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The epistemic dangers of journalistic balance

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Abstract
The newsroom routine prescribing that public interest disagreements be covered in a balanced fashion is a cornerstone of informative journalism, particularly in the Anglo-American world. Balanced reporting has been frequently criticised by journalism and communication scholars on multiple grounds; most notoriously, for its tendency to devolve into false balance, whereby a viewpoint conflict is improperly portrayed as a dispute between epistemic equals. Moreover, a widely shared intuition is that peddlers of false balance are deserving of blame. This seems right; if the charge is to stick, however, we need a more detailed understanding of exactly why falsely balanced journalism is so problematic. This article fills some of these gaps by drawing on discussions in argumentation theory, to reconstruct the kind of inferential pattern set off by balanced reporting; social epistemology, to examine the kind of evidence produced by tokens of this format; and theories of pragmatic enrichment, to identify the mechanisms leading recipients to unwarranted conclusions about the reported topic.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2018, BBC Radio Cambridgeshire invited veteran Green Party campaigner Rupert Read to appear in a broadcast, hosted by well-known presenter Chris Mann, to discuss the question 'Is climate change real?'. The segment was designed to take the form of a debate between 'the two sides' of the issue; Read's opponent was to be Philip Foster, a known climate change denier and frontline campaigner for the repeal of the 2008 Climate Change Act in the UK. Read refused to go on air, writing in an opinion piece for *The Guardian* that "the BBC should be ashamed of its nonsensical idea of 'balance', when the scientific debate [about the reality of climate change] is as settled as the 'debate' about whether smoking causes cancer."[1] The broadcast went ahead nonetheless, with Chris Smith, virology specialist and creator of *The Naked Scientist* podcast, standing in for Read. At the time, 97% of the scientific community was in agreement as to the reality of climate change.[2]

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[1] "I won't go on the BBC if it supplies climate change deniers as 'balance'", accessed July 2023.

[2] For details on the robustness of this quantification, see Cook et al. (2016). As of 2021, this figure has been placed at 99.9% (Lynas et al. 2021).

Similar (and similarly egregious) illustrations of so-called *false balance* – whereby a viewpoint conflict is improperly represented as though the opposing sides enjoyed comparable epistemic standing – are doubtless familiar to many readers. Prestigious news outlets such as the BBC have repeatedly come under fire for their insistent pursuit of 'balance' across the board – most notoriously, though not exclusively, in their reporting on the climate crisis – and for their rationalisation of the same in the name of professional fairness and impartiality. The practice of balancing expert and contrarian voices in news outputs, over matters of settled scientific consensus such as the reality of climate change or the safety of MMR vaccines, has been linked to heightened levels of public confusion and lingering misconceptions as to the robustness and veracity of established scientific facts (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Pingree 2011; Dixon and Clarke 2013b; Kortenkamp and Basten 2015). In addition, the entrenchment of balance as a default framing device or strategy has been criticised for being at odds with journalists' professional commitment to accuracy and honesty in their reporting (Mindich 1998; Boykoff and Boykoff 2004).

Overall, it is fair to say that journalism and communication scholars are broadly in agreement with Rupert Read and, more generally, with the idea that a policy of 'balance by default' is risky at best and reproachable at worst. Yet, extant discussions tell only part of the story. False balance continues to be intensely criticised as a *journalist's problem*, insofar as it evidences a failure to uphold standards denoting competence (e.g. accuracy), and/or good faith (e.g. independence from political and financial pressures). But false balance is also a problem *for audiences*; and, while it has long been clear *that* false balance negatively affects its recipients, comparatively little has been said about *how* it so affects them. Addressing this question will help fill an important descriptive-explanatory gap in discussions of balanced reporting; and it will help clarify when, and why, attitudes of reproach (such as Rupert Read's) towards news outlets (such as the BBC) are warranted.

To this end, this article recruits conceptual–analytical tools from argumentation theory, social epistemology, and the pragmatics of language, so as to bring into view the *inferential effects borne by recipients* of balanced journalism. Specifically, it is first shown that falsely balanced reports are liable to trigger a reasoning sequence recently identified by argumentation scholars as a *meta-argumentative fallacy* (Section 3). The starting point of the fallacy is a purportedly neutral representation of a third-party disagreement over some factual claim *p*; its conclusion is a verdict as to the overall distribution of the evidence for/against *p*. Crucially, reports of third-party disagreements, packaged into balanced frames by news outlets, constitute *higher-order evidence* related to *p*; and, especially where *p* is a matter of specialised expertise, they may be the only such evidence available to a lay audience (Section 4). Recipients of falsely balanced reports may thus be rationally constrained to draw false and unwarranted conclusions about the evidentiary support enjoyed by opposing 'sides' of disputes covered in the news. This qualifies as an epistemic harm borne by audiences. Moreover, as argued in Section 5, the deleterious epistemic effects of balanced reporting are entirely predictable outcomes of familiar pragmatic mechanisms; specifically, we will see that they qualify as *audience-implicatures*. This finding is then shown to support the intuition that ascriptions of blame, directed at news organisations, are indeed appropriate.

2. Balance in context

The practice of reporting news according to prescriptions of balance became an internalised routine and norm of Anglo-American informative journalism in the first half of the twentieth century and remains a cornerstone of many professional style and ethics codes to this day (Lacy et al. 1991; Dunwoody and Peters 1992; Maras 2013;

Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2017). In what is inevitably a significant oversimplification of a textured history, we may trace the origins and rationale of the normative paradigm of balanced reporting (BR) to the confluence of three factors. The first is a lingering fascination with objectivity, celebrated as a central epistemic ideal of scientifically minded inquiry in general, and of journalistic practice – *qua* fact-finding enterprise – in particular (Schudson 2001; Maras 2013: Ch. 1). Secondly and relatedly, the concomitant trend towards the professionalisation of journalism went hand in hand with a pressure, partly practical and partly ideological (Tuchman 1972), to cast journalists as beacons of neutrality: "stenographers of fact" (Ward 2021: 332), trained to observe and report with disciplined detachment, unfettered by subjective and/or partisan values and interests (Mindich 1998). Third, this same reverence and pursuit of observer neutrality may in turn be linked to a renewed preoccupation with safeguarding citizens' intellectual autonomy and promoting democratic deliberation (Figdor 2019; Hughes et al. 2023).

Balance thus emerged as a strategic procedure, or 'ritual' (Tuchman 1972), that served simultaneously as a device for the implementation of these ideals into daily journalistic practice, and as an overt signal of the profession's commitment to the same. Importantly, balance remained a central fixture in news reporting even as voices critical of the very possibility of objective observation (in general, and in journalism specifically) gained traction, and the profession's aspiration to presenting news consumers with a 'view from nowhere' – rooted in the so-called 'naive empiricism' of the 19th century – gradually faded into obsolescence (Mindich 1998; Maras 2013). As attested by journalism scholars, textbooks and style codes alike, objectivity-adjacent ideals of impartiality, fairness and neutrality remain important drivers of news reporting; a small selection of representative examples is displayed below (emphases added).

