

Making Sense of Media and Politics

Five Principles in Political Communication

Gadi Wolfsfeld

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Chapter 4 deals with another form of journalistic partiality: *commercial bias*. News is a business and dramatic stories insure a bigger audience. The pejorative name that has been given to this tendency is *infotainment*. Many critics believe that as the news media become more sensational they lowered the level of public discussion and debate about the major issues facing the country. Returning to the food metaphor, selling cheap junk food will often increase profits but can have a terrible effect on people's health. Although most people don't relate to the emphasis on entertainment as a type of bias, it too determines which stories are selected, how much time and space they will be given, how they will be packaged and sold.

So in this section we move to the second part of the political communication process. After all, the political actors have had their say and after all the unplanned events have taken place it is up to the journalists to create this very special product known as news.

3 No Such Thing as Objective News

If one had to choose the single issue that bugs most people about the news, it is probably the issue of bias. The most common assumption is that journalists are all bleeding-heart liberals who continually refuse to give conservatives equal time. This belief provides at least a partial explanation for the establishment of a slew of conservative talk shows and for the creation of Fox News that claims without a bit of irony that it presents "Fair and Balanced News." There are also critics from the left who claim that the media are capitalist tools whose major interest is to protect elite interests.

There are many problems in deciding just what we mean when we talk about bias and even more when we try to measure it. This can be better understood by thinking about how most of us watch the news on television. Everything we agree with is obviously "true," so we don't pay much attention to it. Everything we disagree with is clearly biased. People are especially likely to see bias when they are emotionally involved in a conflict. Take, for example, a news story that appeared about Sarah Palin in July of 2010.¹ The former governor decided to weigh in on the controversy concerning the plan to build a mosque near "Ground Zero" (the site of the 9/11 terrorist attack). She sent a tweet that said "Peaceful Muslims, pls refudiate." Unfortunately, *refudiate* is not a real word in English and this led to a feeding frenzy by the press. To make matters worse, when asked about it, Palin compared herself to Shakespeare saying that he too made up words.

If you look at the comments people made on the various news sites and blogs where this story was published, you get a pretty good idea of how people judge bias. Those that disliked Palin were thrilled that they had another opportunity to make fun of her. Those who admired the former vice-presidential nominee argued that this was further proof of the leftist bias of the news. Asking a person who is emotionally involved in a conflict about news bias makes about as much sense as asking a Boston Red Sox fan to umpire a game against the Yankees.

The third principle is stated like this: *There is no such thing as objective journalism (nor can there be)*. The real question is not, then, whether or not the media are biased (they are) the question is *how* are they biased. The discussion in this chapter will deal with two types of bias: cultural and ideological. Cultural bias has to do with the fact that every news story is rooted in a certain time and

place. A news report about U.S. race relations in 1960 will look nothing like a report on the same topic in 2010. The issue will also look very different when it is reported in America, France, or Japan. One of the reasons why cultural bias is so powerful is that it is usually invisible. People are rarely called upon to question their basic assumptions about their world in part because ethnocentric news is so natural and familiar.

Ideological bias, on the other hand, appears much easier to recognize. It is certainly a major issue for public debate with countless columns and books ruthlessly attacking the news media for their slanted reporting. Fortunately, there is actually some good research on the question of ideological bias in the news. While none of these studies provide a final and definitive answer to this issue they do shed quite a bit of light on the topic.

Cultural Bias in the News

I'd like you to think about death for a few minutes. It is not a very nice thing to think about, but thinking about it provides an especially important insight about cultural bias in the news. In any given day there are thousands of people dying in ways that could be considered newsworthy. They are murdered, slaughtered, commit suicide, die in traffic accidents, perish in crashing planes and trains, killed in wars and terrorist attacks, die in natural and un-natural disasters, and expire in epidemics.

Almost none of these thousands of deaths will be reported in the news you get. Every news editor has to make decisions about what to cover and what to ignore. Television news is limited by the amount of broadcast minutes and newspapers by the number of pages. Even online news sites that have more space available are limited by the number of paid staff who can prepare stories and put them on the web. There is simply no room in the news for the vast majority of deaths that take place, especially those that occur in other countries. In other words, some deaths are more important to a particular audience than others. Local deaths are more newsworthy than deaths that happen far away and death from terrorism is far more interesting than deaths from traffic accidents.

News is, in the end, always local. Whether it is reporting about our city, our state, or our country the news tells us stories in ways that both interest and make sense to us as an audience. Every news medium in the world operates within a certain cultural context that is reflected in every news item that is produced. This is why many in the field of communication say that news is a "social construction." Every society has certain ways of looking at the political world and our news is constructed by taking those assumptions into account. What we are being fed goes down much easier that way.

The importance of these cultural considerations starts long before an editor decides whether or not to cover an event. The first question you need to ask is whether there are any Western journalists stationed in a particular place. Here's a way to remember this point: *News happens where there are journalists*. When an American newspaper decides to place most of its staff in the United States, a

few staff members in Europe, and none in Africa it means there will be a steady flow of domestic news, some stories from Europe, and almost nothing from the invisible continent. Thus almost every American who follows the news has heard of President Nicolas Sarkozy (and many probably have also heard about his model/singer wife) but few could provide a single name of an African leader. It is true that many news outlets depend on wire services such as AP and UPI to provide them stories they can't get themselves, but even the wire services can't be everywhere.

The decisions made by news editors are based primarily on assumptions about what they assume their particular audience—and their potential audience—wants to hear about. This is just one reason why news could never be "objective." The very fact that editors have a very limited amount of space and that they make choices based on what interests their audience means that they are making subjective judgments all the time. People living in Atlanta have some interests they share with people living in Milwaukee (e.g. the president), but they also have local interests they only share with people living near them (their mayor). They have very few common interests with people living in Bucharest, Sidney, or Jakarta. So news from any of those places is unlikely to interest them. If one of those stories does come on television many see it is an excellent opportunity to make a sandwich.

If the American news media do take an interest in foreign countries, it is because the United States is directly involved. The Tyndall Report examines all of the news stories that appear on the national television networks on weekdays. In 2009, foreign stories accounted for 22 percent of news stories.² Now this may seem quite high, but looking closer one finds that by far the greatest number of foreign news stories had to do with conflicts where the United States was involved: the war in Afghanistan, then stories related to Iran, and then the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Interestingly, the Iraq War was no longer in the top twenty. Not surprisingly, there were almost no stories about Latin America or Africa.

Another study that measured the amount of foreign news in 2009 was carried out in the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism.³ Looking at all different types of news media, the study found an average of ten percent of stories dealt with foreign topics not related to the United States. There were also some interesting differences between the media. Only 3 percent of all news stories on the cable networks dealt with foreign topics not related to the United States and a surprisingly high 17 percent of online news covered these topics. This last figure suggests that the new media may turn out to be less ethnocentric than the traditional press. The issue of how the new media deals with the world will be discussed below.

