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Media Influence through What Is Reported and How It Is Reported

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Abstract

Living in the digital age certainly has its advantages but presents challenges to the basic principles of integrity, honesty, and truthfulness. Media bias can be detected by reviewing the list of trending and widely discussed topics shared by media outlets. The news presented can often be identified as leaning towards one of the three political spectrums: right-wing, left-wing, or center. The infiltration of political bias within the media influences public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely. This prohibition of government entities from restricting free speech however does not apply to private entities. Private entities, particularly social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter can limit, control and censor postings to their sites. As private companies, these social media platforms are legally able to establish their own guidelines and policies. These policies can include censorship of content and banning people from the platform if their policies are violated.

For example, Facebook banned former President Donald Trump for two years after the events at the Capital, which some refer to as an insurrection, on January 6, 2021, citing concern for public safety. People have been banned or suspended from social media platforms for hate speech, anti-Semitic views, white supremacy, sexual exploitation, and other reasons. Once social media begins to ban certain people and posts, they are in effect influencing what their users are exposed to on their site. These social platforms could be said to be banning free speech.

Another avenue of affecting free speech is the selection of what is posted by users on their site. A case in point is The Daily Wire Facebook page. The Daily Wire, authored and controlled by Ben Shapiro, has more followers than The Washington Post. A study by NPR found The Daily Wire received more likes, shares, and comments on Facebook than any other news publisher. The Daily Wire posts news stories from traditional news organizations but adds its own conservative slant. The Daily Wire readily admits they are conservative and biased as such. (Parks, 2021)

The Daily Wire being biased is not unique. You can obtain media bias charts by a simple internet search. Below is an adaptation from AllSides Media Bias Chart (Table 1):

Table 1: Media Bias Chart

Left	Lean Left	Center	Lean Right	Right
CNN Opinion	ABC	AP	The American Conservative	Breitbart
Daily Beast	AP politics and fact check	Axios	The Epoch Times	CBN
MSNBC	Bloomberg	BBC	Fox News online news only	The Daily Mail
Newsweek	CBS	The Christian Science Monitor	MarketWatch	Daily Wire
The New Yorker	CNN news only	NPR news only	New York Post news only	Fox News Opinion
The New York Times Opinion	The New York Time news only	Reuters	The Wall Street Journal Opinion	New York Post Opinion
Slate	NPR Opinion	USA Today	Washington Examiner	Newsmax Opinion
Vox	The Washington Post	Wall Street Journal news only	The Washington Times	OAN

Source: <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>

News Credibility and Social Media

As Albert Einstein once stated, “A foolish faith in authority is the worst enemy of truth.” The credibility of news on social media is often questioned because some user accounts are created and controlled by software also referred to as social bots, as opposed to being posted by a human being. Most users distrust news that was written by computer software. A study by Lee et al. investigated whether social endorsement cues have an impact on the perception of the credibility of news articles posted on social media. Social endorsement cues are indicators of user feedback with the material presented and include the number of likes or shares an article has received or the number of comments social media users have posted in connection with the article. In other words, the imposed question was whether more likes and comments create a higher perception of credibility when compared to news posts with low interaction from users. One factor affecting the prevalence of social endorsement cues is the level of difficulty to modify the source of the information. If the source is relatively easy to modify, its perceived credibility decreases in the eyes of the user. (Lee, et al., 2021)

Study participants were shown two news articles on Facebook, one with several thousand likes and comments and another one with only a few likes. Study participants then had to answer a series of questions regarding their perceived credibility of the articles. The results indicated that Facebook users did not consider the news articles with more likes and comments more credible and therefore did not rely on social endorsement cues to determine credibility. (Lee, et al., 2021) An earlier study by Tandoc (2019), on the other hand, determined that Facebook users perceived

a news article more credible if it was posted by their friends than if the post was made by a news organization. The study also investigated whether the reader's motivation was low or high when reading the information. In other words, if the news directly affected the reader in a substantial way, would their perception of the credibility of the source of information change? The results suggested that reader motivation did not have a substantial effect on the view of source credibility. (Tandoc, 2019) Similarly, both Sundar and Nass (2001), as well as Turcotte et al. (2015), came to the same conclusion that most users will perceive a news article posted on social media by a person they know as more credible than if it was posted directly by a news outlet.

