



STUDY: Sunday News Shows Are Not Informative or Representative

by The Media and Democracy Project
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This study is dedicated to the memory of media critic Eric Boehlert. Eric was a constant source of inspiration for us. He was the strongest voice we knew confronting the uninformative journalism and media failures this study highlights. As Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Will Bunch said after his death, "[This country needs a small army of Eric Boehlerts.](#)" We hope this research report inspires others to join the fight for a better-informed American public.

The Media and Democracy Project is a not-for-profit community of grassroots activists fighting for more informative and pro-democracy media.

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Executive Summary

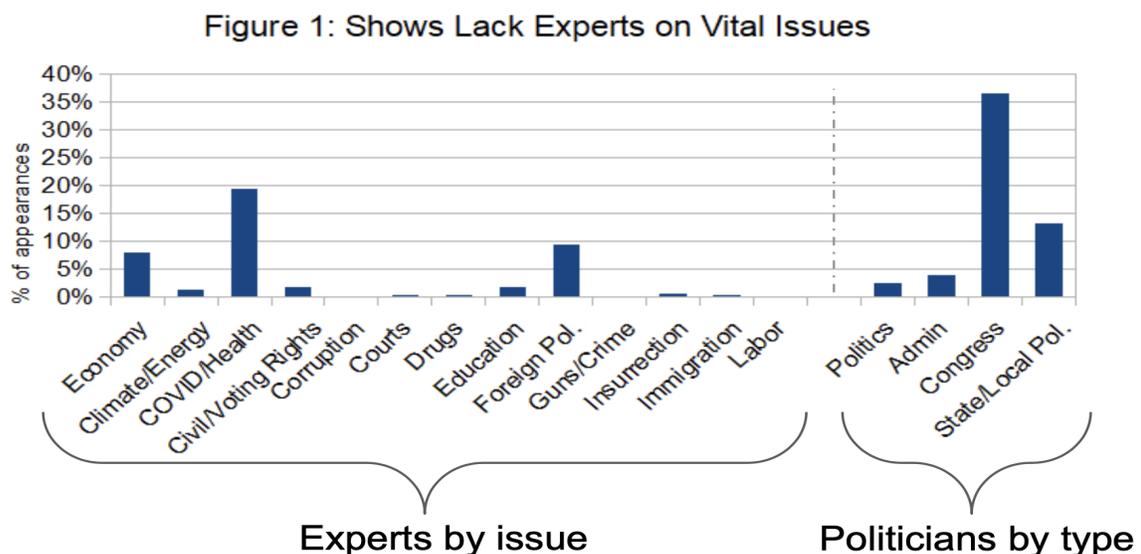
The Sunday Shows are the flagship political and civic discussion TV programs of the major broadcast networks. They are watched by over 10 million people each week but have a much broader reach beyond that, often setting the agenda for news coverage and discussion across all media platforms. Who appears and what topics are discussed, reflects “who” and “what” the mainstream media considers to be most important. To understand this better we, the **Media and Democracy Project**, collected and analyzed information on every guest of the five major Sunday Shows in 2021. We covered ABC’s *This Week*, CBS’s *Face the Nation*, NBC’s *Meet the Press*, CNN’s *State of the Union*, and Fox’s *Fox News Sunday*. There were 816 guests appearing on 251 shows. We performed data analysis on characteristics of the guests and textual analysis of show transcripts.

Politicians invited more than experts

We found that the most common type of guests were members of Congress and that politicians overall, including state and local politicians made up the majority of the guests. Other guests were experts who were invited to discuss topics they have deep knowledge of: medical professionals, cabinet secretaries, climate experts, CEOs, professors, community members, foreign leaders and others. Extensive analysis of the content of show transcripts found that when members of Congress discuss topics, they are more likely to talk about politics and process than substance and their policy prescriptions are more superficial.

COVID covered well but climate, and most other topics were not

We then categorized experts by policy area. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of experts by policy area and politicians by type.¹ The Sunday Shows clearly recognized the need for expertise when discussing the pandemic. 20% of the guests were health professionals — 17% were medical experts. But they had very few experts on most other vital issues. [About half a million Americans died of COVID in 2021](#), 250,000 [died of drugs](#) and [alcohol abuse](#) combined but while there were 141 experts on COVID, there was only one drug policy expert. There were 11 appearances by experts on climate change — just over 1% of all guests and much fewer than the 19 by Gov. Asa Hutchinson alone (R-AR), the most frequent political guest across the five shows.



