



TRACKING PROPAGANDA TO THE SOURCE: TOOLS FOR ANALYZING MEDIA BIAS

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Abstract:

The news media plays an essential role in society, but surveys indicate that the media is widely viewed as biased. This paper presents a theory of media bias that originates with private information obtained by journalists through their investigations and persists despite profit-maximizing news organizations and rivalry from other news organizations. Bias has two effects on the demand for news. First, rational citizens are more skeptical of potentially biased news and thus rely less on it in their individual decision-making. Second, bias makes certain stories more likely than others. This article provides an overview of some useful approaches to understanding the sources of media bias and what to do about them. Bias is often said to “be in the eye of the beholder.” There is some truth to the fact that the psychological phenomenon of “selective perception” leads to “cognitive dissonance” when we are exposed to views very different from our own. But the reality of bias is a much broader and systemic problem when analyzing media, especially given the potential harm.

Keywords: tracking propaganda, analyzing media bias

The President of the United States says the nation has to go to war to eliminate a potentially imminent threat of weapons of mass destruction. Later, after a costly military campaign, none is found. Yet the real threat of terrorism remains. The leaders of several major corporations (and their accounting firms) receive lucrative salaries, bonuses and benefits for keeping the stock value of their businesses high. Subsequently we learn multi-billion dollar deceit was a better description than receipt.

A reporter for a major newspaper admits to faking dozens of stories, putting into doubt the trust readers had in the publication’s commitment to accuracy.

In these cases, and many more, even an intelligent person has trouble telling truth from lies, fact from fiction, or good analysis from bad information. Most of what

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we know is filtered through media, whether that is primarily as entertainment or information. We mostly self-select what we watch, listen to, or read to suit our own interests. This is a practical approach, but leaves us vulnerable to what we don't know as much as what we take in. Importantly, the content of that media has also gone through a winnowing process, selected and influenced by a welter of alternative sources. Given the additional problem of bias, how can we believe in what we "think" we know? How can we trust our leaders?

Bias is the predisposition for or against a particular point of view. Whenever the positions or interests of a portion of the audience are overlooked, distorted, or censored the problem of bias is found. Bias may result from unintentional or deliberate decisions on the part of media gatekeepers, but nevertheless subject's audiences to a skewed reality potentially detrimental to their best interests. The problem of agenda-setting is compounded by the increasing centralization of information supply created from the rise of big media owned by interlocking conglomerates or control by the state. Very few companies own most of the important book publishers, newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television companies, film studios, cable networks, satellite services, internet service providers, and other communication services we use.

The influence of the media elite is so pervasive that many other organizations and their social ideas are effectively disenfranchised by their exclusion from the mainstream channels of distribution. On the other hand, favored viewpoints and groups can receive a boost from biased coverage promoting their cause.

Most media industries, including journalism, ostensibly operate under codes of ethics designed to protect against unfairness and bias. However, these provisos lack grounding in ethical theory and tend to reflect antinomian thinking based on an ad hoc approach to moral decision making with nothing but the situation for guidance. Unlike codes found in other professions such as medicine and law, mass communication codes of ethics in the Western world are also voluntary and have no real mechanisms to punish wrong doers. Similarly, most watchdog organizations are private entities without enforcement power—other than publicity—to call attention to questionable behavior. The U.S. Congress and American government regulatory agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) entrusted with media performance oversight are hemmed in by First Amendment considerations. In practice, this means what is constitutionally lawful is generally treated as what is ethical.

Whether or not media bias exists is a seemingly endless debate. Yet valid questions remain about media performance and the role of public communications practitioners in shaping perception. There are some researchers who use a "social construction of reality" framework to analyze American media and the ways in which information is filtered. Their media effects findings suggest that when bias occurs it stems from combination of factors: the media are neither objective nor completely honest in their portrayal of important issues. Framing devices are employed in stories by featuring some angles and downplaying others.

The news is a product not only of deliberate manipulation, but of the ideological and economic conditions under which the media operate. While appearing independent, the news media are institutions that are controlled or heavily influenced by government and business interests experienced with manufacturing of consent/consensus.

Reporters' sources frequently dominate the flow of information as a way of furthering their own overt and hidden agendas. In particular, the heavy reliance on political officials and other-government related experts occurs through a preferential sourcing selection process that excludes dissident voices.

