

The Effect of the Right-Wing Media on Public Knowledge of the Affordable Care Act (ACA)

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Abstract—Bill Hicks, a famous comedian known for his abrasive, acerbic style of humor, argued in the 1990s that the Media was working against the public's interest by spinning and misrepresenting data. This is evident in the modern day as public knowledge of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is distorted and misrepresented by the misinformation presented by the right-wing media through psychological framing. The conclusion is not only corroborated by specific cases of conservative vitriol but also by the statistics showing the knowledge base of each news network's audience demographic. The "information process" as outlined by Hicks can be delineated into three separate parts, and it is through this course that we find Hicks' argument truly manifest in the modern day. Because of the misinformation phenomenon found in the ACA, it is possible that the very purpose of democracy is being countered as voter bases are acting against their own best interests.

Index Terms— Affordable Care Act ACA, Bill Hicks, Media Bias, Political Affiliation Media Studies Misinformation Media Manipulation Corruption Obamacare Health Care Reform Fox News Washington Times New York Times Politifact Democracy Medicare Medicaid Economy Recession Belief Perseverance Critical Thinking Nimmagadda Sridutt Popular Psychology Social Commentary Critical Cognitive Obstinacy Comedy Henry J. Kaiser Truthfulness



INTRODUCTION

"You watch the news these days? It's unbelievable. You think you just walk out your door, you're immediately gonna [sic] be raped by some crack-addicted, AIDS-infected pit-bull."

WILLIAM MELVIN HICKS [1]

If you were to look up the word "rebel" in the dictionary, you would not find a picture of a smirking Bill Hicks puffing away at a cigarette. No wispy strands of smoke would greet you as you turned the page, and Hicks' eyes would not mock you with their raised, amused expression. You wouldn't find any pictures of Hicks under the words "insolent," "irreverent," or "impudent" either. However, that isn't to say that Hicks, with his caustic and angry sense of humor, did not epitomize these qualities in his comedy skits. Hicks was a rebel. Hicks was insolent. Hicks was irreverent.

At the same time, the outspoken comedian was thought-provoking. Hicks used comedy as a means to convey his messages and personal viewpoints to his audience. Through his sharp use of wit, sarcasm, and irony, Hicks maintained humor by contrasting his brash persona with the deep, profound, and thought-provoking statements his persona made onstage. Hicks fired away sharp one-liners, jeering insults and witty criticisms toward everything that he found mundane, hypocritical, illogical and deceitful about everyday

American culture. Everything was on Hicks' radar; nothing was exempt from the line of fire.

As is the case with most acerbic and profane comedians, controversy hounded Hicks during his lifetime due to his provocative statements. This controversy was not unwarranted by any means; Hicks is known for his offensive skits and fervent denigration of American culture. Materialism, jingoism and anti-intellectualism were just a few of the many topics Hicks would discuss in his comedy routines. These three components would often come together to establish Hicks' deep distrust and hatred of America's "cornerstone" of free speech: the news media.

By presenting examples of American society at its lowest level, Hicks used comedy to convey his doubts over the ability of the uneducated masses of America to really protect their own freedoms and best interests. Through his rabid ridicule of American culture, Bill Hicks argues in *Relentless* that the news media has a negative effect on the American populace because its sensationalism and inaccuracy when presenting contemporary events and issues causes the general public to make misinformed judgments on issues that are pertinent to them (Fig. 1). This trend has been exhibited over the past few years, and it is evident in the right-wing news coverage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) that the news media has often distorted the hard facts of the bill. Through sensationalism and inaccuracy, the right-wing news media has led a large portion of the American populace into being misinformed about the ACA. It is possible that through misinformation, these information sources have swayed a large portion of the voter base into acting against their own self-interest by leading them to form erroneously-founded judgments which they could then act upon when voting.

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HICKS AND THE “INFORMATION PROCESS”

Hicks was a vocal critic of the mainstream media during his lifetime, and he was very clear about his particular disposition. Over the span of his career, the acidity of his comments toward the Media had waxed and waned but became fairly evident during the latter years of his life. Before passing away from pancreatic cancer, Hicks was an ardent critic of the United States government and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) for their violent handling of the Waco Siege [2]. On some nights, Hicks would move from his typically cynical persona into a persona much more bitter and honest.

“Kennedy,” Hicks would often say before moving into his rant about the Kennedy assassination, “I love talking about the Kennedy assassination because to me it is a great example of the totalitarian government’s ability to use to media to be able to manage information and keep us in the dark.” Hicks goes on to describe the physics of the Kennedy assassination. The crux of the joke revolves around the contrast between the accepted version of the truth and the proposed version of the truth made by Hicks. “If the bullet came from here,” Hicks slowly enunciated, “then the head would’ve rocked...right the fuck over here.” By establishing the warrant that the news media may not have been truthful about the cause of Kennedy’s death, Bill implies that there is a higher power at hand working to control the population. It is within this skit that Hicks starts to suggest that the Media may not be on the side of the populace it informs. It is tacitly expressed (through gesticulations and facial contortions) that this account of the assassination as fed to the populace by the news media serves to keep the American public “docile, stupid, and misinformed” [1]. This is implied to be a negative effect as Hicks often portrayed themes of civil disobedience in a positive light in his comedy skits. This particular quote also establishes that claim that being misinformed as a bad thing. The implied meaning, however, is that by being misinformed the American public will then work against their best interest—that is, stay docile and uninvolved in current issues and political participation.

