

Post-Truth, False Balance and Virtuous Gatekeeping

Abstract: The claim that we live in a post-truth era has led to a significant body of work across different disciplines exploring the phenomenon. Many have sought to investigate the role of fake news in bringing about the post-truth era. While this work is important, the narrow focus on this issue runs the risk of giving the impression that it is mainly new forms of media that are to blame for the post-truth phenomenon. In this paper, we call attention to the ways in which journalistic practices in traditional forms of media also play an important role in contributing to a post-truth environment. We will do so by focusing on one particular practice common in news journalism. False balance involves presenting two sides of a debate as more equal than is justified by the evidence. We will argue that although false balance does not constitute fake news, it does contribute to an environment in which truth is devalued. By obscuring what counts as evidence and who qualifies as an authority, false balance legitimizes post-truth attitudes. We finish by outlining the virtues that journalists should develop in order to guard against false balance. While fake news is made more likely when journalists possess the vices of dishonesty, prejudice or corruption, we argue that focusing too much on guarding against these vices may actually make false balance more likely. In order to be responsible gatekeepers and to avoid false balance, journalists must also develop the virtues of wisdom, vigilance, courage, care and justice.

Keywords: Post-truth; journalism; journalistic virtues; false balance; bothsidesism; epistemic virtues; social epistemology; gatekeeping virtues

Introduction

Marc Morano is a high-profile climate change sceptic who works for the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, an organization that promotes climate change denial. Despite having no scientific training, Morano is regularly interviewed on US news programs to provide balance to the expert opinion of climate scientists. He is not alone in being given this platform. A 2013 study by Media Matters found that while only 3% of climate scientists doubt the scientific consensus on climate change, doubters made up 18% of those interviewed on climate change in major US newspapers such as The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post (Theel et al 2013). Similarly, a study from Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) of US newspaper coverage of climate change between 1988 to 2002 found that half of the articles studied gave climate sceptics equal attention to those advocating the scientific consensus. While the media may be moving away

from this approach to covering climate change, dissenting voices continue to receive disproportionate attention (Brüggemann and Engesser 2017).¹

The issue here is one of false balance, that of presenting two sides of a debate as more equal than is justified by the evidence. It is a phenomenon found mostly in traditional forms of media. False balance has been linked to an increase in skepticism about both climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Corbett and Durfee 2004) and the safety of vaccinations (Clarke 2008; Dixon and Clarke 2012; Smith et al 2008; Speers and Lewis 2004). In this paper, we call attention to the ways in which this journalistic practice contributes to a post-truth environment, characterized by a lack of concern for facts and widespread distrust of expertise.

While false balance is increasingly recognized as a problematic journalistic practice, up to now, it has been noticeably absent from public discussions about post-truth. There is a considerable body of work which explores the role of the media in the devaluation of facts and expertise. Yet the focus of attention, especially in philosophy, has been fake news and online media. Philosophers have extensively investigated the nature of fake news (Mukerij 2018; Pepp, Michaelson and Sterken 2019) and the problems arising from it (Levy 2017; Rini 2017). Although this work is important, its narrow focus wrongly suggests that the media's responsibility for post-truth attitudes is limited to journalistic malpractice in new forms of media.

Our goal in this paper is to investigate one way in which journalists at more traditional forms of media (print media, radio and television) contribute to a post truth environment. We start by exploring different forms of false balance and the problems that arise from this practice. While false balance does not constitute fake news, it does, like fake news, contribute to an environment in which truth is devalued. By obscuring what counts as evidence and who qualifies as an authority, false balance legitimizes post-truth attitudes. We will then explore the virtues that journalists should develop in order to guard against false balance. While fake news is made more likely when journalists possess the vices of dishonesty, prejudice or corruption, we argue that focusing too much on guarding against these vices may actually promote false balance. In order to be responsible gatekeepers and to avoid false balance, journalists must also develop the virtues of wisdom, vigilance, courage, care and justice.

¹ For example, a comparative study of 386 prominent climate contrarians and 386 prominent climate scientists by Peterson et al (2019) found that the contrarians featured in 49% more media articles than the scientists, giving them a disproportionate voice in the public debate.

