

Concepts of bias in the media



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What is Media Bias?

What is 'media bias'? It is the perception, correct or incorrect, that television, print, and online content – particularly journalism – lacks objectivity and either consciously or unconsciously skews to favor a particular ideology, agenda, or point of view, political or otherwise. The term is generally (though not exclusively) employed by conservatives who are frustrated by their perception that the news media is relentlessly liberal and unfair in its coverage of news events. A simple Google search of the phrase media bias in fact turns up an overwhelmingly disproportionate number of conservative or rightward leaning sites raging against liberal bias in the news. Arguably, then, media bias is a term that is used as a tool in political warfare: The press is often thought of as a unified voice with a distinct bias (right or left depending on the critic). This simplistic thinking fits the needs of ideological struggle, but is hardly useful in coming to a better understanding of what is happening in the world. (Cline, 2005) Deeper insight is critical into understanding what media bias is, beyond a buzz phrase.

It is perhaps unlikely that true objectivity is possible given the inherently subjective nature of human perception and experience. Human communication always takes place in a context, through a medium, and among individuals and groups who are situated historically, politically, economically, and socially. (Cline, 2005) Balance in journalism, however, is not only possible but also desirable. It is also possible and desirable for journalists to be aware of their own prejudices and/or biases and to adjust the methodology of their news reporting accordingly. Taking pains to seek out as many sides of an issue as can be reasonably included in a story is the

minimum a journalist can do to ensure balance, even if complete objectivity is ultimately unfeasible.

To the extent that it occurs, however, bias is neither necessarily inherently unfair, nor does it necessarily imply untruth. Facts are facts, and although they can be used selectively and manipulated to support a certain ideological point of view, the truth is ultimately what a good journalist seeks, or at least a fair array of facts which allows the consumer of the news report to come to his or her own conclusion as to what the truth is.

In his Media / Political Bias essay, news media professor Andrew R. Cline poses a variety of questions which may be used to determine whether media bias truly exists in any given news story. Here are a few of them:

What is the author's / speaker's socio-political position? With what social, political, or professional groups is the speaker identified? For example, numerous recent reports have shown that various departments in the United States government (including the Department of Defense, Social Security Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services) have been producing news segments, complete with fictional reporters and anchors hired by the government, which are then dispersed to television and radio stations as if they were press releases. In many cases, news outlets have run these spots unedited and without attribution explaining that the source is the government. This practice by the Bush Administration has provoked outrage from all political corners, some of which have dubbed the practice propagandistic and fascistic. Given the conservative ideological slant of the Bush Administration, it is unreasonable to assume that these

faux news segments are without bias, particularly after the Administration publicly rejected the finding of the Congressional Government Accountability Office that such stories — designed to resemble independently reported broadcast news stories so that TV stations can run them without editing — violate provisions in annual appropriations laws that ban covert propaganda. (Lee, 2005) Who would the government go out of its way to give itself permission to not disclose to media outlets that the Bush Administration produced its pre-packaged news segments? As alluded to above, the mere fact of their engaging in such activity does not mean that the positions advocated by the government are without merit or lacking in factual accuracy, but it is peculiar, if the Administration believes in the factual veracity of its productions, that they are unwilling to let them be subjected to scrutiny. It is therefore incumbent upon the news stations to reveal the source of these news segments, and/or seek other points of view with which to balance the point of view articulated in these segments.

Does the speaker have anything to gain personally from delivering the message? Making headlines of late in the United States is the so-called ‘right-to-life’ case of Terri Schialvo, a brain-dead woman who has been on life support since an accident in 1990 that left her in a coma. Her husband and legal guardian has on twelve separate occasions received the blessing of a variety of courts to disconnect her feeding tube and allow her to die, saying he is convinced that not only does she have no hope of recovery, but she would not have wanted to live in such a vegetative fashion. However, Miss Schialvo’s parents disagree and want her kept alive. They hired a ‘spokesman’ to handle all their media interactions, a man by the name of

