**05 MEDIA BIAS**

Media bias is a term used to describe a real or perceived bias of journalists and news producers within the mass media.

In media bias, there is selection of which events will be reported and how they are covered. The direction and degree of media bias in various countries is widely disputed, although its causes are both practical and theoretical.

Practical limitations to media neutrality include the inability of journalists to report all available stories and facts, and the requirement that selected facts be linked into a coherent narrative (Newton 1989). Since it is impossible to report everything, some bias is inevitable. Government influence, including overt and covert censorship, biases the media in some countries. Market forces that can result in a biased presentation include the ownership of the news source, the selection of staff and the preferences of an intended audience, or pressure from advertisers. Political affiliations arise from ideological positions of media owners and journalists. The space or air time available for reports, as well as deadlines needed to be met, can lead to incomplete and apparently biased stories.

Media bias usually refers to a pervasive or widespread bias contravening the standards of journalism, rather than the perspective of an individual journalist or article.

**Types of bias**

* Ethnic or racial bias, including racism, nationalism.
* Ideological bias based on personal philosophy which may include liberalism, conservativism, progressivism, communism, etc.
* Peer culture bias, which is bias based on popular opinions of one’s peer group which may include environment, anti-globalism, etc.
* Political bias, including bias in favor of or against a particular political party or candidate.
* Corporate bias, including advertising, coverage of political campaigns in such a way as to favor or vilify corporate interests, and the reporting of issues to favor the interests of the owners of the news media or its advertisers.
* Political bias, including bias in favor of or against a particular political party, candidate, or policy. (Often, people complain of the "liberal media" or "conservative media".) Other complaints are that the American media has an "either or" view by only focusing on Republicans or Democrats, and ignoring other lines of thought such as libertarianism.
* Sensationalism, which is bias in favor of the exceptional over the ordinary. This includes the practice whereby exceptional news may be overemphasized, distorted or fabricated to boost commercial ratings; entertainment news is often subjected to sensationalism.
* Exaggerated influence of minority views: Like sensationalism, this is a tendency to emphasize the new and the different over the status quo or existing consensus. This may be done in an attempt to be "fair", or to find something worth reporting.
* Bias toward ease or expediency

**Sources of media bias**

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 media and the ways in which information is filtered. According to scholar Richard Alan Nelson's (2003) study Tracking Propaganda to the Source: Tools for Analyzing Media Bias, media effects findings suggest that when bias occurs it stems from combination of 10 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 which 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 avoid self-censorship by reading divergent sources and maintaining a critical perspective on the media in order to make informed choices and participate effectively in the public policy process.

The book's most thorough case study involved nuclear energy. The survey of journalists showed that most were highly skeptical about nuclear safety. However, the authors conducted a separate survey of scientists in energy related fields, who were much more sanguine about nuclear safety issues. They then conducted a content analysis of nuclear energy coverage in the media outlets they had surveyed. They found that the opinions of sources who were cited as scientific experts reflected the antinuclear sentiments of journalists, rather than the more pro-nuclear perspectives held by most energy scientists.

The authors concluded that journalists' coverage of controversial issues reflected their own attitudes, and the predominance of political liberals in newsrooms therefore pushed news coverage in a liberal direction. They presented this tilt as a mostly unconscious process of like-minded individuals projecting their shared assumptions onto their interpretations of reality. At the time the study was embraced mainly by conservative columnists and politicians, who adopted the findings as "scientific proof" of liberal media bias.

This same argument would have news outlets in equal numbers increasing profits of a more balanced media far more than the slight increase in costs to hire unbiased journalists, notwithstanding the extreme rarity of self-reported conservative journalists.

The economics empirical literature on mass media bias mainly focuses on the United States.

The accuracy of this study is doubtful, though, because Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting has throughout its history demonstrated a liberal bias.