This skit is featured prominently in the literary source *Relentless*, a video of Hicks presenting his stand-up comedy routine. Other skits in the source play upon the same themes. In one particular skit, Hicks refers to a realization he had about the news media. “It’s just so scary watching the news, how they built it all out of proportion, [as if] Iraq was ever, or could ever, possibly [sic], under any stretch of the imagination be a threat to us—whatsoever. But watching the news you never woulda [sic] got that idea” [2]. Again, whether or not the warrants behind this quote are factually accurate, the quote clearly demonstrates Hicks’ distrust of the Media. In the same segment, Hicks urges the audience to not take what the Media says at face value. He even goes to say that Americans

have “lost their ability to judge properly.” What is the warrant behind this claim?

Dwight Slade, one of Hicks’ best friends, said in *American: The Bill Hicks Story* that Hicks just wanted to provoke thought in his audience [2]. The documentary actually provides valuable, reliable insight into Hicks’ life and attitude because many of the producers and contributors of the film were his friends and family. Hicks attributes the ability to judge as a necessary facet of critical thinking. Hicks did not use the words “judge” or “judgment” with their typical con-

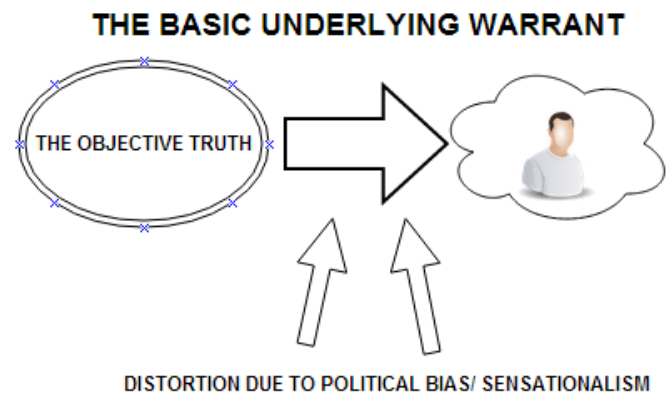


Fig. 1. Political bias, in this particular visual, serves as a keyword for “private agenda.” Political biases and private agendas can distort the truth of public affairs. This is done often through the medium of sensationalism.

notations of prejudice; as a matter of fact, he argues against this very thought process by encouraging the audience to be informed and rely on their curiosity and intuition to become educated rather than by blindly digesting the information given to them. Hicks would often shout in his comedy skits that “you’re [the audience] right! Not those fuckers! Don’t let [the Media] tell you how to think! You’re fucking right!” With this quote, Hicks makes a correlation between the “information” that Media presents and the effect that it has on the general consumer. The quote refers to the aforementioned “Iraq situation” skit as well as the “Basic Instinct” skit. Hicks mocks people who let themselves be influenced into analyzing the movie *Basic Instinct* for critical value rather than just accepting that the movie was simply pornographic and of substandard quality [1]. He does this by mimicking a typical American consumer who states that “oh, does this movie have a meaning? What about the sexual themes? Ooh [sic] controversy! The media must make this movie mean something!” and immediately juxtaposes that physical caricature with his normal persona’s diatribe: “Piece of shit and walk away! That is all, folks” [1].

Through this particular example, Hicks clearly provides a cause and effect process (Fig. 2). The initial reaction of the general population is one of disgust. Then the population

is influenced by the Media into thinking that there may be a deeper, more profound meaning to what is perceived as a “skin flick” by Hicks. Initially, it seems as if Hicks is arguing against critical thinking. As a matter of fact, he still supports critical thinking by urging the audience to not confuse the Media’s values with their own personal values. To Hicks, this

out that the American casualty count was shockingly low when compared to the Middle-Eastern casualty count [1]. This skit leads to a rant by Hicks that mentions how the Media always builds things out of proportion: “You watch the news these days? It’s [fucking] unbelievable, you think you just walk outside your door and you’re gonna [sic] be raped by

HICKS PERSPECTIVE (CAUSE - EFFECT - NEGATIVITY)

