

MODULE 6: NOISE, NEWS, and NEUTRALITY

KEY CONCEPTS

Mass media: Media technologies through which communicators can reach a large audience.

Media producer: Someone who creates media, such as a journalist or newspaper.

Media consumer: Someone who consumes media, for instance by reading an article or watching a news video.

Media conduit: A medium that can communicate products to consumers, such as a newspaper or social media.

Western-centrism: The tendency to selectively prioritise content from the Global North in news media.

Fake news: Deliberately produced untrue content.

Digitalisation: The increased tendency to consume and produce media for the online environment.

Medium/media: A means of communication (e.g. a phone or a newspaper).

Opinion leadership: The ability of someone to communicate an opinion through media channels with many media consumers adopting that opinion as a result.

Biases: A bias is to have a strong tendency to give disproportionate weight in favour or against a certain belief, even if this belief can reasonably be disputed through evidence.

INTRODUCTION

The world has become increasingly digital and connected. For example, in between 2011 and 2021 the share of people living in Indonesia who had internet access rose from 10 to 73.2 percent of the population¹. This increased access has had numerous benefits. It has allowed farmers in rural areas to get up-to-date weather information and information about commodity prices in nearby market areas. In India it has enabled the government to send direct cash transfers to vast sections of the population, and the technology has also allowed remittances to be sent with increased ease across the globe. But at the same time the use of Facebook has been linked to the increased spread of misinformation, such as the spread of anti-Rohingya hate speech in Myanmar² or misinformation during the Philippines presidential elections³.

The print and electronic industries have had to adapt and, in many cases, seen their influence decline. In 2020 people across the world spend more time on the internet than watching TV for the first time⁴. News media has seen a decline in advertisement revenue, with advertisers spending their budgets increasingly on online advertisement. This has led to a decrease in real

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=ID>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/07/facebooks-role-in-myanmar-and-ethiopia-under-new-scrutiny>

³ <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/social-media-misinformation-and-2022-philippine-elections>

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/chart/9761/daily-tv-and-internet-consumption-worldwide/>

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term wages to journalists in countries such as the United Kingdom⁵. In response, we have seen a trend of *consolidation* in producers of commercial news media. Consolidation means that companies merge with each other until fewer and larger companies exist. For instance, in The Netherlands 90% of the newspaper market is owned by two publishers.⁶ Companies consolidate with the aim to reduce operating costs and achieve higher profitability. Critics argue that consolidation risks narrowing the number of authoritative viewpoints in media.

And though we live in a global world, the global reach and reporting of the media leaves something to be desired. Whilst many media, especially in widely-spoken languages such as English, French, Spanish, or Arab, have an increasingly international readership, traditional media is still often domestically focused. In fact, international coverage has been declining amidst a wider picture of declining readership of print media⁷.

In this chapter, we explore the choices made by the media in delivering the latest news. We begin by examining the history and proposed ideal functions of media and subsequently delve into an inquiry of whether the media fulfils these expectations. The chapter is organised into two sections: Section I focuses on the history and fundamental characteristics of mass media; Section II delves into media biases (neutrality) and possible disinformation (noise) and their global influence on reporting.

POTENTIAL BIASES

1. Coverage Bias: This refers to the choice to highlight certain actors or events over others, based on factors that may include importance, interest, or narrative ease.
2. Tonality Bias: This bias occurs when one side of a story receives more positive or negative coverage, reflecting either societal norms or deliberate framing.
3. Agenda Bias: This involves selectively reporting on events or actors to further the media producer's specific agenda or values.
4. Sensationalism: This is a tendency to present information to provoke public interest or excitement, often at the expense of accuracy or nuance.
5. Mainstream Bias: To favour ideas and perspectives that align with what is considered to be mainstream or commonly accepted within society.
6. Conciseness Bias: This refers to the tendency to oversimplify complex topics, leading to a potential loss of essential details and context.
7. False Balance: This occurs when equal weight is given to opposing viewpoints in a story, even if one side is supported by a substantial body of evidence and the other is not.
8. Western-centrism: This bias prioritizes Western perspectives in media, often marginalizing or stereotyping non-Western viewpoints.

⁵ <https://pressgazette.co.uk/number-of-uk-journalists-climbs-to-73000-but-fewer-work-in-newspapers-and-magazines-major-new-survey-shows/>

⁶ <https://www.vn.nl/laatste-nederlandse-dagbladuitgevers-zelfstandigheid/> (article in Dutch)

⁷ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-12/Are%20Foreign%20Correspondents%20Redundant%20The%20changing%20face%20of%20international%20News.pdf> (p 15)

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CONTENT BLOCK I: The features of mass media

In a way, media can be considered older than modern human societies. Some theorists believe that early cave paintings served as its purpose to disseminate information about the migration patterns of hunting animals⁸. The real story of mass media, however, begins with the development of script. With mass media we mean media technologies where communicators can reach a large audience. As professor of Global Studies Jack Lule points out, we can distinguish five stages of development and globalisation of mass media⁹. These are defined by the main techniques used to communicate: oral, script, print, electronic, and digital (see the table below).