**Experimenter bias**

A major problem in studies is experimenter bias. Research into studies of media bias in the United States shows that Liberal experimenters tend to get results that say the media has a conservative bias, while conservatives experimenters tend to get results that say the media has a liberal bias, and those who do not identify themselves as either liberal or conservative get results indicating little bias, or mixed bias

At one time or other we all complain about "bias in the news." The fact is, despite the journalistic ideal of "objectivity," every news story is influenced by the attitudes and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors.

**Bias through selection and omission**

An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. If, during a speech, a few people boo, the reaction can be described as "remarks greeted by jeers" or they can be ignored as "a handful of dissidents."

Bias through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can the form of bias be observed.

**Bias through placement**

Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance.

**Bias by headline**

Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. Headlines are the most-read part of a paper. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists. They can express approval or condemnation.

**Bias by photos, captions and camera angles**

Some pictures flatter a person; others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, the choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. The captions newspapers run below photos are also potential sources of bias.

**Bias through use of names and titles**

News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places, and events. A person can be called an "ex-con" or be referred to as someone who "served time twenty years ago for a minor offense." Whether a person is described as a "terrorist" or a "freedom fighter" is a clear indication of editorial bias.

**Bias through statistics and crowd counts**

To make a disaster seem more spectacular (and therefore worthy of reading about), numbers can be inflated. "A hundred injured in air crash" can be the same as "only minor injuries in air crash," reflecting the opinion of the person doing the counting.

**Bias by source control**

To detect bias, always consider where the news item "comes from." Is the information supplied by a reporter, an eyewitness, police or fire officials, executives, or elected or appointed government officials? Each may have a particular bias that is introduced into the story. Companies and public relations directors supply news outlets with puff pieces through news releases, photos or videos. Often news outlets depend on pseudo-events (demonstrations, sit-ins, ribbon cuttings, speeches and ceremonies) that take place mainly to gain news coverage.

**Word choice and tone**

Showing the same kind of bias that appears in headlines, the use of positive or negative words or words with a particular connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer.

**Bias in the news media**

Is the news media biased toward liberals? Yes. Is the news media biased toward conservatives? Yes. These questions and answers are uninteresting because it is possible to find evidence--anecdotal and otherwise--to "prove" media bias of one stripe or another. Far more interesting and instructive is studying the inherent, or structural, biases of journalism as a professional practice--especially as mediated through television. I use the word "bias" here to challenge its current use by partisan critics. A more accepted, and perhaps more accurate, term would be "frame." These are some of the professional frames that structure what journalists can see and how they can present what they see.

**Commercial bias:**

The news media are money-making businesses. As such, they must deliver a good product to their customers to make a profit. The customers of the news media are advertisers. The most important product

The news media delivers to its customers are readers or viewers. Good is defined in numbers and quality of readers or viewers. The news media are biased toward conflict (re: bad news and narrative biases below) because conflict draws readers and viewers. Harmony is boring.

**Temporal bias:**

The news media are biased toward the immediate. News is what's new and fresh. To be immediate and fresh, the news must be ever-changing even when there is little news to cover.

**Visual bias**

Television (and, increasingly, newspapers) is biased toward visual depictions of news. Television is nothing without pictures. Legitimate news that has no visual angle is likely to get little attention. Much of what is important in politics policy cannot be photographed.

**Bad news bias**

Good news is boring (and probably does not photograph well, either). This bias makes the world look like a more dangerous place than it really is. Plus, this bias makes politicians look far more crooked than they really are.

**Narrative bias**

The news media cover the news in terms of "stories" that must have a beginning, middle, and end-- in other words, a plot with antagonists and protagonists. Much of what happens in our world, however, is ambiguous. The news media apply a narrative structure to ambiguous events suggesting that these events are easily understood and have clear cause-and-effect relationships. Good storytelling requires drama, and so this bias often leads journalists to add, or seek out, drama for the sake of drama. Controversy creates drama. Journalists often seek out the opinions of competing experts or officials in order to present conflict between two sides of an issue (sometimes referred to as the authority-disorder bias). Lastly, narrative bias leads many journalists to create, and then hang on to, master narratives--set story lines with set characters who act in set ways. Once a master narrative has been set, it is very difficult to get journalists to see that their narrative is simply one way, and not necessarily the correct or best way, of viewing people and events.

