**How the Media Twist the News**

by Sheila Gribben Liaugminas

1 In a most ordinary moment on a normal day at work in the Chicago bureau of a major national newsmagazine, I came to a realization that has bothered me ever since. Everyone knows how much power the press has in shaping the news, how its choice of stories and words influence readers. But one afternoon, talking about a rather silly feature story we were doing on pop culture, someone joked, “You know, we can start a trend just by calling it a trend!”

2 I stopped dead. It was true. But I was the only one not laughing.

3 Of course, this was hardly an original insight. Walter Lippmann—journalist, military intelligence specialist during World War I, propagandist, political scientist, author, and adviser to the presidents—made the same observation a generation ago. These words from his book, *Public Opinion*, bear repeating:

Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections. … In order that [the reader] shall enter he must find a familiar foothold in the story, and this is supplied to him by the use of stereotypes. They tell him that if an association of plumbers is called a “combine” it is appropriate to develop his hostility; if it is called a “group of leading businessmen” the cue is for a favorable reaction. It is in a combination of these elements that the power to create opinion resides.

4 Why is it so easy to lead people into new behaviors, desires, and attitudes? Why don’t people think more critically and see through some of the airy media stories that have no real substance—the stories that are less news than public relations or marketing? As Lippmann noted, it’s the result of “[apathy](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854), preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three-legged calves.”

5 These days, sideshows and curious trivia have actually gained even greater importance in an industry that has become a confusing mix of news and entertainment. Still, there are people who would like to pay attention to the more consequential events and issues that used to be called news. These can be hard to discern when politics itself has become [trivialized](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854). Hence the need to become intelligent news consumers: to learn how to pick through massive fields of information for [substantive](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) and fair reporting.

6 This is a tall task. The manipulation of public opinion is of great importance to both the government and the media. And it takes on added urgency in the months before an election.

7 Last year [2001], veteran CBS newsman Bernard Goldberg shocked the media world with his book, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. He minced no words in laying out the fundamental problem. “The old argument that the networks and other ‘media elites’ have a liberal bias is so blatantly true that it’s hardly worth discussing anymore,” he writes. “No, we don’t sit around in dark corners and plan strategies on how we’re going to slant the news. We don’t have to. It comes naturally to most reporters. … When you get right down to it, liberals in the newsroom see liberal views as just plain … sensible, reasonable, rational views, *which just happen to coincide with their own*” (emphasis added).

8 Consider this exchange from [Cable News Network] CNN’s American Morning show. The panelists are talking about the quality of the reporting from the Middle East. Anderson Cooper says, “On both sides of this issue, people see this so clearly one way or the other. It’s really fascinating.” Paula Zahn: “And it clearly colors their reaction to reporting, and I think it’s, you know, very difficult for people to separate their own personal views from the way they interpret the news.” Jack Cafferty: “The news media is [sic] only objective if they report something you agree with.” Zahn: “Right.” Cafferty concludes: “Then they’re objective. Otherwise they’re biased if you don’t agree, you know.”

9 For these three CNN personalities, the news media themselves are [impervious](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) to the [predispositions](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) and prejudice that afflict their audience. But contrary to what CNN might have us believe, bias is a real problem. You can see it in all the ways the media interpret, frame, and produce the great issues of our day. They slant the news according to their ideologies and find sources who will back them up. Over my 23 years with a newsmagazine, it often did a good—sometimes very good—job of reporting and analyzing news and its impact. But sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes the editors assigned reporters to a story that had been preconceived in the New York headquarters—a story with a foregone conclusion. …

10 In a world of media spin, it’s not easy to keep one’s own balance. First, know what your core values are, what you hold to be objectively true. Be discriminating inyour selection of news sources and carefully scrutinize everything you hear and read—see how it resonates with what you believe.

11 Note how news gatherers select subjects and how they cover them. What photographs do they choose? Do their accounts sound slanted, or do they present compelling voices from both sides of an issue?

12 Notice their sources: Do you hear from the same set of “experts” again and again? I find this especially annoying. The newsmagazine I worked for is still using some of the same old liberal “news analysts” they used when I first arrived in the Midwest bureau more than two decades ago. And you see them all over television news as well. When the topic is Catholicism, the networks all call on the same dissident priests and ex-priests, feminists, and “Catholics for a Free Choice”: Andrew Greeley, Eugene Kennedy, Charles Curran, Richard Sipe, Frances Kissling, and so on. Paula Zahn has continually used Sipe as the go-to expert on the troubles within the Church, always describing him as a “retired priest.” He’s an ex-priest, Paula. There’s a difference.

13 “They don’t want our new, fresh sources when they’ve got the regulars who give them the quotes they want,” Ruderman says, sharing my observation that the major media, like the newsmagazine we worked for, have all taken the easy route of using dog-eared Rolodexes[***1***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) to call on the same talking heads[***2***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854). “They never wanted my sources when they didn’t fit the mold of what they wanted the story to say. They had a preconceived idea of the [status quo](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854), and so they would always go to the status-quo sources for their standard comments.” …

14 It’s interesting how much of Lippmann’s analysis from 70 years ago still applies to the media. In the foreword to the 1997 edition of *Public Opinion*, Ronald Steel recalls that from a young age, Lippmann studied politics and the press. “In Liberty and the News he concluded that the newspaper stories of one of the[seminal](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) events of the century (the Russian Revolution) were distorted and inaccurate, based not on the facts but on the ‘hopes of the men who composed the news organization.’”

