

A proposal of a more  
balanced media diet  
and an analysis of  
public media  
percepti...



In America a new political uproar has risen from the ranks of the poor and middle class. There is now a huge political divide between the left and the right, also called the Democrats and Republicans or the Liberals and Conservatives. This divide has caused hostility between politicians and, as one politician describes them, “fake news” sources, as both sides try to appeal to their base or core audience, listeners, voters, or supporters. The distrust of the media is not a new thing though. As the world has transitioned from a traditional media intake to an online or digital media intake the public perception of media sources that, to them, have a bias or a disagreeing platform or opinion has drastically fallen. Now, more than ever, the news an individual gathers is often self-serving to their own political position and the already conceived ideals they stand by. Many of those same people will perceive a media bias in a media outlet of opposing ideas but not in their own source of choice. This act of partisanship is harmful to conversation that tries to “cross the aisle” so to speak and merely repeats what is already believed. This constant intake of self-affirming information only feeds one’s own thoughts. This essay will analyze current media bias and how it effects public perception as well as how these media sources push their agenda or bias; additionally, a proposal of a more balanced media consumption will be introduced.

To understand how a perceived media bias or agenda is created one must understand the types of biases the media uses to push their ideals or to generate reader increase. There are three types of media biases: Visibility, Tonality, and Agenda (Eberl 1128). There are many different names for these bias’s but are almost always referring to the same thing. Visibility bias is a “

bias in a medium when a political actor is the subject of an undue amount of coverage compared to other actors and other outlets” (Eberl 1128). An easy example to relate to would be the 2015-2016 Presidential race. During party primaries the current president, Donald Trump, received an unprecedented amount of media coverage for what was perceived at the time as a “ joke” bid. Trump brought high traffic to the news sources due to his strange approach to the presidential campaign. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic primary winner, also was chosen by the media to be a featured guest on daily headlines. These two polarizing candidates almost entirely overshadowed the rest of the field in the media climate and neither were close to being challenged by their party mates. High amounts of coverage for only particular candidates can be bad for the voter. The visibility of a candidate directly effects their chances to be liked by the public and also accrue a following amongst the public. Not only this, but the “ more visible a party is in voters’ media repertoire, the higher their preference for that party” (Eberl 1128). Meaning that the more a voter sees and hears about a party from their preferred news source the more likely that person takes a liking to that party. Next, there is tonality bias. Tonality bias is referred to as, “ whether evaluations present in media coverage are systematically more favorable to one political party compared to other parties” (Eberl 1128). Doing this allows an outlet to paint individuals as comparatively “ good” or “ bad” to one another so that they can push their agenda, whatever that may be. While visibility bias is almost entirely quantifiable, tonality bias is much harder to measure. Tonality bias is a powerful tool of the media because it directly effects the evaluation of a party/candidate by a voter. Often times traditional news sources are where listeners get their political ideas and their

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ideals are now shifted to the side that the media source prefers. Agenda bias is “ the extent to which political actors appear in the public domain in conjunction with the topics they wish to emphasize” (Eberl 1128). More simply put, agenda bias is when an actor in the political scene, whether that is a senator, representative, or presidential candidate, is given the ability to present their ideas, platforms, or other issues. Agenda bias happens because every delegate wants to appeal to voters. Along with that, every media source has their own beliefs, platforms, or ideas about the economy, religion, drugs, etc.; because of this, the news source is subliminally suggesting to the voter what topics are of importance. Knowing this, it can be assumed that the success of a candidate or party is largely based on if that candidate or party’s platform is in line with the media source that is doing the questioning or interview. Therefore, voter’s opinion of a candidate or party is directly related to the media sources they use (Eberl 1129).

With an understanding of media bias and how it works, it is easy to see how the public has grown to mistrust the media. During the 2012 presidential election it was reported that:

Traditional media lost ground to online sources. Moreover, Obama supporters spent more time with liberal media, Romney backers with conservative media, and regardless of support, attention to neutral media increased. Respondents who thought the media were biased against Obama spent less time with conservative media and more with liberal ones and neutral CNN, while those who judged the media as hostile to Romney spent little time with liberal and neutral media (Kaye 1).

This is important because journalists for so long were regarded as the bridge between politics and citizens. This bridge did its best to not veer too far left nor too far right and provide a neutral or objective synopsis of whatever topic at hand. Voters are now moving away from traditional media and towards alternative news sources. These news sources can be anything from online news forums, podcasts, blogs, or video platforms. These different news alternatives are citizen run and allow the everyday voter to now be involved in the creation of news stories and discussions. With so many ways to attain their information, voters tend to avoid all sources of that are not in line to their own political view and only visit outlets that confirm what they already thought, often referred to as an “echo-chamber”. According to Alberto Ardevol-Abreu’s (2017) research, “In the United States, this reinforcing media space has been dubbed the “echo chamber” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). News media such as Fox News, the Wall Street Journal editorial page, or Limbaugh’s talk radio show create shared opinion environments where the messages from conservative political elites (i. e., the Republican Party) are magnified and “echoed,” while alternative or competing interpretations are silenced” (708). One such popular echo-chamber is on the popular website Reddit in the form of the subreddit, or group, called The\_Donald. This subreddit is a place that worships the ideas of the current sitting President and features popular posts defending Alabama Judge Roy Moore, an accused sexual abuser, of no wrong doing and blames the accuser of being a liar. A classic example of victim blaming, akin to comments such as “she had it coming, look at how she is dressed!”. Other posts make attempts to defraud our previous President and exclaim that he was not a citizen of this country. A lie started and propagated by the current

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sitting President. Sources of media like this exacerbate the partisan divide that was created by the traditional media and creates a larger distrust in traditional media because an alternative source provides every idea that is reinforcing the voters own. This is problematic because the information the voters rely on is now not produced by journalists or ran through stringent checks to ensure accuracy of the information. Any person can write a piece of news, fake or real, and someone will believe it and add it into their political mindsight with no further research or thought. The information is accepted as fact and is damning to the core philosophies behind the profession of journalism. Journalists for so long were considered the cornerstone of democracy and were expected to follow the principles of objectivity, fairness, and clear separation of information and opinion. Journalism is now changing due to the rise of the internet and the crisis among traditional media (Abreu 2017, 704). Citizen journalism may challenge the norms of traditional media; but, as stated above, citizen journalism does not have to adhere to the unwritten standards that most traditional media follows.