**Status Quo bias:**

The news media believe "the system works." During the "fiasco in Florida," recall that the news media were compelled to remind us that the Constitution was safe, the process was working, and all would be well. The mainstream news media never question the structure of the political system. The American way is the only way, politically and socially. In fact, the American way is news. The press spends vast amounts of time in unquestioning coverage of the process of political campaigns (but less so on the process of governance). This bias ensures that alternate points of view about how government might run and what government might do are effectively ignored.

**Fairness bias:**

No, this is not an oxymoron. Ethical journalistic practice demands that reporters and editors be fair. In the news product this bias manifests as a contention between/among political actors (also re: narrative bias above). Whenever one faction or politician does something or says something newsworthy, the press is compelled by this bias to get a reaction from an opposing camp. This creates the illusion that the game of politics is always contentious and never cooperative. This bias can also create situations in which one faction appears to be attacked by the press. For example, politician A announces some positive accomplishment followed by the press seeking a negative comment from politician B. The point is not to disparage politician A but to be fair to politician B. When politician A is a conservative, this practice appears to be liberal bias.

**Expediency bias:**

Journalism is a competitive, deadline- driven profession. Reporters compete among themselves for prime space or air time. News organizations compete for market share and reader/viewer attention. And the 24-hour news cycle--driven by the immediacy of television and the internet--creates a situation in which the job of competing never comes to a rest. Add financial pressures to this mix--the general desire of media groups for profit margins that exceed what's "normal" in many other industries --and you create a bias toward information that can be obtained quickly, easily, and inexpensively. Need an expert/official quote (status quo bias) to balance (fairness bias) a story (narrative bias)? Who can you get on the phone fast? Who is always ready with a quote and always willing to speak (i.e. say what you need them to say to balance the story)? Who sent a press release recently? Much of deadline decision making comes down to gathering information that is readily available from sources that are well known.

**Glory bias:**

Journalists, especially television reporters, often assert themselves into the stories they cover. This happens most often in terms of proximity, i.e. to the locus of unfolding events or within the orbit of powerful political and civic actors. This bias helps journalists establish and maintain a cultural identity as knowledgeable insiders (although many journalists reject the notion that follows from this--that they are players in the game and not merely observers). The glory bias shows itself in particularly obnoxious ways in television journalism. News promos with stirring music and heroic pictures of individual reporters create the aura of omnipresence and omnipotence. I ascribe the use of the satellite phone to this bias. Note how often it's used in situations in which a normal video feed should be no problem to establish, e.g. a report from Tokyo I saw recently on CNN. The jerky pictures and fuzzy sound of the satellite phone create a romantic image of foreign adventure.

**Tools for measuring and evaluating media bias**

Richard Alan Nelson's (2003) study cited above on Tracking Propaganda to the Source: Tools for Analyzing Media Bias reports there are at least 12 methods used to analyze the existence of and quantify bias:

* Surveys of the political/cultural attitudes of journalists, particularly members of the media elite, and of journalism students.
* Studies of journalists' previous professional connections.
* Collections of quotations in which prominent journalists reveal their beliefs about politics and/or the proper role of their profession.
* Computer word-use and topic analysis searches to determine content and labeling.
* Studies of policies recommended in news stories.
* Comparisons of the agenda of the news and entertainment media with agendas of political candidates or other activists.
* Positive/negative coverage analysis.
* Reviews of the personal demographics of media decision makers.
* A comparison of advertising sources/content which influence information/entertainment content.
* Analyses of the extent of government propaganda and public relations (PR) industry impact on media.
* 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.
* Research into payments of journalists by corporations and trade associations to speak before their groups and the impact that may have on coverage.

