



UMB News

Wallace Talks Polarization, Misinformation, and More

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If you're wondering how to consume news and find the truth in an era of misinformation and political polarization, veteran journalist Chris Wallace has a method to share: triangulation.

"I don't think you should trust any one source for news," Wallace said April 7 as the guest on the University of Maryland, Baltimore's (UMB) President's Panel on Politics and Policy, a speaker series that has examined issues important to the UMB community since 2017. "But I always say 'triangulate.' In other words, I believe that everybody should read or consume one news source every day that as a routine matter challenges their views.

"If you watch Fox News, you should also read the front page of *The New York Times*. If you love *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, you should also consume MSNBC. If you're getting news from a variety of sources, there's a greater likelihood that you're going to come to an informed opinion and something closer to the truth than if you're just hearing from one side."

Wallace has worked both sides of the cable news aisle, formerly as host of *Fox News Sunday* and now as an anchor for CNN+, and reported for ABC, NBC, and CBS during his 50-year career. He discussed misinformation, mistrust of journalists, dysfunction on Capitol Hill, interviewing techniques, political echo chambers, and more during the hourlong virtual event, discussing the issues with UMB President Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACs, and taking questions from online attendees.

Mistrust of the news media was a recurring theme among the questions. Wallace pointed out that two reasons for skepticism are business models that don't reward nonpartisan political discourse and outlets that let opinion seep into their news coverage.

"The difference between the editorial page and the front page sometimes is not as distinct as it used to be," he said. "You can put an emphasis on being straight down the middle and factual, but the market doesn't reward that. Frankly, one reason that more and more opinionated news outlets exist and succeed is because that's what people are craving. They want news and opinion that conforms with their view of the world."

Speaking about polarization, particularly on Capitol Hill, Wallace lamented that Republicans and Democrats in Congress generally have failed to find common ground to pass major legislation.

"When I first came to Washington in the 1970s, business got done," he said. "There was legislating. There were compromises on immigration reform, on tax reform. I can think of a whole host of major issues — budgets, tax cuts — where deals got done. But our politics became tribal starting in the early 2000s, and it's gotten gradually worse over the years."

Wallace credited the 2020 book by Ezra Klein, "Why We're Polarized," for detailing the tribalization of American politics and explaining that it involves much more than how you vote.

"The book says it's not just a matter of whether you're Republican or Democrat, or liberal or conservative, that you're in a tribe now," Wallace said. "And what tribe you're in says things not only about what you believe regarding politics and government, but also about where you live, what your view of faith is, whether you're a regular churchgoer or not, where you eat, where you consume the news, and who you associate with.

"It's quite extraordinary. In fact, a study that was done after the 2020 election showed that Joe Biden did much better than Donald Trump in counties that had a Starbucks. Conversely, Trump did much better than Biden in counties that had a Cracker Barrel. So it really does become a cultural, socioeconomic, political, and philosophical phenomenon."

Wallace has gained a reputation as a fair, thoughtful, and incisive interviewer during his long career. He has moderated presidential debates, won three Emmy Awards, interviewed world leaders, and received numerous journalism honors. A secret to his success? He treats both sides the same.

"When Vince Lombardi was coach of the Green Bay Packers, somebody asked one of his linemen, 'Does he discriminate? Does he play favorites?' And the lineman said, 'No, he treats us all like dogs.' And that kind of is my attitude as a political reporter: treat them all like dogs," Wallace said. "Don't be disrespectful, but be challenging, be confrontational. People will come to an interview with a whole staff

and a list of talking points. My attitude is: They're going to tell their story, and I'm going to challenge it ."

In closing, Wallace reiterated that the deep division in the United States is not healthy, comparing the acceptance of the polio vaccine in the 1950s as "a miracle drug" to the current level of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, but he added a dose of historical context and a dash of optimism.

"The idea that your political opinion should play any role on a basic matter of public health is disheartening," he said. "But I wouldn't get too discouraged about it, and I remain reasonably hopeful. The country has been through tough times before — Vietnam and Watergate are two examples — but we seem to muddle through. Ultimately, I have a reservoir of faith and trust in the long-term wisdom of the American people."

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