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## Social Issues in America

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## **Media Bias**

One of the more contentious issues in social science at this time is the question of media bias. Both the scholarly and popular literature are thick with writings on this topic, yet for all the interest in it and work devoted to it we are far from a consensus on how media bias can be defined, conceptualized, or researched. Ironically enough, many writings on the subject of media bias do take the position that the news content distributed to the public fails, in one respect or another, to accurately and fairly represent real events, issues, personalities, and situations. Studies differ sharply, however, on which political positions the bias favors or disfavors, how the news content comes to be biased, the extent to which the bias favors particular interests, and what larger social impact media bias might have.

So while media bias is a social science construct which many people, lay and scholarly alike, agree is important, there is no generally shared assessment of the problem or explanation of it. It seems unlikely, for reasons that will be discussed in this article, that the debate will be resolved soon. Despite the endless arguments which the topic of media bias generates, it is worthwhile to consider why the issue matters, to outline the major points of view on the issue, and to identify the major ideas associated with those viewpoints.

### **What Might the Term, *Media Bias*, Mean?**

Given the heat of the argument surrounding this issue, no definition of media bias will be completely satisfactory. For our purposes here, it is best to think of media bias as some sort of systematic distortion in the way the news media portray social reality. By that we mean that a person forming a judgment about society or an impression about social conditions, based on mediated accounts of the real world, is likely to be mistaken to a significant degree. Related is the idea that a person trying to come to a reasoned position about policy issues will not obtain information of sufficient quality to come to a fully informed position. Also related is the idea that news content may tend to favor certain positions, perspectives, or political or economic interests over others, and thus damages the quality of the discussion of important social issues.

## **The Historical Context: Is Media Bias Something New?**

Some of the heat in the debate about media bias can be attributed to the evolving role of mass media in society. There has been a noticeable shift, over the history of the United States, in the way we conceive of the press and the expectations we have for the press. While various kinds of discontent with news stories seem to go back as far as the press itself, the concern about media bias—in the sense of some systematic distortion in the representation of social reality—is an issue of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The press in the early days of the United States was grounded in the same Enlightenment philosophy as the republic itself: free speech is a necessary ingredient for rational discourse, and is a natural right. The press—at that time, written text only—was a private venture, and news was disseminated in a marketplace of ideas. Legal constraints on content were relatively limited, and the federal government was barred from regulating content. The marketplace itself regulated speech; the belief was that truth would emerge from a vigorous contest of ideas. The primary social benefit of the press was as a check on the power of government.

Certainly this conception of the press has not been entirely discarded, but it is important to note that there was a change over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in how we think of the media. New channels have developed through which people obtain news; some of those channels contain moving images and spoken words instead of print text. While most media outlets are still privately owned, there are now public entities producing news content, such as National Public Radio. Perhaps the most significant change, however, is in our expectations for the media: because of their influence on public opinion, we now feel the media bear some social responsibility for the content they produce. While the early press was expected primarily to check government power, the contemporary media are also expected to expose social problems and imbalances in power, either governmental or private.

In large measure, the media bias issue is rooted in this contemporary expectation that the media should act as a positive social force. Predictably, much of the controversy stems from the disagreement over precisely what “positive social force” means, with regard to news stories.

## **In What Ways Might News Content be Biased?**

A good way to cope with the issue of media bias is to note the different research methods which have been used to study it, and to begin to tease out the major ideas which have emerged from this research. Again, it is important to keep in mind that scholars have not resolved the issue; the findings of studies and media criticism often contradict each other, largely because they measure different attributes of news content, they highlight different aspects of the news production process, they are based on different conceptions of the role the press plays (or should play) in society, or they examine different sectors of the media market.

*Content analysis* is a method often used in studying media. In a content analysis, the researcher identifies particular characteristics of news stories which are of interest, and then measures those characteristics in a representative sample of stories. When this method is executed properly, one can get reliable measurements of those characteristics. For instance, a researcher might measure how often the network news shows run stories about unemployment, or how often the national newspapers of record run stories about crime. Another application for content analysis is to analyze the use of particular language in news stories. For instance, a researcher might measure how often journalists use the word “scandal” when describing a particular controversy involving a political figure, or how often they use the word “crisis” in a story about some social concern.