**Efforts to correct bias**

The technique used to avoid bias is disclosure of affiliations that may be considered a possible conflict of interest.

The other technique used to avoid bias is the "point/counterpoint" or "round table," an adversarial format in which representatives of opposing views comment on an issue. This approach theoretically allows diverse views to appear in the media. However, the person organizing the report still has the responsibility to choose people who really represent the breadth of opinion, to ask them non-prejudicial questions, and to edit or arbitrate their comments fairly. When done carelessly, a point/counterpoint can be as unfair as a simple biased report, by suggesting that the "losing" side lost on its merits.

Using this format can also lead to accusations that the reporter has created a misleading appearance that viewpoint have equal validity? This may happen when a taboo exists around one of the viewpoints, or when one of the representatives habitually makes claims that are easily shown to be inaccurate.

In rare cases, a news organization may dismiss or reassign staff members who appear biased.

**History of bias in the mass media**

Political bias has been a feature of the mass media since its birth with the invention of the printing press. In the nineteenth century, journalists began to recognize the concept of unbiased reporting as an integral part of journalistic ethics. This coincided with the rise of journalism as a powerful social force. Even today, though, the most conscientiously objective journalists cannot avoid accusations of bias.

The expense of early printing equipment restricted media production to a limited number of people. Historians have found that publishers often served the interests of powerful social groups.

Like newspapers, the broadcast media (radio and television) have been used as a mechanism for propaganda from their earliest days, a tendency made more pronounced by the initial ownership of broadcast spectrum by national governments. Although a process of media deregulation has placed the majority of the western broadcast media in private hands, there still exists a strong government presence, or even monopoly, in the broadcast media of many countries across the globe. At the same time, the concentration of media in private hands, and frequently amongst a comparatively small number of individuals, has also lead to accusations of media bias.

There are many examples of accusations of bias being used as a political tool, sometimes resulting in government censorship.

Politicians who favored the United States entering World War II on the German side asserted that the international media were controlled by Jews, and that reports of German mistreatment of Jews were biased and without foundation. Hollywood was said to be in the 1980s, the government of South Africa accused newspapers of liberal bias and instituted government censorship. In 1989, the newspaper New Nation was closed by the government for three months for publishing anti-apartheid propaganda. Other newspapers were not closed, but were extensively censored. Some published the censored sections blacked out, to demonstrate the extent of government censorship. In America during the labor union movement and the civil rights movement, newspapers supporting liberal social reform were accused by conservative newspapers of communist bias.

**Role of language in media bias**

Language may also be a more subtle form of bias.

Mass media, despite its ability to project worldwide, is limited in its cross-ethnic compatibility by one simple attribute language. Ethnicity, being largely developed by a divergence in geography, language, culture, genes and similarly, point of view, has the potential to be countered by a common source of information. Therefore, language, in the absence of translation, comprises a barrier to a worldwide community of debate and opinion, although it is also true that media within any given society may be split along class, political or regional lines. Furthermore, if the language is translated, the translator has room to shift a bias by choosing weighed words for translation.

**National and ethnic viewpoint**

Many news organizations reflect or are perceived to reflect in some way the viewpoint of the geographic, ethnic, and national population that they primarily serve. Media within countries is sometimes seen as being sycophantic or unquestioning about the country's government.

Western media is often criticized in the rest of the world (including eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East) as being pro-Western with regard to a variety of political, cultural and economic issues. Al Jazeera has been frequently criticized in the West about its coverage of Arab world issues.

**Other influences**

However, the decisions of the editorial department of a newspaper and the corporate parent frequently are not connected, as the editorial staff retains freedom to decide what is covered as well as what isn't. Biases, real or implied, frequently arise when it comes to deciding what stories will be covered and who will be called for those stories.

The apparent bias of media is not always specifically political in nature. Bias has also been claimed in instances referred to as conflict of interest, whereby the owners of media outlets have vested interests in other commercial enterprises or political parties. In such cases in the United States, the media outlet is required to disclose the conflict of interest.