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Bias in Journalism Today

Everywhere Americans turn, they are bombarded by opinions of journalists. There are left-wing reporters adamantly campaigning for environmentally-friendly legislation, and right-wing news anchors covering stories about the “failing” presidency. Journalism is everywhere, and it becomes difficult to tell straight truth from sensationalized facts. Michael Schudson defines journalism as "the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance" (Schudson, 11). That’s a big responsibility. Understanding the origin of journalism’s purpose and its process of “producing information about contemporary affairs” is crucial to understanding the appropriate time and place for bias. Generally, journalists do well at objectively reporting the news. However, they are the handful of opinionated journalists that cannot help but to fill the content of their stories with loaded words and “between the lines” reporting. Sometimes, this can hurt the audience reading the story, but other times, it can be of advantage to the reader. Today, journalists play a vital role in the American society: their job is to report news that is important and interesting to the public in an unbiased, accurate manner. However, when bias gets in the way of objective reporting, it can be destructive to the journalist, or it can be helpful to the reader.

A journalist, defined by Joseph Turow, is “an individual who is trained to report nonfiction events to an audience”. This can include reporters, editors, or producers, and can span a wide variety of media forms including print (magazines, newspapers), electronic (radio, TV, internet), and now, audiovisual reports on the Web. Journalists have forever relied on newspapers as the main medium of conveying their message, but over the years have expanded to radio, television, and now, the ever-growing “cyber world” of blogs, podcasts, and online text articles. (Turow, 53)

Since the beginning of journalism, journalists have acquired some major responsibilities. In colonial America, as conflict with Britain started to increase, journalists were finding it harder and harder to stay neutral while bringing the news to the public. They became obliged to take sides and print partisan stories (Schudson, 73). Journalists are still fighting this battle today; amidst an atmosphere of war, change, and economic downfall, journalists are finding it difficult to stay objective when reporting the news. This battle gets even more difficult when journalists are trying to “spin” every story that they write to have a greater impact on their readers. Steve Salerno states that this is what journalism has evolved into: “dealing with that life *is not*”. Journalists tend to exaggerate the truth in order to make their story more appealing to the reader; sometimes to a point where it is not the original story-something completely different. Michael Schudson, who generally praises the success of objective journalism, even says that some journalists are becoming biased, explaining that some journalists end up “knowing what the real event looks like, but then coloring it to advance a political, economic, or ideological aim”. Many critics agree that this problem is affecting the journalists greatly, and thus, they are beginning to fail at their jobs. The job, which Gunilla Carlsson states, is “crucial to the development of a country”.

In any democracy around the world, the citizens must learn to think for themselves, and be able to understand the happenings of the country, and participate in the political process. This is where journalism enters the picture. Journalists must report the news in order to “greatly influence” the citizen’s ability to partake in this process. This means that “journalists have a responsibility towards their fellow citizens to provide correct and analytical information”.

(Carlsson, 2) Likewise, in America, journalism serves the same purpose. Journalists must report the news of the nation in a way that his or her readers will be able to understand, be educated about the progressions of the nation, and therefore, be able to form his or her own opinion in order to participate in the national conversation about current topics. Herein lies the critical questions of whether journalists are morally obligated to report “the truth and nothing but the truth”, or, in some cases, are able to inject a subtle sense of bias in order to assist the reader in forming his or her own opinion.

The way journalists have come to report the news to the people has become indeed a process of steps, but a process worth following in order to report the news timely and objectively. First, deciding whether a story is “newsworthy” is most likely the most difficult of steps. Journalists must “select relevant news items for their audience”, or choose stories that run parallel with current occurrences in the country (Windsor, 1). This increases the appeal to readers, and causes them to pick up the morning papers and read the front page story. Newsworthiness keeps the reports up-to-date and current, and shows the audience that the story does, in fact, deserve attention (Schudson, 31). This can become rigorous when surrounded by a world with many different events occurring. But, “if journalists knew more about what their audiences consider essential about the public works they cover”, Herbert J. Gans says, “they could probably get a better handle on what journalistic news these audiences want or are ready to

accept.” For example, in America, the most current events center around the Presidential administration, health care, and the War on Terror. Americans want to hear about these stories because in reality, Americans are facing these issues first-hand. Therefore, they need to know background information, current legislation about the topics, and most importantly, extremely current updates about every action relating to the topic. This means that any journalist within the national or political beat must cover any story related because it is newsworthy to Americans. Deciphering the newsworthiness of a story is crucial when figuring out what news to report.

Secondly, and most importantly, a journalist must relay this information with “minimal prejudice and bias” (Windsor,1). As stated earlier, this is becoming increasingly difficult every day as conflict arises. However, journalists must remember that they are there to report the “cold, hard facts” and not merely share their opinions. In the more contemporary news realm, journalists strive to report both sides fairly and, in doing this, provide the reader with adequate information to make their own decision about an issue; which is one of the main purposes of a democracy (Schudson, 39). U.S. journalists are well known for their disconnection with their reports, and therefore have taken most of the credit for developing such a “free-thinking” society (Schudson, 43).

Realistically, however, it is almost impossible for a journalist to be completely objective. Almost all articles hint at even the most subtle shades of opinion, but this can be useful to a reader. Daniel Sutter uses the example in one of his essays of government activity as a news subject:

“Each day, stories must be generated for the evening newscast and tomorrow’s paper; a lack of fires or murders or avalanches on a given day leaves news organizations in a bind. Government provides a steady, predictable stream of stories-legislative votes, presidential trips, economic statistics, news studies, and congressional hearings. An expansion of government provides more agencies and more programs on which to report”.

As Sutter explained, sometimes breaking news can come to a grinding halt, leaving journalists and networks with nothing “of substance” to report. Therefore, to keep the audience’s attention, journalists begin to turn to government as a “backup”. When journalists report this informational news, they tend to indirectly inject bias into their story, which is acceptable to a certain degree. Christine Stoddard says that “readers should even consider a degree of subjectivity as a strength that they can choose to accept or debate in an article”. As long as the journalist’s opinion does not get in the way of the facts of a story, a reader can use the various ideas presented in the story as a way to form his or her own opinion that best fits his or her “personality, mentality, and lifestyle” (Stoddard, 1).

In America today, journalists have a difficult job: “representing the opinions of the people in writing stories that reflect every aspect of an issue in the most truthfully representative way possible” (Stoddard, 1). However, from colonial America to our contemporary society today, that has been a challenge to some journalists. When deciding newsworthy content and then presenting it to the public, journalists can get mixed up in their own opinions, and sometimes that makes its way into the story. Intentional media bias is frowned upon, unless of course it is placed in the “op-ed” section of the news. On the other hand, subtle hints of bias can be acceptable if used in the correct way. If the bias does not obscure the facts presented to the reader, it can aid the reader in shaping his or her own opinion. Subtle signs of bias can be

considered “passion for the subject”, or just simply neglecting the fact that it is there. Whatever the case, bias is as widespread as media and journalism, and as old. In the end, it is the reader’s job to decipher whether the bias is intentional or not and therefore absorb the story presented by the journalist and develop an opinion. Journalists generally report the news fairly and cover both sides of the story, but when they “slip up” and include loaded words or stories that have a hidden agenda, it can either hurt the journalist, or be of aid to a reader when forming an opinion about an issue present in society today.