Stage	Examples	Notable developments	Notable characteristics ¹⁰
Oral	Oral tradition of storytelling, such as the <i>Iliad</i> and <i>Odyssee</i>	Oral remains the most basic form of communication (along with writing)	Used mostly for narratives, including religious narratives
Script	The Bible, bookkeeping documents,	The development of writing tools for easier writing, and specialisation of writing within scholarly classes	The development of local and national information informed people about their environments and made media time- and environment-bound.
Print	The Gutenberg Bible	Innovations in printing technology (from block printing to printing presses) and adaptation (from religious texts to books, newspapers, and pamphlets)	The development of differential magazines enabled the first filtering of content on the basis of class, and led to people being able to signify their class status on the basis of what media type they consumed
Electronic	Telegram, radio, and TV	The development of speed in long-distance	The mass communication age allowed for

⁸ Christopher Chippindale and Paul S. C. Taçon (eds.), *The Archaeology of Rock-Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1998, ISBN 0521576199).

⁹ <https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-handbook-of-globalization/n22.xml>

¹⁰ Donald L. Shaw, Bradley J. Hamm & Diana L. Knott, "Technological Change, Agenda Challenge and Social Melding: mass media studies and the four ages of place, class, mass and space", *Journalism Studies*. Volume 1, 2000 -Issue 1, 57-79. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/146167000361177>

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		communication (telegram and telephone) and in mass communication (in radio and TV)	individuals with access to recording channels to disseminate their message to various
Digital	The World Wide Web (internet), e-mail, smartphones and apps.	Web 1.0 – developer-generated content. User-generated content on bulletin boards and later blogs. Web 2.0 – user-generated content through social media.	Digital media exaggerates the trends outlined above, and allows for individualised media diets and refined choices. It is also the age of user-generated content.

We can distil the table above into two key features for the evolution of media: the ability to reach larger audiences and the enhancement of consumer choice. These changes have occurred at different paces across the globe and have had a profound impact on how people access, consume, and act upon information.

Reaching Larger Audiences

The first key feature is the number of people a communicator can reach through different mediums. In the oral tradition, messages were limited to those within earshot, relying on second-hand communication to spread further. Hand-written texts expanded the reach, although limited by literacy and the ability to produce copies. The advent of the printing press greatly eased the dissemination of information, making it cheaper and more widespread. Electronic communication enabled quicker connections over long distances, impacting trade and military command. Finally, digitalization further increased accessibility and ease of access. This shift in who and how many can access information plays a vital role in education, communication, and informed decision-making.

Enhancement of Consumer Choice

Digitalization significantly enhanced consumer choice in what, when, and how media is consumed. The internet allows control over content consumption, whether reading different news sources like The Guardian or Financial Times or watching recorded programs via platforms like YouTube or BBC iPlayer. This change in consumption patterns influences beliefs and actions, fostering education and socioeconomic mobility, as well as signalling to other consumers who you are through the media you consume. It can also lead to consumers choosing for media that is more aligned with their own viewpoints, leading to people moving through “filter bubbles”, where they only engage with media that corresponds to prior held beliefs.

Whilst increased consumer choice is a defining feature for digital media, the effects of increased consumer choice can be observed through earlier evolutions as well. As an example, the printing press made it more economical for more people to read books. This then helped a larger group of people to educate themselves and join the middle class. In turn this increased their demand for reading books in the language that they spoke rather than the

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language of academia. In Europe this meant reading in German or French rather than in Latin. This helped spread national languages and build national consciousness¹¹.

Global Developments and Adaptation
While not delving into a precise history of mass media development, it is essential to recognize that these advancements did not occur simultaneously worldwide. Early developments, like block printing in China, laid the groundwork for future innovations such as the Gutenberg press, influencing each other through trade and competition. The adoption of mediums like the printing press varied across countries, influenced by economic, cultural, and logistical factors. For example, literacy levels, religious objections, and the means of introduction all affected the rate of adaptation.

Differences between countries also influence how communication methods are adopted. Slower data speed and cost have led to variations in internet access between developing and developed nations, with platforms like Facebook serving as primary means of access in many developing countries. The language spoken in a country may even affect how that country is viewed abroad, with English-speaking nations often having more readily available news reports for global audiences and receiving more international attention¹².

