

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power

Robert M. Entman

School of Media and Public Affairs, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052

This article proposes integrating the insights generated by framing, priming, and agenda-setting research through a systematic effort to conceptualize and understand their larger implications for political power and democracy. The organizing concept is bias, that curiously undertheorized staple of public discourse about the media. After showing how agenda setting, framing and priming fit together as tools of power, the article connects them to explicit definitions of news slant and the related but distinct phenomenon of bias. The article suggests improved measures of slant and bias. Properly defined and measured, slant and bias provide insight into how the media influence the distribution of power: who gets what, when, and how. Content analysis should be informed by explicit theory linking patterns of framing in the media text to predictable priming and agenda-setting effects on audiences. When unmoored by such underlying theory, measures and conclusions of media bias are suspect.

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This article proposes integrating the insights generated by framing, priming, and agenda-setting research through a new, systematic effort to conceptualize and understand their implications for political power. The organizing concept is bias, that curiously undertheorized staple of public discourse about the media.

With all the heat and attention it incites among activists and ordinary citizens, bias is yet to be defined clearly, let alone received much serious empirical attention (Niven, 2002). The term seems to take on three major meanings. Sometimes, it is applied to news that purportedly distorts or falsifies reality (*distortion bias*), sometimes to news that favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict (*content bias*), and sometimes to the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content (*decision-making bias*). This essay argues that we can make bias a robust, rigorous, theory-driven, and productive research concept by abandoning the first use while deploying new, more precisely delineated variants of the second and third.

Depending on specific research objectives, the distinctions among these three concepts can be crucial (Scheufele, 2000). The present article suggests that parsimonious

Corresponding author: Robert M. Entman; e-mail: entman@gwu.edu.

integration can nonetheless serve at least two goals. First, systematically employing agenda setting, framing, and priming under the conceptual umbrella of bias would advance understanding of the media's role in distributing power, revealing new dimensions and processes of critically *political* communication.¹ Second, such a project would offer normative guidance for scholars, for journalists striving to construct more "fair and balanced" news, and for the many citizens and activists who feel victimized by biased media (cf. Eveland & Shah, 2003).

Most of the studies that do explicitly explore bias focus on presidential campaigns and administrations and find little evidence of decisive or consistent, liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican bias (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Niven, 2002; but cf. Jamieson & Waldman, 2002; Kuypers, 2002). Yet this conclusion sits uneasily alongside findings, not usually filed under "bias" scholarship, that reveal news consistently favoring one side. Examples of such apparent content bias include the media's images of minorities (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Kang, 2005) and their coverage of U.S. foreign policy (Entman, 2004). The consolidating question, then, is whether the agenda setting and framing content of texts and their priming effects on audiences fall into persistent, politically relevant *patterns*. Powerful players devote massive resources to advancing their interests precisely by imposing such patterns on mediated communications. To the extent we reveal and explain them, we illuminate the classic questions of politics: who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1966)?

Reconsidering connections

Scholars can shed new light on bias by examining linkages among the three concepts that have received such intense scholarly scrutiny. We can define *framing* as the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation. Fully developed frames typically perform four functions: problem definition, causal analysis, moral judgment, and remedy promotion (Entman, 1993, 2004). Framing works to shape and alter audience members' interpretations and preferences through *priming*. That is, frames introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way (see, e.g., Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997).

The strategic framing contests that occupy the heart of the political process take place in the first instance over the agenda (Riker, 1986). *Agenda setting* can thus be seen as another name for successfully performing the first function of framing: defining problems worthy of public and government attention. Among other things, agenda problems can spotlight societal conditions, world events, or character traits of a candidate. The second or "attribute" level of agenda setting (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001) centrally involves three types of claims that happen to encompass the core business of strategic framing: to highlight the causes of problems, to encourage moral judgments (and associated affective responses), and to promote favored

policies. Priming, then, is a name for the goal, the intended effect, of strategic actors' framing activities.²

The oft-quoted but misleading phrase that inaugurated the modern study of media effects is that: "the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13, emphasis in original). Although the distinction between "what to think" and "what to think *about*" is not entirely clear, the former seems to mean what people decide, favor, or accept, whereas the latter refers to the considerations they "think about" in coming to such conclusions. The distinction misleads because, short of physical coercion, all influence over "what people think" derives from telling them "what to think about." If the media really are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think.

