do. But as it is, because the line goes northward and turns into a box, our “strong left” rating pushes us outside of the box – effectively into the “yellow” zone. Along with, for example, The Intercept, Teen Vogue, and NPR's Code Switch. I asked Vanessa Otero about the lines.

John Biewen, in interview: It sounds like what I'm hearing is that the reliability axis is in some ways more important in terms of the quality of a, of a source.

Vanessa Otero: Uh-huh.

John Biewen, in interview: Um, but it seems it would be pretty natural, the way that green, yellow, and red work in our lives...

Vanessa Otero: Uh-huh, yeah. (laughs)

John Biewen, in interview: ...that people would think, oh, that, that green box, inside that green box is where you want to be.

Vanessa Otero: For news. I mean, it's nuanced. Again, another limitation of a visual medium, you know, and things like short, visual shortcuts, like green and yellow and up and down. It's always a delicate balance between simplicity and nuance. So with yellow, we're not saying yellow is bad, we're just saying yellow is not exactly news. We're saying that things that are in the green box, those are the most news things, news-like things.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh. So, for a source like Scene on Radio, no matter how high we rate on the reliability of our journalism, we land outside the elite space of the green box because what we do isn't "news."

John Biewen: Here's Vanessa again.

Vanessa Otero: All we are trying to do there is distinguish between, this is news, and this is not exactly news. This is more analysis and opinion.

John Biewen: She compares this dichotomy to news articles as opposed to analysis or opinion pieces in a newspaper.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: OK. But I wonder if the typical person looking at that chart is gonna get all that nuance.

John Biewen: On its website, Ad Fontes explains how to interpret the chart pretty much as Vanessa did in our interview. But yeah, I don't know how many people who see the chart make it to that page on the site.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Speak for yourself, John. Every chart I read, I then go to the website and painstakingly read each detail, each...

John Biewen: (Laughing) How to interpret it...

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But back to what we were just talking about: The fact that a strong bias rating puts you outside of the green box, when that bias rating can be based on the fact that you used words like "White supremacy" and "patriarchy" to describe things that are indisputably a part of World History? Seems like a problem.

John Biewen: Here's another example like that, but even more kind of eye-popping. After my interview with Vanessa, Ad Fontes shared with us the notes from their analysts on what they found most biased or least reliable in Scene on Radio's reporting. After listening to the first episode of our climate season, *The Repair*, one of the analysts wrote this: "The whole episode is about climate change and environmental destruction which ... is a strong left leaning philosophy."

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Wait a minute. Wait. So, if you even *address* the issues of climate change and environmental destruction, *that* signifies a "strong left leaning philosophy"?

John Biewen: The head of Quality Assurance at Ad Fontes, a fellow named Brandon Muller, answered my emailed question about this. He called it "an example of a not good comment" by the analyst – because "it does not satisfactorily justify/explain" the bias score. But Mr. Muller said he did not find a problem with the "hyper-partison-left" rating that analyst gave to the episode – though he conceded that he personally, Muller, had not listened to the episode.

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Chenjerai Kumanyika: But here's the thing. The point here is not a critique of Ad Fontes. I mean, there's a lot of confusion about what bias is, and I think that's reflected and perpetuated in the Ad Fontes model. Right? In other words, they're picking up something that's, I think, already out there. In a way, what Ad Fontes is trying to do is they're just trying to say that their way of talking about bias is just descriptive, right, not an indication of good or bad journalism. But if they're being descriptive, why not just say, "This outlet covers climate change and discusses trends of racism and sexism in world history"? Because that would be descriptive. Instead, they do this thing, like, where they're trying to be systematic, but then I feel like they're kind of getting it, at the very least presenting it, wrong, in a really deceptive way.

John Biewen: In their bias rating, yeah. And my question is, why not just throw out the bias rating and judge news sources for their reliability? If you're saying that bias is not a value judgment. Is this solid information, rigorous reporting that backs up its claims with evidence?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Isn't that what matters, as opposed to some relativistic and highly subjective measure of so-called "bias," based on the questions being asked and on their assumptions about how stuff is gonna land, or people's reactions to certain words and subject matter that are politically coded in some way?

John Biewen: Before we leave Ad Fontes behind, there's one more thing I think you and our listeners will be interested to know – and that is, who are the main customers for Ad Fontes and what it does. It's a for-profit company, as I mentioned. It invites individuals to subscribe, people who want access to these ratings for the media they consume, and some news organizations and social media companies. But the primary customer base is advertisers.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, for companies trying to decide whether to advertise with a certain publication or TV show or podcast, by paying Ad Fontes, they get access to the thousands of ratings the company has done, not just the small number on the public chart.

John Biewen: Otero told me companies want to advertise in what she calls “high quality news” environments, and Ad Fontes helps them find those sources.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I guess it's not a surprise, right? I mean, look, advertisers are the most important customers for news organizations. The media itself mostly runs on advertising dollars. So it makes sense that a company in the business of ranking news organizations would find its customers in the same place.

John Biewen: Chenj, after all this talk about journalistic bias across two episodes now, I want to mention a take on the whole subject from the great Brooke Gladstone. That's a name I think a lot of our listeners will recognize.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Absolutely. The longtime host of *On the Media*. And much respect to Brooke Gladstone. She's somebody I've learned so much from.

John Biewen: For sure.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And she offers another kind of intervention into the conversation about bias – and specifically, the related notion of journalistic “objectivity.”

John Biewen: Yeah, Brooke has argued for years that “transparency is the new objectivity.” So, we can't aspire to pure objectivity or complete “neutrality,” whatever anybody might mean by those words. So, she says, journalists should try, as honestly and fairly as possible, to figure out what's true. And then we should be transparent about our sources and our processes, so listeners and readers can more easily assess whether to trust what we're telling them.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I like to think that's a pretty good description of what we do on Scene on Radio.

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John Biewen: I hope so. So, where did our society's confused understanding of bias come from, historically? And is the pursuit of neutrality, or objectivity, the *best* tradition of journalism? What about an earlier pivotal moment when Americans were confronting a tyrannical government?

Joseph Adelman: One of the things that the revolutionary crisis in the 1760s and 1770s does, it really pushes people to make a decision and say, no, what I'm doing is projecting this particular view as an oppositional check on government power.

John Biewen: Next time: Some early media history that sheds light on our time.

The News was created and produced by me, John Biewen, with Chenjerai Kumanyika and story editor Diane Hodson. 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, Goodnight Lucas, and Jason Hill. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. You can find transcripts at our website, Sceneonradio.org. The show is distributed by PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.