Randall Terry. Who is Mr. Terry? He was famous as an anti-abortion activist in the 1980s and 1990s, whose organization Operation Rescue advocated harassment and violence as a means to stop abortions and to conduct protests at abortion clinics. A 1998 lawsuit put a stop to Operation Rescue's activities, leaving Mr. Terry without his key cause, and, presumably, means to earn a living. Can Mr. Terry be trusted as an objective, fair spokesperson for Terri Schialvo, given his bias? Is his goal an altruistic one, i. e. simply to save Terri Schialvo's life, such that it is, or does he have another agenda, to further his own career and the cause of the religious fundamentalists who refuse to accept the various court decisions giving Mr. Schialvo the right to terminate his wife's life? Mr. Terry's own words may give some insight into his ultimate goals: In a 1995 speech, for example, Terry reportedly said of doctors who perform abortions, ' When I, or people like me, are running the country, you'd better flee, because we will find you, we will try you and we will execute you.' (Miner, 2003) This is a peculiarly ironic and hypocritical warning, given Mr. Terry's proclamation in defense of the sanctity of human existence: Life is life. (Miner, 2003) Given these facts, it is unlikely Mr. Terry can be trusted to be unbiased or objective given his ulterior motives and personal belief system - both of which he is entitled to, but ought to be fairly and fully disclosed by those reporting on the Terry Schialvo case.

How does the speaker present arguments? Is the message one-sided, or does it include alternative points of view? Does the speaker fairly present alternative arguments? Does the speaker ignore obviously conflicting arguments? If the message includes alternative points of view, how are those views characterized? Does the speaker use positive words and images

to describe his/her point of view and negative words and images to describe other points of view? Does the speaker ascribe positive motivations to his/her point of view and negative motivations to alternative points of view?

The most effective way to explore this series of questions is to utilize the macro-example of the Fox News Channel, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, employs the slogans We Report, You Decide and Fair and Balanced, when in fact Fox News is anything but. First, the chairman of Fox News, Roger Ailes, was the campaign manager for George Bush, Sr.'s 1988 presidential campaign, and a political consultant for several subsequent Republican candidates. The 2004 documentary *Outfoxed* obtained internal Fox News memos that documented directives from senior management instructing news editors, assignment editors, and anchors to focus on stories mirroring talking points issued by the Republican Party on a daily basis. Notably, the Republican Party line that Democratic Senator John Kerry, George W. Bush's opponent in the 2004 presidential campaign, was a flip-flopper, is employed dozens of times by Fox News anchors out of the context of editorials, following a March 16, 2004 memo from Fox News executive John Moody setting the story of the day, which says, Kerry, starting to feel the heat from his flip-flop voting record, is in West Virginia. The documentary also shows several clips in which Fox News anchors deliver other shockingly unfair and unbalanced lines on-air, such as Assuming the unthinkable happen and Senator Kerry becomes president Former Fox News reporter John DuPre details how he was sent to California to cover Ronald Reagan's 90th birthday party at the Reagan Library, only to find only a handful of citizens had showed up; when he tried to tell his superiors there was no story

to be covered, he was told to lie on air that a huge crowd had amassed nonetheless. Later, DuPre was suspended and then resigned.

The media watchdog organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) conducted a study analyzing six months of Fox News Channel programming (June to December 2003) to see if, in fact, the proportion of its guests' political viewpoints was indeed fair and balanced. The study determined that 57 percent of guests were explicitly conservative, 12 percent were centrist, and 11 percent were liberal or progressive. These data speak for themselves.

Another remarkable aspect of Fox News Channel's analysis of current events and news is the way in which it characterizes opinions that run counter to the conservative Republican point of view. *Outfoxed* shows conservative talk show host Bill O'Reilly repeatedly demanding on several different occasions that his liberal guests shut up when they disagree with him — after O'Reilly denies on camera that he has only silenced a guest once in such a manner. When O'Reilly guest Jeremy Glick, whose parents were killed in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, expressed his opinion that President Bush had helped create a foreign policy environment which fomented the hatred of Al Qaida against the United States, O'Reilly flew into a rage and threatened bodily harm - on the air — to Glick unless he left the building. On the Fox News Channel talk show *Hannity & Colmes*, co-host Sean Hannity taunted actress Janine Garofolo's stance against the Iraq war by taunting her: Saddam Hussein loves you.

Ultimately, one of the most damning statistics is an October 2003 poll of regular Fox News viewers which showed that 67% believed the United States

had found a link between Iraq and Al Qaida, an assertion completely unsupported by facts and explicitly rejected by President Bush's bipartisan 9/11 Commission. Can any reasonable person come to the conclusion that Fox News Channel is seeking to provide the truth to its viewing audience?

What is even more chilling, however, is that several Rupert Murdoch-owned media outlets in Australia refused to run ads for *Outfoxed*'s theatrical release in that country, claiming the film was offensive, and (unsuccessfully) threatened lawsuits to prevent its release in the United States.