> Balance aims for *neutrality* [and] requires that reporters present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute [. . .] with roughly *equal attention*. (Entman 1989: 30)

> The professional canon of journalistic *fairness* [. . .] – presenting the most compelling arguments of both sides with *equal weight* – is a fundamental check on biased reporting. (Gelbspan 1998: 57)

> Reuters journalists [. . .] strive for *balance* and *freedom from bias*. (Reuters Standards & Values)

> News in whatever form must be treated with *due impartiality*, giving due weight to events, opinion and main strands of argument. [. . .] We must take particular care to achieve due impartiality when a 'controversial subject' may be considered to be a major matter. (BBC Editorial Guidelines)

> Balance is a norm as well as a practice of *objective* news; it is the professional method in which a reporter presents both sides in a news story, and its use is prescribed by a professional norm of *fair* treatment or *neutrality*. Balance is also presumed to provide an epistemic contribution towards the social goal of democratically legitimate public policy in the public interest: it supports each citizen's ability to reason to informed conclusions based on all the relevant evidence. (Figdor 2019: 69)

The 'impartiality-as-balance paradigm', as it is termed by Wahl-Jorgensen et al. (2017), has been much discussed since its codification into newsroom routine. In the domain of political reporting, where it first became an established practice, balance is canonically operationalised via dualistic formats (the 'seesaw model'); as such, it has been criticised for encouraging (or even requiring) the continued exclusion of perspectives that are already marginalised in the deliberative stage, thus further entrenching inequities in political representation. BR is also regarded as posing a threat to the professional aims of *informing*, and of doing so *accurately*, insofar as it forces what may be complex and multifaceted issues into simplistic narrative molds. This worry may be further exacerbated wherever balance is effected by employing unqualified he-said/she-said formulae: sequential juxtapositions of the disputants' voices, conveyed either directly (A said: "p", B said: "not-p") or indirectly (A said q, B said B said not-q), often inadequately complemented by correctives or contextualisations.

Hughes et al. (2023) examine a recent illustration of these worries in a study of the BBC coverage of the 2019 UK electoral campaign. The authors' news item of choice is a (rather memorable) controversy surrounding the incumbent Conservative Party's claim that they were building 40 new hospitals – a claim that was unequivocally belied by publicly available state documents. Among other things, Hughes et al. (2023) found that there were differences in how the story was covered in television broadcasts (News at Ten) and on the BBC website (which has included a fact-checking section since 2017):

> Television news coverage [...] simply balanced competing claims by [Conservative leader] Johnson [...] and then offering a rebuttal from [Labour leader] Corbyn. [...] The weight of evidence here, provided by one part of BBC news, was that 40 new hospitals were not being built, but perhaps due to concerns of appearing impartial in the much more high-profile flagship television news bulletin [...] this conclusive judgment was not conveyed to [television] audiences, but only limited to those either directly reading Reality Check or those motivated enough to click through to the online story to find the fact-check. [...] Different story archetypes perhaps provide a neat, if imperfect, summation of these findings. On broadcast, the stories are typically 'he-said-she-said'. Online they are more akin to 'he-said-she-said-he's wrong', whereas Reality Check has a model closer to 'he-said-he's-wrong' (Hughes et al. 2023: 12-13)

Here, Hughes et al. (2023) hypothesise that the use of unqualified he-said/she-said formats may be explained (more accurately, rationalised) by editorial fears of appearing biased. The format is also often defended on practical grounds: constant and ever-shorter deadlines make it impossible, at times, to verify every statement made by public figures, so reverting to the no-frills he-said/she-said format enables journalists to deliver the news *and* lay claim to the protective shield of messenger neutrality. It is then no surprise that similar practical pressures are also consistently cited in the domain of science reporting: the combination of tight deadlines, relentless market forces, and patchy scientific literacy naturally favour reverting to balance as a "surrogate for validity checks" (Dunwoody and Peters 1992: 210), "if journalists lack the time or expertise to assess the validity of conflicting statements from different sources" (Brüggemann and Engesser 2017: 59).

It is thus that in political journalism, and even more – for obvious reasons – in science journalism, balance often becomes false balance: the portrayal of a disagreement as if the parties involved, and the positions they endorse, had equal or comparable epistemic standing when in fact they do not. Probably the best-known examples of false balance

are found in the context of climate science reporting, witnessed by the media's tendency to present "the views of both proponents and skeptics of [the hypothesis of anthropogenic climate change] as if they were equally supported by evidence" (Leuschner 2018: 1264), as a result of which "climate [change] skepticism ultimately receives disproportionate media attention in the US [and elsewhere]" (*ibid.*). False balance has also been a fixture in journalistic reporting on evolutionary theory and intelligent design (see e.g. Dunwoody and Peters 1992; Eldredge 2006); and it has occasionally been brought to quasi-surreal extremes, as when the BBC's director of editorial policy, David Jordan, stated in 2022 that "everyone should expect their views to be appropriately represented by the national broadcaster – even if they believe the Earth is flat."[3]

The persistence of improper applications of balance in science reporting is documented by several descriptive analyses of reporting trends at national and global levels (e.g. Boykoff and Boykoff 2004; Painter and Ashe 2012; Brüggemann and Engesser 2017; McAllister et al. 2021; Ruiu 2021) and denounced as constituting a kind of 'informational bias' (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). False balance has been linked to the disconnect between expert consensus and public perception of the same (Ceccarelli 2011; Pingree 2011; Koehler 2016); to heightened levels of confusion, among citizen audiences, as to the robustness of scientific claims and the credibility of the scientific community (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Dixon and Clarke 2013b,a); and to the escalating polarisation in contemporary societies, driven by the gradual erosion of trust in non-partisan institutions (e.g. Jang and Hart 2015; Carmichael et al. 2017; Imundo and Rapp 2021).

Despite persistent criticism, and despite seemingly well-intentioned attempts to amend editorial policy in response (e.g. Bridcut 2007; BBC 2007), false balance continues to haunt informative journalism – in particular, though as we've seen not exclusively, in the domain of science reporting. Thus, while the intuitions underwriting the negative assessments of false balance are widely shared, they have evidently yet to be satisfactorily addressed. To this end, we join the ranks of an as yet modest circle of philosophers seeking to better understand the problems associated with BR (Simion 2017; Figdor 2019) and assess possible ameliorative strategies (Gerken 2020; Rietdijk and Archer 2021).

3. Balance as bothsiderism

As we have just seen, the endurance of BR is at least partly explained by its conceptualisation as a proxy for impartiality, providing news outlets with "strong grounds to defend the fairness and independence of their coverage as part of the journalistic rituals by which the illusion of objectivity is maintained" (Lee et al. 2008: 696). Balance may also be described as a procedure for constructing news outputs. In this sense, the use of balanced formats qualifies as one of the many *framing choices* made by professional journalists on a daily basis (Entman 1993; Entman et al. 2009).[4]

Balance, then, is a strategic ritual (Tuchman 1972, see Section 2); and it is a framing ritual, prescribing a certain way of organising (representing) the elements of a news output. As such, it is foreseeable that balance, alongside and in combination with other journalistic framing devices, will *affect audiences* – shaping their perception of which facts, viewpoints, individuals are more or less salient; which attributes are apt for a given situation; which options are (not) available; which options are preferable and why; and

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[3]"BBC does not subscribe to 'cancel culture'", accessed July 2023.