In any case, cultural bias does not only have an effect on which countries we hear about it also has an influence on *what* we hear about them. In general, when editors assume that their audience has little or no interest in a particular country, they will only cover it if something truly awful happens. Countries (e.g., Britain) that are considered important are covered on a regular basis and this means that routine events (elections, major speeches by the prime minister) get at least some

exposure. The poorer countries are only covered when something extraordinary happens and those exceptions are almost always negative. It is sad but true that, from a news perspective, ten deaths in New York are worth about twenty-five in London, which are worth tens of thousands in Africa (and here too, only if they die all at once).

One of the consequences of this process is what can best be called the *principle of representative deviance*. If asked, people know that news deals with the deviant and unexpected. But if most of the information people get from the news is negative, few can resist coming to the logical conclusion that these stories provide an accurate description of the country. There is really no choice from most citizens: if that is all you hear your images of those countries will be negative.

If you want further proof of how this works, I'd ask you to think about the first thing that comes to your mind when you are asked to think about Indonesia? The first thing that is likely to be one of two things: either the tsunami that took place in 2004 or the terrorist attacks in 2003. There is never going to be any routine news coming out of countries like Indonesia so that is the way most Americans will think about these countries (if they ever think about them at all).

This constant flow of negative news about culturally distant countries brings us back to the distinction between front and back door coverage. The front door of respectable coverage is reserved for things that happen in either our country or countries we consider important. Weaker countries almost always enter through the back door because of some exceedingly deviant event. Ongoing negative coverage of these weaker nations in the Western news media is likely to lower any chances for investment or tourism in these countries. Here too then the news media become important agents for increasing the economic gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" only this time it takes place on an international scale.

One of the reasons why cultural bias can be so powerful is that it tends to be invisible. Most people who turn to the news media don't think about how little access they have to most of what happens in the world. Their view of the world is extremely narrow but unless somebody points it out, they are unlikely to notice. The way the news is constructed appears quite "natural" because this is the news we are used to.

News Frames

An excellent way to understand how cultural bias influences the way news stories are told is to think about *news frames*. The concept of frames came up earlier but this is a good time to go into more depth. News frames are organizing devices journalists use to tell a coherent story. You can think of it as an ongoing theme that runs throughout a particular story or a particular set of stories.

A good example would be the "War on Terror" frame that came into place after the September 11, 2001, attack in the United States. This phrase became an icon that appeared on every television screen in the United States and served to thematically link a variety of different news stories. This would include both stories about U.S. soldiers getting ready to leave for the War in Afghanistan and

stories about what President Bush and everyone else in the world intended to do about the terrorist threat. The use of the War on Terror frame provides an important guide not only for audiences but also for editors, reporters, and camera operators.

Once a news frame has been established it serves two important functions for journalists. First, it operates like a powerful search engine as journalists go out in search for stories that fit the frame. Certain stories fit quite easily (the endless search for Osama bin Laden) while others don't (an Afghani wedding party accidentally getting bombed). Events that don't fit the frame are less likely to get much media attention. News frames are also tools for providing *meaning* to events. Once a news frame has been established, journalists use frames to tell us how to understand a particular event. In news stories connected with the War on Terror, for example, one finds heroes and villains as well as victories and defeats.

This explains why it was so important for the Bush administration to claim that the subsequent Iraq war was also part of the more general War on Terror. In this case, however, the Bush administration was less successful because certain people in the political elite, the news media, and many political organizations were unconvinced. Bush was unable to take control over the political environment surrounding the issue. Eventually, these groups received important support for their rejection of the War on Terror frame when government officials admitted that no real link had been found between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda.

The fact that Bush was hoping to apply the War on Terror frame to the Iraqi War and others refused to accept it reminds us that political actors have their own *ideological frames* they are trying to promote. Think of these as packages of claims and ideas that are used to "sell" a particular viewpoint. When leaders and activists successfully promote their frames to the news media, it provides them with an enormous boost for their political efforts. Groups who want harsher laws against illegal immigration, for example, will often promote an "Anti-terrorist" frame arguing that such legislation would prevent terrorist from crossing the border.⁴ More often than not, however, the news media find themselves dealing with *competing* frames. Those who want more liberal laws concerning immigration, for example, would try to frame the issue in terms of social justice.⁵ In these cases, while journalists sometimes give certain frames preference, they may also decide to either give equal time to each frame or to construct their own.

Consider the controversial topic of abortion. There are two major camps and two major frames that are usually being promoted to the media and to the public: Pro-Life and Pro-Choice. Each group has chosen terms that culturally resonate with a large segment of society (who can be "anti-life?"). Each movement also has a package of terms and ideas that serve as rhetoric tools for convincing people that their positions should be accepted. The National Right to Life Organization provides the following abortion facts for people who come to their site.⁶

Heart begins to beat around 22 days from conception

There have been more than 40 million abortions since 1973

Women have cited 'social reasons,' not mother's health or rape/incest as their motivation in approximately 93 percent of all abortions

A June 1999 Wirthlin poll found that 62 percent of Americans support legal abortion in only three or fewer circumstances: when the pregnancy results from rape or incest or when it threatens the life of the mother

The National Organization of Women, on the other hand, promotes a pro-choice position. One of the strategies for promoting this frame is to talk about a concept called "reproductive justice":⁷

Reproductive justice ensures that women are healthy, both physically and emotionally; that they can make decisions about their bodies and sexuality free from government interference; and that they have the economic resources to plan their own families. A woman's well-being requires self-determination, equality, and the respect and support of her society.

The goal of each of these groups is to speak to the news media and promote their positions. Even better from their point of view would be if journalists were to emphasize the group's preferred language and facts and to turn movement leaders into routine sources. So this process brings us to the question of how these contests play out in the news and which types of political actors are most and least likely to succeed.

The Construction of News Frames

So how do the news media construct news frames? If anybody came up with a simple answer to this question they'd be rich. After all, isn't this what public relations is all about? While I hate to disagree with P.T. Barnum not all publicity is good publicity. If the news media portray your organization as a bunch of extremists, you will take a very serious hit in terms of contributions and volunteers (and if you *do* suddenly get any new volunteers, you'd probably want to check them for weapons).

Journalists construct news frames by trying to find a *narrative fit between existing frames and the events they are covering*.⁸ Journalists have a limited number of interpretive frames on the social shelf and they take down the one that appears to be the most appropriate for the events they are covering. As noted, when there are competing frames (two or more frames on the shelf) they can either choose to prefer one over the other or apply each to a different part of the story.

So the first step is to focus on what is on the shelf at a given time or place. The available frames can only be understood by looking at the political, social, and cultural environment in which the journalists are operating. William Gamson and Andre Modigliani have a wonderful example of how important this can be in understanding the construction of news frames.⁹ Nuclear energy was first developed in the United States immediately after World War II. It was seen as

a wonderful innovation with infinite potential and no serious risks. There was really only one frame that dominated both political discussions of the topic and in the media: progress. Nuclear energy was considered a positive development and one of the greatest inventions of all time.