Content analysis, as a research method in studying communication, is well-established. When content analysis is used to address the issue of media bias, however, the scholarly arguments quickly break out over how to interpret the findings. The two examples of content analysis above illustrate this. How much coverage of unemployment or crime is the appropriate amount, and how much coverage would suggest the news content distorts reality? Are the words “scandal” or “crisis” appropriate descriptions, or are they hyperbole? As evidence of media bias, the findings of content analyses become controversial because there is no general agreement on what characteristics the coverage *should* exhibit. Put another way, content analysis is a sensible way to precisely measure how much and in what ways actual news coverage deviates from some defined journalistic ideal; the controversy stems from the lack of agreement on that ideal.

*Surveys* are another common method for researching human communication. A well-executed survey can give reliable measurements of the characteristics, preferences, behaviors, or attitudes of a large group of people. A number of studies have found that journalists, as a group of people, are not representative of the population as a whole. In specific, journalists tend to be from wealthier backgrounds than average, to be better educated, and to hold political opinions farther to the left than the population as a whole. Again, the controversy more often centers on how to interpret these measurements than on their accuracy. If journalists as a group are indeed a social elite, does that necessarily mean that the news content they generate is biased? Is it true, in effect, that their own viewpoints significantly color the ways they cover issues?

Recently, books have appeared which are the personal accounts of veteran journalists. Unlike many autobiographies by journalists, a number of these have directly taken up the issue of media bias. Predictably, some of these works argue that the media tend to favor the political left and others that the media are neutral or favor the political right. While these are not scholarly research, they do resemble a method widely used in researching human communication. *Ethnography* uses the stories people tell about their experiences to help researchers see patterns in those experiences, and develop general ideas about social reality. Again, the method is well-established as a way to study communication, but how to interpret these memoirs is not clear-cut. The stories journalists tell about being inside the news industry indeed offer insights into the question of media bias, but journalists themselves disagree whether there is a bias in news and what the nature of such a bias might be.

In sum, we can distinguish a variety of methods that scholars have employed to study and critique the news media, and we can identify different aspects of the news media they have considered important to that study. Some scholars have taken an essentially macro view; they attend to such things as the financial structure of news organizations, advertisers' influence on news organizations, reporters' dependence on government officials for sources, and journalists' codes of ethics. Other scholars have taken an essentially micro view, and studied news content itself; they attend to such things as the themes of stories, the choice of experts quoted in the stories, the selection of graphic elements or pictures to accompany the text or narration, page position in a

newspaper or sequence within broadcast news, and journalists' personal beliefs and values.

The key point to keep in mind when reading scholarly studies of the news media or reading memoirs written by journalists, is that none of these works has definitively resolved the issue of media bias. As in the case of other contentious issues in the social sciences, an informed reader will look at a variety of perspectives on the issue, and weigh the evidence and arguments thoughtfully and fairly in coming to his or her own opinion about the issue.

### **What Theories Explain How Media Bias Might Affect Society?**

It is also useful to identify theories of media effects which are relevant to the media bias issue. Media effects theories are explanations or models of how communication through the mass media affects society. There are five which are particularly applicable to the issue of media bias: framing, priming, agenda-setting, cultivation, and spiral of silence.

*Framing* concerns the words in which social issues are described. In essence, the terms in which we discuss an issue imply certain value judgments about behaviors or material conditions, indicate the relative importance of the issue, and suggest particular ways a social problem might be addressed. The concern, regarding media bias, is that the way the press frames an issue might give it too much or too little weight in public discourse, might favor one side at the expense of another, might downplay information relevant to the issue, or might overstate other information about the issue.

*Priming* concerns the way news stories affect the image of public figures. Since the public tends to interpret new information about public figures in light of an image derived from prior information, a distortion in that image can interfere with thoughtful and reasonable consideration of that person's actions and statements. If the press predisposes the public to feel a particular way about some figure, whether positively or negatively, it may have biased the discussion of issues concerning that figure.

*Agenda-setting* refers to the way certain issues or questions gain the public's attention, while others do not. Here, the concern is that the press can lead people to believe some social condition is important by covering it extensively, or lead people to

consider some social condition is inconsequential by ignoring it or covering it minimally. Again, the issue of bias is that the press has influenced public opinion in an inappropriate or damaging way.