Both cultural factors and elite control can play a part in whether new forms of media are adopted by audiences. For instance, block printing in the Arabic script was slowed down by religious objections to printing instead of writing down the Arabic language, which was considered a holy text – although some commentators note that strictness of these objections differed per country and that this may be influenced by powerful actors afraid of the social changes brought in by increased access to the public of religious texts.¹³ Yet another factor could be the means by which the printing press was introduced. The first printing press was often brought to the Global South by Christians with the aim to showcase Bibles to convert locals or local leaders to Christianity, which was not always well-received¹⁴.

The purpose of media

In our analysis of media's societal impact, it is important to consider the motivations and influences affecting both the producers and consumers of media. Lets look at various motivations or producing or consuming media.

Media Producer's Perspective

- **Ideological Motivation:** The producer of media might be driven by a desire to communicate an idea or belief to a broader audience. Historical examples include Martin Luther's dissemination of his critiques against the Catholic Church or a contemporary journalist penning an opinion piece about governmental misconduct. One of the most prominent motivations is to hol those in positions of power, such as government or business leaders, accountable.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 63-76

¹² <https://gijn.org/2019/09/27/watch-your-language-how-english-is-skewing-the-global-news-narrative/>

¹³ Feodorov, Ioana (2013). "[Beginnings of Arabic printing in Ottoman Syria \(1706-1711\). The Romanians' part in Athanasius Dabbas's achievements](#)". *ARAM Periodical*. 25:1&2: 231–260

¹⁴ Angus Maddison: *Growth and Interaction in the World Economy: The Roots of Modernity*, Washington 2005, p.65

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- **Economical Motivation:** Media producers may aim to generate income through their creations. This could manifest in the aspiration to write a bestselling book or to attract a vast audience to a YouTube channel. The underpinning objective here is economic sustenance or profit-making. It is important here to recognise that sometimes media companies are not owned by media producers, but have profit-making parent companies.

Media Consumer's Perspective

- **Information:** Consumers may engage with media for the purpose of information acquisition. This could be driven by a need to make well-informed decisions, such as understanding governmental policies or staying abreast of industry research, innovations, and competitor activities. In an academic context, media consumption may facilitate self-education.
- **Entertainment:** Beyond information gathering, media consumption can also provide entertainment and enjoyment. This encompasses reading books for leisure or indulging in celebrity gossip. Even informational media can be engaging and enjoyable, depending on its presentation and the reasons for engagement by the consumer.
- **Signaling your identity:** The choices in media consumption can also be indicative of personal beliefs, affiliations, or tastes. For instance, a subscription to *The Guardian* might suggest a leaning toward left-wing politics, while referencing sources like *Fox News* or *Das Bild* may signal alignment with right-wing ideologies. Literary choices, such as reading James Joyce's "Ulysses" or a Sally Rooney novel, can reflect intellectual preferences, classes or a willingness to embrace friends' recommendations.

Case Study: Are we Amusing Ourselves To Death?

In 1985 the cultural critic Neil Postman published the book "Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness". He begins provocatively by asking which dystopia may be the more real threat. Is it the world of George Orwell's *1984*, a world in which an overpowering outside force in the form of a totalitarian state seeks to control and dominate us through force and repression? Or is it the world of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where humans take drugs to live compliant and happy lives?

Postman believes that the rise of TV over print media has meant that Huxley's dystopia is more likely to be true. He argues that the TV has conflated information with entertainment, which leads to information being lost to entertainment. He argues that is due to the limitations of TV as a format, where you need to quickly capture audience's attention, as the audience may otherwise move to a more appealing channel. Information as presented on TV is therefore designed to be short, visually entertaining, and appealing to the need of advertisers.

He contrasts the age of TV with the age of print entertainment. He argues that the more contemplative practice of reading a book and the increased time an author can devote to its

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ideas and arguments leads to a more informed audience.

Reflection questions

Is Postman correct or wrong? Have we gotten less informed through the rise of TV? Is it possible to be informed through entertainment?

Does Postman's argument hold for the Internet age?

The production of media

To start it is important to understand the difference between producers and conduits of media content. A producer is someone who creates media, such as an author of a newspaper article or a YouTube video creator. A conduit, on the other hand, is a channel that provides access to media, such as a newspaper company or social media platforms like Instagram. The distinction can be subtle, as some entities act as both a conduit and a producer, with newspapers often employing journalists while also publishing the content. Digital media generally provides a more distinct separation between these roles.

