

Perception is Reality

By Holly Stidham

The compass has pointed towards true north and aided in navigation since the eleventh century. It enables explorers, ship captains, and pilots to accurately assess their current position and determine a heading. News plays a similar role in the lives of Americans. Information is used to assess the outside world, so people can decide which course to take. However, a compass is only valuable when it holds true north constant. Without an accurate source of information, the American people could become lost as a ship at sea. Bias ¹ is an inclination of temperament or outlook. In other words, bias is the lens by which all people see their world; each lens is unique, slanting a different way. Bias in news is preventing our compass from pointing to true north; it is altering public perception. This becomes apparent when looking at the purpose of news, how bias is undermining this, and what can be done to solve the problem. Although the general term “news” encompasses media in many forms such as radio, television, and print, the mission of the medium remains unchanged.

¹ Definition: BIAS. Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bias>

According to the American Press Institute², “News is that part of communication that keeps us informed of the changing events, issues, and characters in the world outside.” News is the primary vehicle used to convey information to the public. For example: ABC World News Tonight³ has a viewership of 8.3 million people and the Morning Edition⁴ radio show has 14.65 million weekly listeners. With this vast sphere of influence comes a responsibility, which is written in a code of ethics⁵. It includes: verifying information before releasing it, avoiding conflicts of interest, do not misrepresent or oversimplify, and allow subjects of news coverage to respond to allegations or criticism. Anything that manipulates viewer perception is propaganda that cripples the autonomy of listeners and their ability to make educated assessments. Bias can quickly turn ethical journalism into stories with a truth value that rivals science fiction and fantasy novels.

When a news organization allows partiality in its reports, truth slips through the cracks. All people are biased; it is simply human nature. As author E. B. White once said, “I have yet to see a piece of writing, political or non-political, that does

² “What is the purpose of journalism?” American Press Institute 2018

³ Moraes, Lisa. September 26, 2017. Deadline. <http://deadline.com/2017/09/abc-world-news-tonight-wins-total-viewers-nbc-nightly-news-wins-demo-tv-ratings-1202177175>

⁴ NPR Ratings at All-Time High. March 2017. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/about-npr/520273005/npr-ratings-at-all-timehigh>

⁵ September 6, 2014. Society of Professional Journalists. <https://www.spi.org/ethicscode.asp>

not have a slant. All writing slants the way a writer leans and no man is born perpendicular.” However, truth cannot be sacrificed on the altar of partisanship. There are two types of bias found in news organizations; one of which is bias in the investigation process. An article in The New York Times⁶ revealed that a false story had “slipped through” CNN’s fact-checking process. CNN’s legal department had raised concerns; however, that did not stop publication. One June 22, 2017, CNN released an article claiming one of the President’s advisors had ties with a Russian investment fund, which was under Senate examination. It was later discovered that the journalist, who wrote the article, had concealed his use of a single wavering source. CNN retracted the inaccurate story. Three men who were involved in the story’s vetting and publication process resigned. Surprisingly, bias not only affects the material reported, but plays a role in what is omitted, which is the second type of bias, story selection. According to a poll⁷ in 2011, the average adult American believed 25% of the population was homosexual, and students estimated 31%. The actual tally was about 3.5%. Why was public perception mistaken? News organizations’ wide coverage of the homosexual community makes this minority appear much more substantial. Perception is reality and

⁶ “At CNN, Retracted Story Leaves an Elite Reporting Team Bruised”. Ember, Sydney. September 5, 2017. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/business/media/cnn-retraction-trump-scaramucci.html>

⁷ “Americans Greatly Overestimate Percent Gay, Lesbian in U.S.” Newport, Frank. May 21, 2011. Gallup News. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/183383/americans-greatly-overestimate-percent-gay-lesbian.aspx>

biased news is skewing the public's perception. In December 2017, Pew Research Center⁸ released a report contrasting the media coverage of various presidents during their first 60 days. The study showed that 62% of stories about the Trump administration were negative; while, Obama's administration received only 20%. This stark contrast shows that bias in news organizations has resulted in a form of card stacking. Media bombards people with negative stories about what **they** dislike and positive stories about that which **they** support. Ethical journalism cannot be found in either type of bias.

News organizations have an obligation to leave bias at the door. Now one might ask: Is this a realistic goal considering no man is born perpendicular? Yes. Although **individuals** cannot be completely objective, an **organization** can. News casters and journalists from various viewpoints can be hired to guarantee competitive values are displayed. Also, personal comments must be omitted. Opinion is expected in programs such as, "The View" and "The Rush Limbaugh Show" because they are talk shows. News organizations are not. They have a duty to inform people about events in an impartial fashion. When news outlets take

⁸ "17 striking facts from 2017". Geiger, Abigail, December 26, 2017, Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/26/17-striking-findings-from-2017/>

action and remove bias, viewers will be able to draw their **own** conclusions from the data presented.

Compasses must be calibrated to ensure their depiction of north is accurate; likewise, news organizations need to be “calibrated” to accurately inform the public. Biased reports skew a person’s perception of reality; thus, funneling his or her decision’s outcome. We the people are trusting news media to update us accurately and objectively. Information and influence in union are a powerful force. News organizations wield both. Through bias elimination, media will mirror its code of ethics; ensuring that perception is truly reality.