*Cultivation* is the name given to a long-term, generalized effect of television programming on culture. Regarding media bias, cultivation theory is relevant as a way of explaining how television news stories might build or reinforce a particular view of the world. Here, the concern is that news stories often share particular themes over a long span of time, and that shared themes may condition viewers' sense of social reality, yet those themes may in fact not be a balanced or accurate view of social reality.

The *spiral of silence* is a colorfully-named theory describing how mass media content may tend to foster certain opinions about issues while suppressing others. In brief, mass mediated stories give individuals a sense of what the general public thinks about issues. Individuals who see those issues differently tend to be silent about their own views, out of a desire to be socially acceptable. In that way, the mass media may bring about a conformity or orthodoxy in viewpoint. Here, the concern is that news stories might stifle diversity in individual thinking and personal expression about social issues; the bias consists of that orthodoxy which the news supports.

### **What is the Connection Between the Political Spectrum and the Concerns Over Media Bias?**

In general terms, media critiques often tend to mirror the differing ideological tenets of the political left and right. For our purposes here, it is useful to think of the contemporary political left as rooted in an essentially collectivist view of humans and social institutions; people are shaped by the larger social institutions of their day, and the social reality which people experience is largely a "construction" built through interactions among people. Hence, it is appropriate for news content to be judged by its contribution to positive social change, including rectifying perceived imbalances in power and wealth. The contemporary political right, in contrast, is rooted in an individualist view of humans acting in a free marketplace of goods and services. The social system is a product of individual human agents, each pursuing his or her own

interest; the value created in the social system is a product of the system's self-regulation. Hence, it is appropriate for news content to be judged by its facticity and impartiality.

Media critique from the left thus highlights ways that news content reproduces existing social institutions and maintains the status quo of the social system. To many critics on the left, this means that the press in the United States fails to expose inequities and support social reform movements to a sufficient degree. These critics view this as an ethical failure of the press. A specific problem, related to this failure to take a sufficiently activist role, is that most news outlets in the United States are private, profit-making organizations. Many leftist critics argue that news content is insufficiently critical of corporations as social institutions and of capitalism as a social system. The trend, in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for the ownership of news outlets to become concentrated only reinforces this failure, in the eyes of such critics.

Resource dependency also figures strongly in leftist media critique. Because reporters are dependent on political leaders for the information they need to write their stories, they cannot be as rigorous in their investigations of political power as they ideally would be. Parallel to that concern is the dependency of news organizations on advertising revenues; this is another reason, leftist critics argue, that news content is not rigorous enough in scrutinizing and criticizing the actions of corporations. Examples of leftist media critique can be found on the web site of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (<http://www.fair.org>).

Media critique from the right tends to focus on entirely different aspects of news content and the news production process. The predominant concern is that the news content is not neutral, but subtly partisan, in its tone. Newsrooms tend not to reflect the actual diversity of political thinking in the population at large: a large majority of journalists place themselves on the political left and themselves hold leftist positions on issues. Most journalists are from upper middle-class backgrounds, and some critics say this limits their ability to fairly represent political viewpoints common in other social classes. Individual reporters are likely to feel some degree of pressure to conform to the dominant political thinking in their workplace; groupthink thus reduces the diversity in viewpoint available within a news organization.



Critics on the right hold that the journalists' personal beliefs color their reporting, particularly in the choice of stories to feature (agenda setting), the way events are characterized (framing), and the word choices when describing political leaders (priming). In this way the reportage sometimes distorts the content of political speeches, or misrepresents the details of policy proposals. Critics on the right see these distortions as evidence of favoritism or antagonism toward particular viewpoints or leaders. Examples of media critique from the right can be found on the web site of the Media Research Center (<http://www.mrc.org/>).

### **Might the Development of the World Wide Web Have an Impact on the Media Bias Debate?**

The World Wide Web has clearly increased both the amount of information available to ordinary citizens, and the variety of information sources that can be accessed easily. Both hard news stories and political commentary can be accessed at any time of day by anybody using an inexpensive personal computer and dialup account, or by using computing equipment made available at libraries and schools. Moreover, the reach of a single individual through the World Wide Web is literally global in its geographic scope, while it had been limited by time and distance in access to the traditional media.

This development amounts to a significant erosion in the *gatekeeper* role that news outlets used to fill. One necessary step in the production of news stories is the decision about which events or issues will be covered and which will be ignored; another key step in this process is finding the *peg*, or thematic idea a story will be written around. In this sense, the news outlets previously were gatekeepers of the news content the public consumed.

