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SINCLAIR BROADCAST GROUP, INC.



PARTISAN PABLUM

HOW SINCLAIR'S POLITICAL AGENDA THREATENS THE
QUALITY LOCAL JOURNALISM CONSUMERS TRUST

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SPECIAL REPORT

Partisan Pablum: How Sinclair's Political Agenda Threatens the Quality Local Journalism Consumers Trust

Sinclair Broadcast Group has a troubling track record with the truth. Since it announced its planned merger with news giant Tribune Media in May 2017, the company has faced a very public firestorm over its history of infecting local news coverage with politically charged programming. Turning America's local news stations into partisan outlets is nothing new for Sinclair, though. The company could be considered the Godfather of agenda-driven local media, with criticisms of media bias dating back to the early 2000s. Most recently, Sinclair has been under fire for its now infamous "must run" segments – short pieces of political commentary produced in Sinclair's national headquarters that the company requires all local affiliates to air.

One of the earliest criticisms of Sinclair's coverage was in response to Sinclair executives' mandate that news anchors at its local affiliates run editorials supportive of the Bush administration's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Newsroom staffers pushed back "saying such statements could undermine the public faith in their political objectivity." Since then, Sinclair has continued to push heavily partisan commentary in the lead-up to elections and faced a barrage of negative attention for content critical of Democratic candidates before the 2004, 2010, and 2012 national elections. Most recently, in 2016, Sinclair made headlines for striking a deal with Jared Kushner to give the Trump campaign positive press, while heavily criticizing Trump's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Sinclair Admits it has a Political Agenda

In a 2004 interview, Sinclair chief executive David Smith claimed that "ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the media is left of center" and that "there are two companies doing truly balanced news today: Sinclair and Fox."

- "At Sinclair, the top of the food chain is David Smith. An imposing man with a pink complexion and a confrontational manner, Smith comes across like an overgrown frat boy who suddenly struck it rich. His father, Julian Sinclair Smith, launched the family's first television station in 1971, and in the last decade, David and his three brothers have expanded the operation into a broadcast empire with access to four in one American households. During a daylong tour of Sinclair's headquarters, on the outskirts of Baltimore, Smith repeatedly boasts about his wealth ('I bet you wish you were my son,' he tells me. 'It would put you in a different financial bracket') and proudly shows off his travel photographs, which are mounted and displayed in the hallways of Sinclair's five-story office building. He makes no secret of his support for Bush and describes Sinclair as one of the only bastions of objectivity in American journalism. 'We're in the center,' Smith insists, sitting in his fifth-floor executive suite. 'Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of

the media is left of center. Paula Zahn or Peter Jennings or anybody who is attempting to pass himself off as reporting news — they're not telling the whole story. Dan Rather wants you to believe that Saddam Hussein is a nice guy! There are two companies doing truly balanced news today: Sinclair and Fox.” [Eric Klinenberg, "[Beyond 'Fair and Balanced'](#)," *Rolling Stone*, 02/24/05]

Sinclair’s VP of News produced a segment in March 2017 that accused other news outlets of reporting “irresponsible... one-sided news stories” that he considered “fake news.”

- In the video, from March 2017, "Sinclair VP of News" Scott Livingston described the trend of "irresponsible and one-sided news stories plaguing our country" and accused national media of posting "fake news" without "fact checking." ["[Sinclair VP of News: Announcement from KSNV News 3, Las Vegas, March 23, 2017](#)," YouTube, 03/23/17]
- “Sinclair asked stations to run a short segment in which Scott Livingston, the company's vice president for news, accused the national news media of publishing ‘fake news stories.’” [Sydney Ember, "Tilting Right, TV News Titan Roils Its Staff," *The New York Times*, 05/13/17]

When Sinclair came under fire in July 2017 with accusations of political bias, the VP of News defended the programming, saying the “commentaries provide a viewpoint that often gets lost in the typical national broadcast media dialogue.”

- “Livingston argues in the memo that while it’s true Sinclair issues ‘must run’ content, media reports which say they are of ‘poor quality’ and ‘politically tilted’ are not true, and that ‘must runs’ amount to less than one hour per week, on average, of Sinclair stations' coverage, compared with more than 35 hours of local news. Plus, he argued that such commentary provides a viewpoint not usually found in the national media.

‘While it is true that Sinclair offers commentary segments from Mark Hyman and Boris Epshteyn, this content is clearly identified as commentary and constitutes a tiny percentage of the station’s weekly broadcast content,’ Livingston wrote. “‘Mark and Boris’ commentaries provide a viewpoint that often gets lost in the typical national broadcast media dialogue. Boris Epshteyn worked in the Trump White House, a fact that Sinclair makes no effort to hide, and provides a unique insight that viewers can’t find anywhere else. The presence of former administrative personnel serving as news commentators is a well accepted practice in journalism.” [Hadas Gold, “Sinclair executive defends company from 'biased' media in internal memo,” *POLITICO*, 07/18/17]

Sinclair forces its local affiliates to air ‘must-run’ segments. These stories are produced at Sinclair’s national headquarters and feature often controversial, heavily partisan content.

- “They are called ‘must-runs,’ and they arrive every day at television stations owned by the Sinclair Broadcast Group -- short video segments that are centrally produced by the company. Station managers around the country are directed to work them into the broadcast over a period of 24 or 48 hours. Since November 2015, Sinclair has ordered its stations to run a daily segment from a ‘Terrorism Alert Desk’ with updates on terrorism-

related news around the world. During the election campaign last year, it sent out a package that suggested in part that voters should not support Hillary Clinton because the Democratic Party was historically pro-slavery." [Sydney Ember, "Tilting Right, TV News Titan Roils Its Staff," *The New York Times*, 05/13/17]

Prior to the current form of 'must-run' content, Sinclair required each stations to air a nightly editorial called 'The Point,' in which company VP Mark Hyman railed against the "angry left."