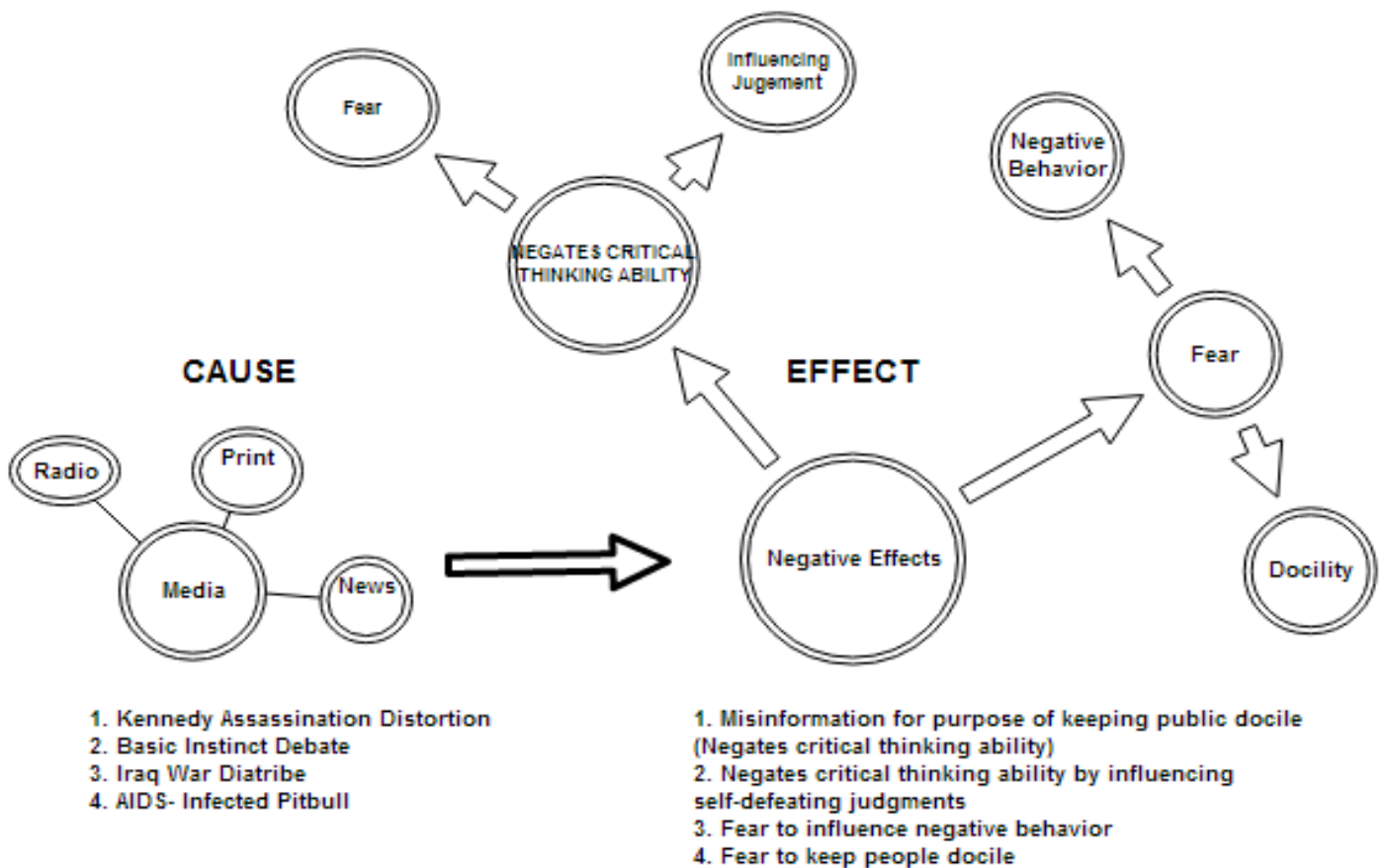


Fig. 2. The figure graphically illustrates the complexity of Hicks’ argument as well as the clear cause-and-effect structure of the Media on the public through misinformation and sensationalism.