With regard to hard news stories, people now can easily obtain content that was inaccessible to them before, such as out-of-town or foreign newspapers. Perhaps the greatest change is in access to news commentary, however. There now are many web sites offering commentary (i.e., interpretations of events, arguments for particular policy choices, or analyses of political ideology) from perspectives across the entire political spectrum. This development has certainly not led the traditional media to abandon the

genre of op-ed writing, but has indeed offered the information consumer a far greater choice in sources of commentary. Some sites allow readers to contribute their own comments to discussion threads, which develop into a sort of collaboratively authored content; this new level of interactivity is yet another dimension of the erosion of the gatekeeping role news outlets used to play.

While independent journalism was certainly not unknown before the World Wide Web, computer-mediated communication has fostered an explosion in the availability of news content apart from the established news outlets. Clearly there is a new burden on the reader to critically evaluate content from this alternative channel, but the point here is that the evolution of these alternative sources has recast the media bias debate in different terms. One can no longer generalize easily about the nature of published news commentary, for the simple reason that virtually every conceivable viewpoint is represented in the form of a web site. In sum, the evolution of computer-mediated communication as an easily accessed channel has ended the dominance of news content by a relatively small number of outlets. By doing so, it has greatly increased the diversity in available news content and commentary.

In addition to the web sites maintained by such traditional hard news outlets as television stations and newspapers, it may be interesting to examine some web sites offering commentary, interpretation, or policy analysis. There are number of such sites listed in the bibliography of this entry.

### **Is There Any Way News Content Could Avoid Being Biased?**

In a pluralistic society with a free press, it seems extremely doubtful that any particular news outlet or any particular body of news content could be immune to a charge of media bias, for a number of reasons. At a fundamental level, any written or visual narrative is a selective version of reality. The creation of that narrative necessarily involves decisions about what information will be included or excluded, what perspectives on the events will be highlighted or ignored, and what aspects of events or personalities will be highlighted or ignored. The very process of creating news content therefore entails decisions which embody value judgments, whether conscious and deliberate or unconscious and inadvertent. To the extent that social structures and

institutions are enactments of particular values, perhaps at the expense of alternative values, the decision process involved in creating news content can be criticized as supporting particular interests and devaluing other interests. Put simply, it is difficult to conceive of a process by which news content could be created which is value-free or which absolutely cannot be seen as supporting particular interests over others. To that extent, news content will always be liable to the charge of bias.

It thus seems far more constructive to rethink the media bias question as an issue of fairness. Then the question becomes whether news outlets take a partisan, involved stance on public questions or whether they maintain a sufficient degree of detachment; whether they seem to favor particular sides in an issue, or particular actors in a power struggle; whether they rely too much on information sources with vested interests in the news content; whether they use neutral language in their reportage, or emotionally-charged language. In short, the question becomes whether there could be professional norms in journalism which tend to produce news content generally regarded as impartial. Such content would seem both feasible and desirable.

Even if individual news outlets had their own particular biases, it is also feasible that across the entire media marketplace the biases would offset each other. Balance, in the sense of diversity in the media marketplace, would thus be the absence of dominance or monopoly regarding content. The World Wide Web has dramatically increased the information available to the ordinary citizen, and seems to have recast the issue of media bias in exactly this way.

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## **Websites of Interest**

### *Media Criticism*

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (<http://www.fair.org>).

Media Research Center (<http://www.mrc.org/>)

### *Policy Analysis*

The Brookings Institution (<http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/>)

Cato Institute (<http://www.cato.org/>)

### *Political Commentary and Interpretation*

Rush Limbaugh (<http://www.rushlimbaugh.com>)

Jim Hightower (<http://www.jimhightower.com/>)

Andrew Sullivan (<http://www.andrewsullivan.com/index.php>)

Matt Drudge (<http://www.drudgereport.com/>)

Town Hall (<http://www.townhall.com/>)

Jewish World Review (<http://jewishworldreview.com/>)

Nation (<http://www.thenation.com/>)

Salon (<http://www.salon.com/>)

National Review Online (<http://www.nationalreview.com/>)

### *Online Newspapers*

Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>)

Washington Times (<http://www.washtimes.com/>)

Wall Street Journal (<http://online.wsj.com/public/us>)

New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com/>)

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