Fox News Channel has the First Amendment freedom to say whatever it cares to on-air, whether it be right-wing propaganda or anything at all; what is intellectually disingenuous is that the channel refuses to acknowledge its bias, and instead employs a blatantly false marketing technique to assure viewers of its journalistic objectivity. Former Fox News producer Jeff Cohen says in *Outfoxed* that a better slogan for Fox News would be 'We opine, you recline.' This witty remark cuts to the heart of the issue, which is that Fox News is and should be free to be an outlet for right-wing editorializing, but it is nothing less than a travesty for a powerful 24-hour cable news channel to pretend to be a reputable source for objective reporting.

To be fair to Murdoch, he has made no public secret of his wish to balance what he perceives to be the liberal bias of such media outlets as CNN, CBS News, and the *New York Times*, but none of these sources of news employ the crass, manipulative distortions employed by Fox News Channel. The one example, perhaps, is the story on CBS' *60 Minutes* program in which famed anchor Dan Rather delivered a story purporting to show documents proving

George W. Bush had illegally avoided military service during Vietnam. It was subsequently determined that the documents may have been forged, and not properly vetted in a rush to air the story in time to affect the 2004 presidential election. The resulting scandal led to Rather's early retirement. These sorts of incidents, however, are few and far between in comparison to Fox News Channel's regular journalistic transgressions.

In forming Fox News, what Murdoch may have reacted against - legitimately — is the irrefutable fact that most journalists are left-leaning in their personal political views. 1997, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) surveyed over 1, 000 journalists, asking What is your political leaning? The results? 61% said Democrat or liberal-leaning; 15% said conservative or Republican-leaning, and the rest identified themselves as independents or centrists. Not only that, but the proportion of journalists identifying themselves as conservative or Republican-leaning had declined 7% since the survey was first taken in 1988, whereas the liberal-leaning/Democratic statistic was unchanged. Is it possible for these 61% to not consciously or unconsciously let their personal views affect the way in which they report the news?

The political proportions found in the ASNE rather closely resemble the political proportions of the guests on Fox News Channel, except in reverse. Nobody can say whether this is a coincidence or not, but Murdoch's formula is certainly enjoying a considerable amount of success. Fox News' ratings are even eclipsing those of longtime cable news giant CNN:

[As of March 2, 2005] FNC averaged 1.57 million viewers in primetime, up 18 percent from the same period last year, while CNN fell 21 percent to 637,000 viewers from the same time period. The growth appeared across the board at Fox News: *On the Record With Greta Van Susteren* up 37 percent; *Hannity & Colmes* up 19 percent; *Special Report With Brit Hume* up 20 percent; and "The O'Reilly Factor," up 9 percent. (WorldNetDaily, 2005)

Clearly there is a hunger for what Fox News is peddling, whether it be garbage or truly fair and balanced.

The real question is why Murdoch and Roger Ailes aren't simply calling Fox News exactly what it is: an unashamedly biased and partisan source of conservative propaganda. What, indeed, is wrong with bias as long as there are a fair number of balanced outlets available for people to choose from? As alluded to before, Murdoch and Ailes are perfectly entitled to program their cable channel any way they care to; it is within their First Amendment right to do so. However, given the fact that millions of people tune in to Fox News, in many cases solely to Fox News, to become informed, it is a travesty of journalism that Murdoch and Ailes aren't being honest about what their channel is peddling. If they were to claim that CBS and the *New York Times* are not honest about the liberal slant of their journalistic wares, then the challenge for Fox News is to one-up its rivals in integrity by being honest about what it is. Until such time, as they do, they are the ultimate example of media bias; they are not a cure for the problem, but a mutation of a terrible virus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

<https://assignbuster.com/concepts-of-bias-in-the-media/>

- Cline, Dr. Andrew R. Media / Political Bias, University of Missouri, 2005.
- Lee, Christopher. Administration Rejects Ruling on PR Videos, *Washington Post* , March 14, 2005.
- Miner, Barbara. Randall Terry Resurfaces: Christian Right Jumps into Terri Schiavo Fray *In These Times* , November 24, 2003.
- *Outfoxed* , documentary produced and directed by Robert Greenwald, Carolina Productions / MoveOn. org / The Disinformation Company, 2004
- American Society of Newspaper Editors Survey, 1997. Available from:
- <http://www.asne.org/kiosk/reports/97reports/journalists90s/survey19.html>
- CNN Tanking as Fox News Surges, *WorldNetDaily*, March 2, 2005