- "In the firmament of right-wing media outlets, Sinclair stands somewhere to the right of Fox News. Its archconservative politics may not be served up with Fox's raw-meat bite, but what Sinclair lacks in flash, it makes up for in unabashed cheerleading for the Bush administration. It sent a team to Iraq to report 'good news' about the war and forced each of its sixty-two stations to broadcast a pledge of support for Bush. Last April, it refused to air a Nightline special listing the name of every American soldier killed in Iraq, and it gave national exposure to Stolen Honor, a documentary attacking John Kerry, just weeks before the election. And each night, Sinclair requires all of its stations to air an editorial segment called 'The Point,' in which company vice president Mark Hyman rails against the 'angry left' and 'clueless academia,' dismisses peace activists as 'wack jobs,' calls the French 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys' and supports a host of right-wing initiatives, from a national sales tax to privatizing Medicare." [Eric Klinenberg, "[Beyond 'Fair and Balanced,'](#)" *Rolling Stone*, 02/24/05]

Sinclair's Partisan Agenda-Driven Programming Through the Years

Sinclair "used its 173 television stations to advance a mostly right-leaning agenda since the presidency of George W. Bush." - The New York Times

2000-2008: Proud Member of the George W. Bush Fan Club

"After the September 2001 attacks, Sinclair executives ordered news anchors at its local stations to run editorials announcing support for the Bush administration's response."

After newsroom staffers said "such statements could undermine public faith in their political objectivity," they were allowed "to say the message was from 'station management.'"

- "After the September 2001 attacks, Sinclair executives ordered news anchors at its local stations to run editorials announcing support for the Bush administration's response. Some news staffers, such as those at Sinclair's two Baltimore stations, WBFF and WNUV, objected, saying such statements could undermine public faith in their political objectivity. The editorials were read nonetheless, with language stating the support for Bush came from station management." [David Folkenflik, "[Sinclair's TV program on Kerry is called illegal donation to Bush](#)," *The Baltimore Sun*, 10/12/04]

- "In the days after the September 2001 terror attacks, Sinclair required the news and sports anchors and even weather forecasters to read editorial messages explicitly conveying full support for the Bush administration's fight against terrorism. After some staffers raised objections at its flagship station in Baltimore, Sinclair officials allowed anchors there to say the message was from 'station management.'" [David Folkenflik, ["Sinclair Broadcast Group Has Deal To Buy Tribune Media's TV Stations,"](#) *NPR*, 05/08/17]

Sinclair was heavily criticized for its plans to air a documentary attacking Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's military record just before the 2004 presidential election.

Even after accusations of the programming being an illegal corporate contribution to the Bush campaign and calls for an advertiser boycott, Sinclair did not altogether cancel the program.

- "In 2004, Sinclair generated controversy when it considered airing a documentary attacking Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kerry's military record just before the election. After complaints from Democrats and calls for an advertiser boycott, Sinclair backed down and ran a program that analysts said was more balanced. The company nevertheless fired its Washington bureau chief after he publicly said that plans to air the anti-Kerry film were 'indefensible.'" [Paul Farhi, ["Under new ownership, WJLA-TV takes a slight turn to the right,"](#) *The Washington Post*, 09/16/14]
- The Democratic Party said that Sinclair's plans to air the anti-Kerry documentary amounted "to an illegal corporate campaign contribution to President Bush" and said they planned to "file a formal complaint today with the Federal Election Commission over the plan to broadcast the program." The documentary, "Stolen Honor: Wounds That Never Heal," alleged "that North Vietnamese captors used Kerry's statements about atrocities committed by American troops during the conflict as an excuse to torture U.S. prisoners of war." Democratic Party officials, including Terry McAuliffe, then DNC chairman, "took pains to say that the producer of Stolen Honor was a discredited journalist who held no standing in the profession." The producer, Carlton Sherwood, "was fired by a Washington television station in the early 1980s after a story he did on the Vietnam War memorial came under severe attack" and "later joined the Washington Times." [David Folkenflik, ["Sinclair's TV program on Kerry is called illegal donation to Bush,"](#) *The Baltimore Sun*, 10/12/04]
- "The Sinclair Broadcast Group initially planned to show the anti-Kerry 'Stolen Honor' on its 62 stations, but backed off and ran excerpts in a more balanced news show on the Vietnam POW issue." [William Booth, "Docu-Trauma; For Political Films, the Box Office Is More Bombo Than Boffo," *The Washington Post*, 11/02/04]
- "A complaint was filed with the FEC by the Democratic National Committee relating to a documentary, 'Stolen Honor,' critical of John Kerry's service in Vietnam. [Sinclair] aired portions of the documentary last October as part of a news special. A complaint was also filed by an individual in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, relating to commentaries by Mark Hyman that editorialized about Mr. Kerry. In a unanimous vote, all six of the FEC Commissioners agreed that [Sinclair], Mr. Hyman and Mr. Smith did not violate any campaign finance laws and that their broadcast activities were protected by the 'press

exemption.'" ["Federal Elections Commission Finds No Violation By Sinclair; Complaint by the DNC is Dismissed," *PR Newswire US*, 07/28/05]

Sinclair fired its DC bureau chief, after he spoke out against the Kerry documentary, calling it "biased political propaganda, with clear intentions to sway this election."

Upon the bureau chief's termination, it came to light that he had tried to get out of his contract on four previous occasions, all of them prompted by matters of bias.

- Sinclair "fired its Washington bureau chief," reporter Jon Leiberman, in October 2004, saying, in a statement, "'We are disappointed that Jon's political views caused him to violate company policy and speak to the press about company business.'" Leiberman made remarks, published by *The Baltimore Sun*, in which he called the anti-Kerry documentary "'biased political propaganda, with clear intentions to sway this election.'" Leiberman "said Sinclair told him that he was fired for cause and would receive no severance." [Kasey Jones, "Sinclair fires reporter who criticized plans for program on film about Kerry, discussed a staff meeting," *The Associated Press*, 10/19/04]
- One year after being fired, Leiberman was sued by Sinclair "for damages and for what it says are violations of his contract." Sinclair's lawsuit claimed that Leiberman "broke company rules by speaking publicly about his disaffection with his bosses after they ordered Sinclair stations around the country to pass off as news a documentary critical of presidential candidate" John Kerry. The company claimed that Leiberman "owes Sinclair almost \$17,000 in so-called liquidated damages, equal to a percentage of his salary had he served out his contract." At the time of his dismissal, Leiberman said "that in almost five years of working for Sinclair he had asked to be released from his contract on four occasions, all of them prompted by matters of bias. He was refused each time." [Nick Madigan, "[Sinclair sues ex-employee for damages, pact violation](#)," *The Baltimore Sun*, 10/20/05]

His firing came just months after Sinclair sent him with a conservative commentator to Iraq to cover a story on purportedly "positive, untold stories" that the "liberal media" didn't cover.

