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A social-science perspective on media bias

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A SOCIAL-SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA BIAS

ABSTRACT: *The questions of whether the news media are biased, and if so, in what direction, typically generate more heat than light. Here, we review some of the most recent and meritorious empirical studies on media bias. This evidence suggests that several prominent national news outlets have a distinct slant to the left or right, and that exposure to these sources influences both public opinion and voting behavior.*

The debate over media bias is a fever swamp of partisanship that social scientists have, for the most part, avoided, leaving the field to polemicists left and right. Our aim here is to highlight what we regard as "the gold in the garbage": the more reliable data on media bias. We will therefore dispense with the usual practices followed in discussions of media bias, retaining only three of the features of the highly charged public debate.

First, as do most commentators on the issue, we focus on the news media rather than the entertainment media, despite the possibility of

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bias in the latter, because it is so much harder to infer either the direction or the impact of such bias. Second, we define bias as an ideological slant that may take a number of forms: Democratic or Republican partisanship; liberal or conservative positions on public-policy issues; or broader assumptions about, say, business corporations or the causes of social, economic, and foreign-policy problems. Third, we assume that such a slant, if it exists, is either to the "left" or to the "right." This is not to deny the substantive importance of other kinds of bias, whether nationalism, anti-Americanism, negativism, or celebrity worship. But we adopt the working assumption that the widely used practice of *categorizing* ideologies as "left versus right" will, itself, probably be reflected in whatever ideologies actually stand behind most media bias.

Indeed, one of the starting points of any serious analysis of the subject must be the fact that journalists are extremely likely to self-identify as being ideologically on the left. A Pew Research Center poll (2004) recently found that only 7 percent of the journalists employed at national news organizations self-identify as "conservatives," compared to 34 percent who call themselves "liberals."

But what to make of such data, and the many studies showing that elite journalists vote overwhelmingly Democratic (Groseclose and Milyo 2005)? It could simply be that liberal opinions are essentially better-informed opinions, so that objective journalists are led by natural intellectual processes toward liberal conclusions. By definition, however, it is impossible to separate this theory from substantive political judgments, thereby re-entering the ideologically self-confirming tendencies of media-bias discussions; so we bracket the theory.

Much the same can be said of the standard practice, by critics of *conservative* media bias, of inferring from the ownership of the news media the political views that must necessarily be broadcast by the news media. In the words of Eric Alterman (2003), "You're only as liberal as the man who owns you"; that is, even the most liberal journalists are reined in by conservative media owners. This is another ideologically self-confirming theory, one that is part of the standard viewpoint of the left: namely, that class interests determine political behavior. Thus, such analysts as Alterman, Ben Bagdikian (1990), and Robert W. McChesney (1999) think that the bias question is settled by establishing that the media are "corporate owned," rarely attempting to establish what the political views of news-media corporate executives actually are, or whether these executives would be willing to sacrifice corporate profits in order to propagate conservative views, in competition with other

news media that retained their objectivity. Lacking empirical data on these questions, or on the actual newsroom and hiring practices that might follow from the hypothesized "corporate bias," we bracket this theory, too.

The key issue that is never directly confronted by these approaches to the question of media bias, or by so much of the public debate over the issue, is the extent to which journalists' *work product* exhibits an ideological slant. The place to hunt for gold is, therefore, not in speculative theories about the "obvious" validity of liberal ideas, the "obvious" effects of corporate ownership, or the "obvious" bias evident in differences between journalists and the general public; rather, a non-ideological, scientifically respectable approach to the question should dig through content analyses—even though these, too, have their problems.

What Do Journalists Actually Say?

Perhaps the simplest form of content analysis is to count instances of the use of partisan labels or ideological terms by journalists. At least in the American context, where partisanship and ideology are widely considered undesirable, labeling somebody in this way can subtly denigrate their opinions. Another merit of this method is that the subtlety is on both the audience's and the journalist's side of the transaction: a journalist's *failure* to label someone or something in partisan or ideological terms may successfully convey to the audience a biased version of (what the journalist considers to be) the non-partisan, non-ideological objective truth.

