

Telling both sides of the (misguided, patronizing) story

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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As I've [said before](#), the objectivity-fetishizing conventions of straight news reporting make me crazy. It's not just the odd philosophical throwback of implying that reporters can somehow avoid writing as particular people situated in particular contexts. It's also the convoluted copy, in which even plain facts can't be stated plainly if they happen to be unpopular.

So I was glad when NPR released its new [ethics handbook](#), in which among other things the network states that it favors "truth" over "the appearance of balance" and adds that "if the balance of evidence in a matter of controversy weighs heavily on one side, we acknowledge it in our reports."

Jay Rosen rightly [characterizes this](#) as NPR "committing itself to avoiding the worst excesses of 'he said, she said' journalism." I thought of this the other day when I heard a *Morning Edition* piece in which, after playing tape of a voter talking about President Obama and referring to him as a Muslim, the reporter told listeners simply: "Obama is not a Muslim; he's a Christian." He handled a claim about the president's citizenship the same way. Score two for facts, zero for "he said, she said" obfuscation-in-the-name-of-fairness. (And yes, I hope and expect to hear NPR handle 9/11 truthers and other corners of the evidence-free left in similar fashion.)

Another frustrating convention of ostensible neutrality: telling "both sides" of a story. As if there are always exactly two, and they're always equally worth telling--and as if telling a pointless or unfair or misleading or patronizing story is somehow legitimized by doing it again, but about different people. Exhibit A: Alexandra Pelosi and Bill Maher prove their journalistic balance (!) by making fun of not just poor white Republicans in the South, but also poor black Democrats in New York:

No point in my saying more when Ta-Nehisi Coates [has it covered](#):

Cruelty is cruelty and the fact that one's condescension is of the rainbow doesn't make one any less condescending.

Pelosi thinks she's surprising by her willingness to unleash her quick wit against poor black people. But there is nothing noteworthy about offending "both sides," a feat that can be managed simply by relieving yourself on a crowded street. Moreover, very few black people who've spent time in the white world will be shocked to learn that liberals are just as capable as conservatives at regarding them as objects to be invoked at their leisure.

[Read it all.](#)