Media production often involves multiple players, each with unique motivations. Consider an opinion columnist who submits their work to an editor at a newspaper. The newspaper itself may be run by a commercial entity or controlled by the state. Each of these participants may operate with differing economic or ideological goals. These differing motivations can lead to conflicts. For instance, a columnist might strive for completeness, adding many footnotes, possibly causing delays. An editor with financial concerns may push for adherence to deadlines, leading to what is known as a principal-agent problem. This situation arises when two parties have different interests, but one has authority over the other. In an ideal world, such problems wouldn't occur, but limitations in opportunities, audience demand, or production costs can create this tension.

Conflicts may also arise from ideological differences. Media outlets often have defined editorial values. A publication like *The Economist*, which advocates for free speech and open debate, may clash with a journalist who believes in certain speech restrictions. This can lead to internal tension over what content is published.

Ownership can be seen as one of the most important actors in this landscape. Owners control the media to the highest extent. They gain profits and incur losses from media operations and are able to significantly influence the media governing body (e.g. board of directors, editor-in-chief). The owner can open, suspend, transform, sell or close the media outlet. There are generally two groups of media owners on the market.

The first of these is state ownership, e.g. in public television like BBC in UK, TVP in Poland, Deutsche Welle in Germany. There is a strong interest for the public to own media to increase the highest accessibility to information and ensure the proper quality of information. State-owned media demonstrate various levels of bias and neutrality from being propaganda tools for the ruling party to the standard of excellent objectivity.

The second of these concerns private owners. These can be individuals (Elon Musk – Twitter, Jeff Bezos - Washington Post), families (e.g. Murdoch Family of NewsCorp, which includes

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Fox News, Shaw family in Canada), private firms (e.g. Axel Springer, AT&T), shareholders, or employees (media cooperatives e.g. Il Manifesto in Italy).

The influence of media

Does what is produced by the media influence the public into holding different beliefs, or does the public self-select the media that confirms what they already believe? One way of looking at that puzzle is through the selective exposure theory proposed by Joseph T. Klapper.¹⁵ Klapper suggests that consumers selectively choose to engage positively with content that agrees with their predispositions. For example, if you identify as a progressive, you are more likely to want to watch or respond positively to progressive media content. A consumer may choose to either not engage with media that oppose their views, choose to engage with it selectively, or only selectively retain information. It is important to ask ourselves the question as to how our predispositions arise. These can be formed by the *groups and group norms* to which a consumer belongs to, such as your friends and family. If your friends and family are staunchly liberal and in favour of minority rights, you have to violate their norm if you say you support strong constraints on migration. The fear of burning bridges with your peers may dissuade you from forming or expressing those views.¹⁶

They can be formed by which types of media are commonly available to a consumer. For instance, in a free market society, media that gather enough demand should be available easily enough. In authoritarian regimes, the available media can be constrained through effort by government censors.

They can also be formed by *opinion leadership*, the opinion that is expressed by someone the consumer holds in high regard. For instance, if someone is likely to vote for the Republican Party in the US, they were more likely to agree with the viewpoints of Donald Trump once Trump got nominated as the Republican Party candidate for the U.S. Presidency. This was despite the fact that Trump had views on immigration and economic policy that went against dominant strains of thought in the Republican Party prior to his nomination. One way in which an opinion leader can become popular is by presenting information through the technique of *framing*. With framing we refer to the way in which information is selected, presented, and contextualised by actors. For instance, Trump framed himself as an outsider in contrast to a group of political insiders – both Democrat and Republican - which he claimed were corrupt and served their self-interest over the interest of the common good. In doing so, he framed the election to be about combating corruption and the politicians who allegedly benefited from this corruption.

This theory leaves open the question as to who is more or less likely to become recognised as an opinion leader. One answer to this is the propaganda model advanced by Chomsky and Hermann in the book *Manufacturing Consent*. They describe five filters through which mass media operate.¹⁷ These are:

¹⁵ Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, 1960.

¹⁶ Kahan, Dan M. 2013. 'Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection,' *Judgment and Decision Making* 8, no. 4, 407–424.

¹⁷ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, 1988.

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- Ownership and the profit incentive. Mass media is owned by private actors who want to make a profit, which means that the media will be skewed to publishing information that is likely to reach a large section of the audience. In the age of free information, this can also be a section of the audience that is willing to pay for this information, either directly (through subscriptions or one-off payments) or indirectly (through being targeted by advertising revenue).
- Advertising: mass media is often more expensive to produce than what individuals are willing to pay. In some cases this is solved by having state media that are funded through the taxpayer. For most media this is solved in part through advertising. This means that mass media needs to be attractive to advertisers.
- The media elite: people who frequently engage with the media may know how to exploit biases in the media or use informal channels to get preferential access to media. For example, if a politician has been in power for a long time, there may be more contacts with journalists that they might be able to exploit to appear on the news or get a quote in the newspaper. Expressed in the terms of the theory of Klapper, this may increase the chance that this person may become an opinion leader.
- Flak: if a journalist strays too far from the consensus, they may receive backlash. If they attempt to discredit a powerful politician, this politician will try to discredit sources or distract leaders. This backlash may be successful enough to bury the story or dissuade the journalist from publishing the story.
- The common enemy: one can create a common enemy for audiences to create a *bandwagon effect*, where public opinion is unified. An example for this is the choice of who to support when a war breaks out in a foreign country. Another example is the use by Ronald Reagan of the story of benefit fraudster Linda Taylor to create the image of a “welfare queen”, which was an attempt to convince American voters to support cuts to the welfare state.¹⁸

