

# Sensationalism

*For the philosophical doctrine of the theory of knowledge, see Sensualism.*

**Sensationalism** is a type of editorial bias in mass media in which events and topics in news stories and pieces are overhyped to present biased impressions on events, which may cause a manipulation to the truth of a story.<sup>[1]</sup> Sensationalism may include reporting about generally insignificant matters and events that do not influence overall society and biased presentations of newsworthy topics in a trivial or tabloid manner contrary to the standards of professional journalism.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

Some tactics include being deliberately obtuse,<sup>[4]</sup> appealing to emotions,<sup>[5]</sup> being controversial, intentionally omitting facts and information,<sup>[6]</sup> being loud and self-centered and acting to obtain attention.<sup>[5]</sup> Trivial information and events are sometimes misrepresented and exaggerated as important or significant and often include stories about the actions of individuals and small groups of people,<sup>[1]</sup> the content of which is often insignificant and irrelevant relative to the macro-level day-to-day events that occur globally. Furthermore, the content and subject matter typically affect neither the lives of the masses<sup>[1]</sup> nor society and instead is broadcast and printed to attract viewers and readers.<sup>[1]</sup> Examples include press coverage about the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal,<sup>[1][7][8]</sup> Casey Anthony Trial,<sup>[1][9]</sup> Tonya Harding's role in the attack of Nancy Kerrigan,<sup>[1][10]</sup> the Elian Gonzalez affair<sup>[1][11]</sup> and the O.J. Simpson murder case.<sup>[1][12]</sup>

## In mass media

One presumed goal of sensational reporting is to increase or sustain viewership or readership, from which media outlets can price their advertising higher to increase their profits based on higher numbers of viewers and/or readers.<sup>[13][14]</sup> Sometimes this can lead to a lesser focus on objective journalism in favor of a profit motive,<sup>[15]</sup> in which editorial choices are based upon sensational stories and presentations to increase advertising revenue.<sup>[15]</sup> Additionally, advertisers tend to have a preference for their products or services to be reported positively in mass media, which can contribute to bias in news reporting in favor of media outlets protecting

## Journalism



News · Writing style · Ethics · Objectivity ·  
News values · Attribution · Defamation ·  
Editorial independence · Journalism school ·  
Index of journalism articles

### Areas

Arts · Business · Data · Entertainment ·  
Environment · Fashion · Medicine · Politics ·  
Science · Sports · Technology · Trade · Traffic ·  
Weather · World

### Genres

Advocacy · Analytic · Blogging · Broadcast ·  
Citizen · Civic · Collaborative · Comics-based ·  
Community · Data · Database · Gonzo ·  
Immersion · Investigative · Literary · Muckraking  
· Narrative · "New Journalism" · Non-profit ·  
Online · Opinion · Peace · Photojournalism ·  
Scientific · Sensor · Underground · Visual ·  
Watchdog

### Social impact

Fourth Estate · Fifth Estate · Freedom of the press  
· Infotainment · Media bias · Public relations ·  
Press service · Propaganda model ·  
Yellow journalism

### News media

Newspapers · Magazines · TV and radio · Internet  
· News agencies · Alternative media

### Roles

Journalists (reporters) · Columnist · Blogger ·  
Editor · Copy editor · Meteorologist ·  
News presenter · Photographer ·  
Pundit / commentator

their profits and revenues, rather than reporting objectively about stated products and services.<sup>[14][16]</sup>

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**Category: Journalism**

However, newspapers have a duty to report and investigate stories related to political corruption. Such investigative journalism is right and proper when it is backed up with documents, interviews with responsible witnesses, and other primary sources. Journalists and editors are often accused of sensationalizing scandals by those whose public image is harmed by the legitimate reporting of the scandal. News organizations are not obliged to (and are often ethically obliged *not* to) avoid stories that might make local, state and national public figures uncomfortable. Occasionally, news organizations mistakenly relay false information from unreliable anonymous sources, who use mass media as a tool for retaliation, defamation, victim and witness tampering, and monetary or personal gain. Therefore, any story based on sources who may be reasonably assumed to be motivated to act in this way is best interpreted with critical thinking.

