

Bias in the news -- David Paletz' Views

Based on David Paletz' speech "[Media Influence: Public Policy and Public Opinion.](#)"

The term "bias," as used here, refers to the sense of twisting or "angling" news stories in ways that tend to alter or distort inevitably the reality that the news is based on in the very process of constructing a story made of words and visual images that can only partially capture "real" events. Bias, in this sense, does not refer to slanting the news toward a particular political or ideological viewpoint.

I. FORM BIAS

- Ordering (eliminate chaos, artificial order, condensation, problem-solution, chronology, cause-effect)
 - News writers and producers need to create stories that have a structure so that readers and viewers can follow what is being described. Even though participants in many situations may experience the event as confusing or chaotic (e.g. a flood, a shooting at the mall, a disorderly meeting), the reporter's job is to create news that makes sense of it all. Typically that involves adding to the "real" events an order that eliminates chaos by using the conventions of good writing and story-telling. For example, narrative structures tell stories from beginning to end with a sense of culmination and resolution that no one inside the event could have known at the time. News writers often use organizational schemes such as cause and effect, or problem-solution to clarify complex issues. And, of course, a news story is always shorter and less complex than the actual events it is based on. Thus reporters must condense the story into a manageable and understandable lengths by leaving out details that the reporter concludes are of lesser importance. All of this is an artificial "addition" to the reality that is the basis of a news story, thus, a "biasing" of reality.
- Drama (fast cuts, artificial conflict by juxtaposition, emotion)
 - Our modern video age has brought with it a preference by many viewers for movement, action, and drama in what we watch. Video news producers, like action movie directors, know that many in the audience will lose interest without some drama, movement and excitement in the story. While emotional involvement certainly drives video news, print news also is affected by the audience response to emotion and action. For video news, fast cuts from scene to scene add drama. Editors can create a sense of conflict (and, thus, an emotional response) by placing shots of news figures stating differing views next each other as if in a debate. And for as long as there has been video news reporting, emotional responses from people covered in the news has served to "hook" audiences into the story.
- Aggressive interviews (makes people defensive, shot-gun, not normal rules of conversation = strange reactions)
 - The kind of conversation most of us have in ordinary life (including many people who are sources of news) tends to be polite, responsive and supportive. Interviews with reporters can sometimes be quite different in ways that would be considered unfriendly or rude in everyday life. When reporters shout accusatory questions unexpectedly at a news source, raise unanticipated questions that suggest wrong-doing or question the sources motives, even those with experience in dealing with media can behave in unusual or unflattering ways.
- Access (You can't cover what can't be seen or where you aren't allowed to go. Thinking/caring and motives are invisible too.)
 - Reporters can't cover features of a story that they don't have access to. Places reporters can't go (e.g. North Korea, secret military facilities, secured private property, etc.) get less coverage in news and that may distort our understanding of events. One location in almost all news stories that reporters don't have complete access to is the minds of those involved in the story. We often can't be sure whether decision-makers were thoughtful or careless, criminals were cruel or delusional, politicians were trying to serve the public interest or simply assure their own reelection.

- Visual technique (motion/turmoil, camera angles for intimacy, superiority, warmth, nerves)
 - With visual news presentations we tend to think that the camera represents what the viewers' eyes would have seen had they been there. In fact, camera angles, close-ups, movement, choice to focus on details (e.g. quivering hands, a yawn, a flash of what might be anger) can (artificially?) create an interpretation or mood that may be quite different than what individual "on the scene" actually experienced

II. MENTAL STRUCTURE BIAS

- Theme/interpretation, also known as Schemata or Frames (social conventions, familiar "myths," e.g. Paletz' massage parlor example, self-serving politicians, etc.)
 - Even when news stories give us "just the facts" (who, what, when, where, why), the story is about something larger than just the events themselves. News reports typically place the story in some context of significance to the reader/viewer, that is they often provide a theme. Any event can take on multiple different "meanings" depending on what theme is selected by the news writer. There are quite a number of common themes that appear regularly in news coverage. A few of these include "the cover-up," "corrupt politicians," "there's some good in everyone." "the common people help each other in times of crisis," etc.
- Definition of what is news (timeliness, prominence, significant consequence, human interest, proximity, threat and reassurance).
 - What stories are covered by reporters and what information is included in stories is partially dictated by what is generally considered newsworthy, generally in the news business or specifically by a particular news organization in order to fit the definition.
- Knowledge of news reporters/editors (wrong understanding, complexity and time, limited interest in topic).
 - What information is covered in the news and how well it is covered depends on the knowledge of the reporter in relation to the topic. If reporters don't understand a complex issue well (e.g. financial regulation, cutting edge science, etc.) the story will be less complete, the "theme" may be inappropriate and the viewers will understand less. News writers also adapt stories to what they believe is the level of understanding of the reader/viewer. News stories created for an audience with limited ability to understand the topic will be simplified, perhaps over-simplified (or it becomes confusing).
- Source influence (elites and officials get interviewed others don't, sensationalist views get more attention)
 - News stories need identified sources for the information included. Reporters seek quotations for credibility and to make the story more interesting or more human. But among those who may have insights on a story, elected officials, famous people and the "usual" experts are more likely to appear in the story and have their views included than less well-known (but sometimes more knowledgeable) people. Bono may be interviewed on hunger in Africa but a professor of food security with years of research may not. Government officials (especially those up for election) almost always have thoughts on issues and make easy sources for quoting by the press. Sensational or extreme views can create extra emotion and drama and so individuals who express such views may be more likely to receive press coverage than those who are more "middle of the road." Some people (famous or seeking fame) adopt extreme views or actions specifically to get press attention.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF ISSUES: EFFECTS ON PUBLIC OPINION

What effects does news coverage have on the opinions readers and viewers have toward the topics covered?

- Stabilization of opinion by the public (esp. of themes).
- Raised expectations of effectiveness (of the establishment, government, self).
- Agenda setting (a mild effect in areas the public knows and are of low emotional content).
 - Media polls tend to affect the opinions they purport to reflect.
- Amplification of views already held by members of the public on all sides of an issue.
- Change/creation of new views (when the audience's knowledge base is low and personal connection to the topic is weak).

The News in Summary

1. The news is less than reality. Why?
 - i. Editing out of detail
 - ii. Missing or misunderstood information
 - iii. Lack of access to key elements of the story
2. The news is more than reality. Why?
 - i. Themes and interpretations are added
 - ii. Order is created in stories
 - iii. Source and commentator influences add select interpretations
3. The news is different from reality. Why
 - i. Drama elements emphasized alter "reality."
 - ii. Ordering, framing and context effects do as well.
4. The news is sometime adversarial (but not too often).
5. The news is less influential than we think in most cases.
 - i. It is not really partisan (We just notice information we disagree with more.).
 - ii. It reinforces views more than changes them (except for the totally new).
6. Bias is more subtle than we realize.



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