[4]The literature on news and media frames is vast, spans several decades and multiple disciplinary areas, and impossible to summarise here. See e.g. Entman et al. (2009) and Scheufele (2015) for accessible overviews. See Goffman (1974) and Tversky and Kahneman (1981) for seminal work on frames and framing effects from a sociological and a psychological perspective, respectively.

so on (Iyengar 1994; Levin et al. 1998; Nisbet 2009). And what has consistently emerged, through decades of research, is that false balance affects audiences specifically by priming them to engage in *unsound reasoning* – a fact that has been notoriously exploited by profit-driven power-holders and corporations to muddy public understanding of settled science (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Ceccarelli 2011; Krüger 2021).

What has been much less discussed, and is therefore less clear, is *what kind of reasoning* is liable to be triggered by false balance, and BR more generally. Addressing this question will help fill an important descriptive-explanatory gap and will help sharpen evaluative assessments of the practice. With these aims in mind, we begin our analysis by showing that BR is a catalyst for a *meta-argumentative* reasoning pattern – *bothsiderist reasoning* – first rigorously described by Aikin and Casey (2022).

Bothsiderist inferences, or arguments, are meta-argumentative since they distinctively and inherently involve "reasoning about reasons" (Aikin and Casey 2022: 4). In this sense, they resemble the more familiar class of straw-man arguments, which canonically operate upon an existing ('lower-level') argument by misrepresenting the latter's strengths/weaknesses to push against its tenability. Similarly, the canonical bothsiderist argument builds upon an existing *controversy* – a dialectical conflict between two sets of reasons, i.e. two arguments – to push against regarding either side as rationally superior. In more detail, the starting point of bothsiderist reasoning is a *descriptive* premise, to the effect that there exists a disagreement over a particular proposition, *p*; its end point is one of various possible *prescriptive* conclusions: "either suspend judgment and action on [*p*], keep all voices in the conversation [. . .], avoid partisanship [. . .], or split the partisan difference" (Aikin and Casey 2022: 9). More succinctly, and following Aikin and Casey's nomenclature: since there are reasons in favour of *p*, and reasons against, we should be *epistemically modest* about the status of *p*.

One way of understanding bothsiderist reasoning, then, is as a heuristic: a strategy for solving the problem of justifying one's beliefs about *p* without appealing to direct evidence – for instance because obtaining such evidence would be too time-consuming, or cognitively challenging, or outright impossible. Instead, the strategy is to consult evidence about the (presumptively reasons-based) *p-beliefs of others* and use these as a proxy justificatory basis for one's own *p*-beliefs.

In principle, these kinds of moves can be perfectly unproblematic. Imagine that I come across an unsigned painting while sorting through my late grandmother's belongings. My artistic knowledge is negligible: for all I know, this could just as easily be a long-lost masterpiece or an amateur's work. I'm not interested in keeping the painting, but I'd like to know whether or not it is the work of a recognised artist. I'm not going to pore over countless art books (which I'd first have to buy) to try to settle the issue: it would require an inordinate amount of time and effort, and I might still end up none the wiser. Instead, I take the painting to an art history department, hoping for expert advice on the matter. The department's only two painting experts, however, are of different minds: Prof A says the painting is an original Shmicasso, Prof B says it's not. From where I stand, there is nothing to indicate that Prof A deserves more/less credibility than Prof B. I might be able to find other art experts elsewhere, but I have a lot on my plate and don't know when or if that might happen. For the time being, the only thing that is clear to me concerning the artistic value of the painting is that *it is the subject of controversy*. For the time being, then, it would be both natural and appropriate for me to err on the side of epistemic modesty, and 'suspend judgment and action' on the matter.

Now imagine that I read a newspaper article recounting a similar story: an unsigned painting has been recovered from someone's cellar; two art historians hold conflicting (reasons-based) opinions about the painting's authenticity. The article itself begins with a stage-setting description of the circumstances of the painting's discovery; it goes on to

present the disputants' views, in simple succession; and ends by recalling one or two unrelated cases of similar findings, and/or similar controversies, in recent years.

Imagine, also, that the article fails to mention that Prof A (one of the two cited sources) reached her verdict by employing a technical method that is regarded as fundamentally wrong-headed and unreliable by the vast majority of art historians. Perhaps the reporter himself was unaware of this detail. Perhaps he was aware of it but lacked the time to fully verify the matter. Perhaps he was consciously or unconsciously conditioned by editorial pressures (No taking sides! Present the facts!), or by market pressures (Attract eyeballs! Attract clicks!).

Whatever the reasons, it seems clear that from where *I* stand, the two scenarios are structurally pretty much the same. In particular, both start out in the same way: a factual question is made salient (Is the painting an original Shmicasso?), and two conflicting responses are recorded (Yes-because-*R*, No-because-*S*). This is what Aikin and Casey (p. 6) refer to as the first 'moment' of bothsiderist reasoning:

> The first moment involves characterizing a matter as controversial. This means that the matter appears unresolved since, even if the disputants themselves believe the matter is clearly resolved, they have not convinced each other.

Let us quickly return to the BBC Radio example (Section 1) in light of the foregoing. Recall the basic plan for the segment: an in-studio debate between two guests, hosted by BBC journalist Chris Mann. This basic plan was executed; according to Rupert Read, "Much of it wasn't bad. [. . .] But the framing was awful, and framing is everything, so far as the message that most listeners receive is concerned". Recall, in particular, the opening question of the debate: 'Is climate change real?' The phrasing of the question is key, because initiating a *bona fide* debate with a polar question presupposes that the truth of the matter (i.e., of the bare assertive 'Climate change is real') is not fully settled.[5]

There are thus three key components of the BBC's decision about how to frame the broadcast: the choice of conversation format (a debate between proponents of conflicting positions); the choice of debate opener type (a polar question; vs, say, 'Which kinds of measures should national governments prioritise in order to mitigate the climate crisis?'); and the choice of debate opener token (vs, say, 'Are the Paris Agreement goals realistic?'). In so doing, the BBC opted to frame the reality of climate change (RCC) as *a matter of ongoing dispute* (Step 1).[6]

Now, if a presumptively truth-abiding source of information presents us with a picture that paints some *p* as the subject of unresolved controversy, *and we have reason to take this picture, and its source, as reliable*, then presumably we are entitled to treat the fact of controversy at face value. That is: there is evidence (be it empirical evidence, argumentative evidence, or both) in favour of *p*, *and* there is evidence against *p*, *and* neither definitively outweighs the other, else why would this be reported in the news? So, "we assume both [sides] have validity" (Oreskes and Conway 2011: 268), in which case "one must presumably give both sides their due" (Aikin and Casey 2022: 3).