The impression that the above discussion gives is that of a mass media that is slow-moving, beholden to the mainstream, and conservative in attitude. There is indeed some evidence that consumers and the media are slow to update their beliefs. For instance, in the book *Factfulness*, the physician Hans Rosling exposes that people systematically underrate the rate of progress made by humanity on a wide range of outcomes ranging from poverty to wealth to violence¹⁹.

¹⁸ Ann Cammett, *Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens: How Metaphor Shapes Poverty Law*, 34 B.C.J.L. & Soc. Just. 233 (2014), <https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/jlsj/vol34/iss2/3>

¹⁹ Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons we’re Wrong About The World – and Why Things are Better Than You Think* (2018)

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Humans scored worse than monkeys...

Most **humans** got 1 to 4 correct answers. They would have scored better if they had closed their eyes and picked answers randomly. All the questions had three options which means that the

average **monkeys** (or humans with closed eyes who don't know what options they choose) would pick the right answer every third time, by pure luck, giving them 6 correct answers out of 18.

... because they suffer from systematic misconceptions about the world

The reason why humans score systematically worse than random must be that they suffer from systematic misconceptions, probably because they see similar media images from the rest of world and their brains get the same overdramatic impressions of global trends and proportions.

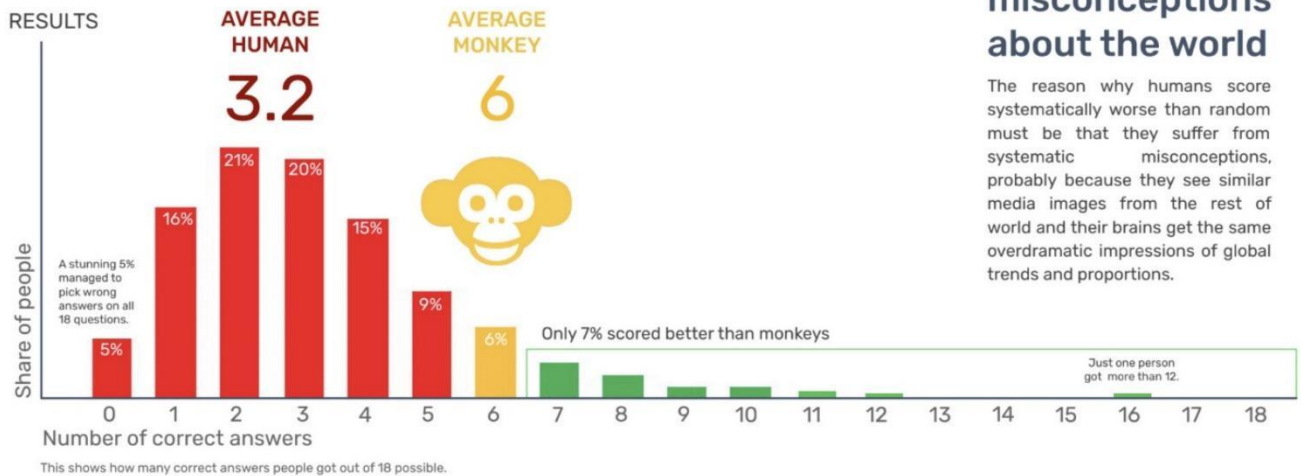


Figure 1: How misinformed humans are about the world²⁰

At the same time, we sometimes see quick and large attitude shifts amongst large sections of society, with the media often championing those stories or shifting gears. An interesting case study is the increased acceptance of LGBT rights. A 2016 study by Phillip M. Ayoub and Jeremiah Garretson found that increased positive representation of lesbian and gay individuals in the media drove increased positive perceptions of lesbian and gay relations amongst a wide audience.²¹ They found that the media chose to offer space to more lesbian and gay people on the basis of increased consumer demand by younger cohorts, who were more likely to hold progressive pro-LGBT attitudes. This in turn influenced a wider segment of the society. Here we can see that a commercially and culturally interesting subgroup can change media behaviour and affect broader attitudes.

