

# The Media Is Broken

And not for the reasons you think. **By David Brooks** Opinion Columnist

Dec. 26, 2019 The New York Times

Those of us in journalism primarily do one thing: cover events. We report and opine about events like election campaigns, wars and crimes. A lot of the events we cover are decisions — a decision to reform health care or write a tweet — so we tend to congregate in the cities where decision makers live. The internet has sped up the news cycle. Now we put more emphasis on covering the last event that just happened. But it's still mostly events.

But a funny thing has happened to events in this era. They have ceased to drive politics the way they used to. We've seen gigantic events like impeachment, the Kavanaugh hearings, the Mueller investigation and the "Access Hollywood" tapes. They come and go and barely leave a trace on the polls, the political landscape or evaluations of Donald Trump.

Events don't seem to be driving politics. Increasingly, sociology is.

Do you want to predict how a certain region is going to vote in the 2020 presidential race? Discover who settled the region in the 17th and 18th centuries. If the settlers were from the East Anglia section of Britain, then that region is probably going Democratic. If the settlers were from the north of Britain, that region is very likely to vote for Donald Trump. Do you want to predict how a state is going to vote? Find out how that state voted in the 1896 presidential election. As Washington University political scientists Gary Miller and Norman Schofield have observed, 22 out of the 23 states that voted Democratic in 1896 had turned Republican by 2000. Similarly, 17 of the 22 states that voted Republican in 1896 had turned Democratic by 2000. The parties have flipped regions. Do you want to predict how an individual is going to vote? Ask a simple question: Is she urban or rural? Geographic and psycho-sociological patterns now overshadow events in driving political loyalties and national electoral outcomes. Demography is destiny.

There's a more precise way to put this. An event is really two things. It's the event itself and then it's the process by which we make meaning of the event. As Aldous Huxley put it, "Experience is not what happens to you, it's what you do with what happens to you." When a whole country sees events through a similar lens, then you don't have to think a lot about the process people use to make meaning. It's similar across the land. But when people in different regions and subcultures have nonoverlapping lenses, the process by which people make sense of events is more important than the event itself.

For reasons I don't understand, we've had an epistemic explosion over the past few decades. Different American regions and subcultures now see reality through nonoverlapping lenses. They make meaning in radically different ways. Psycho-social categories have hardened.

We in the media will continue to cover events, which, of course, is absolutely necessary. But with some noble exceptions (I'm thinking of Thomas Edsall of *The Times* and Ronald Brownstein of *The Atlantic*), we underreport on how meaning is made in different subcultures. You can't make sense of reality without that. Often we throw up our hands: "Can't these people see the facts?!" I'm as guilty as anyone.

In this new context, I'm curious to know how lenses get crafted. For example, intersectionality is a lens that was created by theorists decades ago and is now a way of seeing that many people use to organize their view of reality. How did that happen? I'm curious to know how a man in rural Idaho who has lost a son to suicide and a brother to fentanyl sees the impeachment hearing. How does he make meaning of that event in real time? I'm curious to know how you can change another person's lens. Can you do it by writing and talking or do you have to move her to a different place and immerse her in a different reality? I'm curious to know how power inequality shapes people's lenses. As Jonathan Rauch [suggests](#) in the current issue of *National Affairs*, ideological polarization is not on the rise, emotional polarization is on the rise. We don't necessarily disagree more. We perceive our opponents to be more menacing. We see more fearfully.

The big difference for those of us in media is that the main story is not only where the decision makers are creating events. It's also and maybe more so in the eyes of those doing the perceiving. Obviously, in this era it's even more important to have a news organization that is ideologically, culturally and geographically diverse, so you can surface and explore the different unconscious ways groups see.

It's also important to ask different questions. It's not enough to simply ask people's opinions through polls and interviews. Epistemology is deeper than opinions. It's found through deeper probing. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to think about our jobs in more profound ways. The core insight is that in a hyper-pluralistic society you can't know people in other groups until you know how they know you.