In extreme cases, mass media may report only information that makes a "good story" without regard for factual accuracy or social relevance. It has been argued that the distrust in government that showed in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal created a new business tactic for the media and resulted in the spread of negative, dishonest and misleading news coverage of American politics;<sup>[15][17]</sup> such examples include the labeling of a large number of political scandals, regardless of their importance, with the suffix "-gate".<sup>[17]</sup> Such stories are often perceived (rightly or wrongly) as politically partisan or biased towards or against a group or individual because of the sensational nature in which they are reported. A media piece may report on a political figure in a biased way or present one side of an issue while deriding another. It may include sensational aspects such as zealots, doomsayers and/or junk science. Complex subjects and affairs are often subject to sensationalism. Exciting and emotionally charged aspects can be drawn out without providing the elements needed (such as pertinent background, investigative, or contextual information) for the audience to form its own opinions on the subject.

Mass media occasionally uses a comedic website as a source, then mistakenly relays the joke as news, without any factual checks. One widely reported example involved *The Onion*'s story on Harry Potter.<sup>[18][19]</sup>

## History

In *A History of News*, author Mitchell Stephens (professor of journalism and mass communication at New York University)<sup>[2]</sup> notes sensationalism can be found in the Ancient Roman *Acta Diurna* (official notices and announcements which were presented daily on public message boards, the perceived content of which spread with enthusiasm in illiterate societies).<sup>[2]</sup> Sensationalism was used in books of the 16th and 17th century, to teach moral lessons. According to Stevens, sensationalism brought the news to a new audience when it became aimed at the lower class, who had less of a need to accurately understand politics and the economy, to occupy them in other matters. Through sensationalism, he claims, the audience was further educated and encouraged to take more interest in the news.<sup>[2]</sup>

## In broadcasting

Sensationalism is often blamed for the infotainment style of many news programs on radio and television.<sup>[2]</sup> According to sociologist John Thompson, the debate of sensationalism used in the mass medium of broadcasting is based on a misunderstanding of its audience, especially the television audience. Thompson explains that the term 'mass' (which is connected to broadcasting) suggests a 'vast audience of many thousands,

even millions of passive individuals'.<sup>[3]</sup> Television news is restricted to showing the scenes of crimes rather than the crime itself because of the unpredictability of events, whereas newspaper writers can always recall what they did not witness.<sup>[2]</sup> Television news writers have room for fewer words than their newspaper counterparts. Their stories are measured in seconds, not column inches, and thus (even with footage) television stories are inherently shallower than most newspaper stories, using shorter words and familiar idioms to express ideas which a newspaper writer is more free to expand upon and define with precision.

## See also

- Agnotology, the study of culturally-induced ignorance or doubt
- Betteridge's Law of Headlines
- CNN effect
- Censorship
- Clickbait
- Culture of fear
- Disinformation
- Dumbing down
- Exploitation film
- Infotainment
- Junk food news
- Loaded words
- Man bites dog
- Mean world syndrome
- Media bias in the United States
- Media circus
- Misinformation
- Moral panic
- Profit motive
- Propaganda model, in mass media
- Pulp magazine
- Spin, an interpretation of an event designed to sway public opinion
- Succès de scandale
- Tabloid journalism
- Tabloid
- Trial by media
- Weather wars
- Yellow journalism

## References

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18. ↑ Snopes: Harry Potter Satanism

19. ↑ "Harry Potter Books Spark Rise In Satanism Among Children". *theonion.com*. Archived from the original on 15 August 2000.

External links

- "What's Wrong With the News?" from Fairness & Accuracy In reporting



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Deception	Forms	Advertising · Propaganda · Public relations · Spin · Tabloid journalism
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		Others
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<b>Psychological warfare</b>	Airborne leaflets · False flag · Fifth column · Information (IT) · Lawfare · Political · Public diplomacy · Sedition · Subversion
<b>Public relations</b>	Cult of personality · Doublespeak · Non-apology apology · Reputation management · Slogans · Sound bites · Spin · Transfer ·

	Understatement · Weasel words
<b>Sales</b>	Cold calling · Door-to-door · Phone · Pricing · Product demonstrations · Promotional merchandise · Promotion

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