

**The Influence of Media Sources: How the Media Affects Judgment**

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## Abstract

The ability to trade information at such a large scale has arguably been a pivotal step for the advancement of the human race. However, this same phenomenon has also been a source of tension among different groups that have often resulted in social divide, and at times, physical violence. Accordingly, this paper aims to experimentally gauge peoples' knowledge of and ability to detect the phenomena of bias, which we argue is a cause of the dilemma mentioned above. More specifically, the researchers sought to explore participants' knowledge of bias in general and how external sources of bias may influence the way they think and the judgments they make. The researchers framed their inquiry around how news media outlets disseminate information and utilize biased tactics, like *framing* and *priming*, to influence their viewers. To measure whether or not participants were aware of this phenomenon, researchers deployed an online survey that exposed participants to twelve different news articles containing high, medium, and low levels of bias. Finally, the researchers studied the ability to detect bias among participants by comparing the group that received the treatment vs. the group that did not. Researchers believe that those educated on bias are more likely to have the ability to detect bias and are therefore less likely to be influenced by it. This may have possible implications for improving how information is disseminated and interpreted, which may ultimately improve the way we interact with one another as a society. However, the researchers feel that further research is needed.

*Keywords:* bias, framing, priming, information dissemination, news media outlets, influence, detecting bias

## Introduction

Over the course of time, media has evolved in many ways. The first source of printed text was found in China in the midst of the first millennium A.D. It was then revolutionized by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450, creating the Gutenberg Printing Press (History.com Editors, 2018). Over time as technology advances, media has taken on many forms such as radio, television, and social media. Throughout the history of media, its underlying objectives when presented to the general public have always been present. Since the beginning of media, those in charge of its creation have always held control of how events and their stories have been portrayed. Despite media creators being consciously aware of their influence or not, there is no denying that the framing of media has had an effect on how individuals view and interpret the world around them. In this paper, we will be exploring how the media affects one's judgment of news stories and the events they cover.

The topic of media and framing is important for three reasons. The first is that it gives some insight into the role of judgment and decision-making. Humans tend to think that their actions are a result of their own thoughts and beliefs. To an extent, this is true, however, those thoughts and beliefs are guided by the world around them whether it be friends, family, or even strangers. The majority, if not all, of one's judgments and decisions, is a byproduct of one's environment and consumed media. Second, this study should bring to light the degree to which actions and thoughts are truly genuine. Knowing this will help guide people's actions to be more natural to who they are and how they may actually view the world. Being able to detect bias in the media could assist fields such as cognitive science, political science, and psychology, in classifying different types of biases. Third, this study will be able to expose the power of the media on our judgment, especially surrounding major events such as crime, immigration, and

law-making. Since major events tend to be the ones when the stronger morals tend to appear, it is a good place to start when looking at the effects of the framing of media.

The circulation of biased media has a strong impact on the perception of events that are taking place, therefore influencing one's opinions and beliefs on those events. Media companies portray news with specific frames and priming to persuade the opinions of their audience. This can lead to the use of biased information being circulated through the media. These biases, often undetected by consumers, can influence the opinions and beliefs of the current events being covered.

The media's impact on judgment and the effect that bias has on people's opinions on current events surrounding them has become more widely studied. Broadly, we attempt to explore how framing and priming influence the perception of viewers on events covered in the media. This paper seeks to answer the question specifically of how able people are to perceive different levels of bias in the media when presented with headlines. By testing whether people are able to more easily perceive higher levels of bias in different sources after being educated on what bias is.

In this study we will be distributing a short survey presenting participants with various news article headlines, asking them to determine the amount of bias present in the headline. Note that approximately half of the participants will be receiving the treatment. We hypothesize that when participants are treated with a brief lesson on what bias is, they will provide ratings to headlines with more bias more accurately than those who do not receive the lesson.