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[5]For an in-depth study of polar questions (i.e. yes/no questions) within a Conversational Analysis framework, see e.g. Heritage (2003, 2012).

[6]Throughout the article, I assume that groups and collective entities or agents (such as the BBC) can assert, and more generally that they can do things with their words. For a defense of this thesis from the literature on the epistemology of group testimony, see Lackey (2021); for defenses from a speech-act theory perspective see Meijers (2007) and Townsend (2020).

3.1. Who committed the fallacy?

Notice that, over the course of the discussion so far in this section, audiences (recipients of balanced reports) have gradually become more visible. Bothsiderist reasoning, in both virtuous and vicious instances, begins with framing, and framing is typically something that one agent (speaker/originator) does with at least one other agent (audience/recipient) in mind. This is important because audiences are themselves active participants of bothsiderist reasoning. Once the framing step is completed, audiences may reject the speaker's characterisation of the state of the evidence; if they don't, uptake is secured, and the fact of the existence of a controversy over p will enter the common ground (Step 2).[7] And, once the fact of controversy over p enters the common ground, it is again audiences who make the crucial bothsiderist move towards epistemic modesty (Step 3).[8]

Technically, then, it is audiences who *commit the fallacy* of bothsiderism (where a fallacy is indeed committed):

> [The] roles that can contribute to bothsiderist reasoning are those of the discussant who tries to portray the matter as more controversial than it really is [. . .], the one who surveys and represents the discussion and in so doing inflates the significance of the controversy, and the audience who infers from the fact of disagreement that the issue is not closed by the evidence. (Aikin and Casey 2022: 19)

One thing that jumps to the eye in this description of the division of bothsiderist labour is that it remains neutral on the distribution of *responsibility* for the fallacy among the various participants, thus suggesting (ironically enough) that it is shared equally by all parties. This evaluative neutrality makes sense in the context of a first-time exploratory analysis of a "heretofore untheorized" fallacy *type*, as is Aikin and Casey's. But when we turn our attention to concrete exemplifications of the fallacy, it leaves much to be desired.

Returning once more to our initial illustration, imagine a radio listener – call him Pat – who, having tuned in to the infamous BBC Radio broadcast, surmises that the debate over RCC is not yet settled. "Both discussants seemed sure of what they were saying, and the points they made seemed mostly reasonable . . . ", he might think; "There's probably some truth to what each said, but I suppose we'll have to wait and see what's what", he might conclude. In drawing this epistemically modest conclusion, Pat partakes in, and *strictu sensu* commits, the bothsiderist fallacy: he improperly or mistakenly concludes, from the fact that he has witnessed two parties disagreeing over RCC, that RCC is not conclusively settled by the evidence; accordingly, the better (epistemically and practically prudent) option is to suspend judgment on the issue, at least for the time being.

Epistemically modest conclusions are not warranted with respect to RCC: Pat's reasoning instantiates the fallacious version of bothsiderism. *And whose fault is that?*, a cynic or a provocateur might ask. Nobody twisted Pat's arm and *made him* engage in faulty reasoning; there was nothing stopping him from doing some extra research into the matter, even prior to listening to the broadcast; at the very least, he could have researched the invited discussants' credentials. If he didn't, and he came to believe that RCC is not settled after listening to a third-party disagreement broadcast by the BBC, that's on him.

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[7]Obviously, what will realistically happen is that some recipients of BR will grant uptake; others will actively refuse it; and yet others will do neither (e.g. if they get distracted while, or prior to, reading/listening; perhaps if they are profoundly uninterested in the topic; etc.).

[8]Aikin and Casey do not distinguish between what are here labelled Step 1 and Step 2 of bothsiderist reasoning: framing and interpretation are subsumed, in their analysis, under the broader heading of "meta-evidential phase". I introduce the distinction to better keep track of who does what, as bothsiderist reasoning unfolds.

Rhetorical moves of this sort are simple enough – and notoriously effective (Ceccarelli 2011; Oreskes and Conway 2011; Dixon and Clarke 2013a). Aikin and Casey's analysis of the meta-argumentative fallacy of bothsiderism is descriptively illuminating, but lacks the evaluative depth required to resist such moves, and so to vindicate the prevailing intuition that responsibility is (mostly) borne by news sources. As a first step in this direction, the next section takes a closer look at the kind of evidence with which recipients of balanced journalism are presented.

4. Balance as higher-order evidence

Over the past decade, social epistemologists have been intensely preoccupied with viewpoint conflicts, or controversies, that qualify as *peer disagreements*: disagreements between agents whose epistemic standings, with respect to *p*, are on a par (equally good, equally bad).[9] A focal question, in this literature, concerns the prescriptive moral of such situations: if A and B are epistemic peers with respect to *p* (they have access to the same evidence bearing on *p*, are equally competent when it comes to processing that evidence, etc.) and they are in disagreement over the truth of *p*, how should they rationally respond (i.e., adjust their beliefs) to this situation?

While there are several competing accounts speaking to this question, there is at least a broad consensus that the very existence of a (peer) disagreement *itself* constitutes evidence relevant to *p*. Specifically, it constitutes *higher-order evidence*: evidence speaking either to the quality, or character, of the first-order (direct) evidence related to *p*, or to a disputant's response to that same first-order evidence (or both). And, since any rational response to a disagreement over *p* ought to (somehow or other) factor in the available evidence relevant to *p*, it follows that A and B face a rational pressure to (somehow or other) adjust their respective doxastic stances in light of the fact of their disagreement.[10]

Notably, discussions of peer disagreement have mostly focused on the adjustments that *the disputants* may be required to make in light of their disagreement. By contrast, less attention has been devoted to this same prescriptive challenge as it arises in multi-party conversational contexts featuring an *onlooking audience*. Namely: how should an audience (a single bystander, a co-located group, disparate sections of the general public, etc) rationally respond on being presented with higher-order evidence in the form of a third-party disagreement? *A fortiori*, there has been little discussion of how this same prescriptive challenge plays out in the multi-party conversational contexts that are this paper's focus: cases in which a disagreement (possibly but not necessarily between purported peers) is picked out (selected, or reconstructed) by a designated source (the reporter, in turn channelling a specific editorial policy; the news organisation) and presented to a designated audience (news consumers, typically of heterogeneous competence levels with respect to the relevant first-order evidence).

Though disputant-centred discussions of peer disagreement remain mainstream, some exceptions do exist. Especially pertinent for present purposes is Neil Levy's recent discussion of the normativity of *no-platforming* – the act or practice of denying a public platform to individuals known for holding controversial or extreme views on ideologically charged issues (such as race, gender, religious codes, but also science, history, etc.), on the part of an institution (such as a university). No-platforming has been a topic of intense discussions in the philosophical literature, where however it is

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[9]*Roughly* on a par, anyway; see e.g. Lackey (2008). We will not be engaging with the ongoing discussion over what exactly determines peerhood, or whether peerhood is even possible, here.