Hofer and Pintrich (1997) created a classification of people based on their "epistemological development involving the level of sophistication of their thinking about the nature, processes, and bases of knowledge and knowing." Robertson argues that these personal beliefs regarding credible journalism are the underlying source of how a news article's credibility is evaluated by a reader. The prevalence of interpretative journalism has increased in recent years. Journalists include their own opinion or analysis of the information instead of only reporting on the facts, and allowing the reader to reach a conclusion. Such a paradigm has therefore increased readers' skepticism about the credibility of the reported news. (Robertson, 2020)

News Credibility as a Principle of Democracy

The freedom to receive and disseminate news is one of the underlying principles of democracy, encompassed in our right to free speech. The majority of research focuses on the source of news as the main determinant of the reader's perception of credibility. As noted earlier, a software-written news story is perceived as less credible than one written by a journalist. With the increased use of artificial intelligence and digital media in general, Lee evaluated the credibility of news created by means of artificial intelligence. (Lee, Nah, Chung, & Kim, 2020) As confirmed by prior studies by Cassidy (2007) as well as Johnson & Kaye (2009, 2014), readers' perception of credibility changes over time if they are repeatedly seeing the same news source, even if it was perceived as not credible at the onset of information sharing. In other words, the longer readers hear or read the same information, the more credible it becomes in their eyes.

According to the Council of Europe, the freedom to receive truthful information is a fundamental right of citizens. The information thus should not become a commodity or merchandise that can be sold or tweaked to be more marketable. The media should also refrain to manifest themselves as if whatever they are stating is in accordance with the prevalent public opinion. To impose such restrictions on themselves, media companies must abide by ethical principles and engage in self-control when disseminating information. As eloquently summarized by Encabo (1995) "Any democracy, in order to flourish, must provide for the participation of its citizens in public affairs, which means that citizens and institutions must be able to express themselves publicly and receive the correct information. The challenge is to guarantee truth and impartiality in transmitting the news, to make sure that information and communication are not the results of manipulation; in a word, that the medium is not the message." (Encabo, 1995)

Nearly thirty years later, in the era of fact-checkers, Encabo's warning about the attempt of the media to establish the absolute truth sounds quite eerie. Absolute truth can rarely be established.

As a matter of fact, this would require a certain group of people being pronounced as the ones checking for truth and ultimately establishing what the truth is. However, this would inevitably result in censorship. Censorship, as the antithesis of freedom of expression, has been declared eradicated and therefore, the media should not aim to proclaim a fact as absolute and unchangeable truth. (Encabo, 1995) The question is then, who is fact-checking the fact-checkers and what makes them the authority to proclaim certain information as facts while labeling others as misinformation? According to O’Leary, the three most influential fact-checkers are FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and The Fact Checker by the Washington Post. There is no shortage of criticism towards the three platforms since they tend to resist alternative facts. (O’Leary 2017) Even Ukraine established a fact-checking online portal in 2016 (Ukrainian Weekly, 2016), albeit it only did so two years after the Maidan revolution in Ukraine, which created conflicts and perhaps unfavorable views of the Ukrainian government, that in return had to be “fact-checked” to lessen the negative projections of the protests in the media. (Gorenburg, 2015).