Elites presumably care about what people think because they want them to behave in certain ways, supporting or at least tolerating elite activities. Given limitations of time, attention, and rationality, getting people to think (and behave) in a certain way requires selecting some things to tell them about and efficiently cueing them on how these elements mesh with their own schema systems. Because the best succinct definition of power is the ability to get others to do what one wants (Nagel, 1975), "telling people what to think about" is how one exerts political influence in noncoercive political systems (and to a lesser extent in coercive ones). And it is through framing that political actors shape the texts that influence or prime the agendas and considerations that people think about.

Having shown how agenda setting, framing, and priming fit together as critical tools in the exercise of political power, we now need to connect them to bias. To help avoid the terminological confusion discussed previously, I propose to distinguish bias from *news slant*. Slant characterizes individual news reports and editorials in which the *framing favors one side over the other in a current or potential dispute*. Mainstream news organizations contend that they treat competing frames equivalently, ensuring that their reports do not slant. Yet, political actors constantly (and strategically) complain that the media favor their opponents. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that these elites might sometimes have it right: They or their opponents do often succeed in imposing slant on mainstream media reports. Slanted news is not, as journalists tend to insist, the rare exception.

Beyond racial issues and foreign policy, scholars often discover a decided tilt—at least on the dimensions that they (imperfectly) measure. These include coverage of congressional candidates (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002), protest movements (Rojecki, 1999), tax policy (Entman, Bell, Frith, & Miller, 2005), unions (Martin, 2004; but cf. Manheim, 2004), and media bias itself. On the latter, Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) found that most coverage asserts that liberal bias permeates the press. In other words, the allegedly liberal media ironically and consistently slant in favor of conservatives' preferred framing when the media

themselves are on the agenda as a political issue. Watts et al. (1999) also showed that much of the public accepts this view.

Scholars need to assess the larger theoretical implications in these demonstrated instances of consistent one-sided framing. If the patterns of slant persist across time, message dimensions, and media outlets, it means that the media may be systematically assisting certain entities to induce their preferred behavior in others. That is to say, the media may be helping to distribute political power to particular groups, causes, or individuals. This brings us to the proposed definition of content bias: *consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side in conflicts over the use of government power*. By this definition, to reveal media content biases, we must show patterns of slant that regularly prime audiences, consciously or unconsciously,³ to support the interests of particular holders or seekers of political power.

By introducing the foregoing definitions, this article seeks to reduce the confusion and imprecision sown by the three most common uses of “bias.” The greatest advantage of thinking about slant and bias in this way is that it avoids irresolvable questions about truth and reality. It retires the notion of distortion bias, which serves mainly as an epithet against news that some actors dislike. As political communication research demonstrates, indisputable facts play only a partial role in shaping the framing words and images that flow into an audience’s consciousness. Because almost any nontrivial reality will be controversial—susceptible to two or more framings—what we can and should do is to determine *whose power over government action is likely enhanced by media framing*. In other words, we should study how the news slants in particular instances and whether slant falls into recurrent patterns that, in Schattschneider’s (1960) classic formulation, “mobilize bias”⁴ in the political system by helping some actors regularly prevail over others.

Having refined the second common meaning—content bias—it remains to consider the third, which refers, usually pejoratively, to the inevitable influence of newsmakers’ belief systems on the texts they produce. It seems pointless either to deny or to denounce the existence of these decision-making biases. All information-processing persons and organizations employ what might more neutrally be called heuristics. This is the only way they can cope with bounded rationality and information overload. The media’s decision biases operate within the minds of individual journalists and within the processes of journalistic institutions, embodied in (generally unstated) rules and norms that guide their processing of information and influence the framing of media texts.