## **Background**

### *General Bias*

Bias is the tendency to prefer one thing over another that prevents objectivity, that influences understanding or outcomes in some way (Bell, 2013). It is important to note that bias can be obviously noticeable, overt, or more subtle, covert. Despite our ability to notice bias, it is unavoidable. Bias can be found in any form and in any context. It can come from our friends, colleagues, family, and even strangers. It can even be found in music, advertisements, and television shows. So, it is important to be aware of how bias can appear in the world around us in order to make decisions that truly represent one's own beliefs. There is also biased language that is seen as even or unbalanced in presentation. Different types of bias language include gender bias, racial bias, ethnicity bias, disability bias, and many more.

### *Media Bias*

One may wonder why bias is important or what information dissemination and the media have to do with bias. This section will provide some background information to walk the reader through our study process and what led us to this inquiry. We will also explain key topics like media-based bias, *framing*, *priming*, and possible societal implications that tie into the importance of bias in the media.

Accordingly, sharing information is the basis of both significant progress and tension within our development as a society. Thus, researchers felt it would be interesting to examine the quality of how information is shared, the motives behind how information is shared, and how it affects peoples' beliefs and judgments. Namely, we framed our question around the concept of bias. We opinionated that bias, especially in how information is shared, is a primary influencer of how one thinks and judges at the group and individual levels. Many studies have covered bias starting at the individual level. However, in this study, we amplified our focus to include how

larger groups, like news media platforms, use biased tactics like *priming* and *framing* to influence their readers/viewers into thinking or believing a certain way.

In Robert M. Entman's article "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power", Entman explores how news media is a source of bias for people. Essentially, this article studied how the media uses biased tactics like "framing, priming, and agenda-setting" to influence their viewers. In addition, Entman set out to explore the possible implications these phenomena may have on larger concepts like power, democracy, and the people affected by them (2007, p. 163). The article explains framing and priming functionally and contextually as follows:

*We can define framing as the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation. Framing works to shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through priming. That is, frames introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way. Priming, then, is a name for the goal, the intended effect, of strategic actors' framing activities (2007, p. 164-5) .*

Entman studies how framing and priming are used as "tools of power," and then "connects them to explicit definitions of news slant and the related but distinct phenomenon of bias" (2007, p. 163). *A slant* is a tool that news reporters use to influence viewers to favor one side of a political issue over the other.

The author mentions that since media dissemination is such a widely used platform to transfer knowledge, the manner in which information is passed around could have significant impacts at a micro and macro level. As a result, the author notes that *slant* is an equally important concept since it could have significantly troublesome future implications.

To illustrate, Entman explains that the persistence of media outlets using slant may heavily influence the power of one political group over another. This would be problematic in a government that is supposed to equally and fairly represent the people it is in charge of. Having a one-sided government could allow one group to assert their power over the rest, which would destroy the idea of a government and possibly cause more tension and further chaos (2007, p. 165-6). Entman mentions how such an occurrence could exacerbate long-standing and ongoing issues of '...heterosexism, individualism, consumerism, and [w]hite privilege, among other deeply entrenched values that certainly help allocate power in American society' (2007, p. 170). These arguments may seem theoretical at best, but the article does go on to explain a more precise/mathematical way of measuring the topics mentioned above. However, we will not cover this for the sake of the scope of our study.

Researchers used the concepts from Entman's article to provide an experimental example of the definitions of such concepts. However, these concepts are also meant to help our general audience understand why they were used in our study and how they relate to our original hypothesis. Thus, the reader must understand these concepts before proceeding through the study.

## **Methods**

In this paper, we are attempting to test the ability of participants to identify the bias that is portrayed in the media. The study we used to test our theory consisted of a survey experiment created through Qualtrics online, that was eventually taken online by participants. Participants were from an undergraduate student subject pool at a West Coast University. Each participant was compensated with subject pool credit (that can be used for extra credit in classes) for participation.

In the survey given to participants, a series of twelve (12) news headlines from various sources were displayed in a randomized manner to each participant. The headlines were chosen along with specific topic and type guidelines, where six (6) of the headlines were from liberal news sources, and six (6) were from conservative news sources. Within the ideological typology of the sources, six(6) from each ideology group are on the subject of crime in the United States, while the other six(6) are on the subject of immigration issues in the United States.

