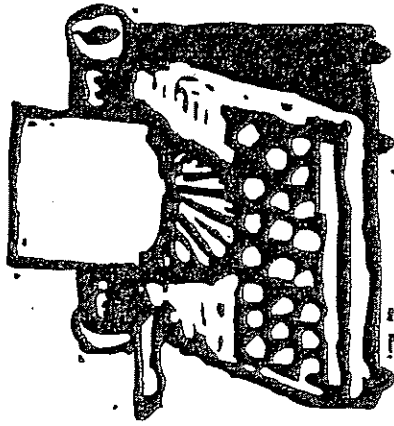


THE SOCIOLOGY OF NEWS

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United States and the chairperson of IBM is empowering; the impression it promotes of equality and commonality, illusion though it is, sustains a hope of democratic life.²⁴ Moreover, visibility—public visibility—is of enormous importance even if few people bother to read or watch the news. So long as information is publicly available, political actors have to behave as if someone in the public is paying attention. If the news media are the messenger services for political elites, they are not private messenger services, and this is an essential element of news as a social activity.²⁵ Contemporary journalism presumes that the public is eavesdropping; even if the public is absent, the assumption of the public presence makes all the difference.

The third kind of media effect comes from the bias, slant, or frame of a news presentation—not the information itself and not the public aura around it, but the particular shape that the media have given the information. Almost all studies on the media focus on this, and not without reason. Decisions about framing are moral, ethical, and political judgments, whether conscious or unconscious. They are also judgments from inside news institutions, rather than in the nexus between the news media and the institutions they report on. Moreover, these judgments are ones about which news institutions, professional journalists, and various traditions and conceptions of journalism differ. So there is much at stake here. Framing most strenuously calls journalists to account and raises questions about their moral and political judgment. It thus requires a chapter in itself, even if, in the end, the power of framing can be understood only in relation to the force of information itself and the power of the public aura of news.

Chapter Three MEDIA BIAS (MEDIA EFFECTS, PART 2)

NEWS IS NOT a mirror of reality. It is a representation of the world, and all representations are selective. This means that some human beings must do the selecting; certain people make decisions about what to present as news and how to present it. *Washington Post* columnist David Broder writes that "the process of selecting what the reader reads involves not just objective facts but subjective judgments, personal values and yes, prejudices. Instead of promising 'All the News That's Fit to Print,' I would like to see us say—over and over, until the point has been made—that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we have heard about in the past 24 hours—distorted, despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias, by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to lift it from the doorstep and read it in about an hour."¹

Broder rightly emphasizes selection but misleadingly implies that the primary factors in distortion are personal. They are not. Rather, they are socially organized distortions built into the structures and routines of news gathering. Broder seems to suggest that if only journalists had a little more time they would be

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able to iron out most of the flaws in their work, but it is not so simple. Most of the subjectivity in news is not idiosyncratic and personal but patterned and predictable. Journalists do not make their decisions at random. Precisely because they are under pressure to churn out a product every twenty-four hours or, these days, even more rapidly, they depend on reliable shorthand, conventions, routines, habits, and assumptions about how, why, and where to gather the news.

Many critics of the media assume that somewhere there is a perfectly objective or fair way to represent each event in the world (leaving aside the fundamental question of what constitutes an event and why events rather than, say, underlying processes should be the subject matter of news). They further assume that any deviation from fair representation can be accounted for by media bias. "Bias" in this context means that the reporter, editor, or news institution owner knows what the real event looks like, but will color it to advance a political, economic, or ideological aim.

Intentional political bias certainly exists in the news media. In fact, it is well institutionalized—the very purpose of the opinion columnist or the editorial page is to interpret, analyze, and persuade. More generally, publishers, editors, and news directors set policies with strong political, though not necessarily partisan, implications. Executives choose, for instance, whether to publish a letter or tract from a terrorist, such as the Unabomber, or to air a videotape from Osama bin Laden. They choose whether to reveal or conceal information that might bear on national security, especially during time of war. They may decide to play down a murder or a suicide because they fear it could inspire copycats; they may choose to limit coverage of a

riot for fear of inciting a riot elsewhere. All of these are decisions a news executive makes out of a set of wider social and political allegiances, not out of insular news professionalism. And there are times when judgments go further still. The executive producer of the *ABC Evening News* in the spring of 1969 asked his correspondents to shift their coverage of the Vietnam War from combat to interpretive reports focused on "the eventual pull-out of the American forces."² In short, he insisted on changing the framework for reporting the war; he imposed a particular view of how the chaos of war was to be sorted out in news reports.