¹ Most administrators were categorized as experts but a small number do not policy specialties. Some guests, such as RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel, were categorized as experts in politics. These were listed with the politicians.

Focus on DC insider topics increases cynicism and polarization

When politicians are the primary commenters, issues are viewed through a political lens which increases polarization. Studies have shown that a focus on political gamesmanship not only leaves the public uninformed but that [“this type of reporting elevates the public’s cynicism toward politics and the issues.”](#)² This type of coverage, rather than the current reliance on politicians, would serve to inform the public much better. As a report from the Shorenstein Center documents, [in the past Sunday Shows featured fewer politicians and more substance.](#)³

Dramatic under-representation of women and people of color, most notably Latinas/Latinos

Figure 2 compares the distribution of guest appearances by gender and broad racial categories to the U.S. population. White men were 64% of the guests despite being less than 30% of the country’s population. A finer distribution by race is shown in Figure 3. This shows that the under-representation of people of color is the result of very dramatic under-representation of Latinos and Native Americans. Blacks appear not to be under-represented, but when multi-racial people are accounted for, they are. Fox was most extreme in gender bias. Nearly 90% of NBC’s guests were White.

Figure 2: Gender and Race of Guests v US Population

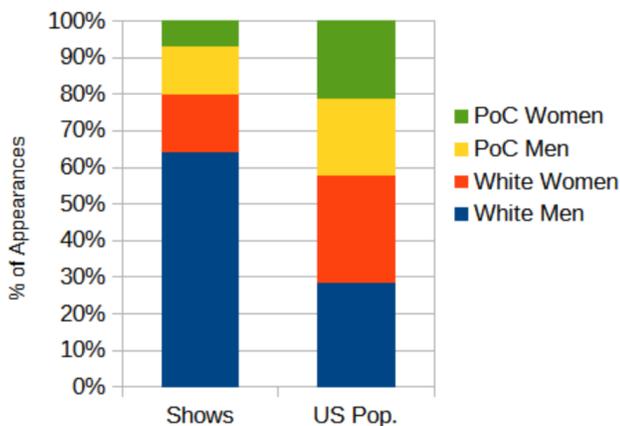
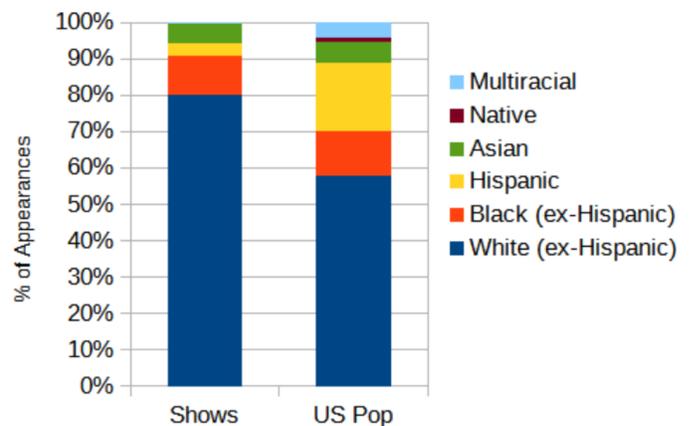


Figure 3: Race of Guests v US Population



All networks hosted coup supporters

We tabulated the Congressional guests who supported the failed coup using grades from the Republican Accountability Project, listing all guests in 2021 who received grades of F, D- or D. Fox hosted by far the most but all of the networks hosted people who supported the insurrection and spread the Big Lie. We object to normalizing any of them.

Sunday Shows can and should do a much better job informing the public on vital topics.

As they illustrated with the coverage of COVID, the shows can use experts to cover vital topics. If they cut the number of Congressional guests in half, there would be room to cover several more topics well. They should not be a propaganda platform for people who deny basic facts and undermine democracy.

² Zoizner, Alon. “The Consequences of Strategic News Coverage for Democracy: A Meta-Analysis.” Communication Research, vol. 48, no. 1, Feb. 2021, pp. 3–25. SAGE Journals, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218808691>.

³ See Matthew Baum, Report on Network Sunday Morning Talk Show Content and Ratings, Comparing 1983, 1999, and 2015, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Policy <https://shorensteincenter.org/network-sunday-morning-talk-shows/>