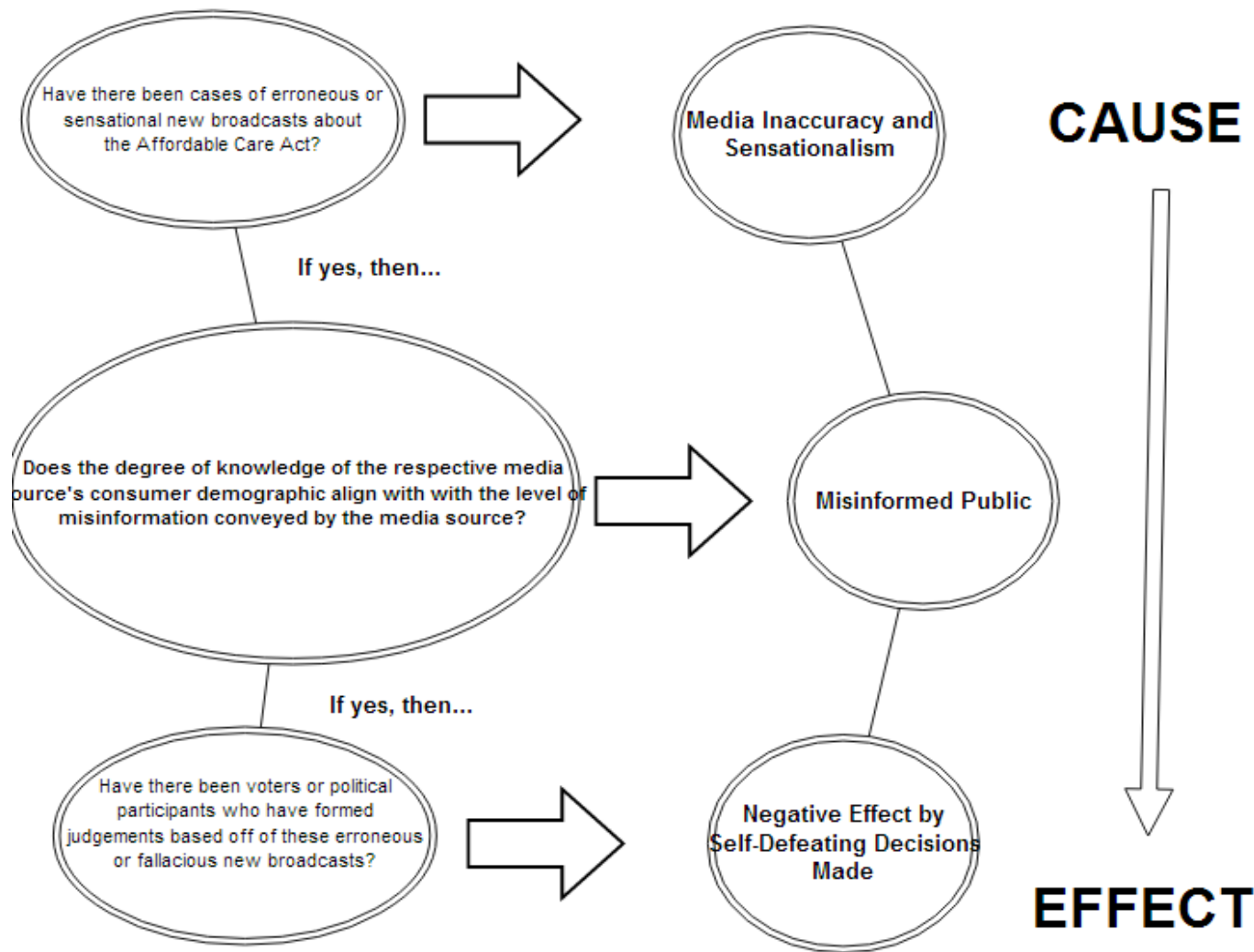
process enables every person to stand up for what he believes in while analyzing the culture around him critically.

The aforementioned example goes to show that Hicks did argue that the Media has a negative effect on the populace by feeding them sensational or erroneous information; the negative effect, it seems, comes from the influence the Media has when it influences people to act against their own interest. We saw this with the case of the Iraq skit, as Hicks went on about how the sensationalism of the Iraq War coverage in the early 1990s led to violent military intervention. Despite being commonly accepted as a “noble war,” the Iraq War’s purpose as projected by the Media was mocked when Hicks pointed

some crack-addicted, AIDS-infested pitbull” [1]. The real meaning of this particular statement is not clear until an assertion made in the final monologue of *Relentless*: “The eyes of fear want us to build bigger locks on our doors, buy guns, and close ourselves [the audience] off. The eyes of love instead see all of us as one.” Bill Hicks clearly portrays the news media as an instigator of fear; thus, the Media has a negative effect by instilling fear within the audience which could lead them to make bad decisions rather than good decisions. When logically explicated, the warrant makes sense; fear leads to decisions made in haste and decisions led by emotion rather than objective reasoning; thus, fear and bad decision-making go hand in

hand. Sensationalism is used by the media to gain viewership by striking emotion into the hearts of consumers; after all, it is a tool that has been used in the news industry ever since Joseph Pulitzer competed with William Randolph Hearst for newspaper circulation [3]. Thus, the spread of fear rather than objective news broadcasts makes it clear that emotions (such as fear) are spread by media outlets for viewership and market share. Sensationalism, it seems, is intentionally conveyed by the news media.

Through each and every one of these examples, an implicit cause and effect pattern is presented. The Media consistently seems to provide sensational or erroneous information to the populace or otherwise influence their thought processes; in response to this process, Hicks perceives that the news media influences people to make judgments that may not be within their best interest. In terms of a functional democracy, it seems reasonable to state that under these terms, the media may actually undermine the purpose of the democ-



HICKS' ARGUMENT AND IT'S ALIGNMENT WITH MISINFORMATION ABOUT THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Fig. 3. By establishing that the cause and effect structure of misinformation in the debate over the ACA does align with Hicks' argument, it becomes clear that the misinformation spread throughout the ACA coverage by major news networks follows the same pattern and thus justifies Hicks' argument with an example of a real world application.

racy by leading people to form judgments on current issues that run counter to their best interests. This brings us to the issue of misinformation spread by the media about the ACA and its effects on voter choice.