1. False Balance

False balance is described in the literature as the journalistic practice of presenting two sides of a debate as more equal than is justified by the evidence. For example, Dixon and Clarke explain the phenomenon in the following way: “‘False balance’ occurs when a perspective supported by an overwhelming amount of evidence is presented alongside others with less/no support and context – where the strength of evidence lies – is excluded.” (Dixon and Clarke 2012: 359) This phenomenon covers at least three different practices.

First, false balance can occur when outsider expert opinions are given equal levels of media attention as the scientific consensus. For example, Lennart Bengtsson is a Senior Research Fellow with the Environmental Systems Science Centre at the University of Reading, as well as a Director Emeritus of the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology. Bengtsson questions the validity of the models on which the claims made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are based. Bengtsson’s credentials as an expert on climate science are not disputed. However, by giving significant attention to outsider positions within the scientific community journalists run the risk of sending the message that expert opinion on the issue is more evenly divided than in fact is the case.

The second form of false balance is the balancing of expert opinions with those of non-experts. For example, a number of celebrities have questioned the safety of vaccinations. These include actors Jenny McCarthy and Robert De Niro who have both given television interviews in which they endorse the widely discredited claim that vaccinations increase the risk of autism (Roberts 2018). Reporting on the views of non-experts in this way runs the risk of sending the message that the views of non-experts should be paid the same amount of attention as those of experts. This is especially worrying when both views are presented alongside each other in news rather than entertainment programs. This form of balance is particularly troubling when a non-expert is not only given an equal platform to an expert but is also portrayed as having equivalent levels of expertise. For example, an article in British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, introduced a debate with the following headline: “When should Britain lift its Coronavirus lockdown? Two experts debate whether it’s time to return to normal.”(Young and Whitworth 2020). One of the “two experts” featured in this discussion was Jimmy Whitworth, a professor of international public health. The other was Toby Young, whose expertise amounted to being an associate editor at internet

magazine *Quillette*. Presenting the debate in this way suggests that both contributors are equally qualified to judge the right time to lift the measures introduced to contain the spread of coronavirus.²

The final form of false balance we would like to propose is the presentation of irrelevant information as a counterpoint to scientific evidence. This is a form of false balance that, as far as we are aware, has not been discussed in the literature up to now. For example, Coral Davenport, the climate energy reporter with *The New York Times*, was interviewed by Alex Witt in 2014 about a government report on climate change. After Davenport explained the impact that the report claimed climate change would have on the United States, Witt responded in the following way:

One in four Americans is skeptical of all the effects of climate change and think this issue has been exaggerated. In the North East [...] we had one of the worst, coldest, snowiest winters in memory. So how does all that fit into the equation for those naysayers, they look to that and say what climate change, what global warming? (Witt 2014: 4:40AM).

There are different ways to interpret Witt's response and question here. We might think she is simply asking Davenport on her views as to why a significant proportion of Americans remain skeptical of climate change despite the evidence. Alternatively she might be offering Davenport the opportunity to try to correct these mistaken views. However, this question might also be understood to be intended as a challenge, with the public's skepticism on climate change and an especially cold winter in the North East giving us reason to be skeptical of climate change. If this is how Witt intended her question then it is an irrelevant counterpoint to the points Davenport is making. The public's opinion about the reality of climate change has no bearing on the facts of climate change. Nor does one cold winter refute a general pattern of warming. However, the way the information and question are presented suggests that these points cast doubt on the report. As a result, the scientific testimony is effectively being 'balanced' with irrelevant information.

Having looked at the various forms false balance can take, we are now faced with the question why journalists engage in it. There are a number of situational factors that can lead to journalists engaging in false balance. Journalists may be motivated by a desire to increase audience

² There may be other forms of false balance than the three we consider here. For example, reducing a discussion in which there are multiple competing viewpoints (for example six or seven well-supported positions) into a debate between two opposing positions may also give a misleading impression of the debate. It is also worth noting that there may also be times when giving undue deference to expert opinion is also problematic. For example, presenting issues that involve value judgements as discussions that only experts can contribute to may be a form of false imbalance.