All this acknowledged, it is still true that intentional, ideologically driven or politically motivated bias does not normally dominate U.S. news institutions. In the social sciences, the idea of bias has largely been replaced by that of "framing." Frames in the media are "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." One can offer fancier definitions than this—say, "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers organize discourse, whether verbal or visual."³ I am partial to the first definition because of the nice phrase "little tacit theories" that seems to me to sum up what actually goes on in journalism better than more ponderous definitions.

Framing is as central a concept as there is in the study of news. It moves the analysis of news away from the idea of intentional bias. That is, to acknowledge that news stories frame reality is also to acknowledge that it would be humanly impossible to avoid framing. Every narrative account of reality neces-

sarily presents some things and not others; consciously or unconsciously, every narrative makes assumptions about how the world works, what is important, what makes sense, and what should be.

Media scholars Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki offer a useful example in their study of images of African Americans in the American news media.⁴ They review studies that find, for instance, that local television news shows a higher percentage of blacks as perpetrators of crimes (and a lower percentage of blacks as victims of crimes) than police statistics reveal. Does this mean that TV news is biased and should work harder to reproduce police statistics more accurately? Should blacks accused of crimes be portrayed on TV news in proportion to their percentage of all accused perpetrators? That might be a poor choice because it would reproduce a bias against blacks in arrest rates—police arrests overrepresent blacks. Should television transmit to the public without comment the bias built into police routines and police statistics? Perhaps what would be more important is to be sure that the percentage of blacks portrayed on TV news as criminals is the same as the percentage of people in the black population who are criminals? That is, if, say, 5 percent of blacks have criminal records, then should TV news show nineteen law-abiding black citizens every time it shows one black lawbreaker? But are blacks in general the tight comparison group? What if 10 percent of black men between the ages of 18 and 30 have criminal records; should TV news feel obliged to show nine young black men without criminal records studying, working, or playing every time it shows one who has committed a crime? Should the comparison statistics the TV news uses to make such judgments be national or local data? On what basis should local TV news executives make these decisions?

It should be apparent that there is no agreement about what feature of reality would be the "right" one for TV news to seek to mirror. It should also be apparent that the more one seeks some model of reality that describes the whole social scene, the less likely it is that standard news practices will lend themselves to its representation. The news picks up the exceptions more often than the rules, the events and actions at the borders and the margins of the normal. If the weather report paid as much attention to sunny, mild days as to hurricanes, floods, heat waves, and cold spells, it might be more accurate but it would no longer be news.

It is worth noting that the weather and the stock market are reported daily, they are simply not emphasized daily. The same cannot be said of the black community or any other demographic group in the population except, perhaps, high-ranking government officials, especially the president. If the president takes a vacation, goes to a concert, or catches a cold, this is reported as news. It is not news if any of the rest of us go to Hawaii or have a sniffle.

To consider framing rather than bias, then, opens the discussion to examining unintentional and even unconscious, as well as intentional selective presentation. It diminishes the extent to which evidence of selection can be automatically read as evidence of deceit, dissembling, or prejudice of individual journalists; it also draws attention to ways journalists select certain traditions and routines of the culture at large and the news business specifically. By discussing framing instead of bias, we accept the possibility that news might speak in more than one voice, even in the same news institution at the same time. "Is it possible," asks John Hartley, "to tell a society by how it edits?"

Is redaction a symptom of the social?" The editing or framing of news brings matters of human interest into a certain form in a particular cultural apparatus, the news.

Some scholars persist in emphasizing the media's uniformity, which derives from its role as a necessary component of advancing the interests of corporate capitalism. Popular in some quarters of the left, this approach sees capitalist self-interest at every turn, as each cover of *Time*, each episode of *60 Minutes*, and every *New York Times* front page shores up a capitalist system. To these critics, every apparent sign of debate or controversy merely covers up a deeper uniformity of views.