[10]Prescriptive stances advocated in the literature can be ordered in terms of how much doxastic adjustment they demand of agents who disagree with their peers. See Frances and Matheson (2019) for an overview.

most often examined in its 'on-campus' instantiations and embedded in the broader debate over the limitations and scope of the ideal of academic freedom (see e.g. Simpson and Srinivasan 2018; Peters and Nottelmann 2021). In contrast, Levy focuses on the specifically *epistemic* (vs moral or political) dimension of the act of refusing a platform to a proponent of what he terms 'bad speech' – "unreasonable minority views about matters of great public interest" (Levy 2019: 488). Accordingly, the intended scope of his analysis is broader than most, encompassing a richer variety of platforms (ranging from university auditoria to newspaper columns), institutional providers, and subject matters.

Against this backdrop, Levy's main contention is that denying a platform to a proponent of 'bad speech' is *pro tanto* justifiable, *on audience-centred grounds*: namely, if it means avoiding the generation of misleading higher-order evidence about the content of that speech. Levy's argument can be naturally extended to the journalistic context.[11] As we'll now see, it also provides clarifying insights on the division of responsibility among the participants of bothsiderist reasoning.

4.1. Who produced the evidence?

The BBC Cambridgeshire broadcast was vitiated by a series of bad framing choices, we saw (Section 3). The BBC made a poor choice of segment opener. And, this poor choice was compounded by the decision *to platform a 'balanced' disagreement* on the question as to the reality of climate change (RCC). For, in so doing, the BBC presented its audience with two pieces of misleading higher-order evidence.

First: the provision of a platform to an advocate of the 'unreasonable minority' view that climate change isn't real (¬RCC) constitutes evidence *that the view, and its advocate, are credible*. In general, the strength of the credibility boost conferred to a speaker and his propounded view will plausibly co-vary with the epistemic 'clout' of the platform. In this case, given the undisputed prestige enjoyed by the BBC, it seems plausible that the corresponding credibility boost would be especially strong. Therefore, the BBC's offer of a platform to an advocate of ¬RCC produces HOE_1: higher-order evidence in favour of ¬RCC.

Second: the provision of a platform to a disagreement over the epistemic standing of RCC, between disputants portrayed as sufficiently credible (to warrant an invitation from a reputable news organisation), constitutes evidence *that the disagreement is genuine*. That is, the disagreement has merit, and so presumably cannot be dismissed out of hand. But the most plausible explanation, when two sufficiently credible disputants genuinely disagree over the epistemic standing of some *p*, is that the first-order evidence does not conclusively establish the superiority of *p* over ¬*p*, and viceversa. Therefore, provision of a platform to a disagreement over RCC between purportedly credible disputants produces HOE_2: higher-order evidence that the first-order evidence is divided between RCC and ¬RCC.[12] Since the first-order evidence actually overwhelmingly supports RCC, HOE_2 ultimately favours ¬RCC.

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[11]It bears noting that Levy's argument has itself generated some controversy in the philosophy community; see, for instance, 'Epistemology and Free Speech', and ensuing discussion, on *Daily Nous*. While this is not entirely surprising, most of the objections I am aware of focus, once again, on university platforms. We can therefore sidestep these criticisms, since they do not directly bear on the varieties of 'bad speech' and platforms that I have in mind.

[12]The split in the first-order evidence conveyed by HOE_2 may – but need not – be even; I am not committing to the implausible claim that one can infer peerhood from any instance of BR. However, BR does stably support the conclusion that the disagreeing parties have both overcome a minimal credibility threshold, and so it supports the conclusion that a definitive verdict on (in this case) RCC is underdetermined by the first-order evidence.

HOE_1 and HOE_2 are individually and jointly misleading with respect to the epistemic standing of RCC.[13] More precisely, HOE_{1-2} misrepresent the respective credibility of RCC and ¬RCC, and so are unreliable indicators of the confidence one should entertain about these claims. Since the first-order evidence is not (even close to being) evenly balanced between RCC and ¬RCC, the best explanation of, and the appropriate conclusion to draw from, HOE_{1-2} is that one or more parties involved in the disagreement should be downgraded (or outright disqualified) in their capacity of competent and/or sincere evaluators of the first-order evidence (Lackey 2008).

But, crucially, this explanation may not be available to all recipients of HOE_{1-2} – here, the radio broadcast audience. For, the possibility of correctly assessing HOE_{1-2} is conditional on the availability of independently reliable (first-order or higher-order) evidence speaking to the epistemic standing of RCC. Since RCC is a subject of scientific expertise, however, most recipients (both actual and intended) of HOE_{1-2} will have limited to no access to such evidence. More precisely, most recipients of HOE_{1-2} will have no access to independently reliable first-order evidence about RCC, since the latter presupposes pertinent scientific expertise, and expertise is in short supply. And so most recipients of HOE_{1-2} will depend on the availability of reliable higher-order evidence about RCC in order to correctly assess the import of HOE_{1-2}.

Again, however, it is not obvious that such reliable higher-order evidence will be easily available; nor that it will be sufficient, quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, to counter the deleterious effects of HOE_{1-2}. In part, this is owing to the fact that higher-order evidence is notoriously difficult to rebut (Levy 2019: 499): "While an argument can demonstrate that the evidence you cite for *p* does not in fact support *p*, as long as the platform provided to you to say it is reputable, it just does confer credibility on you, no matter what anyone says" (see also Lewandowsky et al. 2012, 2016). And in part, it is because the *source* of HOE_{1-2} – a major news network – is likely to be one of the main, if not *the* main, source of higher-order evidence about RCC accessible to the audience.

This makes the task of defeating HOE_{1-2} significantly harder, to put it mildly, and more costly. Recall that HOE_{1-2}, respectively, support the propositions that ¬RCC is credible (HOE_1), and that the strength of the evidentiary support enjoyed by RCC and ¬RCC is not decisive for either side (HOE_2). What sort of additional content would need to be introduced in order to successfully rebut these claims?[14] Simply denying the truth of HOE_{1-2} won't help, as indicated above. The surest path, in order to successfully defeat HOE_{1-2}, would be to undercut the credibility of its source. This is practically difficult however, given the robustness of the BBC's reputation. Technically, though, Philip Foster (the climate change-denying guest) also had a hand in producing the higher-order evidence in question. Wouldn't it be possible, at least in principle, to undercut *his* credibility as a way of neutralising HOE_{1-2}?

Yes and no. Imagine, first, that the second guest on the show had devoted his allotted speaking time to introducing undercutting defeaters – denouncing Foster's lack of scientific credentials, covert interests, etc. Even if we ignored the implausibility of this scenario (it seems unlikely that the show would have been allowed to air), it seems doubtful that an intervention of this sort would impeach the credibility boost afforded by *the BBC's offer of a platform* (HOE_1).

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[13]Obviously, this is not to say that anyone on the receiving end of HOE_{1-2} will *ipso facto* be misled about the epistemic standing of RCC. In particular, it is highly unlikely that the disputants themselves will change their minds (about RCC) in light of either piece of higher-order evidence. The main threat posed by HOE_{1-2} is, of course, to the audience.

