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Summary Article: **Media Bias**

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By definition, the word *bias* refers to showing an unjustified favoritism toward something or someone. Thus, on a very simplistic level, *media bias* refers to the media exhibiting an unjustifiable favoritism as they cover the news. When the media transmit biased news reports, those reports present viewers with an inaccurate, unbalanced, and/or unfair view of the world around them.

Political communication scholars have identified and examined two main types of bias in media reporting. The first type, commonly referred to as “partisan bias,” involves media reports that are slanted in favor of a particular political party. The second type of media bias is known as “structural bias.” This type of bias stems from certain “structures” (customs, reporting routines, commercial pressures, etc.) that operate within the news industry. As a result of the highly commercial and purportedly nonpartisan nature of the mainstream U.S. media, the issue of media bias surfaces in a unique way in American democracy.

Partisan Bias

News that exhibits a partisan bias favors one political party at the expense of other political parties. In the U.S. political system, partisan bias generally alludes to reporting that unfairly favors one of the major political parties, either Democrats or Republicans. In general, when individuals accuse the media of “biased” coverage, they are usually referring to a partisan bias in political reporting.

Through much of American history, accusations of a partisan bias in the media would have made little sense, because American democracy originally rested upon an explicitly partisan press. In early American journalistic history, papers such as the *Gazette of the United States* openly promoted the political positions of the Federalist Party. Competitor papers, such as the *National Gazette*, advanced the views of the Republican Party.

However, from the 1830s to the 1870s the media began adopting nonpartisan, objective news standards. Economic reasons brought on this shift from a partisan to a nonpartisan (objective, nonbiased) style of reporting. Prior to the 1830s, most American newspapers catered to a small, elite audience. Individuals falling below the level of high society could simply not afford these expensive publications; these elite daily newspapers commonly cost 6 cents per issue. In the decade of the 1830s, the penny press arrived in the media marketplace. Penny press papers, such as the *New York Herald* or the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, were inexpensive (a penny per issue) news dailies designed to attract a mass audience. If a newspaper’s goal was to attract the largest possible audience, then that paper could not afford to engage in biased, partisan reporting. Such partisan news coverage would ultimately turn away certain readers. Just as a paper favoring the Democratic Party would repel Republican readers, a paper showing undue favoritism toward Republicans would discourage Democratic readers. A nonpartisan newspaper, on the other hand, could attract a larger audience comprised of citizens belonging to both political parties. The highly profitable penny presses soon discovered that less partisanship in a paper’s reporting resulted in more revenues for that paper.

While the press initially pursued objectivity for economic reasons, it eventually came to view objectivity

as a core journalistic value. As the news media progressed through the 20th century, objective reporting became equated with good reporting. When journalism schools today train future reporters, they place great emphasis on news reports that are objective and free of any partisan bias.

While today's journalism profession stresses the importance of objectivity, the very concept of "objectivity" is very elusive and difficult to define. In defining this elusive concept, journalists have come to equate "objective" reporting with "balanced" reporting. For example, a reporter preparing a news story on a Republican administration's budget proposal would probably turn to key administration officials (e.g., the director of the Office of Management and Budget) for comments supporting this Republican budget. In all likelihood, that reporter would then turn to key Democratic lawmakers to obtain arguments against this budget plan. This media format, which juxtaposes the views of Republican politicians with those of Democratic politicians, has grown extremely prevalent in political reporting. This format's popularity has much to do with the fact that it allows reporters to fulfill their professional obligation to objectivity. This format is "objective" because it is "balanced." Democratic views are balanced against Republican views.

While the mainstream news media in the United States have come to place great value on objective, nonpartisan reporting, that value is not universally shared throughout advanced democracies. In fact, many advanced democracies disseminate news through an explicitly partisan press. In such media systems, news sources are commonly connected to particular political parties. For example, in the British press some newspapers, such as the *Daily Mirror*, promote the political agenda of the Labour Party. Other papers, such as the *Daily Mail*, attempt to advance the causes of the Conservative Party. When a nation's political communication revolves around a partisan press, much like the early days of American journalistic history, charges of partisan bias in the media make little sense. Such charges amount to little more than stating the obvious.