This frame had important implications for how the news media covered nuclear plans. In 1966 there was a serious accident in the Fermi nuclear reactor which is located in Michigan: the cooling system failed and the fuel core had a partial meltdown. Because the dominant assumption was that nuclear power was safe, there was little news coverage of the incident. Gamson and Modigliani tell us that although journalists were informed about the accident almost nothing was reported. The *New York Times* took five weeks to report on the story and referred to it as a "mishap." This inattention meant that the political establishment had little reason to deal with the issue because nuclear energy was not seen as a serious threat to public safety.

Fast forward to 1979. At this point a significant number of movements had been active in promoting anti-nuclear frames. One of these was the "Runaway" frames that claimed that nuclear technology was spinning out of control and unless it was stopped disaster would result. As these challengers grew in influence, journalists began to understand that there were now *competing* frames about nuclear energy: some in favor and some against. Political change (the issue had become controversial) had led to change in the media (more attention to the risks of nuclear power).

It isn't just the news media that reflect changes in the political environment, one will also find changes in books, television, films and (more recently) on the web. One of the most telling indicators of what happened at that time was a 1979 film entitled *The China Syndrome*. The movie, starring Jack Lemmon and Jane Fonda, tells the story of an accident in a nuclear plant in which the core becomes so hot it threatens to burn through the bottom of the plant. This type of meltdown and the subsequent radiation could kill thousands of people. The term *China Syndrome* refers to the fanciful idea that the core would keep burning through the center of the earth and eventually reach China.

In what can only be considered one of the most bizarre coincidences in history, twelve days after the film was released there was a partial nuclear meltdown in the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania. This time the news media went crazy. The accident was a huge story and was published on the front page of every newspaper and led off the evening news for several days. Needless to say the movie *China Syndrome* turned into a blockbuster. More importantly the accident at Three Mile Island led to a complete change in policies concerning nuclear power in the United States; the number of nuclear reactors being built decreased dramatically and quite a large number of reactors were cancelled. It wasn't long before an even more horrible nuclear accident took place in Chernobyl, a city in the Ukraine. Chernobyl provided even more substantial evidence that nuclear power included serious risks. After Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, the Runaway frame became the most prominent frame in every form of media that was analyzed.¹⁰

We can learn quite a bit about news frames from the nuclear example. First, this is another excellent example of the Politics-Media-Politics cycle (PMP). In the early years of nuclear power the “Progress” frame was the only one available for journalists to use; there was nothing else on the shelf. It was only after anti-nuclear groups together with some political leaders started having success in promoting an alternative frame that the news began to talk about the “debate” over nuclear energy. The political environment in the United States (and other countries) had changed because nuclear energy had become a controversial issue. Once journalists recognized the controversy, they began giving more time and space to the anti-nuclear frame. This meant, at the very least, that many more Americans were being told about the possible risks of nuclear energy. The increased level of media attention also forces political leaders to take a stand on the issue; it is no longer something that can be ignored. This then is the second part of the PMP cycle: the change in media coverage leads to further political change.

Second, the example of nuclear energy also tells us that some events, especially major events, can provide important *advantages* to certain political actors and disadvantages for others. The reason a certain group gains an advantage is that one of the frames on the social shelf has a much better *fit* with current events than the other. The accidents at Three Mile Island and later in Chernobyl provided tremendous advantages to anti-nuclear groups attempting to make their case to the news media and the public.

The same dynamic of a particular group gaining advantages also happens when there is a particularly nasty environmental accident such as a train crash involving toxic waste. Green organizations suddenly have their phones ringing off the hook with calls from both journalists and volunteers. Chemical industry executives, on the other hand, are put on the defensive in news reports and pray for the wave (and the fumes) to quickly dissipate. Political waves are fickle however: they can run in different directions at different times. A dramatic rise in oil prices provides advantage to those favoring more off-shore drilling and for those who want to build more nuclear power plants. In fact this is exactly what happened when there was a major hike in oil prices in 2008. In 2010, however, the proponents of off-shore drilling faced a tidal wave of new critics because of the BP oil disaster, the biggest oil spill in U.S. history. The Republican chant of “drill baby drill” that seemed to resonate so well in 2008 had quickly become an embarrassing slogan to be avoided at all costs.

Most political events are more ambiguous in nature and do not provide clear advantages to any one frame. Take, for example, the decision by President Bush in 2007 to deploy 20,000 additional troops to Iraq. The move was named “The Surge.”¹¹ Most Republicans supported the move and most Democrats—including Barack Obama—opposed it. The Republicans saw it as a way of achieving a certain amount of stability in that country (a “Stay the Course” frame) while the Democrats considered it a pointless effort to save a war effort that had gone terribly wrong (“Futile War”). The reactions of each side were predictable given the ongoing debate about the Iraq War. The initial decision to order a surge

provided no clear advantage to either camp, and the U.S. news media provided each side with ample opportunities to present their views.

Over time, however, there was increasing evidence that the surge—together with other changes in policy—may have contributed to an increased level of stability in Iraq.¹² This explains why Senator John McCain was anxious to use his early support for the surge as proof that he was the better candidate for president. At that point in the election campaign, Senator Barack Obama did his best to avoid the issue. The increased stability in Iraq provided, at least temporarily, some advantages to the Stay the Course frame of the Iraq War. This is a case then of how an issue can begin without giving advantages to a particular frame, but, as time progresses, there is increasing evidence that one frame makes more sense than another. At that point the disadvantaged side is trying to duck under the wave while the advantaged side is attempting to ride the wave for as long as possible.

Returning to the nuclear energy example provides us with an additional lesson about news frames. When only one frame is allowed to dominate the news, it can be dangerous because other, potentially more sensible frames are ignored. A good example would be the “Deregulation Is Good” frame that was a common theme in economic news in the 1990s. Conventional wisdom held that the less the government intervened in the economy, the better it was for business. This consensus was reinforced by virtually every commentator that appeared in the media. Many now believe that this economic approach was one of the major causes for the economic meltdown that began in late 2008. Once again a major event provided important advantages to a pro-regulation counter-frame that had been ignored by the media before the crisis.

News frames are important because they can have a significant impact on public opinion and public policy. A perfect example can be found in a book by Frank Baumgartner, Suzanna DeBoef, and Amber Boydstun entitled *The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence*.¹³ Surveys show that there has been a significant drop in public support for the death penalty in the United States. The authors make a convincing argument that one of the reasons is a significant change in the way the issue is being framed by both activists and the news media. Traditionally, debates over the death penalty were framed as either a moral issue (“an eye for an eye”) or as a constitutional issue (cruel and unusual punishment). In the last few decades, argue the authors, there has been a much greater emphasis by the news media on an “Innocence” frame that claims that innocent people are being put to death. Not surprisingly, the increasing availability of DNA testing was one of the reasons for the growing resonance of this frame with the public. The most dramatic rise in the prominence of this frame took place in the nineties and coincided with, among other things, to the creation of the “Innocence Network” that now has offices in all fifty states.¹⁴ There is also good reason to assume that changes in news frames may have been one of the reasons for a change in policies: several states declared a moratorium on use of the death penalty.