numbers. They may believe that controversy generates interest (Stocking and Holstein 1993: Zehr 2000: 86) and providing competing viewpoints will generate controversy (Dearing 1995: 342). As David Grimes (2019) has argued, the desire for debate and discussion in news coverage is often the result of “a fixation with sensationalism”.³ Alternatively, they may believe that a viewpoint that is not popular amongst experts will be popular amongst their potential audience and that people will want to engage with media that represents these views. Perhaps the main situational factor is that journalists often simply do not have enough time to properly research their stories. In his book *Flat Earth News*, former journalist Nick Davies describes how the drive to increase profits has led to the rise of “churnalism”. By this he means the repackaging of largely unchecked material from outside agencies, often at great speed. At the online news service for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2005, for example, journalists were expected to do the following within five minutes of a breaking story: “publish a one-line version of the story on the ‘ticker’ which runs across the top of the BBC website; possibly send an email to the news desk to warn them of the story; write a four-paragraph version of the story and post it on Ceefax as well as on the website; and, at the same time, do the ‘checking’.” (Davies 2008) Unsurprisingly, the consequences of journalists having to come up with stories in so little time are, in the words of Jenny McKay (2019: 71), “undoubtedly detrimental to the quality of the information that reaches their readers.” Under such time pressures, balanced reporting provides journalists with a way of accurately reporting on the claims made by the competing sides of a dispute without having to establish the truth of either claim (Dunwoody 2014: 33).

In addition to these situational pressures, there are also good journalistic reasons to engage in balanced reporting. Journalists may want to provide a diversity of viewpoints in order to enable the audience to draw their own conclusions (Figdor 2018: 69). As Ward (2011: 110) points out, providing this kind of public space in which competing ideas can be exchanged may be an essential component of deliberative democracy. Another motivation that underlies the drive to give a balanced presentation of a story is a desire to be objective, or at least to *appear* objective. Objectivity has long been the guiding ideal of journalism, particularly American journalism.⁴ Robert Entment describes the goal of balance as one that: “aims for neutrality [and] requires that reporters present

³ See also Stocking and Holstein (1993) and Zehr (2000: 86).

⁴ See Mindich (1998) and Schudson (1990; 2001) for accounts of how objectivity became the dominant ideal in American journalism and Schudson (2001) for an explanation as to why this norm emerged first in American rather than European journalism. See Wallace (2019) for a description of how this ideal has been weaponized to silence the voices of oppressed and marginalized groups.

the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute [...] with roughly equal attention.” (1989: 30) By giving equal air time to two different perspectives on an issue, journalists may intend to show that they are not biased in favor of either of these viewpoints (Durham 1998).

2. Problems with False Balance

The drive for balance, then, may be motivated by the reasonable ideal of objective reporting.⁵ However, the literature on false balance has highlighted a number of problems that arise from it. First, news that involves false balance has been claimed to be a form of biased news coverage. According to Boykoff and Boykoff (2004: 134), to present two sides of a debate as balanced when the scientific evidence overwhelmingly favors one side over the other is to present “informationally biased coverage”. By this they mean that such coverage presents the information in a distorted way. According to this critique, false balance is bad for its own sake because it gives a misleading picture of the evidence.

False balance has also been criticized for making it difficult to assess the available evidence. A study by Corbett and Durfee (2004) investigated the effects of controversy in climate change reporting. They found that when participants read an article that included a discussion of scientific controversy surrounding a particular finding, they reported lower levels of certainty about the existence of global warming than when they were presented with an article that described the wider scientific context. Similarly, Dixon and Clarke (2012) conducted a study in which participants were presented with news articles concerning the purported link between vaccinations and autism. Participants were either given articles that argued in favor of the link, against the link, presented a balance of views for and against the link, or that presented unrelated information. Those presented with the balanced articles were less certain than those in the other conditions that there is no link between vaccines and autism and more likely to believe that the scientific community was divided on this issue. This again suggests that being presented with balanced coverage can heighten uncertainty both in scientific claims and in the levels of consensus amongst scientists. To make matters worse, a similar study by Koehler (2016) found that presenting two conflicting expert opinions undermined participants’ confidence in the existence of an expert consensus, even when they were explicitly told

⁵ Though see Wallace (2019) for a critique of this ideal.

that there was a high level of scientific consensus on a particular issue. Given these problems, Carrie Figdor (2018) argues that balanced coverage will only improve the epistemic position of those who are capable of receiving testimony in an epistemically virtuous way.