The Liberal Press Corps

The best evidence supporting the existence of a partisan bias in the U.S. media can be found in data on the individuals who make their living as journalists. Surveys have consistently shown that journalists tend to be more liberal and more favorably disposed to the Democratic Party than is the general public. For example, after the 1992 election, one survey revealed that nearly 90% of the Washington press corps voted for the Democratic candidate, Bill Clinton. A mere 7% voted for the incumbent Republican candidate in the race, George H. W. Bush. These voting percentages from Washington journalists stand in sharp contrast to the overall electorate. In the 1992 presidential race, 43% of the overall electorate cast ballots for Bill Clinton and 37% voted for George Bush (the remaining votes went to the Independent candidate, Ross Perot). Paralleling the results in the 1992 presidential race, surveys have repeatedly shown that the vast majority of journalists cast their votes for Democratic candidates.

Not only do reporters consistently vote for Democratic politicians, but they also tend to possess liberal viewpoints on most political issues, falling on the liberal side of the value divide that separates liberals and conservatives. Demonstrating reporters' liberal values, surveys have shown that a substantial majority of journalists fall into the pro-choice camp on the issue of abortion. Most journalists report that they do not attend any type of religious service on a regular basis. Regular attendance at religious services is one of the best indicators of a culturally conservative viewpoint.

However, the mere fact that most members of the press possess liberal or Democratic political views does not clearly establish a partisan bias in media reporting. A reporter's personal political biases need

not necessarily appear in his or her news stories. Most reporters work in a profession that stresses objectivity and nonpartisanship in political reporting. Media sociologists have pointed out that news reporters who desire career advancement must establish their journalistic credibility. Such credibility comes through objective (nonbiased/nonpartisan) reporting. Hence, reporters face strong incentives to keep their political views in check and out of their reporting.

News Content and Partisan Bias

Discovering whether the personal political biases of reporters shape news reports requires examining the content of news stories. For several decades, political communication scholars have been doing just that; they have been systematically scrutinizing news stories in an effort to uncover partisan bias. In these systematic examinations, researchers have primarily relied upon a research method known as “content analysis.” This method involves coding and counting segments of text, such as paragraphs in newspaper articles or news segments on broadcast news programs.

In their attempts to code and classify news content as biased or unbiased, researchers have struggled to find a workable definition for media bias (i.e., a definition that is clear enough to use in coding content). What appears as biased reporting to one individual may very well appear to be a factual, objective news report to someone else. For example, consider a campaign involving two candidates (Candidate A and Candidate B). In this political race, Candidate A is prone to making misstatements. Unlike Candidate A, Candidate B’s political speeches are generally free of such verbal mistakes. Given Candidate A’s propensity for verbal errors, Candidate A is likely to receive less favorable treatment in campaign news coverage than will Candidate B. In this case, does Candidate A’s higher level of negative news coverage reflect a partisan media bias (the fact that reporters dislike Candidate A’s political party), or does it merely reflect the objective reality of the campaign (the fact that Candidate A makes far more misstatements)? Political communication scholars have struggled with such questions in their ongoing effort to analyze the content news stories and uncover partisan bias.

In light of the difficulty in coming up with a clear definition of partisan bias, researchers have employed a host of definitions in their content analysis studies. For example, some research has attempted to uncover partisan bias by comparing the number of campaign news stories on Democrat-owned issues against the number of stories on Republican-owned issues. (When a political party has developed a better reputation for handling certain political issues, that party is said to “own” those issues.) Others have made an effort to find partisan media bias by contrasting media references to liberal think tanks against the number of references to conservative think tanks. While content analysis studies have incorporated many different definitions of partisan media bias, most have adopted the “50–50 rule” when coding news content for partisanship. This rule suggests that on any given political issue or in any political campaign the media should give roughly equal (50%) voice to the views of both major political parties. This 50–50 rule accords with journalists’ value and view of objectivity. As discussed previously, journalists value objectivity in news reporting, and in the eyes of the press an “objective” story is a “balanced” story.

In addition to counting and coding the sheer amount of press coverage received by each party, many of these content analysis studies have also examined the tone (either positive or negative) of this coverage. In a typical content analysis study, researchers count how many paragraphs in major newspapers are devoted to the Republican candidate or to the Democratic candidate in a particular presidential race (such as the race between Republican candidate George Bush and Democratic

candidate John Kerry in the 2004 presidential campaign). A typical content analysis study would also involve coding the tone (as either positive or negative) of each paragraph. This coding process would reveal the total amount of positive and negative news coverage received by each candidate. If the Republican candidate (George Bush) received more positive news coverage than his Democratic opponent, the content analysis would reveal a conservative bias in the media. On the other hand, if a study showed that the Democratic candidate (John Kerry) received more positive news coverage than his Republican opponent, the research could claim to have uncovered a liberal media bias. In fact, content analysis studies conducted by both the Project for Excellence in Journalism and by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that Kerry received far more favorable press treatment than George Bush over the course of the 2004 presidential race.