However, we know of no labeling study that controls for audience familiarity with the subjects being labeled (or not labeled). This is an important oversight, since no label may be necessary to remind people that Senator Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) is liberal, while the opposite is true for a less well-known, but no less important conservative, such as Senator Bill Frist (R-Tenn.). A more fundamental objection to the extant labeling studies is that—perhaps because they are so easy to conduct—they are too often done in an incredibly sloppy manner. By either cherry-picking cases or using imprecise language in relating a study's findings, it is quite easy to skew the appearance of bias in one direction or another, and these practices are quite common.

A weakness of other forms of content analysis is that they require re-

searchers to make subjective calls about what constitutes "bias," whether regarding the coverage or non-coverage of issues (gatekeeping bias), the attention given to one side in a political debate versus the other within a news story (statement bias), or the tone and balance of a story (coverage bias). The inherently subjective nature of these judgments is problematic enough, but the scholars who undertake these studies rarely employ any sophisticated statistical methods to try to control for determinants of content that avoid the taint of their own possible bias.

However, in a recent working paper on gatekeeping bias, Riccardo Puglisi (2004) analyzes a random sample of about 36,000 news articles from *The New York Times* between 1946 and 1994. Puglisi tests whether the frequency of stories on issues that are "owned" by Democrats (e.g., civil rights, health care, labor, and social welfare) is a function of presidential electoral cycles. Puglisi defines issue ownership by means of public-opinion surveys about which party is considered more capable of handling a particular issue, avoiding the need to impose his own subjective criteria. After controlling for ownership effects and secular temporal trends, he finds a significant shift in the types of news stories that are covered during presidential election years, with the direction being toward topics that are more favorable to Democrats. This result is even more pronounced when the incumbent is a Democrat.

In another working paper, John R. Lott and Kevin Hassett (2004) examine the tone of major newspaper-headline coverage of specific economic reports from 1991 to 2004 (389 news stories from the top-ten-circulation newspapers). This work improves on traditional coverage-bias studies in several ways. First, the authors focus only on the tone of headlines associated with economic news on gross domestic product, durable goods, retail sales, and unemployment; these types of news are reported with some regularity, and so are easily comparable across presidential administrations. Second, while rating headlines as favorable, neutral, or unfavorable does require making judgment calls, the limited focus on headlines mitigates concerns about the inherently subjective nature of such characterizations (at least when compared to more traditional studies of news content)—although it has the disadvantage that journalists do not write their own headlines, so what may be being measured is the bias of other news-media employees. (Since editors have the final call on headlines, however, there may be a silver lining here: headline analysis indirectly addresses the corporate-bias hypothesis, since conservative corporate bias would presumably have to be transmitted down the corporate hierarchy through editors reining in

self-identified liberal journalists.) Third, the headlines being analyzed lend themselves quite readily to econometric analysis. This allows the authors to estimate the propensity of newspapers to place a favorable headline on economic news reports (e.g., the official announcement of a 5-percent unemployment rate for a given month), controlling for both the size and direction of the economic event. This last feature of the study is crucial, since a 5-percent unemployment rate is, objectively speaking, good news when it represents a drop from a higher level, but bad news when it represents an increase.

Lott and Hassett find that comparable economic reports were 20 percent more likely to be assigned positive headlines during the Clinton administration than during the non-Clinton years examined. Among national newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal,* and *The Washington Post* appeared to be particularly positive about economic news during the Clinton presidency.

Lott and Hassett have, we believe, provided an important model for future analyses of the tone of news coverage. And their findings dovetail with Puglisi's conclusion that the news media are biased leftward.

What Do Citizens Actually Hear?

Rather than try to rate the possible content bias of news directly, several authors infer news-media content from the current-events knowledge of people who are exposed to different media outlets.