Generally, in the past, the flow of information from the media to the audience left little to no room for audience interaction with the story. Now that almost all individuals have access to the internet, this has drastically changed. Abreu says (2017), “ the relationship of traditional and citizen news is at an intersect in the most volatile place in current society, social media” (705). Audiences can now openly interact with their favorite, or least favorite, journalists on public forums, such as Twitter. Here, Journalists can work to persuade audiences and further their affirmative initiative with their

base. Not only do audience members get their views affirmed on the television, now they are getting directly and personally affirmed by the journalist themselves. Studies show that individuals who interact directly with journalists have less of a perceived bias of that journalist's news platform. Places on the internet, such as Twitter, are also important because they act as a sort of town-hall meeting space for the world. Any person's idea can be put up for discussion, whether it is good or not. The rest of the "town-hall" is then open to discuss what that person just proposed and this cycle continues over and over and over, ad infinitum. This creates a personal relationship with the news and the individual (Zúñiga 2018).

This rise in social media interaction and citizen journalism has contributed to the emergence of what is referred to as the "Fifth Estate". According to Abreu (2017), "The "Fifth Estate" is an emergent, non-physical institution built on "networked individuals" with the ability to access and share information from a variety of alternative sources, thereby opening "new ways of increasing the accountability of politicians, press, experts and other loci of power" (705). In short, it is the creation of alternate pathways to gain information that are not created by the news institutions. As already stated, social media and citizen journalism such as blogs are the entirety of the Fifth Estate, but why has such an area of media consumption arisen organically? According to a study by Smith & Son, the trust in the media has fallen from 28.3% to 8.8% since 1976 (Abreu 2017, 707). The Pew Research Center also says that, in 2012, 37% of Americans stated that there was great deal of bias in the news, while 30% said there was a fair amount of bias (Abreu 2017, 707). While the concept of media bias does not have a definitive

definition, audiences perceive it based on whether or not they think a story is true or not, regardless of the facts presented. It is complicated to pinpoint media bias because much of it's ties to the psychology of the audience and that the emotions and personal attitudes are almost entirely the basis of perceived bias and not content. This creates a fragmented media where the divisions between party lines and what is or is not "fake news" are largely visible to all. Fox News hates liberals. MSNBC hates conservatives. These are the emotions that audiences are feeling instead of actually absorbing the facts that presented to them, no matter the source. Abreu states (2017) that, "individuals who have a less perceivable bias tend to consume news from CNN and individuals with a heavier bias are more likely to consume Fox News" (709). Abreu (2017) also says that trust in traditional media does not predict one's consumption of any sort of media, whether that traditional, citizen, or social media, the only certain thing is that a negative bias towards any media source produces a decreased consumption of that media source (717).

The cause for this negative bias could be any one thing, or a combination of several things. The most important factor is the wide availability of all information in such a digital world. Any one person can find any piece of information they want, and it is merely a sentence on Google away. This widespread globalization of data leads individuals to seek out safe spaces, or echo chambers, that affirm their ideas and they only continue to feed these ideas. Clay Johnson, author of *The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption*, details this with a simple analogy. Information is food, and America is a gluttonous society. All day, every day, Americans consume



whatever they want, whenever they want with no regard of the impact it is making on their own health and society's health. Johnson says that whenever we read something, such as the latest post about the Kardashians, we are voting with our "click" and showing the media companies that this is the information we, as consumers, want. This form of information is the equivalent to fast food. It lacks in all nutritional areas. Johnson also says that when an individual only seeks out what makes them feel good, it degrades their self. Too much of anything is bad. Too much information from one source only causes an individual to have thoughts from one source. One can't have their own thoughts if all of their thoughts are from one place, because then that person is just that source and not a unique entity. This is why a varied media menu is essential to good health. It allows for a person to better explain the beliefs they hold and allows a person to more concisely explain why they feel that way, using examples from multiple sources instead of one source. A varied media diet, just as in food, can only help one to feel better.

As society transitions into what is referred to as the "Fifth Estate", the divide between traditional, citizen, and social media is only growing. This is mostly due to a growing distrust in traditional media throughout the last 40 years. More and more citizens see media as biased in one way or the other and condition themselves to inherently distrust that media source, no matter the content that the source is creating. This unjust perception creates an us versus them mentality and a hostile news and political atmosphere. Not only is it bad for society, it is bad for individuals. Any one person can seek out information that only affirms their already predisposed ideas and not ideas

that challenge their own. This results in a gluttonous media intake.

Individuals keep consuming more and more and more of what they only want to hear, instead of the actual facts of the situation. A more balanced media consumption not only helps the individual, but also tells the media that consumers are well informed and choose information that is factual, objective, and complete. If audiences continue on this path of self-affirmation, society will only continue to be further divided and hostile to one another.

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