Such content analysis studies have been commonplace in the field of political communication since the 1970s. Most of this research has failed to find any partisan bias in political news stories. Certainly, some studies have uncovered partisan bias on particular issues or in particular campaigns. However, these cases of partisan bias do not appear to consistently favor one party over another. While news reports may favor Republicans on a particular political issue at a specific point in time (e.g., press coverage in the early stages of the Iraq War was favorable to the Republican Bush administration), news reports will favor Democrats on other issues or at other points in time (e.g., over time press coverage on the Iraq War became unfavorable to the Bush administration). Moreover, just as media coverage may favor a Democratic candidate in a particular political race (e.g., in the 1992 presidential campaign, the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton received more positive press coverage than the Republican candidate, George Bush), other studies looking at other campaigns have found media coverage slanted in favor of Republican candidates (e.g., the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, received more positive news treatment than his Democratic rival, Walter Mondale, during the 1984 presidential race). Thus, while many conservative commentators charge that press reports are hopelessly biased in favor of Democratic politicians and liberal causes, decades of research examining actual news content have been unable to find any systemic partisan bias in the U.S. media.

Public Perceptions of Partisan Bias

While media content studies have failed to find any consistent partisan bias in the news, some members of the public consistently see such bias. A 2005 public opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 60% of respondents believed that news organizations are politically biased. Political communication research would caution against drawing any conclusions about partisan bias in the media by relying upon public perceptions of such bias. This caution is warranted because studies have often found a disconnect between perceptions of partisan bias in the news and the actual content of news stories. Bias appears to have more to do with the perception of the person reading a news story than with anything said in the story itself.

The disconnect between perceptions of media bias and actual media content is perhaps best illustrated in work on the “hostile media effect” (sometimes also referred to as the “hostile media phenomenon”). Research into the hostile media effect has found that when individuals see bias in the news, they see a bias that runs against their political views rather than a bias that favors their political positions. When people perceive a biased media, they see a media that is hostile to their political causes or to their preferred candidates.

Research into the hostile media effect has clearly demonstrated that people’s perceptions of a hostile

(biased) media have little to do with the actual content of news stories. Many of the hostile media effect studies have exposed audiences with different political perspectives to the exact same news story. For example, some of the research in this area has examined audience reactions to media messages on animal experimentation. When audiences with divergent political views on this issue (such as animal rights activists and scientists who use animals in their research) read a seemingly neutral (objective/nonbiased) news report on this subject, both audiences perceive a biased news story. However, they see that bias running in opposite directions. When animal rights activists read the news story, they see a biased report that unfairly favors animal experimentation. On the other hand, when the scientific researchers read this exact same news story, they perceive a report that unfairly opposes animal experimentation. After reading the same article, both audiences perceive a media bias that is hostile to their perspective on this issue. Since both audiences form very different perceptions of media bias based on the same news content, their perceptions appear to have little to do with the actual content conveyed in the story.

This hostile media effect does not emerge in all news consumers. Most individuals reading through the aforementioned article on animal experimentation would see a story that is fair, unbiased, and nonpartisan. Most news consumers simply do not succumb to the hostile media effect. This effect, however, does influence a number of individuals, and these individuals share certain traits. For instance, individuals who have strong political views on a subject are particularly susceptible to the hostile media effect. With regard to a news story on animal experimentation, anyone with strong views on this topic (such as animal rights activists or scientists who conduct animal research) is likely to perceive a hostile bias in this news story. In addition, individuals with strong partisan attachments are prone to the hostile media effect. When highly partisan Democrats or Republicans read or watch the news, they tend to perceive media hostility toward their political party. While partisans from both major parties are predisposed to the hostile media effect, this effect appears to be stronger with Republicans than with Democrats.

Structural Bias

As scholars have engaged in an ongoing search through media content for bias, they have observed several trends in news reports that have no apparent connection to partisanship; these patterns do not favor either political party. However, these trends do constitute a form of bias because they provide the media audience with an inaccurate and distorted view of the world around them. This form of media bias is commonly known as “structural bias,” because it stems from certain “structural” features of the news industry. Such structures include everything from reporting routines to newsroom practices to industry incentives. Within any given industry, individuals face certain pressures and incentives. As individuals within the news industry act on these pressures and incentives, they develop a particular way of doing things, such as a way of writing political news stories. When reporters put a certain slant on their stories to adhere to industry pressures and incentives, these stories reflect the industry’s structural bias.

