

Media / Political Bias

*all text from rhetorica.net/bias.htm
Andrew R. Cline, Ph.D.*

Rhetorica

There is no such thing as an objective point of view

No matter how much we may try to ignore it, human communication always takes place in a context, through a medium, and among individuals and groups who are situated historically, politically, economically, and socially. This state of affairs is neither bad nor good. It simply is. Bias is a small word that identifies the collective influences of the entire context of a message.

Politicians are certainly biased and overtly so. They belong to parties and espouse policies and ideologies. And while they may think their individual ideologies are simply common sense, they understand that they speak from political positions.

Journalists, too, speak from political positions but usually not overtly so. The journalistic ethics of objectivity and fairness are strong influences on the profession. But journalistic objectivity is not the pristine objectivity of philosophy. Instead, 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. I believe journalism is an under-theorized practice. In other words, journalists often do what they do without reflecting upon the meaning of the premises and assumptions that support their practice. I say this as a former journalist. I think 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. Remember: Bias does not suggest that a message is false or unfair.

Structural Bias as Theory

I have asserted that some critics of the press think of it as speaking with a unified voice with a distinct ideological bias. I have further asserted that 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. For that better understanding we need a theory.

A theory offers us a model that tells us why things happen as they do. Further, a theory allows us to predict outcomes and behavior. Assertions of ideological bias do neither. While we can expect the press to demonstrate ideological biases in regard to certain issues or other localized phenomena, these and other behaviors are explained and predicted by the structural biases. Since the press sometimes demonstrates a conservative bias, asserting that the press is liberal neither predicts nor explains. Since the press sometimes demonstrates a liberal bias, asserting that the press is conservative neither predicts nor explains.

Test this for yourself. Choose a situation that is current--preferably breaking right now. For each of the structural biases listed above, write down what you would expect the press to do based on that bias. Then, complete the exercise with a concluding statement that takes into account as many of the structural biases as possible. Now, follow the situation for a few days and note how the press behaves. I think you will find that you have successfully predicted press behavior.

News media assumptions about language and discourse

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. Rhetoric scholar James A. Berlin once said that language is "never innocent." By this he meant that 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 (metaphor) 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. It is often pointed out that most news reporters are Democrats or vote for Democrats. Party affiliation, however, tells us nothing about political ideology and the moral concepts that undergird it. There are conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. Be that as it may, 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.