THE DEBATE OVER THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

In order to deduce the degree to which right-wing misinformation has affected the knowledge of the American public about the Affordable Care Act, the evidence of the situation must line up with the same cause and effect structure of Hicks' argument about the news media. This is a three step process.

To begin with, it must be established that the news media does, in fact, misinform the general public through inaccurate reports and sensationalism. From that point on, a strong link must be evident between the American public and the news networks/media sources that the different demographics of voters align themselves with. Finally, it must be

sial facet of health care reform. Clearly, there is something going on with the American public and their knowledge of the Affordable Care Act. 52% of Americans have an issue with the ACA according to a Gallup Poll with a margin of error being ±4 percentage points [4]. However, 71% of the same test subjects found the individual provisions of the bill to have positive rather than negative effects on the state of health care in America [5]. For these two statistics to be factual yet contradictory only goes to show that something wrong is going on with the knowledge base of a portion of the test subjects.

Media Matters, a Media watchdog group dedicated to fact-checking the news media, published a list of erroneous "facts" presented by the Media during the election coverage period under the guise of "political commentary." On June 30th, *Fox News Watch* featured James Pinkerton, a guest who claimed that Chief Justice Roberts has "declared [the ACA] to be the giant – the biggest tax increase in the history of the Universe, and Obama has to wear it" [6]. This statement has been echoed by Rush Limbaugh and Jom Hoft, as they both claim that Obama does actually have the biggest tax hike in United States history despite promising to cut taxes [7]. This has been sharply countered by Politifact, a Media watchdog organization that fact-checks media broadcasts (Fig. 4). The ACA is a smaller tax hike in relation to GDP than the Reagan Tax Increase of 1980 and the Clinton Tax Increase of 1993 [8].

Considering that the economy and debt of the United States has been consistently shown to be one of the most important issues for American voters, these examples of the Media presenting faulty information to the public surely has had a negative effect on voters. According to a study by the World Public Opinion, an organization dedicated to unbiased polling, Fox News viewers were 34 *percentage points* more likely to believe that the health care law will worsen the deficit. 38% of those who rarely watch Fox News said that they believed that the Affordable Care Act would increase the federal deficit over the next ten years. 72% of those who watched Fox News every day thought that the ACA would increase the federal deficit *despite this assertion running counter to the opinion of most economists* [7]. This evidence clearly shows that 72% of those watching Fox News are misinformed about the actual financial implications of the ACA. The demographic of people who believe that the ACA will increase the deficit are the same people who oppose it; considering that Fox News has a median viewer age of 65 years old [15], it is possible that a large majority of Fox viewers are forming judgments that counter their own best interests. The ACA houses provisions to curb the soaring costs of Medicare, according to Sara R. Collins, PHD., Vice President of the Commonwealth Fund, a private research foundation focused on health care. This refutes the assertion made by Mitt Romney and Sean Hannity that the new law cuts Medicare drastically [9]. This information was given by the AARP, a membership organization advocating positive

Tax Bill	Increase as % of GDP
Revenue Act of 1951	1.52%
Revenue Act of 1950	1.33%
Temporary Surcharge of 1968	1.09%
Excess Profits Tax of 1950	.97%
Reagan Tax Increase of 1982	.80%
Tax Increase of 1966	.60%
Oil Windfall Tax of 1980	.50%
Clinton Tax Increase of 1993	.50%
Bush Tax Increase of 1990	.49%
Obamacare	.49%
Tax Reform Act of 1969	.30%
Deficit Reduction Act of 1984	.30%
Budget Reconciliation of 1987	.24%
Tax Reform Act of 1986	.22%
Social Security Tax of 1983	.20%

Fig. 3. This table by Politifact shows that the ACA is, by no stretch of the imagination, the largest tax hike in the history of the United States. It might very well just be the largest tax hike in terms of the growth in the tax base, but in relation to GDP it is a tax increase proportionate to Bush's tax increase in 1990 [7].

established that the audience of these inaccurate new networks form judgments that run counter to their own best interest. The latter will be evident through the poll findings of each demographic. This process follows the same cause and effect structure as Bill Hick's argument (Fig. 3).

Few issues have been more controversial than the debate over the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the most controver-

social change to people over the age of 50 through information and service. Evidently the ACA is being opposed by members of the very same demographic that benefits from the bill due to the misinformation spread by Fox News.