Summarizing these consequences using epistemological terms, the problem with false balance is threefold. First, false balance obstructs the transfer of knowledge. Instead of informing and clarifying, it confuses the audience, rendering it more difficult for them to properly appraise facts, arguments, and evidence. Second, it can be classified as a form of epistemic unfairness.⁶ It overcredits non-experts and debunked viewpoints. At the same time, it typically does not give (sufficient) credit where it is due, that is, to legitimate epistemic authorities. Finally, because it does not do (?) so, it also obscures the notion of epistemic authority itself. It muddies the epistemic waters, misrepresenting who is an expert and for what reasons. Each of these consequences of false balance in turn contributes to what might be described as a “post-truth” environment.

The term “post-truth” is controversial because there is no stable definition, it is often used pejoratively, and it problematically suggests there used to be a “truth” time that was somehow better (Habgood-Coote 2018; Pepp, Michaelson, and Sterken 2019). Bracketing this discussion for now, we stipulate “post-truth environment” to mean an environment characterized by a lack of concern for facts and widespread distrust of expertise. This definition largely overlaps with, but is also a bit more precise than, the Oxford Dictionary’s “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and belief”. Its emphasis on indifference towards facts also connects it to Harry Frankfurt’s concept of bullshit: a way of speaking that is indifferent to truth (Frankfurt 2005: 33-34). Frankfurt himself offers a suggestion for why the practice of false balance may lead to the production of bullshit, noting that it

is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic *exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic*. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the *demands of others*—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant” (2005: 63, emphasis added).

⁶ We have chosen the term epistemic unfairness here to draw a connection with Miranda Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, while keeping a distinction. Just like Fricker’s notion of testimonial injustice, epistemic unfairness is about the unfair distribution of credibility. However, it is much narrower in that it does not originate in more structural societal injustice.

It is plain that where non-experts are asked to comment on topics about which they have little to no knowledge, nonsense can be expected to ensue. It should be noted, however, that this does not always amount to bullshitting, since it is not necessarily indifferent to truth. Presumably, when Robert De Niro speaks about the side effects of vaccines, he is motivated by a legitimate concern about their safety. Still, in many other cases, such as when scientists and non-experts are paid to publicly deny climate change, they are speaking without concern for the truth of their statements. Moreover, even when the speakers themselves are not technically bullshitting, the reporters engaging in false balance might be said to contribute to the production of bullshit by inviting someone who they know is wrong or ignorant to comment on a factual matter.

Its close relationship to bullshit might suggest that false balance is a form of fake news, and that its problems are largely the same. We believe this is not so. For one, fake news may take many forms, but it typically deceives the audience about a particular fact, for example, that the coronavirus is a man-made bioweapon (Rini 2017; Kaszeta 2020).⁷ False balance is much more subtle: it does not deceive about a specific issue, but it presents the surrounding debate as different from how it really is, i.e. as more balanced. Of course, this does have the effect of misleading the audience, but in a way that centers on the framing of the discussion rather than on its content. In addition, false balance seems to be less driven by the intention to deceive. Fake news and false balance thus both obscure truth, but in very different ways and for different reasons.

Fake news and false balance also differ when it comes to their contribution to post-truth attitudes. Both may generate bullshit, but fake news is more likely to consist of plain lies and is therefore more easily debunked. Fake news also does not necessarily undermine epistemic authority. It can be specifically targeted at discrediting someone, in which case it does, but then the effects will be contained. A medium producing fake news may also accidentally undermine its own epistemic authority, which will suffer when it is found out that it has been spreading false information. At the very worst, the accumulation of fake news reduces people's trust in the media in general, because it renders it more difficult to distinguish reliable and unreliable sources. For false balance, the epistemic authority that suffers is the whole notion of expertise. When marginal views are overrepresented, people's trust in the scientific consensus and the methods used to arrive at it decreases. When the opinion of non-experts about scientific facts is treated as equivalent to the opinion of experts, this

⁷ Note that there is no agreement as to whether fake news necessarily entails an intention to deceive (Mukerji 2018; Michaelson, Sterken, and Pepp 2019).

entails a dilution of the privileged epistemic positions experts have. When irrelevant information is used as a valid counterpoint, facts, especially scientific facts, are undervalued.