For media scholars Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, the whole matter is just that simple: the *New York Times* is no better than *Pravda*, the propagandist official newspaper of the Soviet Union. The state is apparently little more than a front for the ruling class.⁶ This is a misleading and mischievous stance, and it is worth taking a moment to say why. First, the *New York Times* has never intended to be anything like the late, unlamented, *Pravda*. *Pravda* journalists understood that their primary aim was to support the socialist agenda as interpreted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. *New York Times* journalists may, indeed, be American patriots, but if they are, it is of their own initiative and not because their employer requires it. They see their day-to-day task as reporting the news, not eliciting a party line. They believe in fair and objective reporting; it is unusual for a reporter to use a strong political framework to interpret events of the day. They almost always embrace professional ethics. Media owners, obedient to market demands or at least to their sense of what the market demands, limit news coverage, notably by setting budgets. But they

rarely seek to use the news (the editorial page is a different matter) as a soapbox for their own political views or the views of whatever political orthodoxy they subscribe to, if they subscribe to any.

Second, there is a vital arena of legitimate controversy in the United States. Neither Republicans nor Democrats question capitalism; neither questions economic growth as a paramount national objective. Yet differences between the parties are real and consequential. The contemporary news media seek to represent both sides fairly. Consider, just in the past ten years, the different consequences of Republican and Democratic policies for gays in the military, women seeking abortions, men and women needing welfare, poor people needing medical care, business owners soliciting tax breaks, manufacturers feeling oppressed by environmental regulation. These differences are prominently reported. Are they trivial in comparison to the fact that both parties accept private ownership of the means of production? Perhaps. But try maintaining that view as you look in the eye the young gay man building a military career, the woman seeking a safe and legal abortion, the people whose "pre-existing conditions" keep them from obtaining health insurance. Can you tell them that their concerns are irrelevant?

Third, there are multiple voices in the American news media. True, the American media do not have a wide-screen view of the range of possible political positions. Compared to the press in most liberal democracies, they foreshorten the representation of views on the left, as does the American political system generally. But these tendencies stop far short of uniformity. If competition often pushes the media toward the least

common denominator of news reporting, other competitive pressures push news institutions not to miss a hot story—at least, not when it has reached a certain level of notoriety. And a hot story is not necessarily one that pleases the powers that be. It may turn out to be the My Lai massacre, a product defect, an oil spill, Watergate, Iran-contra, or an antitrust suit. The American press is unusually aggressive among Western news institutions in pursuing scandal.⁷

Finally, the media are obligated not only to make profits but to maintain their credibility in the eyes of readers. "The most valuable asset a paper has is its credibility," a *Baltimore Sun* editor has observed. "If people think we don't cover stories because they involve us, people will start wondering what else we don't cover."⁸ The media must retain credibility not only with the population at large, but with expert and often critical subgroups in the population, particularly in Washington, D.C. So long as there is heterogeneity among those subgroups, there will be pressure for fairness in the press.

Although the *New York Times* is not *Pravda*, some of the more carefully directed darts and arrows of leftist critics hit home. Certainly the media are generally statist and deeply nationalist.⁹ Chomsky and Herman's extremely critical view of the U.S. press is based on analysis of foreign reporting during the Cold War, and there is no doubt that the press's objectivity weakens in the case of foreign reporting. Indeed, it weakened during the Cold War in just the direction Chomsky and Herman suggest—toward hypercritical reporting of communist regimes and overly generous reporting of noncommunist authoritarian governments.¹⁰ It is also true that journalists take pleasure in and garner rewards for being insiders; the corporate media do

not make life comfortable for the likes of bold, challenging journalists like Edward R. Murrow, Daniel Schorr, Bill Moyers, Sydney Schanberg, or William Greider. Certainly the press more often follows than leads and reinforces conventional wisdom more often than it challenges it.¹¹ Views at the margins get little coverage, not because they lack validity or interest, but because they lack official sponsorship. If the corporate structure of the media does not in itself determine news content, it still tends to marginalize some news and some ways of telling the news. It still tends to subordinate news values to commercial values. Critics from various political persuasions rightly worry over what CBS news anchor Dan Rather termed the "showbiz-ification" of news.¹² But this should not lead us to conclude that "in all press systems, the news media are agents of those who exercise political and economic power" and that "the content of the news media always reflects the interests of those who finance the press," as one journalism scholar does.¹³ This view overrides every important distinction, every precious way in which the press in liberal societies differs from the press in state-run, one-party systems.