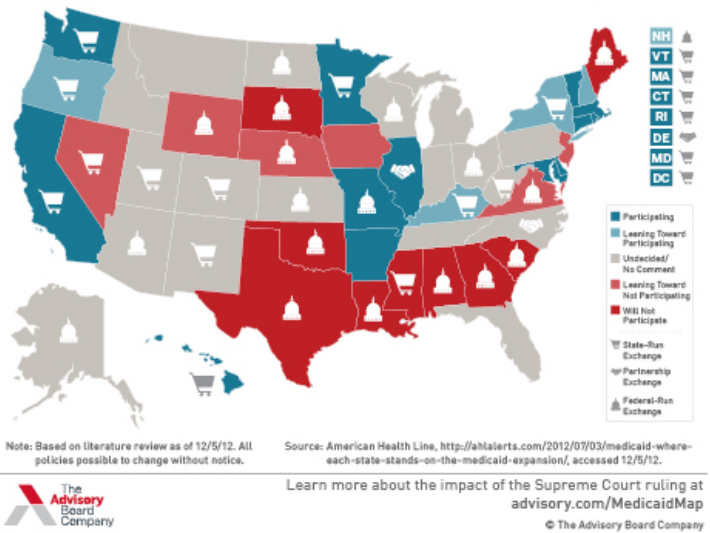
The case of misinformation and media erroneousess does not only affect the older population, however. Take the state of Texas, a state that has vehemently stood against the ACA with its congressional representation [11]. The median annual income of a family in Texas is \$47,601 a year and 23% of the population is living in poverty [Fig. 5a], [13]. Both of these statistics prove to be below the national statistics for the same figures, with 20% of the national population living in poverty and the median national income being \$50,022 a year. This is exactly the kind of demographic that would benefit from the Affordable Care Act, according to a visual analysis done by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation [Fig. 5b], [14]. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to demystifying health care reform and health care laws for the American public, as well as doing public health research. The visual shows that at least 20% of the Texan population could benefit from the ACA due to its expansion of Medicaid. This trend is not just evident in Texas; as a matter of fact, it is evident in most of the Southern states that have been challenging the ACA. Why are these states opposing that particular provision [Figs. 5a], [5]?

We can infer the conservative viewpoints of the population living in these states lead the general populace to seek news sources they align themselves politically with; hence, Fox News and its inaccurate coverage affects their knowledge base profoundly, leading them to act against their best interest. This is justified by the basic human tendency to listen to news sources that align with our own beliefs. These southern states have been historically conservative, and thus the population generally is exposed to conservative news stimuli [3]. 78% of Fox viewers support Republican candidates [15]. This only goes to show the influence that Fox News has on its conservative audience; it is undoubtedly conservative itself!

By presenting the example of southern states challenging the ACA despite a large portion of the population being able to potentially benefit from the bill and the example of Fox News voters opposed the ACA despite being able to benefit from the bill, it has essentially been proven that the right-wing news media has, actually, misinformed a large portion of the public and ultimately led them into acting against their self-interest. The very same demographics that could benefit from the ACA are refuting its services and standing against the bill. This fulfills the final phase of Hicks' argument. People are using misinformation to act against their own interest.

This exemplifies Hick's exact argument as Hicks argued that the media erroneously presents information and misinforms the American public, which in turn causes them to act against their best interest. In the cases presented, Fox News

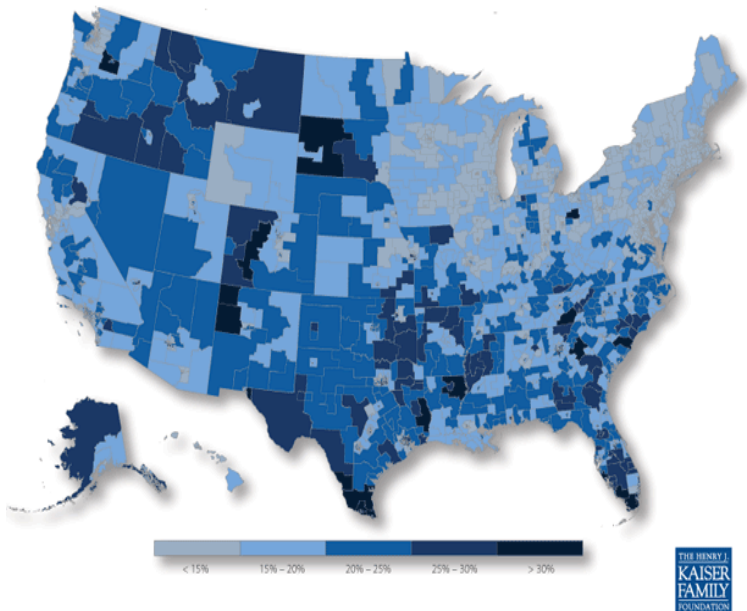
After Election 2012: Where the States Stand What are the States Saying about ACA Medicaid Expansion?



Figs. 4a and b. Why is it that the states that oppose the ACA (or are even indifferent to it) are also the ones who could benefit from it the most? (Images taken from Advisory Board Company [13] and the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation [14], respectively).

Who Benefits from the Affordable Care Act Coverage Expansions?

Percentage of the Nonelderly Population With Income Up to Four Times the Poverty level Who Were Uninsured or Purchasing Individual Coverage, 2010



has clearly misinformed its audience. Being misguided, Fox News' audience has been forming judgments that work against their best interest. It is along these lines that we see that this process aligns with Hicks' argument, thus justifying the real world application of his argument to the ACA debate.

LIBERAL BIAS?