Finally, there are many possible motivations behind fake news. It may be produced for profit, for political purposes, or just for the fun of trolling and getting attention. At its core, it is dishonest. False balance, on the contrary, is practiced for very different reasons, and, as we will show in the next section, it is characterized by very different vices.

3. **The Vices behind False Balance**

One popular theory in communication studies states that journalists have a certain power in society. This gatekeeping theory describes journalists as controlling the flow of information to a whole social system (Lewin 1943). The power of being an informational gatekeeper also implies the responsibility to select which information is relevant for the social system and to present that information accurately (Janowitz 1975). Gatekeeping theory is a standard part of journalistic training, and its principles are reflected in the traditional professional values of journalistic ethics, including explicit Codes of Ethics. Despite variations between codes and countries, the virtues most associated with journalism appear to be honesty, objectivity and integrity (Jones 1980; Iggers 1998: 38-39). Sometimes additional virtues are included, or the same virtues are referred to by different names, such as truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, neutrality, independence, or autonomy (Belsey and Chadwick 1992; Iggers 1998; Ward 2004; Quinn 2007). However, they all mostly seem to boil down to the three central virtues, and the misconduct they are supposed to prevent. Reporters should not misinform their audience, they should not be biased in their presentation of the facts, and they should always avoid conflicts of interest and bribery.

The focus on these virtues makes sense considering the most prominent ways journalists can fail to properly fulfill the gatekeeping role. For instance, fake news is usually a direct result of the absence of one or more of precisely these virtues. A reporter who is dishonest, prejudiced, or corruptible will not present information accurately. These are then the central vices behind fake news, next to perhaps the vices of attention seeking and sensationalism. False balance, too, may be caused by sheer sensationalism. Especially in television, and to a lesser extent in radio, the common sense view seems to be that it is more entertaining to have a debate between two people who disagree than to have one or more experts telling their story and agreeing. This appears to be less prevalent in printed media. In terms of virtues and vices, sensationalism is best thought of as an absence of sincerity or

integrity. The motivation behind programming like this is mostly to make “good TV” rather than to inform the audience.

However, it seems that in most instances false balance is practiced for different, more justifiable reasons, which are perfectly compatible with the traditional journalistic virtues. Honesty, objectivity and integrity require good journalists to be as accurate and unbiased in their reporting as they possibly can be. A journalist who wants to be completely truthful about the scientific community’s stance on climate change may want to represent the full spectrum of opinions to their audience. A reporter who wants to remain impartial and avoid any semblance of bias may want to invite not just a medical expert but also a layperson worried about their child’s health to a discussion on vaccination. Not only are these examples compatible with honesty, objectivity and integrity, but these virtues even seem to require the behavior described. The reasoning behind it is quite understandable, and in cases of political debates over normative issues, giving a voice to minority and non-expert opinions is important and often the only just thing to do. Even in relation to scientific ideas, covering maverick or outsider views plays an important role in challenging dominant scientific paradigms (Dearing 1995: 356).⁸ Ignoring such outsider views can inhibit social and scientific progress. Yet there are also issues that, although politically relevant, are ultimately descriptive, can be settled with facts, and about which there is a substantial scientific consensus. Again, prominent examples include the safety of vaccines and the reality of human-induced climate change. Presenting those issues as political or as something about which there can be reasonable disagreement is itself taking a political stance and moving away from neutrality. It is exactly those issues with regard to which false balance is most prevalent. So where a focus on the virtues of honesty, objectivity and integrity works to prevent the problem of fake news, focusing too much and exclusively on these same virtues is itself a cause of false balance. This raises the question what journalists can do to avoid false balance as much as possible.