So, clearly, news frames matter. When political groups are able to find good evidence as well as supportive allies, the news media can change their approach to the issue. The death penalty example shows us how such changes in the media frames can be one of the forces that contribute to changes in the political process.

Friends and Enemies

News frames are also important for telling us about our national friends and enemies. This too is a form of cultural bias. Every news medium in every country in the world is inherently ethnocentric. Most Americans see the world in terms of four types of countries: friends, enemies, neutrals, and non-existent (“Is that really a country, or are you making it up?”). These cultural assumptions are then reflected in the way the news media frame the world. In general, our friends are noble and just and our enemies are horrible and cruel. It is true that allies can sometimes do bad things (France and Israel are good examples), but our enemies will almost never do anything good. See if you can find a U.S. news story in the last ten years that framed the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahamadinejad in an even moderately positive light.

Robert Entman has a fascinating example of how such frames can be used to separate the good guys from the villains.¹⁵ Two civilian airlines were shot down in the eighties. The first was a Korean Air Lines (KAL) plane shot down over the Soviet Union on September 1, 1983, killing 269 people, including dozens of Americans. The second was an Iranian plane that was shot down by a U.S. Navy ship on July 3, 1988, killing 290 people. In one case the enemy shot down a plane from a country allied with the United States and in the other the United States shot down an enemy’s plane.

The reaction of the American press to these incidents was totally different and completely predictable. The first incident was framed as a case of murder in which the Soviets intentionally shot down a civilian plane. As Entman tells us, the headline in *Newsweek* after the incident was typical: “Murder in the Air.” When, on the other hand, the United States shot down the Iranian plane, it was framed as a “technical glitch.” The overall theme of the Iranian plane stories was that the plane being shot down was an unfortunate accident. In both case these frames were being promoted by the president and the State Department and adopted by the U.S. media.

Without going into the technical details about each incident, it is fair to say that there is no compelling evidence that either country purposely intended to shoot down a civilian airplane. The fact that such similar incidents could be explained so differently provides an important illustration of the ethnocentrism of news. Each story was shaped to meet American assumptions about the world.

Here’s a good way to understand why journalists usually construct culturally biased news frames. There are four major questions you should ask about how any news story is constructed: (1) Who are the journalists who are responsible for creating the story? (2) Who are the major sources they use to gather information for the story? (3) What is the most important audience for the story? (4) What is

the political context surrounding the issue when the story was constructed? Let’s take each question in turn and show why it leads to a culturally biased view of the world using the two downed planes as an example.

When asking “who are the journalists,” we need to think about their national, geographic, and ethnic background. The very fact that a journalist is American, French, or Indian will have a major influence on how they see and report about the world. Next time you watch the news on television try to count the number of non-Americans you see as anchors or reporters.¹⁶ Unless you are watching an international news channel, the answer will probably be zero. Despite their often cynical view of politics, almost all journalists feel loyal to their country. When Americans are killed, it is understandably considered a tragic news story. When people are killed in another country, especially one that isn’t considered important, the story will get much less attention and the victims less sympathy. Virtually all of the journalists who were covering the downing of the two planes were Americans and this, clearly, had a major influence on their perspective.

A second reason why stories are culturally biased is that they depend almost exclusively on American sources to find out what happened. This is especially true when it comes to quick-breaking international stories such as a plane being shot down. The only people who can quickly give reporters the information they need are at the Pentagon, the White House, and the State Department. It is also much easier to get them on the phone, because reporters call the same phone numbers on a regular basis. You can assume that when the Korean airline was shot down, it would have been much more difficult to get the Soviet Minister of Transportation on the phone (first you have to find if there *is* such a thing, then you have to find the country code for Russia, then you have to find someone who speaks English, then...).

When American officials talk to journalists they don’t merely pass on information, they also attempt to explain what happened. In other words, they *frame* the events. This grants these officials tremendous power in promoting their world view to the U.S. media. While the advent of the Internet has made it easier for journalists to get access to foreign sources for information, there is little evidence that this has seriously altered their preference for their own official voices.

Once we turn to the third question—having to do with the nature of the audience—the picture becomes even clearer. Not only do we have American journalists talking to almost exclusively American sources, but they are constructing news that is designed for an American audience. The reason the traditional news media are called the “mainstream” media is because most news companies attempt to appeal to mainstream America. It is true that audiences in some parts of the country are less ethnocentric in their world view, but even they won’t tolerate an overly sympathetic picture of enemies.

The fourth and final framing question deals with the influence of political context on news stories. One way to think about this is to say that *every political story starts in the middle*. When journalists construct political news stories, they almost never start with a blank slate. The vast majority of their audience already

recognizes the major actors and can separate the good guys (friends) from the villains (enemies). In this sense most political news can be seen as an ongoing dramatic series to which people tune in to see what happens next. There is an occasional "special" when either a natural disaster takes place or a completely new candidate for president emerges, but even here journalists and audiences have a pretty good idea what to expect. The truth is that most news is not really that new.

The political context of the downing of the two planes is crystal clear: both of the other countries involved in the first incident were, at the time, considered enemies of the United States. When the KAL plane was downed in September of 1983, Ronald Regan was president of the United States and the Cold War with the Soviet Union was in full force. In fact, Reagan had dubbed the Soviet Union the "evil empire" only a few months earlier (March, 1983).

It is important to remember that allies can become enemies and enemies sometimes become allies. During World War II the Soviet Union was seen as an important U.S. ally against Nazi Germany, and the fact that it was a communist country didn't seem to matter much. Once the Cold War began, however, communism became a *very* big deal, and the rivalry between the two Super Powers continued for decades including the period when the KAL plane was downed. Relations between the two countries improved dramatically during the eighties and nineties with the fall of communism, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Russia becoming somewhat more democratic. All of these changes were clearly reflected and reinforced in the way the American press covered Russia. In recent years tensions between the United States and Russia have again risen, and this too has been reflected in the way the U.S. leadership, the press, and the public relate to that country.

The bottom line is that the news media are important agents for constantly reminding us of why we hate our enemies. This was true when the Soviet Union was the major rival of the United States and no less accurate now that Iran and Islamic terrorists are enemies. Here too one can find the same patterns in television shows, movies, and novels. The villains in these plots are almost always chosen to reflect the prevailing political climate at the time. The same is true of the way the domestic news media in all countries cover the world, especially if they are involved in ongoing conflicts. There are a few exceptions to this rule and the domestic news media will sometimes show sympathy for victims on the other side. But such exceptions are extremely rare. Once the political leadership in a given country has defined a particular group or country as enemies, the news media's major concern is to understand the nature of that threat and what is being done to stop it.

Who You Calling a Deviant?

News frames do not only provide important information about foreign friends and enemies; they also reinforce and magnify people's beliefs about "deviant" and "extremist" groups within our own country. I put these words in quotation

marks because social definitions about what is considered deviant also vary over time and place. Women's groups demanding the right to vote were once considered radical extremists. Here too, journalists do not just make this stuff up; they construct frames based on what they hear from their sources and those around them. In keeping with the PMP principle, when beliefs about these groups change—for better or for worse—so do news frames.