Does the rest of the Media misinform? Some might argue that this particular analysis of the ACA debate is too biased toward the left. As a matter of fact, "The news media is liberal!" is often used as a battle cry by conservatives. Conservatives might say that since the news media is typically liberal, it misinforms about the ACA to portray it in a *positive* light. Then, it seems fair to say that the only way to really understand the facts of current issues is to counterbalance the liberal media sources with a conservative media source. From this perspective, it seems as if Fox News is more reliable because its political alignment is not typical of most media sources.

Despite this viewpoint automatically being attributable to *belief perseverance*¹, it seems to be valid at first glance. After all, not a lot of facts about misinformation from the left seem to be present. Fox News is the only news network that has been mentioned and debunked so far. Make no mistake; this perspective is not deductive of critical thinking. After all, wrong is still wrong.

The fact of the matter is that most of the misinformation about the Affordable Care Act comes from the right-wing media simply because the very ideology of the bill leans to the liberal side of the political spectrum. Such legislature is bound to invoke a hostile reaction from the right-wing media simply because the bill seems to be an example of "socialist" legislation. There are a few problems with that assumption however. By calling the bill a work of "socialism", it is implied that socialism is a worse economic system than capitalism. The two ideologies simply stand on two ends of the political spectrum, and neither one outweighs the other in terms of moral or political rightness. This opposing argument, however, just goes to emphasize the sensationalism of the right-wing media when approaching this particular subject. This is not to say that the left-wing media is completely unbiased. That is not true at all. But really, the left-wing media has been more truthful about the ACA because their liberal bias does not need to oppose any tenets of the bill. Network TV News broadcast audiences, public broadcasting audiences, CNN audiences, and MSNBC audiences have all been exposed to the generally liberal bias of the left-wing media. Yet, all of these demographics consistently outperform Fox News audiences when it comes to their knowledge of the Affordable Care Act and its effects, often by as much as *38 percentage points* [15]. The survey, done by World Public Opinion, has been verified

¹ *Belief perseverance* describes the tendency for those with strong particular leanings one way or another on the political spectrum to refuse to believe or accept facts that contradict their own particular ideology, even if the facts have been proven, justified, and evident. This phenomenon is linked to, but not the same as, *confirmation bias*. Critical cognitive obstinacy may lead to confirmation bias, which is when consumers seek out information that confirms their own beliefs and attitudes. This is the warrant behind the "counterbalance" theory proposed above regarding Fox News and the mainstream media. The theory proposes that Fox News is seen as a legitimate source of information by conservatives simply because it is an alternative to the typical, liberal mainstream media [21].

to be correct to a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$. Clearly, liberal bias is not an issue in this particular case. Conservative bias is.

According to Kevin Drum, writer for the politically liberal *Mother Jones* magazine, the conservative misinformation campaign about "Obamacare" has worked really, really well. While *Mother Jones* has been known to be affiliated with the liberal and independent side of the political spectrum, it has been nominated for the National Magazine Awards 23 times and has won three times for "General Excellence" in 2001, 2008, and 2010 according to the Association of Magazine Media. Drum writes that the conservative misinformation campaign's success in misleading the public has worked really well because the issues that conservatives discuss the most, like low-income subsidies, small business tax credits, and individual mandates, are the ones that people generally know the least about [16]. This assertion was taken from a nonpartisan Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Public Opinion study. "Democrats (32 percent), who generally favor the law, and independents (26 percent) were somewhat more likely to get high scores, getting 7 to 10 answers right, than Republicans (18 percent) who dislike the law in greater numbers" [17]. The *nonpartisan* health care research center addressed the case of misinformation on the right as well! Only 25% of those test subjects who watch Fox News got the 7 to 10 questions right on the test, which was far less than MSNBC and CNN audience statistics. The Kaiser Report even goes on to say that the differences in knowledge between the demographics of network news viewers may be "related to whether or not people generally favor or oppose the law." Media sources that align to the right politically seem to generally oppose the law. Thus, a connection can be made between the information that these conservative news sources present and the relative idiocy of their audience. This only goes to show that the argument involving misinformation about the ACA does not feature any liberal bias because liberal biases by news networks have not misinformed their audience. These networks have no private agenda to misinform. Liberal networks such as MSNBC and CNN cater to a liberal audience. There seems to be no need to misinform about a bill based on liberal ideology to an audience that supports the very same bill!

TO CHANGE (OR TO NOT TO CHANGE)

The generally accepted purpose of journalism is to present the facts of issues that the public cares about. Bernard Goldberg, a respected conservative columnist with many years of experience in the news industry, says that this purpose is distorted as journalists often only present one side of the issue in the hopes of providing some insight to their character [22]. When taking what Goldberg says into consideration, it becomes evident that the news can actually misinform rather than inform

the public because of subconscious (or conscious) individual reporter bias [22].

If so, does our right to freedom of speech, a right to assume to be necessary for a functional democracy, actually hinder the purpose of a democracy? From this particular perspective, it seems to be evident that regulation of the media and news industry must be put into place; this seems to be the next logical step. Whether or not the different news outlets are purposefully biased or not, the fact of the matter is that there is a political bias in the major news networks.