Journalists widely accept the "faulty premise" that the government's collective intentions are benevolent, despite occasional mistakes. The regular use of the word "we" by journalists in referring to their government's actions implies nationalistic complicity with those policies. There is an absence of historical context and contemporary comparisons in reportage which would make news more meaningful.

The failure to provide follow up assessment is further evidence of a pack journalism mentality that at the conclusion of a "feeding frenzy" wants to move on to other stories. Citizens must maintain a critical perspective on the media in order to make informed choices and participate effectively in the public policy process.

Typical of such critics is Edward S. Herman who says in a special issue of *Extra!* (1991), "*Perhaps the most important source of bias is the hidden and implicit political basis of what is 'newsworthy.'*" These choices often reflect a fairly mechanical transmission of what the government chooses to emphasize.

Iraq's human rights abuses suddenly became newsworthy after August 2, 1990, as the Bush administration readied the public for military action against Iraq, while the same abuses were essentially ignored in prior years when the administration was building friendly relations with Saddam Hussein. "*Where the worth of victims, as measured by intensity of focus and indignation, is so closely tied to the government's political agenda, media bias seems evident*" (quote from p. 1). Although he wrote prior to the latest Iraq war and referred to the first President Bush, Herman put his finger on a real problem that would reemerge.

There are many studies alleging or disputing media bias. However, the authors of these works often don't include a framework on which to base their analysis, especially in terms of the fundamental influences that impact on media content. Two polemical but informative books have proven themselves classics in helping to further clarify this issue. As right wing/ conservative/ nationalist stalwarts L. Brent Bozell III and Brent H. Baker note in *and That's the Way It Isn't? A Reference Guide to Media Bias* (1990), "*By exercising control over the nation's agenda—picking and choosing which issues are fit for public debate, which news is 'fit to print'—the news media can greatly influence the political direction of this country. They can ignore or ridicule some ideas and promote others. They can wreck a politician's career by taking a quote or two out of context or by spotlighting a weakness in his background. They can make winners look like losers and vice versa, known that, in the political world, appearance easily supplants reality.*"

Research into payments of journalists by corporations and trade associations to speak before journalists and the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) have pushed back against ANC national spokesperson and national executive committee member Jackson Mthembu's scathing criticism of media. Mthembu (2015) accused them of compromising their ethics and objectivity by expressing their opinions on the #ZumaMustFall campaign on social media.

In the party's online publication ANC Today, Mthembu (2017) used tweets that various editors and journalists had posted to demonstrate how the #ZumaMustFall campaign had revealed the bias in media reporting. *"The media have lost sight of their responsibility to run a filter through the 'truths' being presented to the public,"* Mthembu wrote. *"The ANC notes with interest that while the publications and newscasts themselves attempt to maintain the veneer of objectivity, the journalists who report for these same media have let their colors slip on another, arguably more influential, platform — namely social media."*

The ANC spokesperson went on to write that while social media channels were the go-to platforms for breaking news, journalists should still be mindful of the responsibility they have to maintain objectivity and neutrality. *"Considering this, we should view in a dim light the claim by all the so-called serious journalists that 'views expressed are personal' on social media, and not reflective of their employers. And that retweets are not endorsements,"* Mthembu (2017) surmised.

"With their coverage of #ZumaMustFall, the mask has slipped. There is a double game being played, and it is there for all to see. The bogeyman and ruse of 'looming media censorship' should no longer fool anyone." Mthembu then quoted tweets by prominent media professionals such as *City Press* editor Ferial Haffajee, *TechCentral* editor Duncan McLeod and *Mail & Guardian* editor Verashni Pillay to justify his stance that media objectivity had been compromised. He quoted an excerpt from a tweet Haffajee had sent following the presidency's announcement that Pravin Gordhan would be finance minister, which read: *"President Zuma is now lame duck."* He also quoted McLeod's [tweet](#) on the same issue: *"You can't make a mistake this bad and this embarrassing and damaging and stay on as president. Next step is recalling him. I give it a week."*