The 1993 Council of Europe’s European Code of Deontology in Journalism attempted to create codified standards of democratic controls of media dissemination of information, in other words, self-control by the mass media. As far as the representatives of mainstream media are concerned, the Wall Street Journal and the International Federation of Newspaper Publishers had been critical of this code, essentially detesting the idea to abide by the principles of deontic codes of logic. Under this premise, the media must permit the dissemination of all information, and opposing views must not be deliberately omitted (Encabo, 1995) The Committee of Ministers of the European Council was opposed to several propositions of the code, for example, they rejected the idea to establish a European Media Ombudsman and disapproved the phrase “the organization of public media,” just to name a few (Committee of Ministers, 1994). Since the code was passed before the emergence of social media and it is not binding unless incorporated into specific state constitutions, a more up-to-date version of this otherwise crucial document in journalism is critically needed.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

To compare how different news outlets cover the same story, consider the following:

In a press release regarding the travel restrictions and a ban on refugees by the then President Trump Administration in February 2017, three news corporations BBC, CNN, and Fox News each interpreted and reported this article in their own ways.

BBC (Center) reported this instance as “Trump’s executive order: Who does travel ban affect? On 27 January President Donald Trump signed an executive order halting all refugee admissions and temporarily barring people from seven Muslim-majority countries.”

CNN (Left Lean) addressed this as “Trump’s latest executive order: Banning people from 7 countries and more - With just a few quick strokes of the pen, President Donald Trump

on Friday banned – temporarily, for now – roughly 218 million people from entering the United States.”

Similarly, Fox News (Right Lean) reported this press release as “Trump signs executive order for 'extreme vetting' of refugees - Trump: Our military strength will be questioned by no one. The president says the two executive orders will ensure the sacrifices of the military are supported by the government.”

How a news event is reported can stir emotions and opinions. In addition to “how” a story is reported, “what” stories are reported can be an issue as well affecting emotions and opinions. NPR (2021) discussed how the Daily Wire had created its own popular niche of conservative reporting by only covering stories that promote the conservative agenda. The question becomes does “free speech” influence opinions through “how” and “what” stories are covered by the media.

The current study considered the news topics covered online by NPR, CNN and Daily Wire for one week during September 2021. The topics covered and the coverage by each of the three news outlets is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: News Coverage

Topics	NPR (Center)	CNN (Left Lean)	Daily Wire (Right)
Covid 19	47	60	50
Critical Race Theory	5	12	22
Gun Control	10	14	18
Climate	45	90	2
Afghanistan	29	43	144
Abortion/Pro Life	16	40	70
Biden Administration	6	16	122
LGBTQ+	8	11	15
Cancel Culture	0	2	19
Border/Immigration	0	1	7
Total of these topics	166	289	469
Total articles	256	439	519

As seen in Table 2, the topics chosen to be covered can vary greatly between center, left, or right politically focused news outlets. For example, the right-leaning Daily Wire outlet emphasized and promoted topics that put the Democrat, left-leaning President and his administration in poor light. Specifically, for this week of news, the Daily Wire emphasized the chaotic withdrawal of US troops and civilians from Afghanistan. During the same week, far less emphasis on the situation in Afghanistan was covered by NPR and CNN. Rather, NPR and CNN reported more heavily than Daily Wire on Climate topics.

The news agencies are selecting carefully what the public sees and hears. This type of censorship affects what people think about and how they think about it. That is, news agencies are influencing the thought of the public at large by what and how they report. This practice is in

direct conflict with the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics. The code is a summary of ethical standards that journalists should abide by to ensure the free and unbiased dissemination of information. The code urges journalists to seek the truth and report it accurately, with adequate context, clearly identifying sources of information and courageously reporting even information that involves persons in power. If the reporting contains advocacy for a certain cause or is a mere commentary on the issue, it should be clearly labeled. The code further urges journalists to stay independent and be accountable and transparent in reporting. (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014)

CONCLUSION

In the era of digital media and globalization, it is imperative to establish global journalism standards of ethics to avoid bias and the “selective” distribution of news. Considering and allowing the dissemination of differing viewpoints would lead to a more transparent information flow. (Auman, Stos, & Burch, 2020) As we apparently live in the post-truth era, it is necessary to establish guidelines and oversight on media websites that may impose restrictions on what is disseminated at their whim. We need tools to ensure that all information is available, not just information deemed relevant or truthful by someone who has the power and means to release or withhold information from the public. (Carballo, Lopez-Escobar, & McCombs, 2018)

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