For the selection process of the headlines, two researchers were tasked to find six articles each for a total of twelve news articles. The search criteria were centered around the research team's subjective opinion of articles that reflected high, medium, and low bias levels. These articles aimed to provide the participants with real examples of how the media uses bias to influence people. To probe the readers' ability to detect media bias or display their own bias, researchers searched for articles that were on highly salient issues in the United States, such as crime and immigration. For example, we chose immigration because it seems to be a highly discussed topic. In terms of crime specifically, we chose to describe a particular court case that has been prevalent in the media.

The headlines were ranked by the researchers to each have a level of bias, where each topic and ideological grouping contained a low, medium, and highly ranked biased headline. The participants are asked to rank the level of perceived bias for each headline on a Likert scale with seven points. The scale ranged from "Completely Unbiased" to "Completely Biased", with the mid-range point being a neutral ranking.

The specific treatment that we presented participants with was a video giving a brief lesson on what bias is and how to identify it in news sources. This treatment was randomized to half of the participants, and if they were in the treatment group were shown the video prior to



seeing any headlines. This process was to test the ability of individuals to perceive bias in the control group with no formal lesson on what bias looks like, and see if a brief lesson priming people to think about what bias may look like leads to a difference in perceptions among the headlines.

Following the ranking of headlines, both groups were presented with a short series of other questions. These questions asked participants about their information-sharing habits, as well as their likelihood of fact-checking information they find for accuracy. Other questions also included asking participants about where they gain their news and current events information from, and who they are likely to discuss these types of information within their close circles. The survey concludes with a few demographic and political ideology identification questions.

## **Results**

After collecting the data, there were a total of 101 students that completed the survey entirely. All students that did not complete the survey completely, were excluded from the results. From the data that was collected, there was no indication of which participants had the treatment video and which did. Unfortunately, the researchers did not specify the Qualtrics form to record that information. The main goal of the study was to determine how learning about bias could alter one's detection of bias. Since researchers can not determine that correlation, there were still some interesting findings.

Figure 1 is a visual that represents the rating of bias of crime, separated by their low, medium, and high bias ratings, and by the article title category. When it came to rating news articles associated with crime, participants rated both the low and high categories the highest in "Neither Biased or Unbiased" rating. Neither bias or unbiased rating was highest in the low bias category.

Since all the low bias articles are harder to detect, it reflects that participants probably didn't catch the subtle bias in the titles. As for the high bias titles, those articles were chosen as they displayed overt bias. It seems participants couldn't detect the bias in the high bias articles, since neither bias or unbiased was the most picked for the crime high bias article across conservative and liberal news sources.. Additionally, in the high bias article title, the next highest ranked was 'mostly biases'. Meaning, the majority of participants couldn't not detect the overall bias but there were plenty that were able to see how those article titles displayed bias. In medium bias rating, for both liberal and conservative articles, the highest rating for bias was 'somewhat biased'. Since the medium rated articles in both liberal and conservative categories had some bias detection, it begs to question whether the articles the researchers chose for high bias were not as easily detected. Overall, in the crime article titles, it was seen that participants had a harder time detecting bias.