Minorities are often the ones that suffer the most from this inherent bias. For many years almost all U.S. journalists were White, their sources were White, their intended audiences were White, and the political climate was such that Blacks were seen as threats to the White majority.¹⁷ This type of news coverage was everywhere including the supposedly liberal *New York Times*. As pointed out by commentator David Mills, one of the stranger themes in those news stories had to do with attacks by "Giant Negroes."¹⁸ Headlines include: "Armed Negro Giant Goes Mad on Liner" (May 15, 1916), "Giant Negro Disables 4 Policemen in Fight" (June 12, 1927), and "Posse in Gun Battle Ends Giant Negro's Reign of Terror..." (March 6, 1932).¹⁹

Most would agree that news coverage of minorities in the United States is much less insulting in the twenty-first century. If we use the four framing questions that were formulated earlier, we get a better understanding of how these changes came about. As a reminder, the questions had to do with who constructs the stories, who their sources are, who the audience is, and what the political context is at the time the story is being produced. There are more journalists who are people of color than in the past, more minority sources, news stories are more likely to be written for a more ethnically diverse audience, and, perhaps most important of all, the political context concerning minorities has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. When one combines the impact of all four of these changes, one begins to understand why news about minorities is so different than in the past.

Once again, there are good reasons to believe that news media not only reflected the rise in Black status and power, but that they were also important agents in *accelerating* that process. Having leaders such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice appear in the news on a regular basis no doubt paved the way for something that many thought impossible: a Black president. There are those who say that the first Black president was really David Palmer from the TV show *24* (while others claim it was Bill Clinton). Let's also not forget President Tim Beck who was played by Morgan Freeman in the movie *Deep Impact* (1998). Here too, the fact that television and movie executives were willing to produce movies and television shows with a Black president provides an important sign that public opinion about this issue had gone through a significant change. The same can be said with regard to changes in social attitudes towards homosexuality. Producing a show like *Ellen* in the nineties, which featured an openly lesbian actress playing a lesbian character, would simply not have been possible ten years earlier.

In each of these cases, the news media not only reflected the change in the public climate, they also sent an important message to everyone that this is how people *should* relate to the issue. Political tolerance is in and intolerance is out.

The fact that this change in climate is repeatedly expressed and amplified in both the news and entertainment media not only has an influence on how people see this issue, but it also influences the way political leaders speak about the topic.

One of the most successful ways for the news media to define political deviants is to simply ignore them. Here's a good example. In addition to the Republicans and the Democrats, twelve political parties put up a candidate for president in 2008. Try to name just three of them. I will give you the answer in a minute, but first I need to make a point. The reason why you are having so much trouble is that the news media saw no reason to cover these parties. These parties are ignored because they are considered as either unimportant, extremist, or both. The last time small parties that received any serious coverage was when Ralph Nader ran in 2000 as head of the Green party (yes, that is one of the parties that put up a candidate in 2008) and especially in 1992 when Ross Perot ran as head of the Reform party (yet another from 2008).

If the news media were truly "objective" or even "fair," then they should provide equal coverage to all political parties, even those that don't have a chance of being elected. If you consider that extreme, shouldn't they be given *some* time to present their views? But when most people talk about "balanced" news they are talking about giving equal time to Democrats and Republicans. Here then is the list of small parties that ran in 2008: Constitution Party, Green Party, Libertarian Party, Independent Party, America's Third Party, Boston Tea Party, New American Independent Party, Prohibition Party, Reform Party, Party for Socialism and Liberation, Socialist Party USA, and the Socialist Workers Party.

To find out anything about these political parties—or the dozens of independent and write-in candidates who ran with no political party at all—one would have to go out and search alternative sites on the web. This is a good demonstration, by the way, of why one should be skeptical of those who oversell the power of alternative news sites to change the political world. Each of these political parties had a web site and many received some coverage on alternative news sites. None of this, however, brought them any closer to having an effect on the national, state, or even local elections. The mainstream news media ignore these political parties because journalists see them as marginal and in doing so guarantee that those parties stay that way.

When less mainstream political groups do get news coverage, the mass media have an alternative way of marginalizing them: through labels. Here are some framing terms you should look for when reading or viewing the news: "violent," "extremist," "radical," "fringe," "fanatical," "communist," "socialist," "fundamentalists," "zealots," "cult," or (one of the best) "suspected of having ties to Al-Qaeda." If a group manages to get away with only being called "wacky," "weird," or "bizarre," they should consider themselves lucky. Sometimes these labels are used by the journalists but more often they appear in news stories as quotes from politicians, government officials, or people in the military or the police. In addition, in keeping with the notion of back-door coverage, when the spokespeople from such groups are quoted, it will usually be the weirdest or scariest quotes that are used.

Now all this is not meant to suggest that some of these groups, or even most of them, do not deserve these labels. There are some dangerous groups out there, and if the mainstream media makes it more difficult for evil to survive and flourish, that's fine. The point is that these labels are often based on the news media relying too heavily on official perspectives, the need to create drama, or because journalists tend to conform to the mainstream views of their audience. When you watch or read the news you need to always ask yourself whether *you* believe the labels are justified. This, of course, is not an easy thing to do because almost all of your information comes from the media. It never hurts, therefore, to also turn to some alternative news sites to get a different perspective. It is also worth repeating that such labels can prove to be transitory. Those who fought for civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, and those who opposed either the Vietnam or Iraq wars were all labeled radicals when they began their struggle. Eventually, it was often those who opposed these ideas who found themselves in the minority.

The New Media and Cultural Bias

What about the "new" media? Do they present a less ethnocentric view of the world? To put it differently: Do Internet sites, blogs, and other alternative sources of political information present a wider, more cosmopolitan view of the world? As with many issues concerning the new technology, there isn't enough good research to come to a firm conclusion about this issue. The initial conclusions are mixed.

First the good news. When it comes to having *access* to international news, it is indeed a whole new world. Those who have an interest in foreign countries can find news in almost any language, including news that has been prepared and edited by journalists living in each country. Even those who only speak English are only a click or two away from finding out what is happening almost anywhere of the world (especially as the instant translations improve). Equally important, the events are reported in real time so those who care about international affairs can remain completely up to date.

In addition, as was mentioned before, the initial findings suggest that online news has significantly more international news than the traditional news media. This is important because according to the Pew Research center as of 2009 61 percent of Americans get some news online.²⁰ This puts online sources behind only television as a source of news and ahead of newspapers.

This finding suggests that as the number of online news users rises, more people will be exposed to international news. There is however a second question. How much is this news *truly* international. How much are the stories constructed in ways that are very different than most Americans are used to see. Are those who turn to online sources also seeing events being framed differently?

Those who have studied the new media are not overly impressed by their diversity. Chris Patterson has done quite a bit of research on the topic and convincingly argues that many online news sites give more of an *illusion* of

diversity than actual diversity.²¹ The most important reason for this is that almost all of these sites depend on four news agencies for reporting on international affairs: Reuters, AP, BBC, and Agence France Press (AFP). There are, of course, exceptions to this rule—such as CNN and the *New York Times*—but for the vast majority of news organizations it just doesn't make any economic sense to have reporters roaming the world collecting information. It turns out that outsourcing is just as important for constructing international news as it is for constructing cars.