We can summarise the influence of the media as follows. Media consumers are by themselves relatively ignorant of the world around them²². They form opinions about the world based on their early educational experiences and beliefs of the people around them. Media allows them to update their beliefs, but in limited fashion. It does so primarily by promoting an opinion leader that the consumer is likely to trust. The media is limited in how it updates its own beliefs. They are willing to update their beliefs if driven by incentives to capture larger or culturally powerful audiences, or through the influence of media elites.

²⁰ www.gapminder.com

²¹ Phillip Ayoub and Jeremiah Garretson, "Getting the Message Out: Media Context and Global Changes in Attitudes toward Homosexuality" *Comparative Political Studies*, 50, 8, (2017): 1055-1085

²² Tibor Rutar, *Rational Choice and Democratic Government*, 2021, p. 59-61

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CONTENT BLOCK 2: Media biases and global reporting

In the previous section we gave a grounding on how the media works. We already saw that the media has a particular influence on how the messages that it conveys – or are conveyed through it – are shaped. In this section we discuss possible biases in media reporting and how they affect how consumers view the world. The aim of this section is to inform the reader on the existence of these biases, in the belief that knowing about biases helps spot and critique them. It is important to address that merely informing has been shown to not be enough to fight fake news and media bias.²³

We define biases as follows: to have a strong tendency to give disproportionate weight in favour or against a certain belief, even if this belief can reasonably be disputed through evidence

Biases can propagate through various different mechanisms. We distinguish here between supply-driven and demand-driven bias. Supply-driven bias is a bias that arises because the supplier of media wants to control consumer demand through making its supply as attractive as possible, or wants to persuade consumers of a certain viewpoint. Rupert Murdoch's media empire, which includes Fox News in the United States and The Daily Mail in the United Kingdom has been accused of editorialising in favour of a conservative small-government anti-immigration agenda²⁴.

Demand-driven bias exists when consumers encourage media companies to follow biased reporting. An example of this is social media companies finding out that a minority of users engage more actively and for longer periods of time if they are outraged by sensationalist and partisan headlines. This increases advertisement revenue for these websites, and encourages these companies to promote this kind of content to attract higher engagement²⁵. Companies may in turn find out that offering more sensationalist and partisan headlines will drive more consumer attention, which creates a new supply-driven bias. Both supply and demand-driven bias may arise as a consequence of economic, ideological, or status-driven motivations.

We will identify three large biases: coverage, tonality, and agenda bias.²⁶ We then discuss particular versions of these biases in some detail.

Coverage bias

Coverage bias (or visibility bias) is the choice to highlight certain actors or events over others. An example is the different levels of attention to different conflicts. For example, the civil war in Syria has attracted more international media attention than the civil war in Yemen. Amanda Taub, writing in The New York Times, has argued that this can be explained in three ways. One of them is the larger death toll in Syria. The second reason is

²³ https://pdri.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Fake_News_Paper.pdf

²⁴ Mahler, Jonathan; Rutenberg, Jim (3 April 2019). "How Rupert Murdoch's Empire of Influence Remade the World". *The New York Times*.

²⁵ Soshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*, 2019

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-algorithm-change-zuckerberg-11631654215>

²⁶ Jakob-Moritz Eberl, Hajo G. Boomgaard, Markus Wagner, *One Bias Fits All? Three Types of Media Bias and their effects on party preferences*, 2015. *Communication Research*, 44(8), 1125–1148.

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the larger direct interests at stake for the West in the Syrian conflict. And the third reason is the relative ease of assigning a good-versus-evil narrative in the Syrian conflict which pits together pro-democracy civil combatants versus the authoritarian Bashar al-Assad compared to the more convoluted multi-faction civil conflict in Yemen. Taub argues that most wars receive little attention in Western media, unless these three characteristics are met.²⁷

Reflection question: can you think of examples or counter-examples for Taub's criteria for Western media engagement with conflicts?

Tonality bias

Tonality bias (or statement bias) refers to a bias where one side of the story receives more positive or negative coverage. One example of tonality bias is the differential treatment that Ukrainian refugees have been given by European media compared to refugees from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan.²⁸ As Madeline-Sophie Abbas argues, newspapers in the United Kingdom conflated Muslim refugees with possible terrorist suspects²⁹. In contrast, Ukrainian refugees are treated primarily as victims who are given a positive welcome³⁰. This bias can reflect deeply entrenched norms in a society, as inadvertently expressed by Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov.

*"These [Ukrainians] are not the refugees we are used to...These are our relatives, family. These are Europeans, intelligent, educated people, some of them are programmers. We, like everyone else, are ready to welcome them. This is not the usual refugee wave of people with an unclear past. None of the European countries is worried about them."*³¹

They can also arise as a consequence of deliberate framing by opinion leaders.