[14]Since HOE_{1-2} are already in the common ground, this is a case in which the only option is to introduce 'more speech', although not necessarily speech directly addressing HOE_{1-2}.

Alternatively, imagine – even more implausibly – that Foster's lack of testimonial competence and/or sincerity had been exposed by the broadcast host. Theoretically speaking, this could be a more promising option than the previous. However, there are two problems related to this hypothetical scenario. First, if the point of introducing defeaters is to ensure the factual accuracy of the resulting higher-order evidence, then nothing short of fully neutralising HOE_{1-2} will do (see also Kortenkamp and Basten 2015). But generating HOE_{1-2} was the BBC's own doing; proposing that they turn around and nullify that same evidence is not so much a solution as it is absurd. Secondly, engaging in what would essentially amount to a practical contradiction would presumably damage the credibility of the BBC in the eyes of its audience. For all of the BBC's flaws, this would be an undesirable outcome: if neutralising a particular token of misleading higher-order evidence comes at the cost of depriving audiences of a key resource, when it comes to bridging knowledge gaps, then the price of such a strategy is much too high (De Cruz 2020; Goldman 2001).

Let's recap the train of thought so far. Indiscriminate application of the journalistic balance norm will sometimes foreseeably result in false balance. Falsely balanced reports of third-party disagreements, in turn, produce misleading higher-order evidence about the subjects of those disagreements. Once the misleading higher-order evidence has been generated – once it's 'out there' – it is difficult, and costly, to dismiss it, or make it go away. Airing further testimony that sets the record straight with respect to the first-order evidence may help but likely won't suffice for the reasons just described. Undermining the credibility of the source of the misleading evidence, in turn, may be more effective. But it carries substantial risks of its own, most prominently that of widening existing epistemic gaps, and further eroding public trust in genuinely trustworthy testifiers.

Thus, it falls upon those at the receiving end of BR to manage the good higher-order evidence alongside the bad: "Third parties witnessing the dispute, and who might otherwise have acquired knowledge via testimony from the participants, also have higher-order evidence in the light of which they should adjust their beliefs" (Levy 2019: 493). Crucially, the source of this 'should' is epistemic: adjusting one's beliefs in light of higher-order evidence *is the rational thing to do*. This means that recipients of BR who have limited (or no) reliable means of sorting the wheat from the chaff may have little choice *but* to adjust in the direction of epistemic modesty (Section 3). If this is right, then it looks as though committing the bothsiderist fallacy, in response to false balance, is (at least sometimes) *the rational thing for audiences to do*.

This result offers a first theoretically backed indication that the burden of responsibility is *not* equally shouldered by all those who 'contribute' to instances of the bothsiderist fallacy. This is promising, but it's not enough. Attributions of responsibility require showing that the agent did the deed, did so freely, and did so knowingly. So far, we can lay claim to two out of three. To gain at least some purchase on the third, let us now focus more squarely on the pragmatic dimension of BR.

5. Balance, off the record

At a first approximation, BR involves the performance of a complex speech act type (comprising several levels of embedded assertive speech acts, some of which jointly constitute a disagreement complex), by a complex source (individual journalist, editorial boards, networks, etc.), with a complex recipient as its intended target (epistemically heterogeneous audience, over time), via a variety of formats (equal-time interviews, synchronous or diachronic he-said/she-said reports, etc). For ease of discussion, let us take synchronous *he-said/she-said reporting* as the format of reference. Let us also introduce some (mostly minor) idealisations when it comes to tracing the profiles of originators and recipients. In particular, let us treat *networks* as the primary originators

of news items, since it is typically networks, rather than individual journalists, who have the authority to adopt this or that reporting format (see also fn. 6).

5.1. What gets passed along, and what gets through?

Journalists are in the business of informing, i.e. of providing audiences with 'truth claims'. Generally speaking, uptake of an informative speech act requires that the intended recipient believe that the speaker/informer believes that the uttered locution is true. He-said/she-said reporting is somewhat more complex. Here, uptake presupposes that audiences recognise that originators are committed: *neither* to the truth of each of the locutions jointly constitutive of a token he-said/she-said utterance; *nor* to the truth of the propositional content of one assertion over the other.[15] With respect to surface or on-record content conveyed via he-said/she-said reporting, rather, audiences are required to think that originators are committed to the attribution of the reported locutionary contents to the respective parties in the debate.

On their part, reporters are entitled to assume that the foregoing is indeed what audiences believe – that audiences understand the nature of informative journalism, and the reporter's role, at least to this extent.[16] In turn, audiences are entitled to assume that reporters are reliable and that they comply, not only with Grice's Cooperative Principle but, more stringently, with the conversational maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner). Importantly, this means that as a rule, audiences can legitimately expect that any false implicatures generated via he-said/she-said reporting are accidental, and not borne out of a deliberate attempt to mislead.

With this in mind, the first order of business is to establish which kind (or kinds) of implicature may be generated by he-said/she-said reporting. I first argue that he-said/she-said reporting *qua format* (speech act type) produces *generalised conversational implicatures*: "default inference[s], [. . .] that [capture] our intuitions about a preferred or normal interpretation" (Levinson 2000: 11). I then argue that *tokens* of he-said/she-said reporting are liable to generate what Jennifer Saul has labelled *audience-implicatures* (Saul 2002). In the next subsection, these verdicts are used to sketch a more fine-grained assessment of the distribution of responsibility for fallacious bothsiderist reasoning triggered by balanced frames.

Recall from Section 4 that disagreements among presumptive epistemic peers may provide additional evidentiary cues about either the evidentiary status of the subject of the disagreement, or the relative epistemic standing of the disputants. These additional pieces of (higher-order) evidence are typically inferred vs articulated explicitly, and may be inferred by audiences, if present, as well as the disputants themselves. When disagreements are presented via he-said/she-said reporting, these evidentiary cues are pragmatically conveyed to audiences via implicature (see e.g. Simion 2017). Importantly, the implicatures generated are not specific to he-said/she-said reporting vs other BR formats; they are therefore *conversational* (because non-detachable) rather than conventional.[17] Furthermore, the implicatures generated by he-said/she-said reporting

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[15]Respectively: On pain of incoherence, if nothing else, since the reported content typically includes mutually incompatible assertions. And: based on the conventionalised conception of journalists as operating under norms of neutrality, impartiality and fairness (Section 2).

[16]Note that reporters are entitled to these assumptions despite not knowing who the members of their audiences are. Grice's recommendation letter example is the classic reference for cases of speakers addressing unknown audiences. See Grice (1989: 33).

[17]For a helpful review of the tests commonly employed to distinguish conversational from conventional implicatures, see Blome-Tillmann (2013). For discussion of additional tests, involving *commitment denial strategies* on the part of speakers, Boogaart et al. (2021).

"need not be 'guessed' by the hearer, as they are *generated by the institutional context itself*" (Simion 2017: 416, emphasis added). This strongly suggests that the inferences invited by *BR qua format* are sufficiently stable that they qualify as generalised conversational implicatures (Grice 1989; Zufferey et al. 2019; Levinson 2000).

