

Chapter 10

Media Bias

ABSTRACT

A solution towards media bias would be quite hard since it is somehow part of its culture, but an attempt can be made by allowing watchdog NGO organizations to enforce the law when a breach is in evidence. Then any fine charged should be given to the organization. This way the organization is motivated to continue strict and proper monitoring. An ethical dilemma surfaces when it should never have arisen in democratic society. Give the people truthful and fair accounts of events and be regarded as non-patriotic or defend the country with any means or tactics. Journalistic ethics is most sensitive in situations such as these when disagreement is seen as disloyal. This chapter explores media bias.

INTRODUCTION

Media bias describes the bias of selecting events that will be reported and the way they will be covered by journalists in the mass media. There are several different types of media bias which include: bias by omission, bias by selection of sources, bias by story selection, bias by placement, bias by labeling, and bias by spin. Bias by omission occurs when the media reports selected information, taking only one side of a story instead of both sides; for instance within a story the media omits the events or facts that are unfavorable for its viewpoint (Babylon). Bias by selection of sources happens when more sources are used to defend a certain view against another view, for example by using the phrase “observers believe”. Bias by story selection is the selection of stories by the media (newspaper, TV channel, radio etc...) that

would suit its standpoint or agenda. For example if a channel was known to be on the conservative’s side it would select the positive stories about the conservatives display them leaving out the positive stories of the liberal’s side. Bias by placement is the degree by which the editor of a story places importance on it, for example if a story is considered important for the editor she/he is more likely to place the story on the first page of the magazine or at the beginning of the TV news. Bias by labeling occurs when a certain group is placed under a label for example in most western countries Arabs are labeled as terrorists. Bias by spin takes place when a story only has one side but depending on the way the reporter reports it, his/her tone of voice, the viewers will have a certain preference to the story, for instance if the reporter says the story in a sarcastic way the viewer is more inclined not to take it seriously.

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BACKGROUND

The Oxford dictionary defines bias as the “inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair”. That being said, media bias can have catastrophic psychological and economic repercussions due to the wide dissemination of different media outlets and the heavy reliance of the majority of consumers on the information provided by these outlets. Sendhil Mullainathan and Andrei Shleifer sought to dissect the reasons that drive media bias and the consequences that result from this practice. They identified two main reasons for media bias: ideological, and the “need to tell a memorable story”. The first reason behind media bias (i.e. ideology) stems from the editor or the reporter’s desire to influence audience into adopting a certain opinion or belief system. On the other hand, the second reason behind media bias (i.e. spinning the story) has no hidden political agendas and simply exists to liven up or create a story that would be worth telling in the views of the editors or reporters of a certain media outlet (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). However, David P. Baron adds one supplementary cause of media bias to the previously mentioned two and that is reporter greed. In fact, Baron explains in an article published in 2006 that if reporters or journalists gather information through independent investigation and believe that skewing, manipulating or misrepresenting this information might aid in their career advancement then these journalists might be inclined to act unethically and bias their findings to serve their own personal purposes (Baron, 2006). As an example to this point, Matthew Gentzkow published an article in 2005 and in it he showcased how three different media outlets reported on the same event (a military battle in Samarra, Iraq during the U.S-led invasion in 2003). The three media outlets included in the article

were Fox News (a conservative American media outlet), the New York Times (a liberal American media outlet), as well as AlJazeera (a prominent Arab media outlet). It comes as no surprise that these ideologically differing media outlets gave very varying accounts of the events of that battle. This example goes to show ideology can affect the accuracy of media coverage and thus create bias.

A myriad of research articles has been published seeking to define and explain how people perceive and react to biased media. One of these articles is one written by Matthew Gentzkow in 2005. In it Gentzkow remarked that a consumer “who is uncertain about the quality of an information source will infer that the source is of higher quality when its reports conform to the consumer’s prior expectations”. According to the same article, media bias occurs by “selective omission, choice of words, and varying credibility ascribed to the primary source” (Gentzkow, 2005). Similarly, recent studies have shown that consumers want to read (watch) news that is consistent with their tastes or prior beliefs rather than the truth” (Xi Liang & Savary, 2007). In congruence with this affirmation, Simon Anderson and John McLaren state that media owners and editors of media outlets often have personal political agendas and may choose to manipulate and withhold certain information from the public in order to shape public opinion to their own personal advantage (Anderson & McLaren, 2012). This is particularly dangerous because the same paper uncovered that even rational consumers who have prior knowledge of the editor’s ideology and political agenda may be deceived by this biased coverage of the news due to the fact that the general public does not know how much actual information the media outlet has and thus is oblivious to how much is being withheld (Anderson & McLaren, 2012). Another reason why bias could be particularly harmful is that it is “persistent” in the minds

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