Agenda bias (or gatekeeping bias or selectivity)

Agenda bias is the bias to selectively report on events or actors to further the agenda of the producer of media content. It differs from the coverage bias in terms of *intent* and *scope*. This means that where coverage bias looks at the volume of content produced, agenda bias looks at the reason why certain volume or tones are struck. Agenda-setting can be both done intentionally by a few key actors as well as being the consequence of various decentralised actions. An example of the former can be a media outlet choosing to provide more coverage of the climate crisis, as The Guardian has chosen to do³², by editors or in the face of

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/why-some-wars-like-syrias-get-more-attention-than-others-like-yemens.html>

²⁸ Eva Polonska-Kimunguyi, War, Resistance and Refuge: Racism and double standards in media coverage of Ukraine. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediase/2022/05/10/war-resistance-and-refuge-racism-and-double-standards-in-western-media-coverage-of-ukraine/>

²⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2019.1588339>

³⁰ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/europes-unified-ukrainian-refugees-exposes-double-standard-nonwhite/story?id=83251970>

³¹ Eva Polonska-Kimunguyi, War, Resistance and Refuge: Racism and double standards in media coverage of Ukraine. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediase/2022/05/10/war-resistance-and-refuge-racism-and-double-standards-in-western-media-coverage-of-ukraine/>

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-press-office/2020/oct/05/the-guardian-launches-new-green-initiatives-including-climate-data-dashboard-and-outlines-plans-for-how-it-will-achieve-net-zero-emissions-by-2030>

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consumer demand. The latter may occur if certain ideas become mainstream within certain groups, such as amongst media elite or communities.

Case study: Western-centrism

A good example parodying Western-centric worldviews and attitudes is Joshua Deating's series for Slate called "If it Happened There".³³ In an article parodying coverage of the 2018 US election, Deating opens:

"WASHINGTON, United States—Beleaguered liberal opposition leaders here are looking to legislative elections next month as an opportunity to regain some power after two years of right-wing populist rule. But questions are being raised about the strength of the political institutions in what was, until recently, considered among the more prominent examples of multiethnic democracy in its region."

The humour in this piece comes from the disconnect between how many outlets describe current events in the Global North and the Global South, and how this can colour readers' views. This is a qualitative difference in media production. A quantitative difference also exists: events in the Global South are often less likely to make headlines in international news media.

Neutrality in media

Media outlets are self-aware about the possibility of biases. There have been some attempts to increase the neutrality and objectivity of the media, which we discuss below.

Case study - Fairness Doctrine

The Fairness Doctrine was introduced in 1949 in the USA as a policy intended to ensure fair representation of diverse voices and balanced coverage of controversial issues in broadcasting programs. Due to the limited broadcasting spectrum at the time, the broadcasters were able to significantly control freedom of speech and public debate. The doctrine did not compel stations to provide equal time for all, but only to present contrasting viewpoints. The Fairness Doctrine was used and abused for particular gains in the past. For example, some politicians demanded broadcasting their criticism or rebuttal in a way that made it so problematic and burdensome for stations, that a broadcaster would rather drop the program than apply the Fairness Doctrine. This tactic was used for instance by critics of Reagan-era policies to reduce air pollutants³⁴ While the Fairness Doctrine was not perfectly applied in the past, it does not mean it could not be rectified and reintroduced.

Case study - Awareness Doctrine

A proposed solution to the issues of the Fairness Doctrine is The Awareness Doctrine³⁵. The Awareness Doctrine requires distributors to create a state-approved "rating system to distinguish reporting from opinion and to inform the public when it is watching one or the other". The idea comes from an analogy to TV Parental Guidelines, which appeared to be a successful quasi-self-regulation. There are plenty of advantages of the Awareness Doctrine such as easy adoption, less noncompliance, lack of backlash or government abuse,

³³ <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/10/2018-midterms-trump-if-it-happened-there.html>

³⁴ Add citation: Merchants of Doubt, chapter 3

³⁵ <https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-135/the-awareness-doctrine/>

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adaptability to new technologies. Risks include how to establish an expert group that can provide accurate ratings and public trust in the doctrine.

Case study - Impartiality rule

Some news outlets installed their own neutrality rules. For example:

. BBC (Editorial Guidelines, Section 4) - “more than a simple matter of ‘balance’ between opposing viewpoints. We must be inclusive, considering the broad perspective and ensuring that the existence of a range of views is appropriately reflected. It does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles, such as the right to vote, freedom of expression and the rule of law. We are committed to reflecting a wide range of subject matter and perspectives across our output as a whole and over an appropriate timeframe so that no significant strand of thought is under-represented or omitted.”