If the problem is overreliance on a small set of virtues, the answer is to look for other virtues that can balance them out. These are the professional virtues of the journalist that have not received as much attention. Because the journalist is also a gatekeeper, the virtues are at the same time epistemic and moral in nature. We will here suggest five such virtues that might mitigate the problem of false

⁸ Given this, we should not think that the fairest form of representation is one that is strictly proportional to the level of expert opinion. There may be a case to be made for giving minority views a higher degree of attention than such a directly proportional approach would produce. This is consistent though with the claims we are making about the problems that arise with consistently providing equal airtime to two views when one is overwhelmingly supported by expert opinion and the other is not.

balance, although undoubtedly additional virtues would contribute to optimal journalist practice. Still, the virtues we have in mind – wisdom, vigilance, care, justice, and courage – should be a good start.

Firstly, the virtue of wisdom, particularly practical wisdom, is important especially in the journalist's relation to their audience. They should avoid naiveté about the audience's ability to process information and evaluate expertise and evidence without the proper support. They should also avoid naiveté about the political and economic motivations some commentators might have to openly question the scientific consensus, for instance the monetary incentives there may be to deny climate change. The development of this virtue deserves a central place in journalistic training. Students of journalism should be taught about the psychology of communication. They should also receive at least a basic training in assessing scientific evidence and scientific expertise. The main challenge is to not let wisdom degrade into the type of pessimistic, misanthropic view that will lead to oversimplified, paternalistic reporting.

The second virtue that should be more central to journalistic training is vigilance. Sometimes false balance is the result of a lack of background research or active moderation in a discussion. It is much easier and more exciting to let a debate play out and hope the truth will prevail than to first have to do due diligence and then interrupt whenever commentators say something misleading. Still, arduous and costly as it may be, if a reporter does want to organize a discussion, that level of preparation and involvement is necessary to avoid false balance. Without it, the perceived winner of the debate will most assuredly be the most charismatic speaker rather than the one who has the best arguments. The conditions for the exercise of this virtue are largely institutional, in that journalists need to be provided with the proper resources to be able to be vigilant.

Care is a very broad virtue. The type that is relevant to journalists involves, of course, care for the product they are making: the article or program they are working on. More importantly, they should care about the truth and about what they are communicating to their audiences. Caring in this manner goes beyond merely being honest, because it concerns more than just being truthful and avoiding lies.⁹ It is also about avoiding bullshit, and about the message people take away from reading, watching or listening to what you have created. Journalism should be more about what the audience needs to hear, and less about what the reporter intended (and whether they were biased or not). The journalist should care not only about ensuring that what they say is true but also that the truth is communicated to their audience. In that sense, indifference can be just as problematic as partiality.

⁹ More detailed suggestions for developing the virtue of care in journalism are made by Linda Steiner and Chad Okrush (2006). For a general discussion on the concept of care in epistemology, see Dalmiya (2002).

The discussion about false balance as a form of epistemic unfairness suggests that justice, especially epistemic justice, should be another virtue of the journalist. They should give credit where it is due and not presume to discount years of study and scientific methodology with irrelevant counterpoints like the public perception of a fact. Of course, this does not mean they cannot be critical of experts – they should be. The main point is to avoid legitimizing views that are baseless and thereby inflating the notion of expertise itself.

All of the recommendations above also require the virtue of courage. It is key that journalists do not fear the appearance of bias to the point where they cannot do earnest reporting anymore. Of course, it is important not to be prejudiced, but one should also avoid validating opinions that are manifestly wrong and potentially dangerous. These views do not deserve that much attention. Where it is necessary to cite marginal views or have someone voicing them, journalists should not shy away from strict moderating and explicit criticism. We must realize that false balance is not actual objectivity, it is rather a type of cowardice, resulting more from the fear to be seen as biased rather than the fear of actually being biased.¹⁰

All of the virtues we have suggested above might be summed up under the overarching virtue of responsibility. Journalists should take responsibility for the reports they are making, and crucially, for the message their reporting communicates to their audiences. None of these virtues are completely absent from the current journalistic practice. Nevertheless, we think they have been overshadowed by honesty, objectivity and integrity. Courage and fairness are actually quite often referred to in ethical codes. However, even there they are usually interpreted in the context of those three more central virtues. Courage is typically the courage to investigate and report the facts even when this is against the wishes of the powers that be (Adam, Craft and Cohen 2004). Fairness is interpreted as impartiality in one's presentation, to avoid conflicts of interest or subjectivity (Iggers: 41-43, 91). Instead, we believe that the way we have spelled out the virtues of wisdom, vigilance, care, justice and courage above offers more concrete guidance in how false balance may be avoided. What they each have in common is that they refer back to the first insight of gatekeeping theory. Good gatekeeping does not only entail being accurate, but also to select, and to leave out what is irrelevant, confusing or misleading. Focusing exclusively on honesty, objectivity and integrity, or focusing on a limited interpretation of these virtues, means overlooking the gatekeeper's first responsibility.

