

## Tracking Propaganda to the Source: Tools for Analyzing Media Bias

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### Abstract

*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. This article provides an overview of some useful approaches to understanding the sources of media bias and what to do about them.*

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 are 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 we know is filtered through media, whether that be 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 subjects 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. Bottom line: 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 U.S. 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 [U.S.] 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.”

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), adopt 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.

In addition, another way recently emerged:

12. Research into payments of journalists by corporations and trade associations to speak before their groups and the impact that may have on coverage.

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.

Fortunately for us, 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. We all have work to do!

#### References

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