In terms of industry pressures, the structural bias in the U.S. media has primarily been associated with the strong profit motive that drives commercial media organizations. In the United States, the news primarily comes from profit-driven media corporations. In contrast to other advanced democracies, the United States has a far more competitive and far more commercial media marketplace. Hence, the structural bias that emerges in the U.S. media market is unique in comparison to other modern democratic nations.

Since the late 1970s, the profit motive has become increasingly important in newsrooms throughout the U.S. media marketplace. Over the past several decades, this marketplace has experienced an increasing number of news sources fighting over an everdecreasing news audience. These market trends have resulted in fierce competition in the news industry, and in this intensely competitive environment news organizations have had to focus more and more on producing profits. As media corporations place greater emphasis on profits, the media's structural bias, which emerges from the industry's profit motive, has played an increasingly important role in shaping news coverage.

Political communication scholars have identified a myriad of elements that make up the media's structural bias. The sections following discuss some of the more significant aspects of this structural bias. The elements have been divided into the two central components (revenues and costs) involved in turning a profit.

Lowering Costs and Structural Bias

As commercial enterprises, media companies can increase profits by lowering the costs involved in news production. Such cost-cutting decisions generate certain similarities across news stories.

For example, reporters can lower costs (the time and effort involved in news gathering) by developing relationships with and by relying upon individuals in positions of authority. This helps to explain why government officials serve as the primary sources in most political news stories. For instance, when reporters cover a story on U.S. defense policy, they are likely to contact Defense Department officials or members of Congress serving on defense-related committees. Over time, political reporters build and maintain relationships with politicians and government administrators. Contacting such individuals then becomes an efficient and inexpensive way to obtain content for a news story. As news reporters rely heavily on official government sources, their news stories create a biased (i.e., skewed) picture of the political environment. By depending so heavily on official government sources, news stories become slanted in the direction of the dominant political parties. Most government officials are either Democrats or Republicans. News stories built on commentary from such sources favor the views of the dominant political parties at the expense of less prominent political organizations, such as the Green Party or the Libertarian Party.

Reporters can also lower the cost of news gathering by relying on "news subsidies" (also referred to as "news handouts"). A news subsidy refers to materials that essentially subsidize or economically assist a reporter's effort in putting together a news story. Such subsidies often come from government authorities or public relations practitioners who send out press releases, hold press conferences, or often simply make phone calls in order to provide reporters with story ideas and content. As the news industry has become increasingly focused on profits, its newsrooms have grown increasingly reliant on news subsidies. Recent research suggests that such subsidies account for more than half of all of the content contained in both print and electronic news stories. With their heavy reliance on news subsidies, the media provide news consumers with a biased depiction of the world around them. Many media critics have argued that the press favors the voices of the powerful over the powerless. News subsidies play an important role in this pattern of favoritism because such subsidies are likely to come from individuals and organizations in positions of power. An affluent corporation with highly paid public relations professionals is better able to provide news subsidies than organizations without such financial resources.

Increasing Audience Size and Structural Bias

Another way for news organizations to increase profits is by raising the revenues that flow from advertisers. Advertisers are willing to pay more for a larger audience. Thus, news organizations face strong structural pressures to increase the size of their reading/viewing/listening audience. As newsrooms produce stories designed to attract a larger audience, the stories they air and print come to exhibit several tendencies.

In one such tendency, news stories often emphasize negative news. Psychologists have long recognized that human attention favors negative information over positive information. Taking advantage of this pattern in human attention, the press gravitates toward negative news and away from positive news. A news story about a failed government program is likely to receive more media attention than a news piece on a government program that has achieved great success. The media also devote excessive attention to negative events such as disasters and crimes. This trend in negative news reporting has been steadily on the rise. Content analysis studies of news stories (generally from the 1980s through to the present day) have found that press coverage of the president, Congress, and even government agencies has taken on an increasingly negative tone. By favoring negative news over positive news, the media present the news audience with a distorted image of political reality. For instance, as a result of all of the media attention given to negative crime stories, individuals tend to overestimate the level of crime in their communities; they perceive that crime is more prevalent than it actually is.

The media's structural bias not only favors negative news, it also favors conflict. Just as human attention is naturally drawn toward negative information, it also naturally turns toward conflict. Consequently, the media are partial to stories that portray individuals in a state of conflict. Illustrating the media's fondness for featuring conflict, political news stories often follow a "Democrat said/Republican said" pattern. In this pattern, the news story presents an argument from a member of one major political party followed by a counterargument offered by a member of the opposing party. The media's bias toward highlighting conflict is also evident in coverage of political campaigns. On the campaign trail, candidates spend far more time promoting their political views than on attacking the views of their opponents. However, candidate attacks disproportionately find their way into campaign coverage. By favoring areas of conflict over areas of agreement, the press again provides its audience with a biased (distorted) representation of politics. In this representation, politics becomes an arena for battle rather than a domain for moderation and compromise.