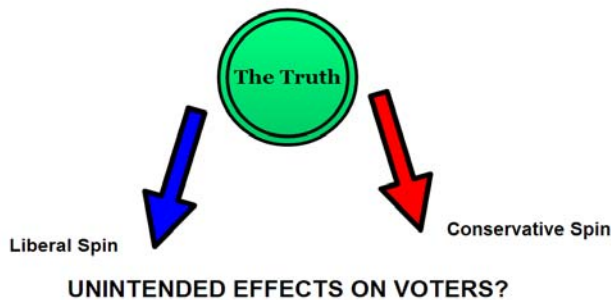


Fig. 6. When we establish that there is spin to news media and that it is intentional, do we see that there are unintended effects on voters? How has the political landscape been affected by the practices of modern day news journalists?

Such regulation would run counter to the concept of freedom of speech in the democratic sense. Bill Hicks, a passionate supporter of freedom of speech (and arguably, freedom of dissent), probably would have found this method of “media control” to be outright Orwellian. Many would assume that the problem would solve itself over time; however, this is based upon the assumption that people would rather listen to objective, honest news journalism than dishonest, subjective news journalism. However, if we take the case of Fox News into account, we see that this has clearly not been the case.

According to the Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), Fox News is the most biased name in news [15]. FAIR derives its reliability from its watchdog status in the Media; the entire organization is dedicated to pointing out inaccurate information conveyed by the Media. Andrew Kirtzman, when applying for a job with Fox, was asked what his political affiliation was. Kirtzman, a respected news reporter in New York City, admitted that when he refused to give his political affiliation, all employment discussion ended [15]. If we take what Bernard Goldberg said about news journalism bias into consideration, we will see that there has to be a fair level of skewed information being presented from Fox News simply because the channel is predominantly run by conservatives. Yet the channel continues to be popular with viewers. *The O’Reilly Factor* has been the number one cable prime-time news show for 50 consecutive quarters despite being generally

accepted as one of the most partisan cable news shows on television by non-partisan pundits [5]. Third quarter network ratings report Fox News had a 6% increase from 2011 to 2012. Clearly, Fox News is still popular among viewers. These statistics tie us right back into critical cognitive obstinacy and confirmation bias.

As freedom of speech is a necessary condition for democracy, we cannot throw freedom of speech under the bus to maintain objective news journalism. After all, there is no written standard for what news journalism should be because in the end, viewers are more likely to use news sources that align with their own beliefs. In addition, political commentary is one of the rights that Americans generally seem to cherish. Thus, the best it seems we can do to ensure that our democracy stays functional (that is, if we accept that a functional democracy has to be one where the public is informed and voting in their own best interest) is instill the skills of critical thinking and analysis in the general American public. At secondary and higher levels of education, critical thinking is fostered and characterized by the production of judgments in complex situations using “sound evidence, adequate evidence, and articulated values” [14]. Given that the political and socioeconomic landscape is a complex environment to wrap one’s head around, being able to reason through information and pick out. In any case, isn’t that what Hicks tried to do all along with his comedy routines?

But it’s not so easy to teach critical thinking. It is not as if the American school system hasn’t tried either. This is because good teachers and professors display the *products* of their critical ability and skills through the arguments and interpretations they make in their daily instruction. Students, however, *rarely witness the thought process that a mind goes through when thinking critically*. Students are often required to complete analytical tasks that require such skills but in the end it is up to student to be able to try to learn and reason for himself [14]. Thus it’s clear that the education system in the America has been trying to foster the skills of critical thinking and reasoning in students. While these skills have applications in virtually every field, there is no doubt that they are paramount in importance when concerning decision making and judgment forming. But something is not working, especially if a large portion of the American population continues to be misinformed by the Media on political matters pertinent to them. Maybe we don’t have an answer to this conundrum yet. It’s not easy to maintain a balance between freedom of speech and freedom of democracy even though they seem to go hand in hand. After all, if an entity feeds the population erroneous information that ultimately leads them to act against their own self-interest, then isn’t the purpose of a democracy neutralized?

But if the government was to take away freedom of speech in an effort to regulate the “accuracy” of the media,

why would it stop there? In some cases, the government has already exercised power to restrict the freedom of speech; the Patriot Act has been used by the FBI over a dozen times to force journalists into withholding interviews and information from publication [19]. *Isn't this regulation of the media as well?*

If the American government goes to that extent to regulate information, our civil liberties would be threatened. So freedom of speech, even if it is misguided, must continue. Perhaps one day Americans will choose to critically analyze the information around them more deeply. At that point, the population can make judgments that actually benefit them rather than hurt them, which lies within the main purpose of democracy: to act as part of a whole to try and fulfill one's interest. Until then, democracy in America must continue upon its rickety wheels nailed together by the informed and weathered away by the misinformed and misguided.

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