The Narrative of the News

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Media bias has been a much-discussed topic as of late, especially given the recent election and the subsequent aftermath. During the election, the media frenzy surrounding various scandals regarding the candidates- for example, the FBI has investigated both of them in the last several months- and the actions of President Trump and his administration has only grown, and with it, discussions of media bias. It includes the bias, real or perceived, within media outlets in regard to the stories they report on. It implies that the report is not objective and is instead tainted by the organization’s political stances and viewpoints. When a news source is unable to report on events and include only facts, untainted by opinions of one side or the other, it shows that this source has another agenda besides simply reporting the news. Though unbiased news is obviously an ideal to strive for, it is something that is incredibly difficult to achieve. The neutrality of news outlets is limited by several factors, making it hard to report on worldly events without any sort of biased tone. It is undeniably impossible to report on every event that happens everywhere all the time, so media corporations need to pick and choose which ones to report on, which can indicate biased reporting. If a news outlet reports more often on events that favor one politician and cast an unflattering light on another because they are only able to report one so many stories, a bias can emerge. Not all biases are political ones, though. Other biases are driven by the market- the views of everyone from the intended audience to the advertisers to the owners of the company can influence the stories that a news outlet reports on and the tone with which they do. It can be much more profitable for a media station to favor one viewpoint over another because many companies are interested in furthering political agendas that will prove favorable for them. If advertisers do not have the added bonus of supporting a station that will promote their interests, they will obviously be less likely to put money into that station. In some countries, extreme government censorship can influence media bias when certain topics are forbidden to report on by the government. In North Korea, for example, media access for foreign outlets is extremely restricted. Foreign journalists are rarely allowed into the country and local journalists are incredibly restricted on what they can and cannot report on. The majority of information that comes from North Korea comes from either defectors, who are not entirely reliable because they obviously had a reason they defected, or is filtered through South Korea, who has had a long, drawn-out history of conflict with North Korea. So, the information coming in or going out can be distorted. Governmental restrictions have a very heavy effect on the media bias of certain countries. In the United States, media bias occurs when one viewpoint is emphasized over another for the purpose of promoting a certain agenda. Typical claims of media bias in the United States include conservative bias, corporate bias, liberal bias, and mainstream bias. Fortunately, there are several international groups that report bias in various media outlets so readers can know which sources to trust.

In an article published in the *Journal of Communication*, there are three types of media bias listed as the most widely practiced; coverage bias, gatekeeping bias, and statement bias. Coverage bias occurs when members of a population are not covered, creating an undercoverage. When large portions of the population are excluded from data, the coverage can become skewed to an inaccurate demographic (Dalessio, 2000, p. 133). Gatekeeping bias is also known as selectivity bias or agenda bias. With Gatekeeping bias, certain stories are chosen for coverage based on ideological grounds, which sometimes affects the coverage of certain politicians based on their political policy. The third type of bias listed in the article is known as statement bias, or presentation bias. This occurs when media coverage is clearly slanted against or towards certain political players or issues. Other kinds of bias include advertising bias, when certain stories are reported on in the interest of pleasing advertisers, structural bias, when the amount of coverage a particular person or issue receives is based on the popularity of the story rather than the ideology behind the figure or incident, and concision bias, reporting on certain stories because they are widely understood and do not require much time to explain. In addition, corporate bias occurs when the tone of stories is painted to please corporate owners of the media conglomerates; sensationalism, which is bias in favor of extraordinary stories and circumstances rather than everyday occurrences; and mainstream bias, or the habit of reporting the same stories that other outlets are reporting and attempting to avoid stories that are controversial or have the potential to offend anybody (Dalen, 2011, p. 34).

There is a clear difference in the way that certain news outlets report on the same events, especially considering those with a known political bias. Fox News, for one, is known for being very conservative while MSNBC often leans more to the left side of the political spectrum. These two media outlets have the potential to cover the exact same story in entirely different ways. Take, for example, the firing of FBI Director James Comey. Upon the news breaking that President Donald J. Trump firing Director Comey on May 9, 2017, both Fox News and MSNBC immediately began responding to the personnel change live.

Fox News’ report was notably short and sympathetic with the Trump administration. The reporter, John Roberts, seemed to agree that the firing of Director Comey was necessary and justified, calling his time in the Director’s chair a “rocky tenure” (Fox News, 2017, n.p.). The majority of the short report covered the controversy surrounding Director Comey’s handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s email scandal. During this investigation, Director James Comey announced that he did not feel that the email issue required any further investigation. The problem with this is that he did so without the permission or feedback of the Attorney General or Deputy Attorney General, both of whom suggested the firing of Comey in the days before his termination. According to the report by Fox News, in announcing his decision without the authority of the Attorney General or Deputy Attorney General, Comey has, “assumed command of the justice department” (Fox News, 2017, n.p.). John Roberts then went on to read the letter that President Donald J. Trump sent to Comey, informing him that he had been terminated. In reading the very short letter, Roberts’ seemed to suggest that Trump was being incredibly transparent about the whole controversy, even though he did not list a reason behind his decision in the letter. While Roberts did say that the decision to fire Comey was unexpected, he also described it as “rich” (Fox News, 2017, n.p.). The report did not mention once that James Comey had recently requested more money from the government to further investigate the possibility of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. This omission was so surprising that it was noted in other news sources.