The media's structural bias also favors known political personalities. Humans tend to pay more interest to information about known personalities than to information about unknown individuals. Capitalizing on this pattern of human interest, political news coverage is skewed toward known political personalities. In U.S. politics, the public is more familiar with the president than with any other politician. In part, the president has attained such familiarity because the president receives far more news coverage than any other politician. When the news media turn their attention to members of Congress, they tend to focus on a handful of prominent leaders or personalities, such as the Senate majority leader or the speaker of the House. By focusing in on these well-known politicians, the media produce a self-reinforcing cycle of political prominence; as prominent politicians receive an undue amount of press coverage, they become even more prominent. By highlighting the voices of well-known politicians, the press provides its audience with a partial picture of politics. In this partial view of the political environment, the audience is exposed to the views of the few (prominent politicians) but does not see the views of the many (the multitude of less prominent political actors).

In terms of its structural bias, the media are also partial to new and novel topics. Since new information attracts more attention than old information, today's newsrooms tend to operate on the belief that only new news counts as news at all. As a result of their continual search for novel news subjects, media coverage typically ebbs and flows in waves. Like an ocean wave, media coverage on any given subject rapidly forms, builds, reaches a peak, and then quickly dissipates. Usually, media coverage begins and builds on a particular subject (such as the subject of Social Security reform) based on some key event (such as a president proposing a major change to the Social Security program). This media coverage rapidly builds to a peak. At this peak point, story after story on Social Security reform appear in newspapers and on news programs throughout the nation. When coverage on the topic of Social Security reform reaches this peak saturation point, news directors and assignment editors start to fear that any additional airtime or print space devoted to this subject will bore the news audience. Consequently, news stories on the subject of Social Security reform rapidly disappear. When acting on this bias favoring new and novel topics, the media once again create a skewed image of politics. This skewed image tends to underrepresent long-running political issues and debates. Many media scholars have argued that this aspect of the media's structural bias (a preference for new and novel subjects) makes it difficult for American democracy to grapple with long-lasting political problems.

As a final element in its structural bias, the media gravitate toward stories with dramatic elements. A dramatic narrative features interesting characters engaged in intriguing actions (usually actions that center on struggle or conflict) that rise to a climax point. A news story on the ramifications of a proposed modification to tax policy does not have the components to build a dramatic narrative. On the other hand, a story about a president having a secretive, ongoing affair with a much younger White House intern, such as the scandal involving President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky, has all of the elements of good drama. This helps to explain why the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal received more news coverage than any other story in 1998. By highlighting such dramatic stories, the media once again construct a skewed image of political reality. Social psychologists have recognized that individuals often assign too much weight to vivid narratives. That is, when individuals view a compelling dramatic story, they often assume that this unrepresentative story accurately represents the world around them.

The Effects of the Media's Structural Bias

The various elements that make up the media's structural bias, ranging from the media's fondness for negative news to their preference for good drama, push media coverage in an increasingly sensationalized direction. This shift in press coverage to more sensational news content has often been described as the shift from "hard news" (stories about key political events and issues) to "soft news" (dramatic human interest stories that generally lack any public policy component). Political communication studies over the past few decades have consistently charted the growth of soft news and the coinciding decline of hard news. For example, a report issued by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that the number of news stories about foreign affairs dropped by 25% between 1977 and 1997. During that same time period, the number of entertainment or celebrity stories nearly tripled. Such findings show that hard news topics, such as foreign affairs stories, are being driven out by soft news subjects, such as stories about Hollywood movie stars.

This growth in soft news has fueled an active debate among political communication scholars over how this softening of news coverage impacts American democracy. On one side of this debate, most scholars view this growth of soft news as a damaging media trend. Such scholars have connected this

growth in soft news to everything from an uninformed electorate to a cynical citizenry to a politically apathetic public. On the other side of this debate, some political communication authorities view the rise of soft news as a helpful media trend. Such authorities argue that citizens today have more hard news options than ever before. Through the virtual explosion of news content on cable television and on the Internet, citizens who want hard news can get hard news. As the reasoning on this side of the debate continues, the growth of soft news helps to satisfy the needs of news consumers who prefer softer news products. In short, soft news helps to diversify the media marketplace by providing a broader range of news products to satisfy the needs of various news consumers.

See also

Hard News; Hostile Media Effect; Party Press; Soft News

Further Readings

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