As Patterson points out, one of the more bizarre consequences of this is that when readers are offered hundreds of links about a news story, those who click on them end up mostly reading the same story. When almost every news site depends on the same news agencies, it really doesn't matter much whether citizens get it from Yahoo.com, the online versions of the *Chicago Tribune*, or even a Canadian online news site such as the *Calgary Sun*. This is what Patterson means by the illusion of diversity.

But perhaps this is not really such a big problem. If the news agencies are producing content that provides a broader perspective on the world and more people are being exposed to these stories, then this should lower the level of cultural bias in the news. There are reasons to believe however that this is not what is actually happening.

First, when it comes to the type of news stories produced by the news agencies, they prepare them with their most important clients in mind. As in any business, this usually means appealing to their wealthiest customers which in this case are the United States and Europe. Here's the way Patterson put it:

Because news agencies must please all news editors, everywhere, they must work harder than their client journalists to create the appearance of objectivity and neutrality. In so doing, they manufacture a bland and homogeneous, but still ideologically distinctive, view of the world; stories challenging the ideological positions of the dominant political players on the world scene (in agency eyes, the US and UK) receive little attention.²²

So even when it comes to the online news world, political power can often be translated into power over the media. This principle also works when we are talking about international political power. If you think for a second about the world of television and films, this is just as true in the entertainment world as it is in news. *American Idol* is shown in a huge number of countries, but television shows produced in other countries are forced to rely on either their local audience or audiences from other nations who speak the same language. There aren't many countries where the 2009 hit *Avatar* was not shown, but how many foreign movies do *you* watch in a given year?

The second reason why online news may not be more multicultural than other forms of news has to do with editorial discretion. News agencies such as Reuters and AP do provide online news editors with quite a few international news stories

to choose from. But most online news sites also have to cater to their audience and including too much "foreign" news could drive people away.

There's a small experiment you can carry out to demonstrate this point (don't worry, no electric shocks are involved). First, go to your computer (you should probably take the book with you). Now go to any of the major online sites where most people see the news. You can either go to major portals such as Yahoo or MSN or online versions of either a local or national newspaper (such as *USA Today*). Once you are on the home page, try to get a sense of the proportion of the international news to national news on the page. This is the information that is being "pushed" at you every time you log on to one of these sites. The international stories you do find on this "front page" will mostly come from either a major international player, a well-known enemy of the United States, or some type of disaster. It is true that most of these online news sites also have a link or a tab called something like the "World," which will provide international news stories to those that are interested. In this case the more interested citizens are "pulling" international information from these sites, in other words actively searching.

One can certainly argue that a simple click brings you far more international news than you would have ever gotten from the traditional news media. Those who want to make the extra effort can carry out a series of clicks and will have access to almost every corner of the world. But now take a closer look at this international news and ask yourself two questions: (1) Did it come from one of the Western news agencies mentioned above? (2) Is there anything in the piece that sounds strange, offensive, or inappropriate for an American audience (e.g., positive coverage of Iran or Northern Korea or coverage of a country you've never heard of)? The answer to the first question is probably yes and the answer to the second will most likely be no.

Now, if you want to become a serious researcher, go one step further. Take a look at a news site that *originates* in a different country. Go, for example, to the *Times of India* (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>). Only now you are starting to see a very different type of news. It is true that here too one will find quite a few news stories that come from those news agencies as well as news about the United States. Due to previously mentioned differences in international power, Indian journalists are far more interested in the United States than American journalists are in India. But you are also seeing a very different set of news stories not only from India, but from countries that matter to India such as Pakistan and China. There will also be more news about Bollywood and, if you really want, you can also read some fascinating news about cricket. Looking closer you will find that it is not just the list of topics that is different, it is also the way the stories are written. They are written by Indian journalists using mostly Indian sources and writing for an Indian audience. You'll also find a similar Indian-centered approach to events if you read the blogs that originate in that country.

In summary, examining the content of the news media does suggest that the technological changes that have taken place may indeed provide more and easier access to international news. In addition, the fact that people need less effort (a

click or two) to get to international news may lead more people to explore other places and viewpoints. It is too early to know whether this trend will continue. One thing I have learned as a social scientist is that I only make predictions about the *past* (and even those I don't always get right).

Ideological Bias in the News

So now, finally, we get to the major question that interests most people: the questions of ideological bias. Most political activists accuse the mainstream media of bias but, not surprisingly, they don't agree on the direction. Conservatives believe that the media slant dramatically towards the liberal side of the spectrum while liberals think the media promote conservative and big-business values. In fact the truth is much more complex than suggested by either of these shallow perspectives.

It is perhaps helpful to start by stating what is generally meant when people talk about liberalism and conservatism.²³ Although such categorizations are always problematic, one way to summarize the differences is to talk about how liberals and conservatives relate to the role of government in our lives. Liberals believe that citizens should be collectively responsible for each other's welfare. This means, among other things, that the government is expected to actively intervene with policies that help the less fortunate members of society. This underlying belief often translates into a "bigger" government. Liberals tend to support policies such as universal health coverage, affirmative action, feminism, and the regulation of the financial institutions. Conservatives believe that individuals should be responsible for their own welfare and the government should stay out of people's lives as much as possible. It is assumed that when people act in their own interests, society benefits. Conservatives are against gun control, against affirmative action, and in favor of lower taxes and a free market. In addition, liberals and conservatives differ with regard to the place of religion and tradition in society. Conservatives are more support of religious values, which explains why they are Pro-Life and want less separation between church and state. Liberals are generally Pro-Choice and oppose any religion in the schools.

Those who write popular books on the topic of media bias usually provide the most simplistic approach to this issue. They simply take one side or the other in this argument and write with passion using a large number of examples to "prove" the case. These books also have great titles that talk about "lies," "the *real* story," or the "idiots" on the other side. If you were to read just one of these books, you would probably be totally convinced that the author was right on the mark about media bias. When one is confronted with so much "compelling" evidence of news coverage that clearly tilts in one direction or another, how can one not come away convinced? If, however, you decide to read a number of books from different camps one of two things will probably happen. Either you will be convinced by those who are closest to your own opinion or you will be left confused (and go back to either reading fiction, watching television, or spending even more time on Facebook).

The problem with such books is that they are based on anecdotal evidence. I should mention that the word *anecdotal* is considered an especially vulgar profanity among most social scientists. The problem with anecdotal evidence is that if you look hard enough you can usually find what you're looking for. All you have to do is scan thousands of hours of television news, listen to hours upon hours of talk radio, read thousands of pages of different newspapers, and ignore any examples that disprove your point. In fact this description is perhaps overly flattering. Most pundits probably don't really spend thousands of hours gathering the "evidence" (let's hope they at least spend *hundreds* of hours).