The Fox News report was staunchly different from the one done by MSNBC, a news source known for reporting from a liberal viewpoint as opposed to a conservative one. While Fox News’ reporter has some unflattering things to say about Comey’s time spent as the Director of the FBI, MSNBC certainly painted Comey’s legacy in a different light. Rather than describing his tenure as rocky, MSNBC’s reporters stated that Comey’s, “tenure in the job had gotten high marks from members of both parties” (MSNBC, 2017, n.p.). It was reported by the left-leaning outlet that Comey did not have an allegiance to any particular political party and had worked for both; instead, he put country before party and did what he thought was right, not what any specific group wanted him to. During the segment, the news team heard from a senior official of the Federal Bureau who said that no one in the department knew it was coming and that the decision to terminate Director Comey came as a complete surprise. It is worth noting that Fox News also stated that the termination was surprising and unexpected.

There were several notable differences in the way the two sources reported the firing. For example, the way each station described Comey’s time as FBI Director showed a stark contrast. Fox News described his tenure as rocky while MSNBC reported that Comey was consistently popular with both parties. The most notable difference was the way the stations discussed the fact that Comey’s firing came shortly after he requested more money for his investigation into Russia’s involvement in the 2016 presidential election. While MSNBC covered the possible relationship between Comey’s termination and his investigation, Fox News did not mention the investigation at all. MSNBC certainly has a reputation for having a liberal bias, but the way that Fox News blatantly ignored some very troubling circumstances that could implicate our president in a serious offense demonstrated their very strong conservative bias. The tones of the reports were very different as well. While there are not many specific things the audience could point to as evidence of bias, the overall tones of each outlet’s coverage were certainly skewed towards opposite ends of the political spectrum. MSNBC’s report seemed to be more critical of President Donald Trump while Fox News was more sympathetic and supportive. Even when these sources report the same event, the information provided and the way it is presented can show a shocking contrast.

Media bias can also have a troubling effect on election outcomes and public opinion, as demonstrated in a study published in the Journal of Public Economics. The study describes elections as the perfect platform for biased media because many people are allegiant to their political party and prefer news that sheds their party’s candidate in a positive light. This preference for biased news is a danger to reason and educated voting; when a news outlet tends to report strictly on positive things about a specific candidate, viewers may miss important information about said candidate that may be troubling or unsavory. Likewise, it can make it difficult for viewers to hear any positive information on their candidate’s opponents. Any scandals regarding one candidate are likely to be highlighted and extorted by one news source while the same source will ignore or minimize scandals of another candidate. According to the report, even members of the audience that are aware of media bias and attempt to lessen its effects are unable to recover all the lost information (Bernhardt, Krasa, & Polborn 20008, p. 1103). This is such a common occurrence because most voters are loyal to their political party rather than being interested in researching each candidate and then making an educated decision.

The study noted that the public’s willingness to trust in biased news sources is a huge cause of inefficiency in voter choices and electoral outcomes. The effect is unlikely to change anytime soon, even though the general population would undoubtedly benefit from gathering their information from unbiased news sources. Although, it is uncommon for the average voter to make an effort to make an effort to make sure the information they receive is unbiased. Even if voters supported unbiased news sources, it is unlikely that such stations would be able to get adequate funding and sponsors because the political viewpoints of advertisers have a large influence on the content and tone of news reports.

There are several ways readers and audience members can try to avoid bias in the media and ensure that the story they are hearing is based in fact rather than influenced by opinion. One indicator that a source is biased is that they call their readers to perform a certain action. When a news outlet asks tis audience to support or cooperate with a specific cause, that is a sign that the source is operating under a certain bias. Another way to spot a biased media source is exaggerated and inflated, attention-grabbing headlines. When outlets rely on advertising money based on the number of people who click on the article, that can help identify a source that may be heavily influenced by their advertisers and is swayed by their monetary supporters. Another indicator of these kinds of sources that post clickbait rather than consistent facts are those that publish headlines that are written as questions rather than providing information. This is a way to attract readers without having to commit to any definite information. For example, the headline ‘The FBI investigates a possible connection between Russia and the 2016 election’ indicates that the FBI is trying to assess whether the Russian government influenced the election. When posed as a question rather than a statement, presenting the story as ‘Did the Russian government influence the 2016 election outcome?’ leaves it up to speculation as to whether there was a connection and lures people into clicking without having to really provide any accurate information. This standard allows outlets to post articles with titles posing literally any question in the world, no matter the quality of content or absurdity of the article. Another sign that a source may be biased is when an article references a source and simply refers to them as ‘a source’. Saying that ‘a source’ stated something or supports an idea does not demonstrate reliability or accuracy. The undisclosed source could be anything from a public relations agency to a random person on the street.