- In February 2004, Sinclair sent a news crew to Iraq "to uncover the stories that its officials believe are being overlooked by reporters for major American television news organizations." Mark Hyman, Sinclair's vice president for corporate affairs, said that the "real accomplishments for the U.S.-led occupation" may be "being drowned out by the constant barrage of stories about guerrilla actions against coalition troops." [David Folkenflik, "[Sinclair crew to cover Iraq](#)," *The Baltimore Sun*, 01/30/04]
- Mark Hyman and Joe Lieberman reported from Iraq for Sinclair. The two presented "what they say are the positive, 'untold stories' that the 'liberal media' don't recount during constant coverage of the attacks against U.S.-led forces and simmering political unease during the occupation of Iraq." "Hyman, Sinclair's vice president for corporate relations and editorialist, has been contributing commentaries from Iraq, while Leiberman, its Washington bureau chief, has reported stories." Hyman and Leiberman painted "a picture of a world where the United States - largely through the presence of troops - has improved the lives of millions, in ways large and small. They have shown

soldiers rebuilding and painting a school. Military doctors giving checkups to children. Soldiers raising money for social services from friends back home.” [David Folkenflik, ["In Iraq, going for the upbeat,"](#) *The Baltimore Sun*, 02/18/04]

Sinclair pulled an edition of ABC News' *Nightline* from local affiliates because it was devoted to reading the names of troops killed in Iraq. Sinclair claimed it was intended to hurt Bush.

The decision resulted in “a torrent of protest,” and Republican war-hero Senator John McCain called the move “deeply offensive.”

- In April 2004, "Sinclair pulled an edition of ABC News' *Nightline* from seven ABC stations because it was devoted to reading the names of troops killed in Iraq. In a statement, Sinclair officials said the show was intended to hurt President Bush. 'The action appears to be motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq.'" [David Folkenflik, ["Sinclair's TV program on Kerry is called illegal donation to Bush,"](#) *The Baltimore Sun*, 10/12/04]
- “The decision by the Sinclair Broadcast Group to pre-empt a broadcast of 'Nightline' devoted to reciting the names of every member of the military killed in action in Iraq ran into a torrent of protest yesterday from viewers, media watchdog groups, and one prominent veteran of the Vietnam War, Sen. John McCain. Senator McCain made public a letter he had sent to the chief executive of Sinclair, one of the country's largest owners of local television stations. He wrote that he found Sinclair's removal of the 'Nightline' news program from the eight ABC affiliates it owns 'deeply offensive.'”

In response, Sinclair CEO David Smith released a letter addressed to Senator McCain, writing “that 'responsible journalism' requires that a discussion of the cost of wars 'must necessarily be accompanied by a description of the benefits of military action and the events that precipitated that action.'” The controversy came at a time when news media focused “increased attention on the cost of the war” and “highlighted that more members of the armed forces were killed in April than in any other month of the war.” On April 30, 2004, “at least two newspapers, USA Today and The Washington Post, displayed rows of photographs of the war dead.” [Bill Carter, ["THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: THE MEDIA; Debate Over 'Nightline' Tribute to War Dead Grows, as McCain Weighs In,"](#) *The New York Times*, 05/01/04]

Conservative commentator Mark Hyman — then Sinclair's VP of corporate relations — compared networks refusing to air the anti-Kerry documentary to Holocaust deniers.

- In April 2004, Sinclair "forbade all of its ABC stations to air a segment of *Nightline* in which Ted Koppel read the names of American casualties in Iraq, which Sinclair's management considered 'motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States.' Six months later, Sinclair executives launched a political effort of their own, instructing all their news stations to broadcast a documentary on John Kerry called *Stolen Honor*, which accused the candidate of treason during the Vietnam War. In the buzz that followed, Sinclair's vice president of corporate relations, Mark Hyman, stoked the fire even further by announcing that any network that refused to air the anti-Kerry documentary were 'acting like Holocaust deniers' and that even if

the documentary was a gift to Bush, the effect was balanced by the existence of suicide bombers in the Middle East, since after all, 'Every car bomb in Iraq would be considered an in-kind contribution to John Kerry.'" [Wil S. Hylton, ["Not Necessarily the News,"](#) GQ, 11/06/05]

In the wake of the Kerry documentary controversy, there was pushback on behalf of shareholders and complaints about Sinclair's "dismal" performance in the stock market.

In October 2004, amidst the controversy of airing the anti-John Kerry documentary, "San Diego lawyer William S. Lerach said he planned to sue on behalf of shareholders, alleging insider trading by top executives as well as damage from the decision to air the film. Lerach said he sent a demand letter on behalf of 1199 SEIU Greater New York Pension Fund, a retirement fund for hospital and nursing home employees, and other unidentified institutional investors and holders of Sinclair stock and debt." [Peter Geier, "Sinclair Broadcast faces shareholder suit in Baltimore," *The Daily Record*, 10/20/04]

"William S. Lerach, a partner at Lerach Coughlin Stoia Geller Rudman & Robbins LLP and a noted securities lawyer" sent a letter to the company "on behalf of a New York pension fund and other investors complaining about the company's 'dismal' performance and its inability to keep pace with the Nasdaq and broadcasting and cable television indexes." [Jaret Seiberg, "Sinclair pulls anti-Kerry film," *The Deal*, 10/21/04]

"The company did not directly address the insider trading accusation, but executive officer David Smith said executives 'have endured personal attacks of the vilest nature.'" ["Threats force Sinclair to show parts of Kerry film," *The Oklahoman*, 10/21/04]

Sinclair was fined by the FCC for "willfully and repeatedly violating" broadcast rules when the outlet failed to disclose that "America's Black Forum" host Armstrong Williams had been paid by an affiliate of the Bush administration's Education Department to make favorable comments about Bush's "No Child Left Behind" policy during his program.