One of the first significant studies of media bias was a book entitled *The Media Elite* written by S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda Lichter.²⁴ Their study tried to understand the level of liberalism in the press by looking at the political views based on a relatively large survey of journalists. Their conclusions, which are often quoted by conservative groups, was that most journalists were urban, nonreligious, and liberal. Fifty-Four percent of the journalists described their views as left of center, twenty-nine percent as "middle of the road" and only 20 percent reported being on the right. This was very different than what was found in the broad public where at the time there were more people describing themselves as conservatives than liberals. The researchers also found that the journalists were far more likely to vote for Democratic candidates for president than Republicans.

Activists on the left, on the other hand, are much more likely to quote the results of a 1998 study carried by the liberal organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).²⁵ One of the important points they made in the study was that when talking about the liberalism and conservatism of journalists one had to ask about their attitudes towards specific issues. Are we talking about liberalism with regard to social issues, foreign affairs, crime, the economy? They also carried out a survey of American journalists and compared this with the views of the general public based on national polls.

There was an interesting difference when one examined journalists' opinions on a number of political issues. The first thing to note is that most journalists described themselves as "centrists" on most issues. When asked about their opinion on specific issues some important distinctions emerged especially with regard to their views on "social" and "economic" issues. The social issues had to do with topics such as gay rights and abortion while economic issues were concerned with things such as whether or not employers should provide health care benefits or whether there should be cuts to social security and Medicare benefits. The assumption with regard to economic issues was that liberals would want employers to pay for health and they would be against any cuts in government benefits. The study found that journalists were indeed more liberal in terms of social issues but were more conservative than the public with regard to economic topics. Even if some will be suspicious of the findings because the research was conducted by a liberal group, the study does remind us of the importance of clearly defining what we mean by a liberal bias. Ordinary citizens and journalists

can certainly be liberal with regard to some issues and conservative with regards to other issues.

The question of how to *measure* liberal bias is even more difficult than the issue of how to define it (although, of course, the two questions are related). There are quite a few studies, for example, that take the approach described above by asking journalists about their views and then comparing those responses to those given by the general public.²⁶ A number of these studies have also come to the conclusion that journalists tend to be more liberal. The underlying assumption is that liberal journalists will generally construct liberal news stories.

There are a number of reasons, however, to question that assumption. First, neither the individual news organ nor the journalists themselves are interested in being identified with a particular camp because it will cost them serious money if they lose significant parts of their audience. Second, few journalists would give up a great news story just because it hurt liberals. Their professional reputation and advancement depends primarily on their ability to produce interesting news stories not advancing a candidate or cause. Third, journalists are extremely dependent on official sources. As discussed in the first chapter, the relative political power of these sources is likely to be far more important than the political views of the journalist. When conservatives are in power, they are far more likely to have routine access to the reporters than liberals who are in the opposition.

Some serious studies have tried to grapple with the issue of how to measure ideological bias. One of the most important is a “meta-analysis” carried out by Dave D’Alessio and Mike Allen.²⁷ A meta-analysis looks at all of the studies done on a research question and tries to come to an overall conclusion about what was found. The idea is that if many different studies using different approaches and methodologies come to the same conclusion they are more likely to reveal what is really going on. If you’ve ever used the Rotten Tomato web site to decide whether or not to go to a movie, you get the idea. D’Alessio and Allen examined a total of 59 studies and found no significant biases in newspapers and only an extremely small liberal bias in television news.

The results from individual studies, even when they are carried out by serious researchers are mixed. Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo decided to look at a wide range of American news media and at the amount to which each news medium cited liberal and conservative think tanks.²⁸ This provided them with the first measure of ideological bias. In the second stage, they compared the news content with the voting records of representatives in the House and the Senate on various issues. Based on this measure, they found most of the news media to be far to the left of most of the political leaders.

Another study carried out by Tawnya Covert and Philo Washburn used a completely different approach and came to a different conclusion.²⁹ They did a content analysis of coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek* of crime, the environment, gender, and poverty from 1995 to 2000.³⁰ Then, they compared these results to the coverage in two clearly partisan magazines: the conservative *National Review* and the liberal *Progressive*. Finally, they calculated “bias scores” and concluded

that the two magazines were “centrists.” Some would argue that being centrist is also a form of bias, but for most critics the question is whether the media tilts towards the left or right.

One other major study worth citing is by David Niven in his book: *Tilt?: Search for Media Bias*.³⁰ Niven argues that one of the problems in measuring bias is that both pundits and researchers often find themselves covering events that are not really equivalent. In an election campaign, for example, one cannot talk about balance in the amount of coverage unless both candidates are equally newsworthy. This is unlikely to ever be the case, so the fact that one candidate receives much more news coverage does not mean the press is biased. It is worth adding that when one candidate or leader is more successful than another, the press cannot be blamed for covering it that way.

Niven examined differences in the tone of coverage when Democratic or Republican presidents found themselves with similar types of successes or failures. One example was how much credit or blame these leaders received when they found themselves facing the same level of unemployment. The logic of the study was that if the press is biased they should give one party’s leader either better or worse coverage even though the objective situation was the same. His careful analysis revealed absolutely no media bias in the coverage of these types of stories. In other words, news values are far more important than the ideological background of the journalists.

You begin to see the problem. Ideological bias is an extremely difficult thing to measure. Just as each pundit takes a different set of examples to prove a point, social scientists use different measures of bias. This reinforces why the meta-analysis is probably the best way to look at this issue. It would be nice if we could at least say with regard to ideological bias that “we know it when we see it”—as was said by Supreme Court Judge Potter Stewart in his attempt to define pornography—but we can’t.

The Media is in the Tank for Barack Obama

In order to understand why ideological bias is so complicated, let’s take what many consider the clearest case of political bias in the news media: the coverage of the 2008 election of Barack Obama. Almost everyone agrees that the U.S. press fell in love with Obama almost from the start.³¹ The press support for Obama appears to have begun when he was running against Hillary Clinton and this affection appeared only to grow more passionate in the race against John McCain. This was the conventional wisdom, even among Democrats.

There was a wonderful routine about this bias on the notoriously liberal *Saturday Night Live* TV show during the primary race between Obama and Clinton.³² The two candidates are having a debate, and the moderator asks the candidates some rather difficult knowledge questions. The bit goes like this:

Moderator: Senator Hillary Clinton. Nigeria’s Foreign Affairs Minister can you name him?

Clinton: I, uh ... don't know.

Moderator: Odo Madueke. Senator Obama, same question.

Obama: Odo Madueke.

Moderator: Correct! Senator Clinton, Sri Lanka's Deputy Ambassador to the U.N. Who is it?

Clinton: Oh, oh, it's Presad, uh, uh...

Moderator (interrupts): It's a trick question, that post is currently vacant. Senator Obama, same question.

Obama: I don't believe there is one at the moment.

Moderator: Correct!

There was another episode on *SNL* where the fawning correspondent's question to Obama is whether the senator is comfortable and whether he'd like a pillow. In an example of reality imitating fiction, Hillary Clinton referred to the routine in the next real debate between the two candidates. She was protesting the fact that she was always forced to answer the questions first and then added: "Maybe we should ask Barack if he's comfortable and needs another pillow."