A nice example of such a study is Hetherington 1996, which demonstrates that people with greater exposure to news during the 1992 presidential election campaign were more likely to hold incorrectly pessimistic views of the U.S. economy, and were more likely to vote for Bill Clinton over George H. W. Bush. However, such studies typically do not confront the fact that people choose how much news to consume. Consequently, in this case, it is unclear whether it was exposure to biased news that misinformed people, or rather that misinformed people also happened to consume more news. Such difficulties are not intractable, but it is fair to say that much of the existing literature has not incorporated appropriate statistical methods for overcoming them.

There are two recent exceptions, however. First, a working paper by Stefano Della Vigna and Ethan Kaplan (2006) estimates the changes in Republican vote share that are attributable to the entry of Fox News

Channel into different cable markets (from 1996 to 2000, Fox News was available in only 20 percent of the United States). The authors also control for a number of other determinants of Republican vote share, including location-specific trends. Overall, when Fox entered a market, it had a large effect. Della Vigna and Kaplan estimate that it persuaded up to 3–8 percent of non-Republicans to vote Republican. This confirms that Fox is conservative relative to the media that liberal media-bias writers contend are, themselves, conservative. But the larger point is that there does appear to be a quantifiable and substantively important treatment effect from increased exposure to one news source relative to others, suggesting both that if content bias can be established in some other way, it matters; and that studies like Hetherington's do establish liberal media bias, not the pre-existing biases of the media consumer.

A very similar conclusion is reached by Alan Gerber, Dean Karlan, and Daniel Bergan (2006), who, in advance of the 2005 Virginia gubernatorial election, provided subjects in northern Virginia with free subscriptions to either *The Washington Post* or *The Washington Times*. Few who have read it (or who write for it) would contend that *Times* is more liberal than the *Post*. And true to this characterization, those who received the *Post* were significantly more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate for governor, and (less robustly) to hold more liberal views on national issues. Intriguingly, a control group that did not receive any newspaper was more likely to vote Republican. However, this may be an artifact of the time period examined in the study. As the authors point out, late 2005 was a time of particularly bad national news from a Republican perspective.

The studies we have been discussing fly in the face of other scholarly literature on the topic, and since many readers may have come across such research, it will be useful to point out what we view as some of the typical defects of much extant work on media bias.

For instance, a widely publicized study by Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis (2003) examined whether exposure to different news sources was associated with misperceptions about the Iraq War. They reported that people who get their news from Fox News Channel were much more likely to hold misperceptions; listeners of National Public Radio were least likely to hold misperceptions. The implication is not only that FNC is more conservative than NPR, but that NPR is to the left of FNC only in the sense that NPR is unbiased, rather than in the sense that it is biased to the left.

Like most previous efforts in this literature, this study suffers from a

failure to identify the treatment effect of exposure to one media source or another, but what is more noteworthy in this instance is the definition of what constitutes a "misperception." Kull et al. define misperception as agreement with any of following statements: (1) "Clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with Al Qaeda has been found"; (2) "Weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq"; and (3) "World public opinion favored the United States going to war with Iraq." These questions are well tailored to catch errors that are likely to be made by supporters of the war—such as those who, presumably, tend to watch FNC. But what about questions that might catch errors likely to be made by opponents of the war—such as the listeners of NPR, if NPR is indeed biased to the left? The study did not ask whether there was evidence that Iraq had any contact with Al Qaeda prior to the war (as opposed to whether Iraq "worked closely" with Al Qaeda); whether there was evidence *before* the war that Iraq harbored WMD ambitions and even stockpiles; or whether the United Nations had demanded that Iraq prove that it had destroyed its previously demonstrated WMD programs and stockpiles, lest it be met with even more "serious consequences" than the sanctions it already endured (as the UN Security Council demanded, in Resolution 1441).