¹⁰ A similar point is made by Jay Rosen (2013), who urges reporters to resist what he calls “false innocence” about their own partisanship.

4. Conclusion: Avoiding False Balance

Philosophical discussions of post-truth and the media tend to focus on the problem of fake news, suggesting that the devaluation of facts and expertise is mostly due to the rise of new media. This wrongly gives the impression that print media, radio and television do not also bear part of the responsibility. We have demonstrated that the phenomenon of false balance, practiced by traditional media, is equally problematic as fake news. Though it is clearly different in its aims and motives, it has contributed to post-truth attitudes in a possibly even more fundamental way. False balance is not just an expression of, but also a partial cause of the worrisome decrease of trust in experts. It can spring from sensationalist tendencies, but more often it seems to be caused by exclusive focus on the virtues of honesty, objectivity and integrity – the virtues that are considered to be central to the journalism profession. In order to prevent false balance as much as possible, we recommend the developing and fostering of additional gatekeeping virtues, including wisdom, vigilance, care, justice and courage.

Although we are hopeful that these virtues can provide better direction for responsible gatekeeping, we realize there are theoretical and practical obstacles to the eradication of false balance. First there is the fundamental difficulty that a layperson cannot reliably determine who is a legitimate expert, and what counts as good evidence. Most evidence can only properly be evaluated by fellow experts, and credentials like degrees or prizes can be misleading. These are some of the most significant problems in social epistemology, which may never be completely solved (Goldman 2001). In the meantime, journalists should get a basic training in scientific literacy and will otherwise have to rely on people's track record in the relevant field as the most accessible legitimate marker of expertise.

There are also practical limitations on journalists' ability to fully exercise all of these virtues all of the time. Many of them are time-consuming and require a lot of effort. Considering the urgency behind news reporting and continuing financial cuts to quality journalism, it will often be impossible for even the best journalist to act fully virtuously. The responsibility to avoid false balance therefore lies not only with the individual journalist, but also with governments, media companies, newspaper publishers, producers and even the audience. As long as funding is tied to ratings, the only way to fully enable virtuous journalism is if the audience develops virtues, too. Alternatively, a more systematic change in the media enterprise is needed. There is also an important role for journalism schools. If virtues are developed and fostered from early on in journalists' training, there is hope that at least some of them become habitual, so that exercising them requires less effort.

Finally, not all of our suggestions necessarily take more time than the production of false balance would. In some ways it is easier to only invite one expert to comment than to also have to interview someone who happens to disagree. In many instances, this is the quickest and simplest way to avoid false balance. Not every article or program on climate change needs to include the voice of the climate change denier. Again, good gatekeeping also means to select only what is relevant. However, we are not claiming that marginal views should never be represented in the media. There are background pieces for which it can be desirable or necessary to give the full spectrum of opinions on a certain issue. Much of the challenge in avoiding false balance is determining, on the basis of contextual factors like the target audience, the time slot or placement and available time and space, which is the appropriate place for giving a nuanced, detailed and complete overview of a discussion. For those pieces there should be enough time made available to do proper research and for the kind of critical moderation that can unveil bad arguments and false beliefs. It is in those cases that the virtues of wisdom, vigilance, care, justice and courage are most needed.¹¹

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¹¹ Thanks to audiences at Tilburg University, the University of Arizona's Centre for the Philosophy of Freedom, and the conference on Virtues, Media and Democracy at the University of Genoa. Special thanks to Amanda Cawston, Simon Frith, Maarten van Houte, Jenny McKay, Maureen Sie, Nancy Snow and Maria Silvia Vaccarezza for their helpful feedback. Alfred Archer's work on this paper was supported by the NOW (The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) Grant Number 016.Veni.174.104.

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