Conversational implicatures require a relatively tight coordination between speakers and audiences.[18] But in the context of informative journalism, where speakers paradigmatically address largely unknown and heterogeneous audiences, such coordination is not plausibly guaranteed on a local, case-by-case basis. In fact, coordination isn't guaranteed even in contexts that are not as pragmatically complex and layered as this: even in relatively ordinary communicative contexts, and with the best of intentions, speakers "can't fully control what they conversationally implicate" (Saul 2002: 241).

More fully, it is possible for a speaker to fail to conversationally implicate *q*, by uttering *p*, because *q* is not required in order to uphold the presumption that the speaker is being cooperative, *by the audience's lights* – though it is so required by the speaker's lights. The same audience, in turn, may think that preserving the cooperativeness presumption requires supposing that the speaker intended to convey (not *q* but) *q∗*. That is, "the audience's state of mind *can* impose constraints on what is conversationally implicated" (Saul 2002: 232).

Thus, an attempted conversational implicature may result in the production of an utterer-implicature on the one hand, and an audience-implicature on the other.[19] The notions of audience- and utterer-implicature are helpful, I think, for diagnosing what goes on, and what can go wrong, when audiences are presented with balanced reports of third-party disagreements. To see this, let us examine a slightly fictionalised and simplified version of our initial illustration.

Imagine that network N reports that *p*: *speaker A said RCC, and speaker B said ¬RCC*. Let's suppose that N is a reputable, well-established news outlet both nationally and internationally; on any given day, millions of people from various corners of the globe read one or more pieces on N's website, or at least check its headlines. And let's focus our attention on two among the numerous recipients of N's report that *p*, Pat and Qat.

As noted earlier, Pat and Qat are entitled to assume that N's report obeys not only the Cooperative Principle but also the maxims, in particular Quantity and Relation

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[18]Grice's definition of conversational implicature is reproduced here for the reader's convenience (Grice 1989: 231):

A person conversationally implicates that *q* by saying that *p* only if:

1. He is presumed to be following the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle.
2. The supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, *q* is required to make his saying or making as if to say *p* consistent with this presumption.
3. The speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in 2. is required.

[19]The definitions of utterer- and audience-implicatures are mirror-image modifications of Grice's definition of CI. Here is Saul's definition of audience-implicature (Saul 2002: 242):

1. The speaker is presumed to be following the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle.
2a. The *audience believes* that the supposition that the speaker is aware that, or thinks that, *q* is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say *p* (or doing so in those terms) consistent with this presumption.
3a. The *audience takes* the speaker to think that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2a) is required.

(Simion 2017) – "if not at the level of what is said, at least at the level of what is implicated" (Grice 1989: 86).[20]

Take, in particular, the second Quantity maxim (Q2).[21] It seems clear that N has violated Q2 in reporting that p: *A said RCC, and B said ¬RCC.* For, on the understanding that the proposition over which A and B disagree (RCC) is both truth-apt and factual (vs, say, expressing an aesthetic preference), and that A and B's assertions about RCC are mutually incompatible, it cannot be the case that these assertions are both true. Thus, N's contribution is strictly "more informative than is required."

Pat and Qat may therefore reasonably think that "there is some particular *point*" (at the level of what is implicated) to N's over-informativeness (at the level of what is said). For instance, Pat may reasonably infer, from the fact that N has quoted *both* A's assertion that RCC and B's assertion that ¬RCC, that N also thought (meant) q_1: *Both sides bring to the table worthwhile contributions, which should be taken into account when thinking about RCC.* In turn, Qat may reasonably think: "N would not have quoted *both* A's assertion that RCC *and* B's assertion that ¬RCC unless N also thought that q_2: *Opinions on RCC, including expert opinions, remain divided.*"

Pat and Qat may further consider, respectively: N knows (and knows that I know that N knows) that I can see that the supposition that N thinks that q_1 (resp. q_2) is required; N has done nothing to stop me thinking that q_1 (resp. q_2); N intends me to think, or is at least willing to allow me to think, that q_1 (resp. q_2); and so N has implicated that q_1 (resp. q_2).[22]

Note that while Pat and Qat reach different epistemically modest conclusions, their inferential paths nonetheless converge insofar as both take the 'point' of N's report to be that of *conveying information about the epistemic status of RCC.* Since this is among the stable inferences triggered by he-said/she-said reporting, Pat and Qat's interpretation of N's communicative intention is both reasonable and appropriate.

If it were also the *only* possible such interpretation, then q_1 and q_2 might qualify as full-blown conversational implicatures of N's report that p; moreover, N could be charged with having deliberately misled its audience by reporting that p. But disagreement reports carry, and may be used to convey, more than one (potential) evidentiary moral (see also Section 4). Specifically, N might be operating under the assumption that speaker B "is a person of interest for the audience in a way that turns data about the quality of B's profile into an

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[20]Quantity maxims prescribe how much information speakers should provide for the purposes of a conversational exchange (Grice 1989: 26):

1. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

In turn, the Relation maxim contains a single prescription (*ibid.*):

1. Be relevant.

Notably, in connection to the second quantity maxim Grice (*ibid.*) observes:

> The second maxim is disputable; it might be said that to be overinformative is not a transgression of the Cooperative Principle but merely a waste of time. However, it might be answered that [. . .] such overinformativeness may be confusing in that [. . .] hearers may be mislead as a result of thinking that there is some particular *point* in the provision of the excess of information. However this may be, there is perhaps a different reason for doubt about the admission of this second maxim, namely, that its effect will be secured by a later maxim, which concerns relevance (Grice 1989: 26–27).

[21]For simplicity, I take both Quantity maxims to be in play. But not much hangs on this: the argument goes through even if one takes Q2 to be subsumed under Relation (see previous footnote).

[22]Adapted from Grice (1989: 31).

interesting piece of news," and, furthermore that "the audience either already has (shared background) or, alternatively, is offered independent information as to the truth or falsity of the content of that person's testimony, so as to be able to judge her moral/social/political [or epistemic] profile" (Simion 2017: 417). And so, in reporting that *A said RCC and B said ¬RCC*, N may have intended to convey information, not about the epistemic status of RCC but *about the epistemic standing of the parties involved* in the debate.

Say this is the case. Under this supposition, the *speaker*'s intention constitutes a defeater of the success conditions of conversational implicature. For, N may have intended to convey a different proposition q_3, but failed to conversationally implicate it if q_3 is not required to preserve the presumption of cooperativeness, *by the audience's lights*. Under this supposition, N will have *utterer-implicated*, but not conversationally implicated, q_3 (Saul 2002).

To see how this might play out in a bit more detail let us focus again on the second Quantity maxim. N knows that *p: A said RCC and B said ¬RCC* constitutes an over-informative contribution. N also knows that the audience knows this. In addition, N knows that *s: RCC is settled by the evidence*. N may also believe that the audience has (prior, independent) epistemic access to *s*. Given these assumptions, N may therefore think that the most salient (perhaps only) explanation, in order for the over-informative contribution *p* to count as cooperative (and not breach expectations of impartiality), is that N intended to convey q_3: *Speaker B is an incompetent, bad faith testifier in the matter of RCC*.