B. Los Angeles Times (Ethics Guidelines) - “A fair-minded reader of Times news coverage should not be able to discern the private opinions of those who contributed to that coverage, or to infer that the organization is promoting any agenda[...]In covering contentious matters — strikes, abortion, gun control and the like — we seek out intelligent, articulate views from all perspectives. Reporters should try genuinely to understand all points of view, rather than simply grab quick quotations to create a semblance of balance[...] People who will be shown in an adverse light must be given a meaningful opportunity to defend themselves”

Case study - Allsides.com

Allsides.com is a website with news coverage gathered from at least three different sources with three different leanings (Left, Center and Right). The idea behind the site is to ensure a variety of perspectives on the events and through confrontation and comparison of conflicting perspectives achieve better objectivity and neutrality. The challenge may be that this induces false equivalence (see below). If media consumers are more interested in self-selecting for their own ‘team’ or reading news as entertainment, then these type of media innovations are also unlikely to reach their target audience.

Case study - Anonymous authors

The Economist, a liberal UK-based newspaper, holds a long-standing practice of articles without the byline (names and surnames of the authors), with few exceptions, in order to speak as one collective voice of the paper. This technique intended to avoid focusing on the bias and personal opinion of the individual writers was also criticized for its manipulative nature. The articles seem more objective, but the bias of the newspaper is widely known and declared to be liberal.

Case study - False equivalence

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In the research "The relevance of impartial news in a polarised world" conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, (University of Oxford October 2021) most respondents share they expect neutrality from media and providing equal time and space for different sides of an issue. Confronted with a case about a "false equivalence", where scientifically backed opinion is presented along the one without such evidence (e.g. climate scientists vs climate deniers), the respondents still supported the opportunity to listen to all views.

Communication noise and fake news

Communication noise is anything that influences the interpretation of a message in communication. It might be literally a sound in the background that makes it difficult to understand what someone says. However, for the purpose of this module, noise should be interpreted as psychological noise, which refers to biases, stereotypes, prejudices and feelings that make our perception of a message different from others. For example, if a person watches a favourite news show on TV, they are likely to believe and agree with the presented information, while the same information presented in a competitor outlet would be approached more sceptically or even denied.

One of the most important mechanisms explaining psychological noise in media and news consumption is confirmation bias, which means a tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting, information that is consistent with one's existing beliefs. Basically, it refers to a situation when people are more likely to notice, remember and rely on information that confirms their preexisting beliefs and less likely to notice, remember and regard information that confronts it. In terms of media consumption echo chambers and information bubbles are phenomena based on confirmation bias theory.

Such confirmation bias can also lead to the acceptance by some consumers of fake news. Fake news means false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke. Fake news is distributed for political (power, votes), social (popularity, validation) or economic (profits from advertising) gain. It is distinguished here from "accidental" fake news, such as when a journalistic outlet makes factual errors in their reporting.

"fake news" has a long origin and usage dating back to the 19th century, but came to renewed interest in 2017 due to the US presidential election, and was coined as "word of the year" by the publisher Collins. The reason behind the increased popularity of the phenomenon is to be found in an interplay between social media algorithms, advertising systems and high interest in the elections. All those ingredients made it possible for basically anyone to create, massively distribute and profit from fake news.

The technological development and rising popularity of social media can cause fake news to be easily produced, easily distributed and easily misidentified as real stories. As an example, Youtube's algorithm was found to be optimised for sensational, divisive videos usually supporting Donald Trump and damaging Hilary Clinton³⁶. In order to increase audience reach

³⁶ Add reference: Yesilda, 2022 <https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/systematic-review-youtube-recommendations-and-problematic-content>

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and responsiveness strong emotional messages, familiarity as well as division and conflict are used in fake news.

Fake news are widespread and very rarely verified. In 2021, 47% of all people aged 16-74 years in the EU saw untrue or doubtful information on news websites or social media during the 3 months prior to the survey. However, only around a quarter (23%) of people verified the truthfulness of the information or content. One prominent example of disinformation influence was the 2016 elections in the US, where researchers found Facebook the key vector of exposure to fake news³⁷

Among the variety of attempted fake news combating methods are:

- legal bans (e.g. Germany, France) and prosecution (e.g. Turkey, India, Greece)
- cutting off advertising of fake news distributors (e.g. Facebook and Google)
- use of algorithms to downplay false or suspicious feed,
- fact checking and labelling (e.g. Twitter and Facebook),
- crowd-sourced fact-checking (by users, not by experts)
- publisher vivid labelling,
- prebunking (inoculation techniques - explaining ways of manipulation used in fake news).

³⁷ Add reference: Guess, Nyhan, Reifler, 2018

<https://oxfordre.com/communication/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-809#acrefore-9780190228613-e-809-biblitem-0035>