Of course, the press has prominent critics on the right as well as the left. Critics from the right cannot point to media structures as biased against their views; critics from the left win hands down on this point. In the United States almost all influential media institutions are owned and operated by large, profit-making corporations, and every one of them depends on government officials and representatives of other powerful, established social institutions as news sources. There is no getting around this. Critics on the right, however, present an argument that bears serious consideration. They argue that reporters

and editors at leading national news institutions have a predominantly liberal outlook. News has a liberal bias because writers and editors of news are recruited from left-liberal circles. If corporate organization tilts unmistakably rightward, patterns of occupational recruitment veer just as sharply the other way.

President Richard Nixon, his spokesperson Patrick Buchanan, and Vice President Spiro Agnew made this case in 1969. They had a point: in surveys conducted by Robert and Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman, 54 percent of journalists at the prestigious national news outlets identified themselves as liberals, 17 percent as conservatives, and the remainder as "middle of the road." The survey's methodology has been sharply called into question, but its results are consistent with the more casual observations of many other people, including, most recently, former CBS correspondent Bernard Goldberg.¹⁴

The political views of American journalists as a whole, in contrast to the Washington- and New York-based news elite, is closer to that of Americans in general.¹⁵ Even with national journalists, however, the Lichters and Rothman found a very thin liberalism. The journalists turned out to be liberal socially (53 percent thought adultery is not wrong) but plain vanilla on economic issues (only 13 percent thought government should own big corporations). Even the bare majority (54 percent) of journalists who declared themselves liberal, in other words, fully accepted the framework of capitalism, although they wished it wore a human face.

The right-wing critics, moreover, never satisfactorily deal with the question of whether journalists are effective at putting professional norms of objectivity ahead of their personal views.

Liberal leaning though a majority of the surveyed national journalists may be, close observers find them not highly political or politicized. Journalists see themselves as professionals rather than partisans, and they normally act accordingly.¹⁶ Reporters, as Robert Darnton recalled them from his stint as one for the *New York Times*, "generally struck me as hostile to ideology, suspicious of abstractions, cynical about principles, sensitive to the concrete and complex, and therefore apt to understand, if not condone, the status quo."¹⁷ It is not, he argues, that reporters are ideologically conservative. Their jobs simply bind them to the government officials they cover, and they naturally come to see and share something of those officials' viewpoints.

The demands of professionalism may account for some of this. A field that puts a premium on detachment probably also attracts a certain kind of person. *Washington Post* reporter turned media reformer Paul Taylor has written eloquently about his own attraction to journalism.¹⁸ Investigative reporters, he writes, become indignant quickly. They readily see "high conspiracies and base motivations" (p. 26). But most reporters have a very different frame of mind. Taylor writes, "I rarely see anything but nuance, and my first instinct runs toward benefit of the doubt. I find it painful to render harsh judgments about anyone in print. I find it equally difficult to praise anyone, however. I suffer from 'fear of flacking,' a common occupational disorder" (p. 26).

Does Taylor's "squeamishness about making sharp judgments, pro or con" (p. 26) make him unfit for hard-driving daily journalism? Or, as he suggests, does it give him the perfect temperament for the professionalism of modern journalism? "By aiming for the golden mean, I probably land near the

best approximation of truth more often than if I were guided by any other set of compasses—partisan, ideological, psychological, whatever. I'm still wrong much of the time, and I don't kid myself about where I'm headed. Yes, I'm seeking truth. But I'm also seeking refuge. I'm taking a pass on the toughest calls I face—which may explain why I chose to be a watcher, not a doer, in the first place" (p. 26).