Toward more precise formulations of slant and bias

Equation 1 given below serves as a succinct metaphor for the complicated interactions of decision biases with other forces that give rise to news slant. The point of displaying these nonquantifiable forces as an equation is to show that any pattern of news slant has roots that include but are not limited to the decision biases. The

formula asserts that the degree to which a single news construction favors one ideology, interest, group, issue stand, or individual against opponents is a function of the perceived facts plus the interactions of each side's skill at news management with journalistic decision biases. In this light, it makes little sense to assert, as so many critics do, that journalists' personal ideological views are both the only decision biases of consequence *and* the sole forces shaping slant. The illustrated formula depicts a framing contest between the president's party and the opposition.

$$NS = F + [S_{WH} \times (B_E + B_M + B_I)] - [S_O \times (B_E + B_M + B_I)] + E \quad (1)$$

where NS = slant of a specific news item; F = perceived facts; S_{WH} = skill of White House/administration news managers; S_O = skill of opposition party news managers; B_E = decision biases arising from evaluation of the political game; B_M = decision biases arising from market competition; B_I = decision biases arising from personal ideology; and E = event context and other sources of variation.

As the equation suggests, any given set of perceived facts can yield news that slants toward one side, the other side, or even (as in the journalistic ideal) neither side. Because facts rarely speak for themselves, strategic actors must deploy such assets as charisma, a delicate balance of intimidation and flattery, and rhetorical proficiency to promote favored framing. Journalists' responses to these blandishments emerge most importantly from the evaluative standards they apply to actors playing the political game and from the production norms encouraged by market competition. The former include a tendency to slant news favorably toward the side regarded as most powerful, popular, and unified. The latter include such well-documented qualities of news as simplification and fragmentation. Ideologies held by reporters and editors may also play a role in shaping the news (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). However, in news stories and even editorials, personal ideology combines with all the other forces in the model, including external spin managers and internal pressures from owners and executives responding to market incentives (Bennett, 2007; Entman, 1989; cf. Bennett, 1990; Gilens & Hertzman, 2000 on editorials). The final term in the equation denotes event context (newsworthy happenings around the same time) and other unpredictable variables that can substantially influence framing. An example would be the way the sudden eruption of war between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Israel displaced coverage of the Iraq war during the summer of 2006.⁵

If the decision biases persistently converge with stable concentrations of political skill and resources possessed by particular interests, media frames could consistently favor certain policy outcomes and political actors. Such content biases could exist even where journalists and news organizations possess no conscious ideological goals, indeed where they consciously pursue balance (cf. Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992).

Conveniently enough for analysts, the United States has two significant political parties, and journalists organize their source networks and news narratives around them. How might we describe the degree of news slant in the simplified but realistic

case where there are but two strategic actors competing over the framing of news in the national media? If we analogize the national media to a marketplace of ideas, we can develop a descriptive metric of aggregate slant. Such a measure is the first step toward demonstrating media bias. Elsewhere, I have suggested adapting the Hirschman-Herfindahl index (HHI) of market concentration from economics to news diversity (Entman, 2006). The HHI equals the sum of squares of the percentages of market share held by each firm in a market. The maximum score is 10,000, where one firm holds 100% market share ($100^2 = 10,000$), and the score approaches 0 where many firms hold miniscule market shares.