Notice that it is perfectly possible for *some* portion of N's audience to correctly recognise that N's intention, in reporting *p*, was to convey q_3. The problem is that q_3 is not required in order for N's contribution to be recognised as cooperative by the audience *at large*. Pat and Qat, in particular, did not recognise N's intention to convey q_3. This is not because they were oblivious to there being *something* that N intended to convey; but because they incorrectly surmised what that something was. In particular, Pat and Qat took N to have generated epistemically modest implicatures about RCC (respectively, q_1 and q_2). But, again, neither q_1 or q_2 are required in order to satisfy a presumption of cooperativeness *by N's lights*: therefore, q_1 and q_2 also do not qualify as conversational implicatures. Rather, they are recognisable as audience-implicatures.

5.2. Whose responsibility?

Let's quickly recap. We have seen that he-said/she-said reporting reliably triggers inferences to epistemically modest conclusions with respect to the object of the reported disagreement. Strictly speaking, these may be merely audience-implicatures: they may be generated by "the audience's state of mind" in the absence of a corresponding intention, on the originator's part, to convey these particular conclusions.

In the simplified scenario from Section 5.1, we saw that q_1-q_2 may be generated even though it is *not* the case that N thinks that "the supposition that [N] is aware that, or thinks that, [q_1-q_2] is required to make [N's] saying or making as if to say *p* consistent with [the cooperative] presumption", or "that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out" that this is the case (adapted from Saul 2002: 242).

Descriptively speaking, N's contribution clearly qualifies as a misleading utterance (Saul 2012b). Acts of misleading are typically theorised as admitting of two varieties: speakers may mislead audiences accidentally, in which case they may be blameless for their act; or deliberately, in which case they may be blameworthy.[23]

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[23]Saul (2012a) argues that to deliberately mislead is morally no better than to outright lie. Webber (2013) disagrees.

Neither category seems to fit the cases under examination, however. The 'accidental' reading is clearly inadequate. In turn, the charge of deliberate misleading seems much too strong: it would entail ascribing to news outlets such as the BBC a level of calculated maliciousness that seems, quite simply, far-fetched. Put differently: the former reading would presuppose that, in our original scenario (Section 1), the BBC had absolutely no inkling of the possible inferential ramifications of platforming a 'balanced' debate on RCC; the latter would presuppose that they wilfully set up their audience to draw antecedently calculated false conclusions. The cases of interest fall somewhere between these extremes. Bearing in mind that proper and full assessment of responsibility would require saying much more than is possible here, in what follows I sketch how I see the situation.

Recall from Section 2 that by prescribing that reporters "present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute", balanced journalism is "presumed to [support] each citizen's ability to reason to informed conclusions [about the object of a debate] based on all the relevant evidence" (Figdor 2019: 69). Crucially, this presupposes that *third-party disagreements represented via he-said/she-said reporting are significant disputes*. But if a third-party dispute over p is significant – to the point of being deemed newsworthy by a reputable public service outlet – then it is a remarkably short step to the conclusion that p is not yet settled: more evidence may need to be gathered, more discussion should take place, and judgment had best be suspended in the meantime.

Epistemically modest conclusions such as these, and such as q_1-q_2, are typically drawn by audiences. They are also among the stably salient implicatures of he-said/she-said reporting, we've seen (5.1). So, q_1-q_2 are stably salient explanations of N's utterance that p: *A said RCC, and B said ¬RCC*. Therefore, Pat and Qat's inferences to unwarranted epistemically modest conclusions about RCC were *foreseeable from N's standpoint*.

So, N was in a position to foresee that reporting that p carried a significant risk of (epistemic) harm. Plausibly, N was also free to choose whether or not to report that p.[24] And so N meets the conditions for moral responsibility for action. Since the action in question is both wrong (framing p as a genuine disagreement over RCC is at odds with the evidence) and harmful (unwarranted balanced framing triggers fallacious inferences), N is blameworthy for acting as it did. Depending on whether or not one takes N's doxastic situation to have been one of "conscious advertence to the risk of wrong", the verdict of blameworthiness may fall on the side of recklessness or of negligence (Smith 1983, 2011). Even in the latter case, however, a straightforward case can be made – and we made such a case earlier in this section – for regarding N's lack of in-the-moment awareness as an instance of tracing culpable ignorance: "ignorance [that] is traceable to some past epistemic dereliction on [N's] part" (Smith 2016: 95).

Moral philosophers disagree as to whether wrongdoers who act from (i.e. as a result of) culpable ignorance are blameworthy for their (unwitting) wrongful act as well as for their ignorance (Peels 2011), or only for the latter (Smith 2016). We won't enter this debate here. Nor do we need to, I suggest: networks such as the BBC have had multiple opportunities to reflect upon and revise their editorial conduct, and have persistently stuck to the practice of balancing all sorts of disagreements, largely irrespective of the epistemic merit of the 'sides' involved. This consideration suffices, I submit, to disqualify any putative lack of "conscious advertence to the risk of wrong" as an excuse for wrongdoing. In reporting that p, N either recklessly or negligently misled its audience. So did BBC Cambridgeshire, in hosting a 'balanced' debate over the reality of climate

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[24]Here, taking news organisations vs individual journalists to occupy the role of originator of he-said/she-said reporting matters: plausibly, journalists have less freedom to package informative content into this or that format. By contrast, news organisations, which include editorial boards, by definition have free rein over such decisions.

change. So did *The New York Times*, in describing a congressional hearing on greenhouse gas regulation as a discussion in which "Both Sides Claim Science".[25] And for this, they are deserving of blame – and "should be ashamed".[26]

6. Closing remarks

Improper applications of balance formulae, in news reporting, prime audiences to entertain false and unwarranted beliefs about the reality of climate change, the scientific standing of creationism, the moral standing of slavery, and so on. This puts audiences in epistemic harm's way, both directly and in more roundabout ways (Rietdijk and Archer 2021; Terzian and Corbalán 2021; Levy 2022); and foreshadows problematic practical fallout further downstream (e.g. at the ballot box). It is also unequivocally at odds with the journalistic profession's commitment and duty to help citizens bridge the many epistemic gaps of a complex world.

I do not wish to imply that recipients of BR who commit the bothsiderist fallacy are blameless by default; it is easy to imagine contextual circumstances in which news consumers bear their share of responsibility for such outcomes, as a result of intrapersonal epistemic failings. Yet these are the outliers: as a rule, inferences to epistemically modest conclusions may be sensible responses to balanced disagreement reports, rationally *and* pragmatically speaking. The epistemic dangers of journalistic balance are there for all to see, and we'd do well not to underestimate them.

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[25]See "The perils of 'he said-she said' reporting " for non-paywalled discussion.
[26]Read, 'I won't go on the BBC...'. See McDonald (2020) on shaming and blaming.

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