A fourth way to determine whether a source is biased or not is to consider both sides of the issue being reported on. Playing devil’s advocate can help audience members to consider opinions or views that may not be included in one particular news source. Considering an event from alternative opinions can help expand your understanding and widen your viewpoint. An additional way to do this would be to read or hear about the same incident from various news sources. As an example, watching Fox News’ report of the termination of James Comey in addition to MSNBC’s coverage would provide a better and more accurate representation of the event than one would receive from watching just one of them, regardless of which one it was. Combining information from two separate sources, both of which reside on opposite ends of the political spectrum, can ensure that holes or gaps from either source are filled in with information, though biased, from the other source and provide a more precise depiction. Fifth, considering the author of the article can assist in determining whether a source is reported with or without bias. When a report seems especially opinionated, it can be helpful to consider whether the journalist is reporting in the interest of providing the public with the truth or furthering a specific agenda. Similarly, another consideration that should be questioned is what the motive of the author may be. For example, the book *An Appeal to Reason: A Cool Look at Global Warming* by Nigel Lawson suggests that climate change is not the problem that the vast majority of scientists and researchers make it out to be (Lawson, 2009, n.p.). However, minimal research finds that the author is strongly connected to an organization whose client lists includes major petroleum companies like BP and Shell. It is important, as well, to determine the importance of the event being reported on. As previously stated, it is impossible for a news source to report on everything that ever happens. Therefore, media outlets need to choose which events to cover and which to ignore. When a news source reports primarily on stories that are not very important to the operation and well-being of the public, then it can be assumed that that source is probably not the most reliable, as this demonstrates the previously mentioned sensationalism bias.

Many news outlets make an effort to correct any conceptions of bias that surround them. A common practice is the round table, which is played out in a point/counterpoint model, usually consisting of expressions of opposing views. This is supposed to appear unbiased and allow either side of the argument to be heard, but bias still has the potential to affect the segments. Choosing the representatives of each side, writing the questions to be posed, and editing the report to appear impartial all present an opportunity for bias. When executed improperly, this kind of segment can appear incredibly biased and therefore unreliable. It is not difficult to inspire accusations of a false balance, wherein efforts were taken to appear unbiased while really trying to shed a more favorable light on the agenda of their preference. This is particularly possible when one of the viewpoints on the topic being discussed is taboo or unpopular or when one representative makes assertions that are easily proven false.

An example of this kind of format backfiring on a network came from the former political director of ABC News, Mark Halperin. Halperin sent an email to his staff stating that reporters should not artificially hold the two presidential candidates at the time, George W. Bush and John Kerry, accountable on an equal playing field. The email also stated that, “Kerry distorts, takes out of context, and mistakes all the time, but these are not central to his efforts to win” (Drudge, 2004, n.p.). Halperin stated that Bush’s team was attempting to use what he saw is inconsequential details to assassinate his character rather than winning by merit or policy. His email suggested that Kerry should be cut a little bit of slack when it comes to unfavorable information because Halperin felt that Kerry’s message and goals were much more important than the things he does or says. The release of this email on a conservative site, The Drudge Report, led many Bush supporters to feel that they had actual proof that the media was reporting with political bias. It was seen as evidence that Halperin was using his influence and power at ABC to further Kerry’s political agenda.

In order to make strides towards less-biased media overall, the study has a suggestion for moving away from politically-motivated news reporting. It would be imperative to change the reliance on specific advertisers who are interested in pushing their political agendas (Bernhardt, Krasa, & Polborn 2008, p. 1103). When a media outlet is pressured to adhere to the stances of their monetary sponsors, journalistic integrity is at stake, as is the quality of information that is being offered to the public. News sources should not limit themselves to the political stances of their sponsors, as this can exclude many stories, viewpoints, or occurrences, in addition to greatly contributing to media bias. However, it seems unlikely that the public would seek an unbiased media platform and it would be hard to prevent and regulate advertisers from putting pressure on news outlets to portray certain politicians in favorable or unfavorable ways.

Media bias is not unique to one country or another, nor is it specific to particular issues, though it is certainly more prevalent in the political arena. Any new medium is susceptible to bias, including newspapers, television, and radio. It can be incredibly difficult for a news outlet to appear totally unbiased, as no source can report on everything so they have to choose which ones to cover. There are many kinds of biases that are influenced by a plethora of factors. The media can be swayed by their corporate owners, advertisers, target audience, sensationalism, and even other news sources. While media bias is a very often debated and discussed in the United States, it is also very common. Several news sources, like MSNBC and Fox News, report with a widely known bias; MSNBC is known for having a liberal bias while Fox News is known for reporting with a conservative bias. Though it can be difficult to find unbiased news sources, there are many ways to ensure that our viewpoints are not limited by the bias of any news source, including reading about the same events from news sources with different political alignments and paying particular attention to authors, references, and sponsors. It is important for the public to be aware of media bias and make an effort to ensure that they have all the necessary information required to make educated decisions.

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