Haffajee told the *Mail & Guardian* (M&G) newspaper that she agrees with Mthembu that journalists should not use the hashtag #ZumaMustFall, because it amounts to political campaigning. She said, however, that journalists reporting on the marches could use the hashtag as long as it was clear that they were using it to report and not expressing a view. *"The first thing is yes, he's right. Journalists shouldn't be using #ZumaMustFall in a political fashion, or at least I wouldn't. It's a call for everything from a recall of the president to impeachment, and that's firmly in the realm of party politics and also of political campaigning. I don't think that's something that I would be comfortable doing,"* Haffajee said.

he *City Press* editor said that as long as journalists abide by the press code, there is no wrongdoing in them expressing an opinion on social media, and that her tweet was *"a piece of political analysis and a completely fair one that I've seen at least one hundred*

times more". She added: *"As long as I keep it in the terms of the press code, comment is fair on Twitter and so is opinion."*

Speaking to the *M&G*, McLeod defended journalists' right to express their opinions, saying that media workers are members of the South African citizenry and therefore have the right to free expression as entrenched in the Constitution. *"Mthembu seems to think journalists shouldn't have an opinion. Of course journalists have opinions and they're entitled to those opinions — and they're entitled to air them, too. We're part of South African society as much as everyone else and it's our right, as much as it's the right of any South African, to air an opinion on social media,"* McLeod said.

For the *TechCentral* editor, Mthembu's accusations are misdirected, given the economic instability the country faces and the public criticism of the ANC and President Jacob Zuma's leadership. *"Instead of attacking journalists for daring to express an opinion on a social network, Mthembu ought to expend more energy looking elsewhere for what's really ailing South Africa today,"* McLeod said. Sanef, meanwhile, has said that according to the press code and the code of ethics, journalists have a right to express their views —as long as it is clear these views are opinion and they are not motivated by bribes or other external influences.

"Our code of ethics [entitles] them to their comment and also to columns, which are based on fact, so long as it is clearly stated that they are comment," said Sanef council member Moshoeshe Monare. *"I would really be cautious when someone says the media or journalists should not express their views."* The ANC was criticized for its reaction to the #ZumaMustFall campaign, with former finance minister Trevor Manuel writing a letter to Small Business Development Minister Lindiwe Zulu in response to an interview where the *M&G* quoted her as saying that had business supported Zuma's decision to appoint Des van Rooyen as finance minister, the economic fallout would not have been as severe. *"Unfortunately, the media and sometimes public institutions become victims of attack just because they tend to disagree with the politicians" "It's unfortunate, because our democracy means that there should be an open debate and open discussion about matters of public and national interest without anyone feeling that the media, or the judiciary or other public entities, are banding together against the political party."*

Bozell and Baker describe seven methods used to analyze the existence of and quantify bias:

- 1) Surveys of the political/cultural attitudes of journalists, particularly members of the media elite, and of journalism students.
- 2) Studies of journalists' previous professional connections.
- 3) Collections of quotations in which prominent journalists reveal their beliefs about politics and/or the proper role of their profession.
- 4) Computer word-use and topic analysis searches to determine content and labeling.
- 5) Studies of policies recommended in news stories.
- 6) Comparisons of the agenda of the news and entertainment media with agendas of political candidates or other activists.
- 7) Positive/negative coverage analysis.

Their left-wing/liberal/progressive counterparts, Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon in *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (1991), adopts a different starting point. But one can extrapolate from their well-documented work at least four additional strategies, such as:

- 8) Reviews of the personal demographics of media decision makers.
- 9) Comparisons of advertising sources/content that influence information/entertainment content.
- 10) Analyses of the extent of government propaganda and public relations (PR) industry impact on media.
- 11) Studies of the use of experts and spokespersons etc. by media vs. those not selected to determine the interest groups and ideologies represented vs. those excluded their groups and the impact that may have on coverage.

Media have tremendous power in setting cultural guidelines and in shaping political discourse. It is essential that news media, along with other institutions, are challenged to be fair and accurate. The first step in challenging biased news coverage is documenting bias.

Be aware of the political perspective of the sources used in a story. Media over-rely on official (government, corporate and establishment think tank) sources. For instance, FAIR found that in 40 months of Nightline programming, the most frequent guests were Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, Elliott Abrams and Jerry Falwell. Progressive and public interest voices were grossly underrepresented. To portray issues fairly and accurately, media must broaden their spectrum of sources. Otherwise, they serve merely as megaphones for those in power

Count the number of corporate and government sources versus the number of progressive, public interest, female and minority voices. Demand mass media expand their rolodexes; better yet, give them lists of progressive and public interest experts in the community.