- "In 2007, the Federal Communications Commission fined Sinclair \$36,000 for broadcasting two public-affairs shows, 'America's Black Forum' and 'Election Countdown' in 2004 on nine of its stations without disclosing that host Armstrong Williams had been paid by an affiliate of the Education Department to make favorable comments about the Bush administration's 'No Child Left Behind' policy. Sinclair said it had no knowledge of the arrangement, but the FCC said the programs violated rules against 'payola punditry.'" [Paul Farhi, ["Under new ownership, WJLA-TV takes a slight turn to the right,"](#) *The Washington Post*, 09/16/14]
- In 2004, "when conservative commentator Armstrong Williams took \$240,000 in payoffs from the Bush administration to promote its education policies in the media, he needed to reach a national television audience to satisfy the terms of his lucrative deal. Fortunately for Williams, he was good friends with David Smith, the CEO of Sinclair Broadcast Group, the nation's largest owner of television stations. Although Smith says he didn't know Williams was on the take, he liked the pundit's pro-Bush views and was eager to hand him plum assignments at Sinclair. While on the Bush payroll, Williams did an interview for Sinclair with then Education Secretary Rod Paige, the man responsible

for funneling him taxpayer money to secure such prime-time exposure. He also interviewed Majority Whip Tom DeLay, and even got an hour on camera with Vice President Dick Cheney, who rarely speaks to the media. [...] Even before the payoffs became public, the news staff at Sinclair was horrified. The producer who edited the interview Williams did with Paige calls it ‘the worst piece of TV I’ve ever been associated with. You’ve seen softballs from Larry King? Well, this was softer. I told my boss it didn’t even deserve to be broadcast, but they kept pushing me to put more of it on tape. In retrospect, it was so clearly propaganda.’ The Federal Communications Commission is investigating the cash-for-coverage deal, and other media outlets have severed their ties to Williams. But not Sinclair. Smith leaves open the possibility of putting the commentator back on the air, dismissing the entire controversy as ‘foolish.’ Williams, for his part, is confident that Sinclair will have him back. ‘David Smith has stood beside me as a friend,’ he says. ‘I’m not too concerned about my relationship with Sinclair, if you know what I mean.’” [Eric Klinenberg, [“Beyond ‘Fair and Balanced,’”](#) *Rolling Stone*, 02/24/05]

- The Federal Communications Commission's Enforcement Bureau found Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. "apparently liable for a forfeiture in the amount of thirty-six thousand dollars (\$36,000) for willfully and repeatedly violating Section 73.1212(d) of the Commission's rules." The FCC found that "Sinclair stations broadcast an episode of the program 'America's Black Forum,' ('ABF') entitled '2004 Election Countdown,' on September 11 or 12, 2004, without airing the sponsorship identification announcements required by this section." Sinclair argued "that no such identification was required" and stated that "that it neither received nor was promised any consideration for the material's broadcast." The program "consisted, in substantial part, of partisan representatives and commentators analyzing and debating various issues central to the presidential campaign then underway, as well as clips of the candidates themselves making political statements at their respective parties' conventions. Based on these characteristics," the FCC found "that this program material was furnished for use in connection with 'political broadcast matter' within the meaning of Section 73.1212(d) of the Commission's rules." The FCC concluded "that Sinclair willfully and repeatedly violated Section 73.1212(d) of the Commission's rules by airing the ABF episode '2004 Election Countdown' over its stations on the respective dates noted above without airing proper sponsorship identification and that the imposition of a monetary forfeiture in redress of these failures is appropriate." ["FCC NOTIFIES SONSHINE FAMILY TELEVISION, SINCLAIR BROADCAST GROUP OF APPARENT LIABILITY FOR FORFEITURE FOR VIOLATING FCC RULES," *US Fed News*, 08/18/07]
- Armstrong Williams' weekly syndicated newspaper column was dropped by Tribune Media as a result of the controversy. ["Prominent commentator dropped by syndicate over payments from Education Department," *Associated Press*, 01/08/05]

2008-2016: Going All-In to Take Down Obama and Other Democrats

Sinclair aired two “vicious” infomercials timed to coincide with the 2010 and 2012 elections, which were criticized as an attempt “to influence political views days before an election.” One

infomercial, paid for by the National Republican Trust PAC, attacked President Obama and Democrats, accusing Obama of raising campaign money from the terrorist group Hamas.

- “More recently, SBG produced two infomercials timed to coincide with the 2010 and 2012 elections, including *Breaking Point: 25 Minutes that Will Change America*, which alleged that Barack Obama had received campaign funding from the terrorist group Hamas, even though the Obama campaign claimed it had returned the money. In all cases, SBG sought to use its position as an owner of a significant number of local affiliates to influence political views days before an election by showing a documentary that did not provide both sides of the issue equal time to explain their positions.” [Chuck Tryon, [Political TV](#), New York: Routledge, 2016]
- “Numerous Fox affiliates and an ABC affiliate are broadcasting a vicious 25-minute infomercial that accuses President Barack Obama of harboring ‘hostility’ towards America and ties him to malicious rhetoric. The ad, called ‘Breaking Point,’ was paid for by The National Republican Trust PAC, and since Friday has run in Iowa, Kentucky, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Its existence was highlighted by the liberal blog ThinkProgress, a project of the progressive thinktank, Center for American Progress. It chides the ‘destructive ideology of leftist revolutionaries,’ refers to the president as a ‘socialist,’ and claims the views of Democrats are ‘far too extreme for Americans to accept.’ [...] It also accused President Obama of raising campaign cash from Hamas.” [[“Fox affiliates run infomercial in swing states suggesting Obama funded by Hamas, wants to ‘kill some crackers,’” RawStory](#), 11/01/10]
- The National Republican Trust PAC wrote, about *Breaking Point*, “This film will change this election and catapult Conservatives into Congress if enough voters see it before Election Day. Ordinary Americans never receive detailed information like this prior to an election. This film effectively counters the liberal media and their efforts to protect the Establishment.” [[National Republican Trust PAC](#), 11/16/13 accessed via archive.org]

The night before the 2012 election, Sinclair aired a half-hour news special in battleground states that heavily criticized President Barack Obama while hardly examining GOP nominee Mitt Romney.