It may seem that in posing these alternative questions we have fallen into the trap of taking substantive positions on them, making our objections to Kull et al. ideological. However, it was Kull and his colleagues who decided to use the mistaken opinions of FNC viewers as evidence of FNC bias to the right by establishing NPR as the benchmark of unbiased objectivity. We are merely pointing out that it did not occur to these authors that NPR listeners might harbor erroneous views that might just as plausibly be attributed to NPR (or other mainstream media) bias to the left. The Kull study is tendentious, and that is all too characteristic even of the scholarly literature on media bias.

A New Way to Measure Media Bias

As we have noted, most of the traditional attempts at testing for the presence of media bias have some serious shortcomings. But not all of these shortcomings are methodological; sometimes, as with Kull et al., the research is just poorly executed, predetermining results that serve a particular conclusion. However, even the handful of more meritorious studies cannot really tell us much about the *extent* of ideological bias at

a particular media outlet, compared to some meaningful baseline. For example, the observed treatment effect of *The Washington Post* on voting patterns is fascinating, but leads only to the conclusions that exposure to different news sources has important consequences, and that *The Washington Post* is *relatively* more liberal than *The Washington Times*. As with the Kull study, this does not tell us whether the *Post* is more objective than the *Times*, or whether the *Post* is liberal in an absolute sense. Therefore, in "A Measure of Media Bias" (Groseclose and Milyo 2005), we explicitly sought to measure the ideological slant of major news outlets on a known scale.

First, we exploited the fact that there are reliable measures of the ideological orientation of members of Congress. Well-known measures include interest-group ratings, such as those produced by the (liberal) Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and the American Conservative Union (ACU). However, because these interest-group ratings are not comparable over time, Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder 1999 develops a method of adjusting such ratings to permit intertemporal comparisons. In Groseclose and Milyo 2005, we employed intertemporally adjusted ADA scores as our measure of political ideology.

Second, we made use of the fact that both members of Congress and journalists cite putative "experts" in support of their narratives. For example, in Congressional speeches, members of Congress will frequently cite the findings of think tanks and advocacy groups as buttressing their positions. Journalists seek out commentary from the same types of sources. When journalists do so, however, they often don't feel the need to "balance" the opinions of those they cite, as they do when quoting explicitly partisan figures—because they take the objectivity of the so-called experts for granted. Further, even when journalists seek to balance such opinions, their own perceptions about which groups are on the left or right or are "moderate" will influence their choices of whom to consult for countervailing opinions.

By comparing news-media citation patterns to ADA ratings, we were able not only to characterize media outlets as biased to the left or right, but to state with some precision just how far to the left or right. Unfortunately, the actual statistical procedure we employ is somewhat complicated, so we must refer the interested reader to the original study. However, it is worth emphasizing that we analyzed only news reporters' references to think tanks and advocacy groups as objective sources of expertise: we omitted cases in which such groups are labeled

or criticized, and we did not include citations from opinion pieces, editorials, or letters to the editor.

We found that most of the nationally prominent outlets meet the ADA definition of "liberal." More specifically, the most prominent news media cluster around the same ideological range as conservative Democrats in Congress. That is, news outlets such as *The New York Times* and the even *The Wall Street Journal* cite as sources of objective expertise the types of sources thus cited by Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.).

Perhaps even more surprising, we found that while the most conservative national media outlets are *The Washington Times* and Fox News Channel's "Special Report with Brit Hume," both fall into the ideological range occupied by liberal northeastern Republicans, such as Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Me.). In fact, Fox News "Special Report" is actually closer to the political center, by ADA measures, than most other evening news broadcasts.

* * *

Our findings, when considered along with other recent and relatively high-quality studies of media content and media exposure, constitute fairly convincing evidence that those who scoff at the notion of liberal media bias are wrong. In judging the work-product of the mainstream media, the answer is relatively clear: there is bias, and it is roughly as far (or farther) to the left than Fox News "Special Report" is biased to the right.

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