

<http://rhetorica.net/bias.htm>

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## Media / Political Bias

There is no such thing as an objective point of view.

A journalist attempts to be objective by two methods: 1) fairness to those concerned with the news and 2) a professional process of information gathering that seeks fairness, completeness, and accuracy. As we all know, the ethical heights journalists set for themselves are not always reached. But, all in all, like politics, it is an honorable profession practiced, for the most part, by people trying to do the right thing.

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. We may begin to reflect upon journalistic practice by noticing that the press applies a narrative structure to ambiguous events in order to create a coherent and causal sense of events.

For citizens and information consumers (which are one in the same today), it is important to develop the skill of detecting bias.

### Bias in the news media

One of the best approaches to studying bias in journalism is to look at its inherent, or **structural**, biases as a professional practice—especially as mediated through television. A more accepted, and perhaps more accurate, term than *bias* would be *frame*. These are some of the professional frames that structure what journalists can see and how they can present what they see.

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.

6. **Status Quo bias:** The news media believe “the system works.” The mainstream news media never question the structure of the political system. Our way is the only way, politically and socially. In fact, our 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.
7. **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.
8. **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.
9. **Glory bias:** Journalists, especially television reporters, often insert 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.

### **News media assumptions about language**

Simply communicating by written or spoken words introduces bias to the message. If, as asserted earlier, there is no such thing as an objective point of view, then there cannot be objective or transparent language, i.e. a one-to-one correspondence between reality and words such that I may accurately represent reality so that you experience it as I do. Language mediates our lived experiences. And our evaluation of those experiences are reflected in our language use. Language cannot be neutral; it reflects and structures our ideologies and world views. To speak at all is to speak politically. The practice of journalism, however, accepts a very different view of language that creates serious consequences for the news consumer. Most journalists do their jobs with little or no thought given to language theory, i.e. how language works and how

humans use language. Most journalists, consciously or not, accept a theory of language as a transparent conduit along which word-ideas are easily sent to a reader or viewer who then experiences reality as portrayed by the words.

From George Lakoff's *Moral Politics* (U of Chicago P), journalism **falsely** asserts that:

1. **Concepts are literal and nonpartisan:** The standard six-question rubric of journalism (who, what, when, where, why, how) cannot capture the complexity of issues as seen through, and expressed by, the incompatible moral systems of liberals and conservatives.
2. **Language use is neutral:** "Language is associated with a conceptual system. To use the language of a moral or political conceptual system is to use and to reinforce that conceptual system."
3. **News can be reported in neutral terms:** Not if #2 is correct. To choose a discourse is to choose a position. To attempt neutrality confuses the political concepts. Is it an "inheritance tax" or a "death tax"? What could possibly be a neutral term? To use both in the name of balance is confusing because most news articles don't have the space, and most TV treatments don't have the time, to fully explain the terms and why liberals prefer one and conservatives prefer the other. There's no time or space to explain why this language difference matters (beyond political tactics) to the formation, implementation, and evaluation of policy.
4. **Mere use of language cannot put anyone at a disadvantage:** Again, see #2.
5. **All readers and viewers share the same conceptual system:** We share the same English language, i.e. its grammar. We often do not share dialects or the denotations and connotations of concepts, lived experience, and ideologies. The statement "I am a patriotic American" means something entirely different to liberals and conservatives. That difference is more than a matter of connotation. The differences in connotation spring from different moral constructs. What the conservative means by that statement appears immoral to the liberal and vice versa.

These false assumptions by journalists, rather than overt politicking, help create the political bias news consumers often detect in news reporting. A conservative will quite naturally assert a conservative world view by using concepts in ways comfortable to conservatives. The same goes for liberals. However, the ethics of journalistic practice strongly urge reporters to adopt the assumptions about language listed above and the structural biases listed above. The ethics of journalistic practice encourage journalists to adopt a (nonexistent) neutral language to mitigate any effects of ideological bias. There simply is no concerted or sustained effort to slant the news for political purposes by mainstream news outlets.