- Sinclair Broadcast Group aired a “half-hour special” the night before the 2012 presidential election “on six stations in Ohio, Iowa, Florida and South Carolina.” The special was “criticized as a partisan attack on President Barack Obama.” [Merrill Knox, [“Sinclair’s Election Eve Special, Broadcast in Swing States, Criticized as Partisan,” TVSpy](#), 11/07/12]
- “On the eve of the 2012 election between Obama and Republican Mitt Romney, for example, Sinclair stations in several battlegrounds states aired a -corporate-produced half-hour news ‘special’ that criticized Obama’s handling of the economy, his signature health-care law and the administration’s management of the terrorist attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Romney’s record received less scrutiny.” [Paul Farhi, [“Under new ownership, WJLA-TV takes a slight turn to the right,” The Washington Post](#), 09/16/14]

- “Rather than a side by side comparison of the two major party candidates, however, the special featured some of the most partisan criticisms of President Barack Obama, and spent relatively little time examining Republican nominee Mitt Romney. ‘Much of the first two years of President Obama’s term in office was spent developing and defending Obamacare — that’s the Affordable Care Act, signed into law in March of 2010,’ anchor Bob Kendrick said, near the program’s halfway point. ‘It supposedly guarantees health care for any U.S. resident who could not obtain good health care otherwise. The biggest parts of the law go into effect in 2014, with other pieces of it rolling out over the next decade. The cost of Obamacare is making many Americans sick to their stomach, though.’” [Eric Lach, [“Ohio Viewers Hit By Anti-Obama TV ‘Special’ On Election Eve,” Talking Points Memo, 11/06/12](#)]

***The Baltimore Sun* reported on a strange robo-call directed at local residents and voiced by an anchor at WBFF, a Sinclair-owned station, which appeared to be biased against Maryland’s Democratic Governor.**

- “In 2012, Baltimore residents received a strange robocall voiced by Jeff Barnd, then lead anchor at WBFF. Residents were told in the call that it was a ‘survey.’ But, in fact, the language of the questions they were asked was so loaded that it could create an unfavorable attitude toward Democrat Martin O’Malley, who was then governor. At the very least, the questions could elicit answers that might support an on-air story showing a large segment of area residents opposed to him. The common political term for such a slanted survey is ‘push poll.’”
- Survey participants were initially asked questions about Lyme disease, and then were asked “a much lengthier series of questions on Maryland politics and O’Malley, which seemed like the real purpose of the call. The questions were about the Dream Act, The Civil Marriage Protection Act, Maryland income taxes being raised, O’Malley’s ‘legislative agenda’ and whether the governor backed the Civil Marriage Protection Act and the Dream Act to ‘further his political career?’” [David Zurawik, [“What an even bigger Sinclair might mean to democracy,” The Baltimore Sun, 05/08/17](#)]

WBFF Fox 45, a Sinclair-owned station in Baltimore, “misleadingly edited and aired video of a protest march to make it seem as if protesters were chanting ‘kill a cop.’”

- In 2014, WBFF Fox 45, a Sinclair-owned station in Baltimore, “misleadingly edited and aired video of a protest march to make it seem as if protesters were chanting ‘kill a cop.’ But what the marchers were actually chanting in response to the lead of a Baltimore woman, Tawanda Jones, whose brother had died while in police custody in 2013, was, ‘We won’t stop. We can’t stop ‘til killer cops are in cell blocks.’ That was only five months before the unrest following the death in Baltimore of Freddie Gray while he was in police custody – a time of heightened police-community tensions nationwide.” [David Zurawik, [“What an even bigger Sinclair might mean to democracy,” The Baltimore Sun, 05/08/17](#)]
- Tawanda Jones “filed a \$3 million defamation lawsuit against” WBFF-TV and Sinclair Broadcast Group, its parent company, in June 2015. The lawsuit alleged that the station “misrepresented her chants during a nonviolent protest” when it “broadcast a video of a

Washington, D.C., protest against police brutality that had been edited to misquote Towanda Jones as chanting 'kill a cop' instead of referring to 'killer cops.'" WBFF "aired a segment publicly acknowledging the mistake" in December 2014. "Shortly after the video aired, a reporter and photographer involved with the story were fired from the station, according to news reports." "The lawsuit seeks \$1 million in compensatory damages and \$2 million in punitive damages, claiming that after the edited video aired, Jones received death threats, lost community support for her protests and has been 'reduced to reclusive behavior.' Jones has also regularly received psychological treatment since the video aired, the complaint states. In addition to accusing WBFF and Sinclair of defaming Jones' character and portraying her in a false and misleading light, the lawsuit also alleges negligence, stating that the station and its parent company had a responsibility to the public not to 'rig' or 'slant' the news and to report accurate information to serve the public interest." [Lauren Kirkwood, "Baltimore woman files defamation suit against WBFF, Sinclair," *The Daily Record*, 06/26/15]

After Sinclair purchased D.C.'s ABC affiliate WJLA-TV in 2014, the station took a "noticeable turn to the right," regularly featuring conservative pundit Mark Hyman and partnering with the conservative newspaper the *Washington Times* – to many WJLA employees' chagrin.

- In 2014, Sinclair Broadcast Group purchased WJLA-TV, Washington's ABC affiliate, and the station's news operations took "a subtle but noticeable turn to the right." For example, under the station's new ownership, "Mark Hyman, a veteran conservative pundit" and Sinclair executive, appeared on the morning news to rail "against the inconsistent enforcement of a ban on travel to Cuba by Americans." Hyman's commentary, ranging "from warning about the cost of Obamacare to advocating the abolition of the Transportation Security Administration" became "a regular feature on WJLA," just as it is "on dozens of stations owned by the Sinclair Broadcast Group, the new owner of ABC 7."