The analogy from HHI to the marketplace of ideas is imperfect—the HHI assumes that each firm offers the same product, whereas stories can differ considerably. Many other measures might turn out to be more useful, so this example is offered merely to illustrate the potential for developing metrics of slant and bias that more accurately gauge the media's effects on political power. We can assume three firms in the marketplace of (potentially) slanted stories: the White House, the opposition party, and the neutral informer. It is inherently a concentrated market because it has only three suppliers, so will automatically generate a non-zero HHI score. This is not unrealistic. American political discourse is constrained, the marketplace of ideas concentrated relative to many European countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The Aggregate News Slant Index (ANSI) formula is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{ANSI} = & (\% \text{ share of side with highest portion of framing paragraphs})^{2.5} \\ & + (\% \text{ share of side with second highest portion of framing paragraphs})^2 \\ & + (\% \text{ share of side with lowest portion of framing paragraphs})^{1.5} \quad (2) \end{aligned}$$

In principle, measures of slant can and should incorporate visual and verbal information and even aural aspects of the text, as long as all components are selected in accordance with an underlying theory of framing effects. To conserve space, this example employs only verbal assertions. Reflecting the inherently concentrated U.S. idea market, scores can range at the lowest to about 771 (rather than the zero theoretically reachable by the HHI), if each actor has a 1/3 share. It can reach 10,000 just like the HHI, should one actor dominate 100% of the paragraphs with framing assertions. Each side's share of the "market" is raised to a slightly different power (averaging out to 2). This allows the index to be interpreted analogously to the HHI: the higher the score, the more slanted the discourse toward the dominant supplier.

Assuming the paragraph as the unit of analysis, coverage in which 55% of paragraphs favor the White House, 35% the opposition, and 10% the neutral informer (by balancing assertions favoring the White House and opposition frames) yields a score of 2,369. The scores for each side would have to be supplied to indicate which one the skew favored. Coverage in which the framing shares were identical but broke 55%–35% for the opposition would yield the same score of 2,369, but the opposite substantive interpretation. Again, this is but one metric and better ones that take into

account more factors (e.g., potential differences in individual responses to frames) should be developed.

One crucial limitation of this equation is that any final ANSI should properly weigh all those elements of framing that demonstrably have priming effects—that decisively move audiences' thoughts, feelings, and actions. In other words, to make the most accurate inferences about slant, one should not count equally every assertion that seems to support the White House line or the opposition. For example, in framing the Bush tax cuts of 2001, there is good theoretical reason to weigh assertions that the policy would result in great collective benefits more heavily than assertions that the policy would yield benefits to particular income classes. This is because American citizens tend to develop "sociotropic" preferences based more on their sense of a policy's overall societal impact than its impact on themselves (see Entman et al., 2005). Granted, such precise, theory-based sifting of content analytical data is a tall order, but not an impossible one. Although political psychology and opinion scholarship does not exactly offer a cornucopia of established generalizations on which bias researchers might build definitive measurements, it does provide plenty of guidance. The caveat is merely that we incorporate state-of-the-art knowledge about agenda setting, framing, and priming into bias analysis and not that such analysis must await final conclusions from political behavioral research.

By the definitions advanced here, if we wanted to argue that systematic media content bias exists, we would add together the results of analyzing the slant in many reports, across specific policy issues, candidacies, or other objects of attention, in various media and over time to create a Bias Index (BI):

$$BI = (ANSI_1 + ANSI_2 + ANSI_3 + \dots + ANSI_i) / i \quad (3)$$

Complicating any definitive conclusions from such a formula is that political actors possess mixtures of interests and positions. An individual, group, or interest favored by news slant in one domain may be disfavored in another. For instance, although most affluent people support lower income and estate taxes, they conflict over a wide range of policy issues involving their particular investments and they may identify personally as environmentalists, evangelicals, or homosexuals (or all three). This complicates what it would mean to say the media are biased toward the upper class. The dynamic nature of bias creates another analytical dilemma. The forces that slant the news can change: A charismatic, rhetorically gifted Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton may be replaced by a less-talented George H. W. Bush or Al Gore; unexpected events like 9/11 can overwhelm an issue agenda; and new technologies can disrupt the media market.