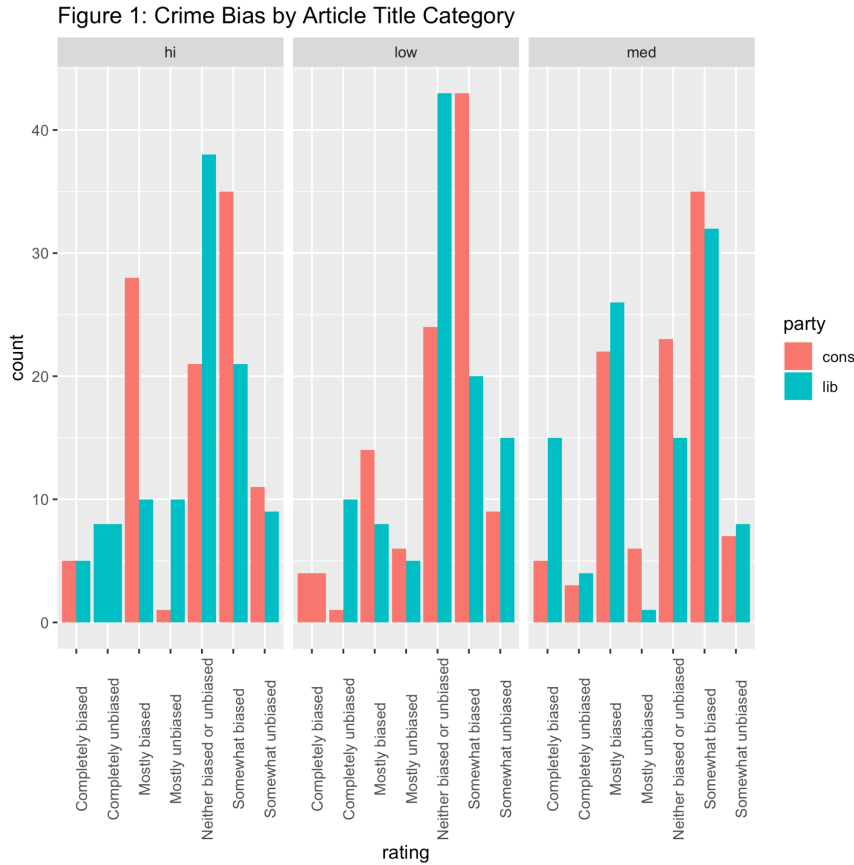
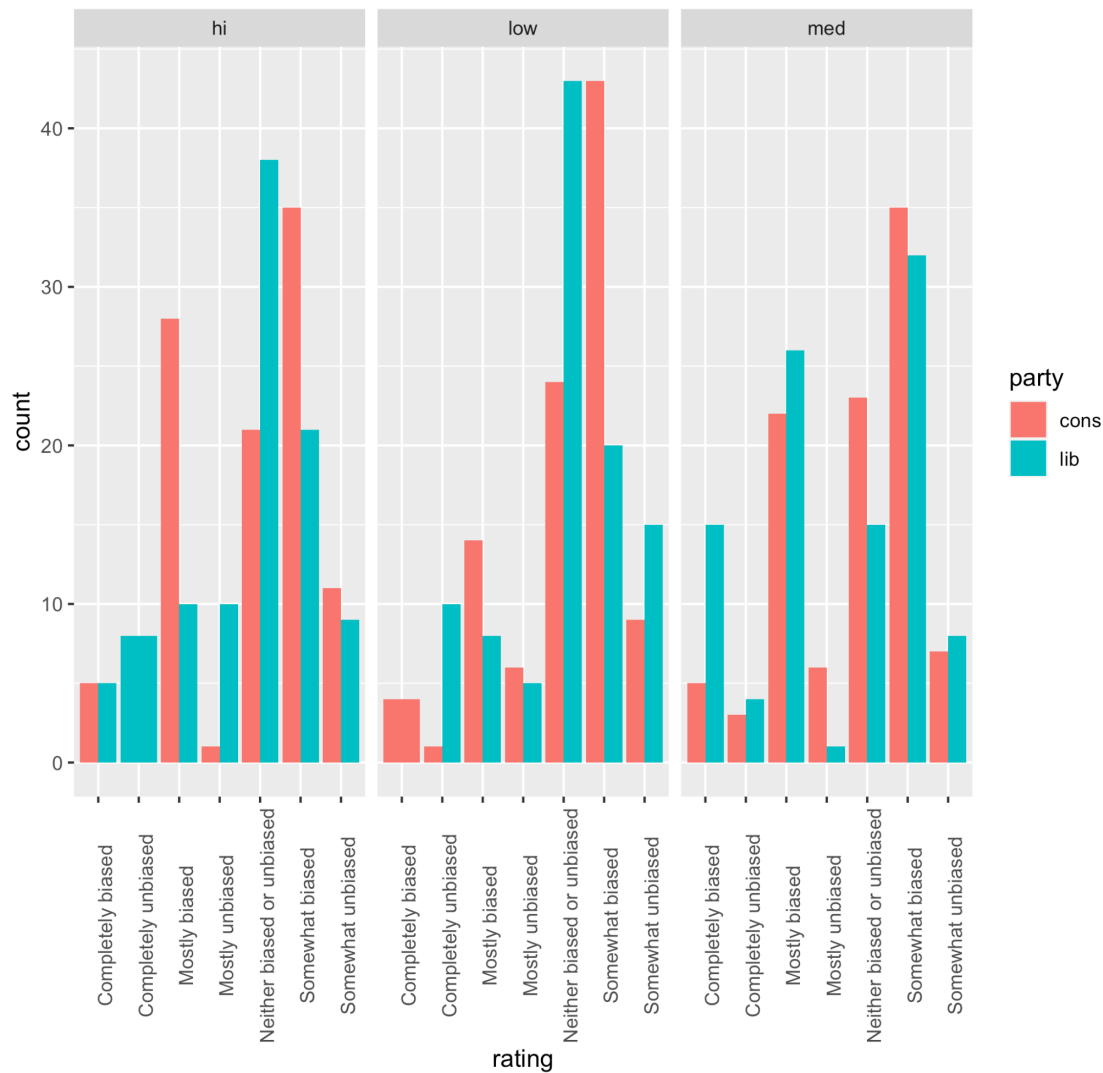