After purchasing WJLA from Allbritton Communications in a \$985 million deal, Sinclair began "a partnership with the editorially conservative Washington Times to feature the newspaper's 'Golden Hammer' award on the air each week. The award recognizes 'the most egregious examples of government waste, fraud and abuse,' as determined by the Times." One award "went to state and local governments that give Hollywood filmmakers tax credits to lure movie and TV productions, which WJLA's report suggested amounted to a government subsidy of scripted sex and violence." WJLA also began "to carry pieces produced by Sinclair's Washington bureau about national issues and federal programs," which were generally "critical of the Obama administration and [tended] to offer perspectives primarily from conservative think tanks."

Sinclair's acquisition of the station "caused some unease in WJLA's newsroom." Staffers said that "some of the stories ordered by Sinclair on a 'must-run' basis don't meet the station's long tradition of non-partisan reporting. Moreover, they suggest that airing criticism of the federal government without rebuttal is bound to play badly in a region that is home to hundreds of thousands of federal workers." [Paul Farhi, "[Under new ownership, WJLA-TV takes a slight turn to the right](#)," *The Washington Post*, 09/16/14]

- Mark Hyman's "conservative views resemble those of David Smith, the Sinclair CEO, who believes that the mainstream media are overwhelmingly liberal." [David Folkenflik, "[Sinclair's TV program on Kerry is called illegal donation to Bush](#)," *The Baltimore Sun*, 10/12/04]

Sinclair “used its TV stations to launch the Sunday morning public affairs program “Full Measure With Sharyl Attkisson.” Attkisson previously accused CBS of “liberal bias” and claimed “that the government hacked her computer after her aggressive reporting on the Obama administration.”

- “Sinclair has used its TV stations to launch the Sunday morning public affairs program ‘Full Measure With Sharyl Attkisson.’ Attkisson is a former CBS News correspondent who contended that the government hacked her computer after her aggressive reporting on the Obama administration. When she left CBS after 20 years at the network, she went public in saying there was a liberal bias in its coverage.” [Stephen Battaglio, "[Sinclair Broadcast Group](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, 05/09/17]
- “Full Measure with Sharyl Attkisson” launched in October 2015. [[Form 10-K, Sinclair Broadcast Group](#), Securities and Exchange Commission, filed [02/28/17](#)]

Sinclair has a close relationship with Ben Carson. During the 2016 primaries, Sinclair repeatedly featured Carson as an “expert” in programming and “aired his hour-long autobiographical promotional film” just before he announced his presidential candidacy.

Longtime Sinclair ally Armstrong Williams was Ben Carson’s business manager and the de facto head of his presidential campaign.

- Sinclair’s “managers have been particularly close to Carson, who practiced medicine in Baltimore for many years. Sinclair featured him repeatedly as an expert source in televised ‘town hall’ meetings before he declared his candidacy in early 2015. Its stations also aired his hour-long autobiographical promotional film, called ‘A Breath of Fresh Air, A New Prescription for America,’ just before Carson’s official announcement. The Carson infomercial was produced by a company run by Armstrong Williams, which paid Sinclair an undisclosed fee for the airtime.”

In January 2016, “Sinclair began producing a public-affairs talk show called ‘The Right Side Forum’ hosted by Armstrong Williams, Ben Carson’s business manager and the de facto head of Carson’s unsuccessful presidential campaign. Williams is a longtime business partner of Sinclair; in 2013, he acquired TV stations from Sinclair when the company reached federal limits on station ownership.”

During the 2016 campaign, Sinclair-owned stations aired “exclusive” interviews with Donald Trump surrogates, including Ben Carson. “During one of the Carson interviews, Sinclair managers provided questions for local-station reporters to ask, such as ‘Dr. Carson, you toured Detroit, your home town, with Donald Trump Saturday. What will Donald Trump offer the African American community better than Hillary Clinton can?’ And: ‘He has talked a lot about job creation. What will he do specifically to help

employment among African Americans?" [Paul Farhi, "[How a giant TV company helped Trump's campaign](#)," *The Washington Post*, 12/22/16]

- "Scott Livingston, Sinclair's vice president of news, said that Carson was invited to be on the two panels because he 'offers a unique, fresh perspective on the issues. He has always been on panels with multiple viewpoints. Our goal is to offer a wide range of views.' Carson, a favorite among some tea party activists, is politically in step with Sinclair's chief executive, David D. Smith, and Smith's extended family, which controls Sinclair, the largest owner of TV stations in the nation. The Smith family has been a major contributor to Republican candidates. Democrats have charged that the company has used its stations to boost Republican candidates at the expense of Democrats." [Paul Farhi, "[Sinclair Broadcast Group gives a possible presidential contender a microphone](#)," *The Washington Post*, 01/21/15]
- "Conservative columnist, commentator and entrepreneur Armstrong Williams can add broadcast ownership to his professional resume. The Federal Communications Commission has approved the sale of two local television stations in Michigan and South Carolina to Mr. Williams, a decision he has been waiting for since late February... The purchase was made in concert with a broader series of station acquisitions brokered by Baltimore-based Sinclair Broadcasting, which owns and operates, programs or provides sales services to 140 television stations in 72 markets. Sinclair's television group reaches approximately 35 percent of U.S. television households and includes Fox, ABC, MyTV, CW, CBS, NBC and Azteca affiliates." [Jennifer Harper, "Columnist purchases two TV stations; FCC's approval finalizes Williams' deal with Sinclair," *The Washington Times*, 11/21/13]

2016 – Today: Let's Make a Deal (for Better Trump Coverage)

Jared Kushner admitted to business executives that Donald Trump's presidential campaign "struck a deal with Sinclair" to "secure better media coverage."