Despite these limitations, the approach in this study could yield important benefits. Scholars could comprehensively inventory media framing of federal tax policy since 1980. Experiments and other research might specify those elements in the framing of tax debates that move audiences, which could serve as bases for content analyses of the major national broadcast and print media. If the outcome were a BI score of (say) +4,471 for cutting taxes we might conclude that the

national media have been biased in favor of tax reduction since 1980. Multiple ambiguities would remain: Does reporting of various tax proposals and their impacts vary a lot over the years or among media outlets? How long must slant persist to merit classification as bias? What score on the BI crosses over from reasonably balanced into biased?⁶ These are just for starters. But at least scholars would be on firmer ground in assessing the systematic impacts of media framing, agenda setting, and priming on power in the realm of tax policy (see Entman et al., 2005; Hacker & Pierson, 2005, for relevant findings).

Conclusions

Some researchers in the critical studies tradition might conclude that the media meet the suggested standards for bias at a more fundamental level: consistent framing in favor of capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, individualism, consumerism, and White privilege, among other deeply entrenched values that certainly help allocate power in American society (Budd, Craig, & Steinman, 1999). However, this research is more concerned with media interventions in the day-to-day contests to control government power *within* the snug ideological confines of mainstream American politics. These set the boundaries for public discourse on most government policies. They also set the boundaries for discussions of the media as political actors, which are widely seen as exhibiting liberal bias. That belief, despite the lack of empirical evidence, has become a valuable power resource for conservative elites (Watts et al., 1999).

If anything, research cited previously suggests a net advantage for conservatives across a range of issues and groups. This should not be surprising. Even if journalists working for the national media tend to be predominantly (though moderately) liberal (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2004), that could be outweighed by such factors highlighted in Equation 1 as the simplification and fragmentation biases (Bennett, 2007), conservatives' deeper financial and organizational resources for skilled media management (Hacker & Pierson, 2005), the limits that the campaign finance system places on Democrats' rhetorical options (Entman, 2005), and the strong influence of corporate advertisers and owners on media production incentives (Baker, 1994; Bennett, 2007).

Again, however, we need more conceptual refinement and empirical research before reaching any final conclusions. I do think it reasonable to suggest that when news clearly slants, those officials favored by the slant become more powerful, freer to do what they want without the anticipation that voters might punish them. And those who lose the framing contest become weaker, less free to do (or say) what they want. Integrating framing, agenda setting, and priming research by applying the concept of media bias to illuminate political power in America offers at least two benefits, then. Not only could it yield wide-ranging and perhaps converging streams of empirical evidence about patterns in the media's problem definitions, causal analyses, moral judgments, and preferred policies that do make a continuing difference to who

gets what, when, and how, but it could also improve normative prescriptions for enhancing the media's contributions to democracy.

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Notes

- 1 This article considers only the mainstream power struggles, usually between liberals and conservatives roughly (but increasingly—Hacker and Pierson [2005]) aligned with the two major U.S. parties that structure the electoral system. Space limitations preclude exploration of the media's role in reinforcing (or refereeing conflicts over) deeper structures of power (cf. Carragee & Roefs, 2004).
- 2 Kimberly Gross (personal communication) suggests that scholars often seem to choose among the three terms based less on theoretical distinctions among them than on the dependent variable of interest. They tend to use agenda setting when explaining the "most important problem" survey response; framing, when tracing impacts on policy preferences; and priming, when exploring evaluations of political leaders.
- 3 The literature repeatedly demonstrates impacts of unconscious reactions on attitudes and actions (see Kang, 2005).
- 4 Writing at a time when the minimal media consequences paradigm reigned, Schattschneider himself was not referring to media bias, but his use of the term inspires the one advanced here.
- 5 As complex as the illustrative formula already is, it omits such complications as the interactions of perceived "facts" with the skill of opposing media manipulators and the dynamic nature of news slant, which can change with changing facts or new tactics by one side or the other. These are beyond the scope of a brief essay.
- 6 There is no objective, bright line dividing reasonably balanced from slanted framing; slant and bias, matters of degree, exist on continua.

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