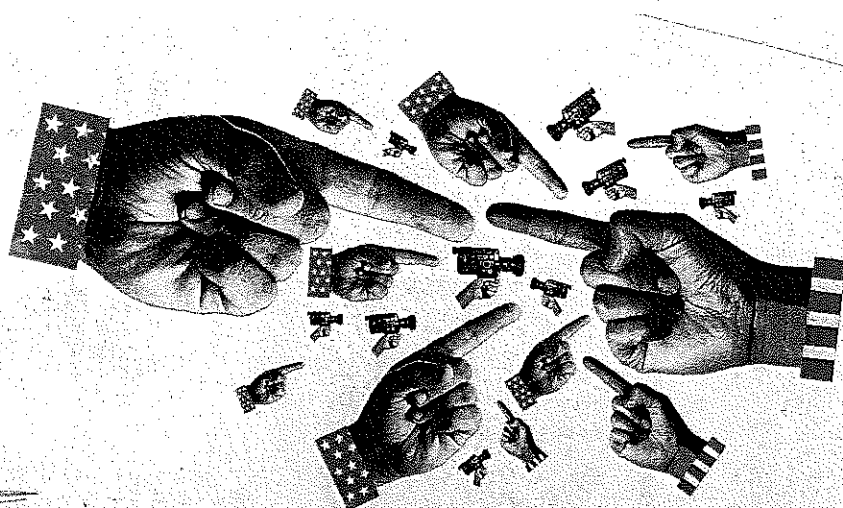


Tuned In



Unfair and Balanced. When blaming both sides isn't accurate news

By James Poniewozik

"REALITY," STEPHEN COLBERT ONCE said, "has a well-known liberal bias." He was joking—or "joking"—but he identified a serious problem for political reporters in a polarized era. What do you do when the actual reality of a news story is not balanced between two sides? What do you do when the facts of a situation are such that to describe them accurately will make you sound biased?

This month's fiscal crisis is one such situation. One party (in fact, one wing of the Republican Party), seeking the elimination or delay of Obamacare, precipitated a government shutdown and threatened a default on U.S. debt. Period. There was no corresponding threat or demand on the Democratic or White House side; having passed the Affordable Care Act into law three years ago, they are not in the position of saying, "Pass Obamacare or we shut 'er down."

That's the situation. To describe it accurately, as the news should, is not to endorse an ideology. It's not to say that Obamacare is good or bad. It's not to say that Republicans do or don't have good reasons to oppose it. It's not to say that Democrats have or haven't sought political benefit in the aftermath. It's to correct-

ly place the impetus where it belongs.

Much of the big-picture news coverage has been clear on this. But as the crisis dragged on, more news stories framed it as old-fashioned gridlock between two equally culpable, stubborn, useless sides. It's become BOEHNER, WHITE HOUSE HARDEN STANCES (*Washington Post*); CONGRESS PLAYS CHICKEN (CNN); "each side trying to blame the other" (*Politico*).

"Both sides are to blame; the truth is somewhere in between"—that has always been the political media's happy, safe place. Some of the reasons for this are noble: journalists genuinely want to give both sides a hard, fair look. Some reasons are less proud: wanting to keep access to pols in each party; not wanting to alienate readers or viewers; because subscription and advertising dollars know no party. Seeming fair becomes more important than being fair.

At worst, a legitimate impulse ("Let's make sure we've checked out the other side") becomes skewing reality for the sake of appearances ("We have to put in an example of the other side's doing this"). It's a way of ingratiating yourself, having a populist point of view divorced from a political one: Those bums in Congress

won't do their jobs, but we're on your side, America! If all else fails, you can always quote ideologues in each party and make your lead, "Congress points fingers."

Ah, saved by the magic fingers again. Media critics, especially on the left, call this kind of thumb-on-the-blame-scales balance "false equivalence." That charge itself can be used as a crowbar to leverage coverage in one direction or to obscure issues in a dust cloud of "But they started it!" Not every criticism of two parties needs to come with a numerical assessment of who did it first and worse; that can make every politics story as recrimination- and second-guess-filled an exercise as trying to slice the last brownie in half for a pair of 5-year-olds.

But in a case like the fiscal crisis, false equivalence matters. It's the difference between reporting an extraordinary event and an ordinary one, which in this case is crucial to how the story plays out politically. It's a matter of whether "not changing current law" becomes redefined as "getting 100% of what you want." If this is just one more case of those knuckleheads in Washington "digging in their heels," "playing the blame game" and so on, it normalizes the situation for the news audience. It sends the tacit message that it is entirely ordinary, every so often, to have a forced national-debt crisis that reasonable people resolve by renegotiating major pieces of law.

Is the situation ordinary? It's true that legislators of both parties—like Senator Obama in 2006—have made grandstanding votes against raising the debt limit many times in the past. But those were stage-managed protests in which votes were carefully counted and there was no serious fear that the U.S. would actually default, unlike what took place in 2011, when the crisis resulted in a downgrade of the U.S. credit rating. That's another case where "The other side did it too" does not an equivalence make.

So here, "Both sides created this mess" sounds neutral, but it's actually taking a side—or at least adopting the framing that one side is counting on using to a political end. Reality doesn't always have a bias—liberal, conservative or otherwise. But when it does, it's not journalism's job to rebalance reality.