Figure 2 is another visual that represents bias detection in news articles related to immigration from both liberal and conservative news outlets. In this figure, it is very apparent there are a few ratings that stand out more than others. For example, in the low bias article titles, participants ranked the articles titles as 'Neither biased or unbiased'. This isn't entirely incorrect, since the research purposely chose articles that had little to none bias. In the medium article titles, participants ranked conservative titles as 'Somewhat biased' slightly higher than liberal titles but, nonetheless, most participants ranked the medium ranked articles titles as having some detectable bias. Lastly, in the high bias article titles, the most ranked bias level was 'Neither biased or unbiased'. The second most ranked bias level was 'Mostly Biased'. This leads researchers to believe that participants may have been hesitant in picking whether or not news articles had bias language in them.

Figure 2: Immigration Bias by Article Title Category



## Conclusion

Based on researchers' ranking of bias in crime and immigration news articles, it does not align with what the participants ranked. Although the researchers used their subjective knowledge and ranking for the news articles, a lot of participants could not detect bias in the article titles. As for the article titles themselves, no background was needed to understand the immigration titles. The articles that spoke about crime were about an ongoing court case. Some participants may have

not known about the case and the article titles could have had subtle implications that the participants may not have been aware of. One major finding, interestingly, majority of participants when rating bias in the news articles, picked neither bias or unbiased. The second most-picked ranking across headlines was 'somewhat biased'. This leads researchers to believe that there is a split of those that can detect bias and those who might not fully know.

Unfortunately, not recording who has the treatment video and who did not put a set back in our findings.

## **Discussion**

This study focused on being able to identify bias using news media headlines. Some participants were given a treatment video that gave further information on what bias is and how to identify it. After analyzing the data, it is unclear which participants did or didn't receive the treatment. The main goal of this study was to identify if having some background on bias, having the treatment, helped with detecting bias in media. Since there is no way of knowing which participants had the treatment, or not, researchers had to interpret the participants' overall rankings.

Within this study, there were some limitations that can be helpful to note for future testing. The articles displayed in the study were subjective to the researchers as we picked articles that we believed were considered liberal and conservative articles from predominantly liberal and conservative news sources. In addition, given the amount of time the researchers had to run the study, we only included two different types of bias which were crime and immigration, but also limited the number of participants taking the study. Those who did do the study can be a limitation as we used an online survey tool that could only be accessed by undergraduate students. Statistically, this region of the US is predominantly democratic or liberal and can have

skewed the results. The researchers were aware of the limitations and based on the results future research recommendations would be to include a variety of different biases and have a more representative pool of participants.

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