What is the race and gender diversity at the news outlet you watch compared to the communities it serves? How many producers, editors or decision-makers at news outlets are women, people of color or openly gay or lesbian? In order to fairly represent different communities, news outlets should have members of those communities in decision-making positions. Demand that the media you consume reflect the diversity of the public they serve. Call or write media outlets every time you see an all-male or all-white panel of experts discussing issues that affect women and people of color.

Political coverage often focuses on how issues affect politicians or corporate executives rather than those directly affected by the issue. For example, many stories on parental notification of abortion emphasized the “tough choice” confronting male politicians while quoting no women under 18—those with the most at stake in the debate. Economics coverage usually looks at how events impact stockholders rather than workers or consumers. Demand that those affected by the issue have a voice in coverage.

Do media hold some people to one standard while using a different standard for other groups? Youth of color who commit crimes are referred to as “super predators,”

whereas adult criminals who commit white-collar crimes are often portrayed as having been tragically led astray. Think tanks partly funded by unions are often identified as “labor-backed” while think tanks heavily funded by business interests are usually not identified as “corporate-backed.” Expose the double standard by coming up with a parallel example or citing similar stories that were covered differently.

Does coverage of the drug crisis focus almost exclusively on African Americans, despite the fact that the vast majority of drug users are white? Does coverage of women on welfare focus overwhelmingly on African-American women, despite the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are not black? Are lesbians portrayed as “man-hating” and gay men portrayed as “sexual predators” (even though a child is 100 times more likely to be molested by a family member than by an unrelated gay adult. Educate journalists about misconceptions involved in stereotypes, and about how stereotypes characterize individuals unfairly.

Often the most important message of a story is not explicitly stated. For instance, in coverage of women on welfare, the age at which a woman had her first child will often be reported—the implication being that the woman’s sexual “promiscuity,” rather than institutional economic factors, are responsible for her plight. What are the unchallenged assumptions?

Coverage of rape trials will often focus on a woman’s sexual history as though it calls her credibility into question. After the arrest of William Kennedy Smith, a New York Times article (4/17/91) dredged up a host of irrelevant personal details about his accuser, including the facts that she had skipped classes in the 9th grade, had received several speeding tickets and—when on a date—had talked to other men.

When media adopt loaded terminology, they help shape public opinion. For instance, media often use the right-wing buzzword “racial preference” to refer to affirmative action programs. Polls show that this decision makes a huge difference in how the issue is perceived: A 1992 Louis Harris poll, for example, found that 70 percent said they favored “affirmative action” while only 46 percent favored “racial preference programs.” Challenge the assumption directly. Often bringing assumptions to the surface will demonstrate their absurdity. Most reporters, for example, will not say directly that a woman deserved to be raped because of what she was wearing. Demonstrate how the language chosen gives people an inaccurate impression of the issue, program or community.

Coverage of so-called “reverse discrimination” usually fails to focus on any of the institutional factors which give power to prejudice—such as larger issues of economic inequality and institutional racism. Coverage of hate speech against gays and lesbians often fails to mention increases in gay-bashing and how the two might be related. Provide the context. Communicate to the journalist, or write a letter to the editor that includes the relevant information. Usually headlines are not written by the reporter. Since many people just skim headlines, misleading headlines have a significant impact.

Analyses using these methodologies are appearing more regularly from monitoring groups ranging across the political spectrum from Fairness and Accuracy in

Reporting (FAIR) and the Institute for Media Analysis (IMA) on the left to Accuracy in Media (AIM) and the Center for Media and Public Affairs on the right. Even though disagreeing on specifics and ideology, they are making valuable contributions to our understanding of the communications process.

I find this encouraging, especially for those of us who value individuality. We are already living in a propaganda environment, i.e., a pervasive cultural condition in which opinion and belief are constantly manipulated by “social managers” more interested in asserting control than promoting freedom, more concerned with maintaining an illusion of choice rather than encouraging truly independent thought.

The would-be dictators face competition and each of us has the power to challenge their predictable intermittent rituals which promote rubber stamped prepackaged commodities ranging from candidates to products. By insisting that those who lead us are accountable, we lessen the chance of abuse. The answer to bias then is not more apathy but more involvement, not more ignorance but more intelligence.

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