- In December 2016, Jared Kushner was overheard at "an off-the-record meeting in the Morgan Stanley Cafeteria for the Partnership for New York City," admitting Donald Trump's presidential campaign "struck a deal with Sinclair Broadcast Group during the campaign to try and secure better media coverage." Sinclair was given "more access to Trump and the campaign," and in exchange, "Sinclair would broadcast their Trump interviews across the country without commentary." Scott Livingston, vice president of news at Sinclair, said their deal with Trump was "'an extended package, extended story where you'd hear more directly from candidate on the issue instead of hearing all the spin and all the rhetoric.'" [Josh Dawsey & Hadas Gold, "[Kushner: We struck deal with Sinclair for straighter coverage](#)," *Politico*, 12/16/16]
- "Those statements appear to be at odds with comments made last week by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and a key adviser. In a speech to business executives in New York, Kushner said Trump's campaign struck a deal with Sinclair to provide access and coverage, according to an account of the address by Politico. Kushner reportedly

said that Sinclair's stations, particularly in swing states such as Ohio and Florida, reached a far greater audience in their local area than a national network like CNN could. 'It's math,' he said." [Paul Farhi, "[How a giant TV company helped Trump's campaign](#)," *The Washington Post*, 12/22/16]

- "Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law and now a senior adviser in the White House, said at a meeting with business executives that the Trump campaign had reached an agreement with Sinclair to give more access to Mr. Trump and the campaign under the condition that the interviews be broadcast without commentary on the company's affiliates, according to two people who had attended the meeting but were not authorized to discuss it. Taped in Sinclair's Washington bureau, the interviews with Mr. Trump were broadcast across several swing states.

"Sinclair has disputed reports that it engaged in any unusual arrangements with the Trump campaign, saying in a statement that it offered no deals on tone or subject matter and that it also approached Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign." [Michael J. de la Merced & Nicholas Fandos, "[Fox's Unfamiliar but Powerful Television Rival: Sinclair](#)," *New York Times*, 05/03/17]

During the 2016 campaign, Sinclair "gave a disproportionate amount of neutral or favorable coverage to Trump" and portrayed Hillary Clinton "in an unfavorable light."

Throughout the 2016 campaign, Sinclair scored dozens of interviews with Trump surrogates, including 15 'exclusive' interviews with Trump himself and 10 with his running mate, Mike Pence.

- "A review of Sinclair's reporting and internal documents," by *The Washington Post*, "shows a strong tilt toward Trump. Sinclair gave a disproportionate amount of neutral or favorable coverage to Trump during the campaign while often casting Clinton in an unfavorable light."

"Sinclair-owned stations and its Washington bureau scored 15 'exclusive' interviews with Trump over the past year, including 11 during the final three months of the campaign in critical states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio. They did 10 more with Trump's running mate, Mike Pence, from August through October, as well as 10 with Trump surrogates, primarily Ben Carson. Sinclair stations aired five such interviews with Clinton running mate Tim Kaine and two with Chelsea Clinton but none with Clinton or another top surrogate." "Sinclair managers asked Sinclair-affiliated stations in Green Bay and Madison, Wis., to air extended portions" of a Trump interview "two days before the Wisconsin Republican primary." [Paul Farhi, "[How a giant TV company helped Trump's campaign](#)," *The Washington Post*, 12/22/16]

During the 2016 election, local Sinclair stations were required by managers in Washington to make room in their evening newscasts or morning programs for "must-run" segments, such as, "Why did Hillary Clinton struggle with disclosing her medical diagnosis?" and "Donald Trump Reflections of 9/11."

- “News stories and features favorable to Trump or that challenged Clinton were distributed to Sinclair stations on a ‘must-run’ basis — that is, the stations were required by managers in Washington to make room in their evening newscasts or morning programs for them. A ‘must-run’ email from Washington managers to stations on Sept. 13 read this way: ‘DESCRIPTION: Why did Hillary Clinton struggle with disclosing her medical diagnosis? She has been repeatedly faced with previous questions of trust. Can a president lead with so many questions of transparency and trust?’ Another, from Sept. 8: ‘DESCRIPTION: Hillary Clinton showed up to talk about the responsibilities of being a leader at the commander-in-chief forum and the first question she took from the audience was about the email/server debacle. Clinton has repeatedly admitted it was a mistake, but 18 months since the first story broke and she’s still in the mode of damage control.’ An October ‘must-run’ story was a report about conservative activist James O’Keefe’s ‘sting’ video in which two Democratic-affiliated contractors who were surreptitiously recorded discussed disrupting Republican events and mused about a voter-fraud scheme. Another, on Sept. 9, was titled ‘Donald Trump Reflections of 9/11,’ which also included a package in which Ivanka Trump discussed what she would do in a Trump administration. In early September, it pushed ‘Women for Trump,’ a feature about Trump’s daughter-in-law Lara and another woman who was campaigning for him. There were no equivalent ‘must-run’ stories examining Trump’s refusal to release his medical or tax records or about questions surrounding his charitable foundation. In addition, Sinclair offered no stories about Clinton’s views about 9/11, about what role Chelsea Clinton might play in her mother’s administration or about Bill Clinton’s campaign role.” [Paul Farhi, [“How the nation’s largest owner of TV stations helped Donald Trump’s campaign,”](#) *The Washington Post*, 12/22/16]

Sinclair lashed out at “multiple news organizations” after they published, in Sinclair’s words, “misleading and irresponsible reports” about the company’s partisan, one-sided campaign coverage during the election.

- In a January 2017 press release, Sinclair Broadcast Group “commented on multiple news organizations that [had] recently published or perpetuated misleading and irresponsible reports regarding Sinclair’s political coverage of the Trump and Clinton campaigns.” Sinclair claimed that “recent reporting by the Washington Post was too egregious for the Company to stand by quietly and not inform the public of the incomplete and misleading coverage published by a once respected newspaper.” The press release included “an Op Ed from the Company submitted to the Washington Post, that the Post refused to publish,” written by John Solomon. “The Post offered Sinclair a 200 word letter to the editor which Sinclair did not consider to be a reasonable response.”

