

THE MEDIA & BIAS

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN OBJECTIVE POINT OF VIEW

A journalist attempts to be objective by two methods: fairness to those concerned with the news and a professional process of information gathering that seeks fairness, completeness, and accuracy

The press is often thought of as a unified voice with a distinct bias (usually right or left leaning)

This simplistic thinking is hardly useful in coming to a better understanding of what is happening in the world.

The press applies a narrative structure to ambiguous events in order to create a coherent and causal sense of events.

STRUCTURAL BIASES IN JOURNALISM

Commercial bias:

The news media are money-making businesses.

- 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 because conflict draws readers and viewers.

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.



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, or is simply boring.

Bad news bias:

Good news is boring (and probably does not photograph well, either).

- 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.

Narrative bias:

The news media cover the news in terms of “stories” that must have 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, which often leads journalists to 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.

Fairness Bias

One of the hallmarks of journalistic objectivity is fairness. So much so that the search for balance sometimes results in a sort of faux conflict.

- The result is that if someone presents a viewpoint in a news story, editors and journalists are literally compelled to dig up an opposing viewpoint in the name of balance, regardless whether the opposing point of view is needed or even logical.
- This compulsion for fairness has resulted in a conflict-driven media filled with pundits from opposing sides literally shouting each other down in the name of balance.
- Structural Biases in Journalism
- This sort of balance game can literally create an illusion of legitimacy for a viewpoint that isn't warranted.



- 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.
- 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 and you create a bias toward information that can be obtained quickly, easily, and inexpensively.
- The result is the hurried call to a veteran “expert” or official for a pithy quote or opinion in a hurry. Well-known sources become regulars on talk shows, or are often quoted in news stories—



[Gerald Rivera](#)

as much because they can be accessed quickly as for the validity of their opinions.

- Much of deadline decision making comes down to gathering information that is readily available from sources that are well known.

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 AND DISCOURSE

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.

Anti-bias crusading as an elitist practice: (From George Lakoff’s Moral Politics)

Journalism falsely asserts that:

- **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.
- **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.

- **News can be reported in neutral terms**

- To attempt neutrality confuses the political concepts.
- Is it an “inheritance tax” or a “death tax”? What could possibly be a neutral term?
- There’s no time or space to explain why this language difference matters (beyond political tactics) to the formation, implementation, and evaluation of policy.

- **We share the same English language, i.e. its grammar.**

- However, 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.

The Moral?

- Journalists must recognize their biases, personal, professional, and structural (built into the industry in which they work).
- They must strive to overcome these biases if we are to have a press that is truly representative of the totality of the people it represents.

*If you don't read the newspaper,
you are uninformed; if you do
read the newspaper, you are
misinformed.*

Mark Twain