As noted, there was also a widely-shared belief that the media was extremely biased for Barack Obama during election campaign against John McCain. In fact in a poll carried out by the highly respected Pew Research Center in October of 2008, 70 percent of Americans believed that the press was biased for Obama and only 9 percent thought the press favored McCain (the rest either thought the candidates were getting equal treatment or didn't give an opinion).³³

The Pew Research Center also did a very serious content analysis of the news content of over 2,400 news stories from forty-eight news outlets during the six weeks from the end of the conventions through the final debate.³⁴ Both the results and their interpretation provide important evidence about the nature of bias in the press. The researchers found that the press didn't give an unusual amount of favorable coverage to Obama; it simply gave a disproportionate amount of negative coverage to McCain. In fact there were three times as many unfavorable news stories about McCain than there were positive ones. Obama, by contrast had a fairly similar amount of positive and negative stories written about him. So on the face of it, this should be the smoking gun: The U.S. press *was* in the tank for Barack Obama.

There is, however, one major problem with this conclusion. Was all the negative news about McCain because the journalists didn't want him to be president (assumedly because they don't like Republicans) or was it because there was simply much more negative news to report about the McCain's campaign? This brings us back to the earlier point: the more successful politicians will always get more favorable coverage. The Pew research shows, for example, the McCain coverage started positively but became sharply negative after his first reaction to the economic crisis (he said that the "fundamentals of our economy are strong"). McCain then suspended his campaign and returned to Washington, which to quite a few people seemed more of a campaign gimmick than a serious response to the crisis. Now add to that the fact that Obama was continually rising in the

polls as McCain was dropping and you begin to ask: was there simply more bad news about McCain or did the press make a conscious or unconscious decision to report more bad news about McCain and less about Obama?

Here is the way the Pew report put it:

One question likely to be posed is whether these findings provide evidence that the news media are pro-Obama. Is there some element in these numbers that reflects a rooting by journalists for Obama and against McCain, unconscious or otherwise? The data do not provide conclusive answers. They do offer a strong suggestion that winning in politics begat winning coverage, thanks in part to the relentless tendency of the press to frame its coverage of national elections as running narratives about the relative position of the candidates in the polls and internal tactical maneuvering to alter those positions. Obama's coverage was negative in tone when he was dropping in the polls, and became positive when he began to rise, and it was just so for McCain as well.³⁵

Now this certainly sounds like a PMP cycle. Political change (McCain making mistakes and falling in the polls) leads to media change (more negative coverage of McCain) that probably led to further political change (fewer people willing to vote for McCain). As the Pew researchers put it by looking at the actual events, it would appear that the coverage can be better attributed to "reinforcing—rather than press generated effects of the media."³⁶

The problem with this smoking gun is that Barack Obama had a lot of things going for him that had nothing to do with a liberal bias. He was simply a great news story. Here is the first Black man in the history of the country with a realistic chance to become president of the United States. He has an extremely charismatic personality, an amazing speaker, and someone who ran an almost flawless campaign. Huge and enthusiastic crowds greeted him not only in the United States but also abroad. From a news point of view Hillary Clinton was the first woman with a serious chance to become president, but she was already a well known personality. John McCain ran an extremely problematic campaign so the question which cannot be answered is whether the media would have covered him differently if his popularity had *risen* and Obama's had fallen during this time.³⁷

The point is that there are many cases in which the ideological and commercial interests of the press push in the same direction, and this makes it impossible to sort out the "real" reason for bias. The best tests for liberal bias take place when these considerations run in *opposite directions*, cases in which the assumedly liberal news media finds themselves with an extremely popular conservative candidate or a major event that gives clear advantages to conservative arguments.

Here are some examples to consider. President Ronald Reagan was often called the "the Great Communicator" because of his ability to speak in ways that resonated with so many Americans. He was an extremely conservative leader but, in an important biography by Mark Hertsgaard, the author claimed that the

supposedly liberal press was mostly a mouthpiece for the Reagan White House.³⁸ A second example would be the amazingly positive and enthusiastic coverage of George H.W. Bush during the first Gulf War.³⁹ As is often said, nothing succeeds like success. It is true that his popularity declined as the country's attention turned inward, but it certainly suggests that Republican presidents can achieve enthusiastically positive coverage. The same can be said about the extremely positive coverage George W. Bush received after the September 11, 2001, attacks.⁴⁰

There are also other examples that suggest that commercial considerations are far more important than any ideological predilections. Consider, for example, the massive coverage of the Monica Lewinsky affair. Clinton was a very popular Democratic president, but the press devoted an enormous amount of time and space to this affair because it was such an incredibly juicy story. I think it would be fair to say that Democrats caught in good scandals are just as likely to be skewered by the media as Republicans. Here are two examples: New York Governor Eliot Spitzer who had to resign because he visited prostitutes and Governor Rod Blagojevich who was arrested and later impeached for allegedly trying to sell Barack Obama's Senate seat. These were both Democrats and yet the news and entertainment media turned each of these politicians into national jokes.

There is one more point that you should keep in mind when thinking about the supposedly liberal media. The news media love, more than anything else, conflict and war. In fact without conflict there wouldn't be much left to report apart from Brangelina and Koala bears coming to the local zoo. A truly liberal, dovish press would put much more emphasis on peace and reconciliation. But peace is simply not newsworthy. Imagine replacing the normally menacing music that marks the beginning of "Action News" with the Beatles song "All you Need is Love." It doesn't really work, does it? Peace and love make for great music but lousy news. There is a good reason for the adage: "if it bleeds it leads." The world portrayed by the news media is frightening, and this emphasis provides important advantages to those leaders who are promoting a tough stand against crime and a hawkish approach to foreign affairs.

So what's the bottom line? Based on the evidence, there is good reason to believe that most American journalists tend to be more liberal than the average American. It is also difficult to claim that this difference never has an influence on the way journalists cover politics, especially when it comes to social issues and human rights. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that cultural bias is a far more powerful influence on how news is constructed. Journalists and their audiences are both products of the social and political environment in which they live. In addition, the fact that the cultural filter is for the most part invisible makes it that much more effective. People are rarely forced to confront their most basic assumptions about the political world.

There is another filter employed by the news media that has been alluded to before and has a major impact on the construction of news: *commercial bias*. Commercial bias refers to the tendency of journalists to choose, highlight, and create dramatic news stories. Stay tuned because that's coming up next.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. There was a good deal of discussion in this chapter about the notion of frames. Find an example of a public debate that is going on in the news media. Try to give a title to at least two competing frames that are being promoted and think about the language or visual images antagonists are using (or should use) to promote their frames. Would you say that the media coverage is more sympathetic to one of the frames? Are there any interesting differences in how the debate is framed in various news media?
2. Do you think that most news media have a liberal or conservative bias? If you have an opinion about this issue, try to take the *opposite* position and see if you can find news stories that support that position. Now think about your actual opinion. How could you convince someone from the opposite camp that your claims about media bias are correct?