15 Lippmann then posed a more fundamental problem, as Steel relates: “How could the public get the information it needed to make rational political judgments if it could not rely on the press? Unbiased information had become essential, he argued, because ‘decisions in a modern state tend to be made by the interaction, not of Congress and the executive, but of public opinion and the executive.’ … For this reason the accuracy of news reporting, the protection of the sources of public opinion, had become the ‘basic problem of democracy.’”

16 The power of public opinion, which is supposed to be the driving force behind most important decisions in a democracy, can itself be driven or steered by the prejudices of unofficial opinion-makers. Vigilance and self-awareness are its only protection. Which is why, wherever they get their news, intelligent citizens will take nothing for granted except their principles.

**Why Partisans View Mainstream Media as Biased and Ideological Media as Objective**

*by* Matthew C. Nisbet

1 We’ve reached a unique paradox in American political culture today: Both liberals and conservatives view the mainstream media as biased, yet tend to believe that their own ideologically-like minded outlets and commentators provide objective coverage. Claims of media bias have long been the lingua franca[***3***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) of the conservative movement with the creation of rival outlets first in the form of magazines such as the *National Review*, then political talk radio, and culminating with Fox News and right-wing blogs.

2 Yet over the past decade, harsh criticism of the mainstream media has also increasingly [emanated](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854) from the left with claims of biased coverage a fundamentalcore belief of progressive advocates working on issues ranging from climate change to social policy. In turn these same progressives tend to prefer the “objective” coverage at magazines like the *Nation*, blogging platforms like the *Huffington Post*, and most prominently MSNBC which has positioned itself as the liberal counter-weight to Fox News.

3 Research in the field of communication has tracked the psychological under-pinning of this societal trend, explaining why partisans view mainstream coverage as biased but perceive their preferred ideological outlets as fair and balanced. In a recently published book chapter on the social psychology of political communication, my colleague Lauren Feldman and I review and explain this research, drawing in part on Feldman’s own work in the area.

4 Here is an excerpt on media bias, from that chapter.

*Across national settings, there is an ever*[***pervasive***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854)*belief in various forms of media bias. In the U.S., over the past two decades, the dominant belief regarding media bias is that the mainstream news media favor liberal causes and political candidates. Yet, when researchers conduct content analyses to search for systematic patterns of partisan bias in coverage of elections, across studies they are unable to find definitive evidence (D’Alessio D. & Allen, 2000). If social scientists using the best tools available to them find it difficult to observe hard evidence of liberal bias, why are beliefs among the public so widespread? Moreover, across country settings and issues, what explains the difference between subjective perceptions of media bias and objective indicators relative to coverage?*

*In research on perceptions of the news media, credibility is understood as a subjective assessment, influenced by the partisan or ideological background of the audience and the claims about bias that might emanate from trusted sources such as political commentators or like-minded friends. In the U.S. context, these claims are typically focused on a liberal bias charged by conservative elites and reinforce a widespread belief among conservative-leaning audiences (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Audiences, then, do not typically assess story content on its own merits but rather on the basis of preconceived notions about the news media—often stemming from journalists’ tendency in many stories to cover and reflect on their own potential liberal bias. A number of other studies have also suggested that individuals’ expectations for bias in a news source or in the media, more generally, are likely to influence their perceptions of bias in news coverage (Arpan & Raney, 2003; Baum & Gussin, 2007).*

*Perhaps the most crucial determinant of perceptions of bias in the news, however, is the extent to which news coverage is seen as disagreeing with one’s own views. Individuals who feel most strongly about an issue tend to see their own side’s views as being more a product of objective analysis and*[***normative***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854)*concerns, and less influenced by ideology, than the other side’s views (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995). This human tendency translates directly to judgments about the media. In a range of studies, when news audiences who*[***hew***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854)*to opposing sides on an issue are given the same news coverage of the topic to evaluate, both view this identical coverage as biased in favor of the other side (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). The phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “hostile media effect.” Researchers believe that the explanation for this hostile media effect is selective categorization: opposing partisans attend to, process, and recall identical content from a news presentation but mentally categorize and label the same aspects of a story differently—as hostile to their own position (Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004).*

*The original hostile media effect assumes that news coverage is inherently balanced. The relative hostile media perception (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) relaxes this assumption, making it applicable to news that is slanted in favor of or against a particular issue. In the presence of the relative hostile media effect, supporters and opponents of a given issue perceive bias in a consistent direction (i.e., leaning toward one side), but each group perceives coverage as significantly more unfavorable to their own position relative to those in the other group. In other words, partisans perceive less bias in news coverage slanted to support their view than their opponents on the other side of the issue.*

*Interestingly, then, whereas the implication of the original hostile media effect is a partisan public perceiving media bias where none was present and thus potentially rejecting useful information, the implications of the relative hostile media effect are somewhat different. Of consequence here is that partisans will fail to recognize bias in news that is in fact biased, in instances when that bias is*[***congruent***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854)*with their pre-existing views. This bias against news bias is troubling. Americans’ trust in news sources has become deeply*[***polarized***](https://everettwa.springboardonline.org/ebook/book/B7C7945E1F0345D88B0C0D29D3976F8A/C01E784FF4E749B995E88CC2E28A8854)*in recent years—with Republicans, for example, attributing more credibility to the conservative Fox News and less to most other news organizations than Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2008). In other countries, similar perceptions of a left or right bias to news or alternatively a bias relative to national or ethnic identity exist.*

*In each context, as news—particularly on cable TV and online—is infused with increasing amounts of opinion and ideology, this may make it even easier for partisans to validate their personal political beliefs—by accepting at face value information that comports with their views while rejecting information that advocates for the other side. Thus, the relative hostile media effect may not only reflect partisan divides in news perceptions but may also contribute to the further polarization of political attitudes and knowledge across political systems.*