In an accompanying letter to the Washington Post, Sinclair’s VP of News, Scott Livingston, wrote that the Post’s “piece on Sinclair’s political coverage was misleading and irresponsible. Many key facts were omitted, facts that your newspaper was aware of and refused to include in the article.” Livingston claimed that “the Post story contained misinformation, which could easily have been vetted by your editor, prior to publication” and that “the least you can do is publish” the Op-Ed penned by John Solomon, who served “as COO of the Sinclair owned Circa.com news site.” Livingston cited “the chair of the Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Committee, Andrew Seaman,” who concluded that Sinclair’s “coverage was fair and met the journalistic

standards that were ignored by numerous news organizations including Politico and The Washington Post." [["Sinclair Responds To Multiple Organizations' Misleading And Irresponsible News Coverage," PR Newswire, 01/11/17](#)]

- In December 2016, *The Washington Post* published a piece headlined "How the nation's largest owner of TV stations helped Donald Trump's campaign," which found that "Sinclair gave a disproportionate amount of neutral or favorable coverage to Trump during the campaign while often casting Clinton in an unfavorable light." [Paul Farhi, "[How the nation's largest owner of TV stations helped Donald Trump's campaign,"](#) *The Washington Post*, 12/22/16]

In a rejected op-ed for *The Washington Post*, Sinclair-owned Circa COO criticized *Politico* and *The Post* for reporting that Sinclair gave favorable coverage to Trump during and accused *The Post* of reducing journalism "to he-said-she-said storytelling."

- John Solomon authored a rejected op-ed, submitted to *The Washington Post* after it published negative coverage of Sinclair, entitled, "Washington Post, Politico and the perils of centimeter-deep journalism." The piece was submitted to the newspaper for publication on December 30, 2016. Solomon claimed that Paul Fahri's story, which found that "Sinclair gave a disproportionate amount of neutral or favorable coverage to Trump during the campaign while often casting Clinton in an unfavorable light," "embellished the *Politico* story with an even sexier headline" and reduced journalism "to he-said-she-said storytelling." Solomon argued that *Politico* and *The Post* "should feel some shame in portraying 'straight' coverage of candidates' positions on issues – something news organizations once strived to achieve – as a dirty equivalent to 'favorable' treatment." [["Sinclair Responds To Multiple Organizations' Misleading And Irresponsible News Coverage," PR Newswire, 01/11/17](#) and Paul Farhi, "[How the nation's largest owner of TV stations helped Donald Trump's campaign,"](#) *The Washington Post*, 12/22/16]

At one of Trump's first news conferences as president, he "granted the first of two questions to" a reporter from Sinclair-owned WJLA, "a rare distinction for a local broadcast affiliate."

- In February 2017, "at one of his first news conferences as president, Mr. Trump granted the first of two questions to Scott Thuman, a reporter for Sinclair's Washington ABC affiliate, WJLA, a rare distinction for a local broadcast affiliate." [Michael J. de la Merced and Nicholas Fandos, "[Fox's Unfamiliar but Powerful Television Rival: Sinclair,](#)" *The New York Times*, 05/03/17]

Sinclair hired longtime Trump family friend Boris Epshteyn as "chief political analyst" in April 2017. The company forces local affiliates to air 'must-run' segments featuring Epshteyn's partisan commentary nine times a week.

- Sinclair Broadcasting Group announced in April 2017 that it had named "former White House spokesperson" Boris Epshteyn their "'chief political analyst,'" and that as such, he would be "appearing across the 173 television stations Sinclair owns, operates or provides services for across the country." [Dylan Byers, "[Ex-Trump spokesperson joins Sinclair Broadcasting,](#)" *CNN*, 04/17/17]

- Boris "Epshteyn entered Trumpworld as a surrogate, thanks to a friendship with Eric Trump developed as fellow undergrad students at Georgetown University. He became a ubiquitous presence on cable news throughout the 2016 campaign, first as an outside supporter and then as a paid Trump campaign staffer." After Donald Trump took office, Epshteyn became "a White House official, with an office in the Old Executive Office Building, steps from the West Wing." [Annie Karni, "[White House official terrorizes network green rooms](#)," *Politico*, 03/07/17]
- Epshteyn, "who at one point was on cable news as many as seven times a day promoting Mr. Trump during the presidential campaign" and "was a spokesman for the presidential inaugural committee," left his job at the White House in late March 2017. [Maggie Haberman, "[Boris Epshteyn, Trump TV Surrogate, Is Leaving White House Job](#)," *The New York Times*, 03/25/17]
- Before leaving the White House, Epshteyn was "a special assistant to President Donald Trump who [led] the White House's television surrogate operations." [Jim Acosta and Jeremy Diamond, "[Trump aide Boris Epshteyn leaving White House, officials say](#)," *CNN*, 03/27/17]
- Boris Epshteyn, in 2016, made "about \$80,000 from Trump entities (the campaign and inaugural committee), \$226,800 from an outfit called TGP Securities, and \$240,000 in fees from Prime Health Services (healthcare consulting). He has extensive securities and cash holdings, but also more than \$50,000 in student loans." [David Lat, "[Trump White House Lawyers: How Much Are They Worth? \(Part 2\)](#)," *Above the Law*, 04/04/17]
- In July 2017, Sinclair announced it was "increasing the 'must-run' segments across its affiliates featuring former Trump White House official Boris Epshteyn to nine times a week." Epshteyn's "'Bottom Line with Boris' segments already [aired] three times a week, but will now triple in frequency, featuring a mix of his political commentary as well as 'talk backs' with local stations and interviews with members of Congress. The segments will have a 'billboard,' meaning they're sponsored, but will not be sponsored content, a Sinclair spokesperson said. Epshteyn's segments are 'must runs,' so all the Sinclair stations across the country will air them along with their other 'must-run' segments including conservative commentary from Mark Hyman and the Terrorism Alert Desk segments. Epshteyn reliably parrots the White House's point of view on most issues. For example, he claimed last month that former FBI Director James Comey's testimony on Capitol Hill was more damaging to Hillary Clinton and former Attorney General Loretta Lynch than to the president." [Hadas Gold, "[Sinclair increases 'must-run' Boris Epshteyn segments](#)," *Politico*, 07/10/17]

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