Where reporters make tough calls, personal political bias rarely seems the best explanation. Political analysts Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan's careful study of television and print coverage of the 1980 presidential campaign found, for instance, that the media were strictly neutral in the overwhelming majority of cases. When the media made judgments, those judgments were more often negative than positive, but the negative evaluations landed pretty evenly on both Republicans and Democrats. Being a member of a particular party did not make one more likely to receive media criticism. What invited criticism was being a front-runner in the primary election contests, regardless of party or ideology.¹⁹

Implicit in the critique from the right is that market competition in the news media drives journalists toward scandal and sleaze. Reporters will improve their careers more quickly by uncovering scandal than by recording achievement; they will burnish their reputations more by writing with an edge or an attitude than by writing with cool and scientific detachment. Thus, they contribute to the downgrading of established authority, their reporting diminishes trust in our leading institutions, and their liberal ideologies weaken American values. This is a risky argument for conservatives to make, of course, because it calls attention to the anarchic tendencies of a mar-

kerplace left to its own devices. Conservatives generally embrace this very marketplace.

In any event, critics on the right have called attention to who writes as well as who owns the news. And journalists' politics do make a difference, if not always in the direction the right-leaning critics presume. Indeed, their increasing affluence may influence national journalists much more than do their professed political views. In this case the left has more cause for complaint than the right. Journalist William Greider laments that working-class, street-schooled reporters have been replaced by the "well-educated."²⁰ Concern about this surfaces in acerbic newsroom humor. As Merrill Goozner, former chief economics correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* put it, "News is anything that happens within 100 feet of an editor's house." An even more cynical wisecrack that also circulated in the *Tribune* newsroom is "News is anything that an editor sees while driving into work from the suburbs."²¹ Media critic Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post* writes of the isolation of reporters who drive in from the suburbs and report "by phone and fax." How could such reporters cover poverty or other problems of the inner city? "The plain fact is that newspapers reflect the mood and values of white, middle-class society, and that society, by the early '90s, had simply grown tired of the intractable problems of the urban underclass."²²

But it is more than a matter of boredom or weariness. Journalists, like other human beings, more readily recognize and more eagerly pursue problems and issues when they concern people like themselves rather than those beyond their social circle. Two examples may illustrate the point. When the "Zoe Baird problem" arose in the 1992 controversy over President

Bill Clinton's nomination of Baird as attorney general, media coverage was uniform in a way that escaped notice. Baird and her husband had hired two people to care for their children in their home. Like most Americans in the same situation, they failed to pay Social Security taxes, as required by law, for the domestic employees; the revelation of this fact doomed Baird's appointment as chief law enforcement officer. News coverage in almost all cases examined the legal, moral, and political issues raised by this incident—from the viewpoint of Baird or other people in similar circumstances, not from the viewpoint of the child care workers.

What of legal and moral implications from the point of view of the domestic workers? Barely a mention was made of them, let alone careful analysis. One exception was coverage on Univision, the Spanish-language television network, which profiled the domestics and did an extended story on child care from the viewpoint of underpaid and overworked immigrant care providers.²³ Journalists at Univision, just as committed to professional norms as other journalists, educated in the same schools, participating in the same broader journalistic culture, nevertheless could identify not only with Baird, an attorney, but with the Latino domestic workers she hired. The consensus in the mainstream press arose, not from journalistic routines or patterns of ownership, but from the broad class and racial bias in American society and in mainstream journalism.

Or take the remark of the late Randy Shilts, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter who covered AIDS full time for his paper. When his book on AIDS, *And the Band Played On*, was published in 1987, he said in an interview, "Any good reporter could have done this story, but I think the reason I did it, and no one else

did, is because I am gay. It was happening to people I cared about and loved."²⁴ Shilts's remark is simple and obvious yet generally neglected in most analysis of journalism. A woman reporter is more likely than a man, other things being equal, to see rape as a newsworthy issue. An African American reporter is more likely than a white reporter, other things being equal, to find issues in the African American community newsworthy.

Empathy, fortunately for us all, is not beyond human capacity, and good journalism often evokes empathy. But the person who writes the story matters. When minorities and women and people who have known poverty or misfortune firsthand are both authors of news and its readers, the social world represented in the news expands and changes.

A THEORETICAL EMPHASIS on framing instead of bias reveals that the decisions inherent in the manufacture of news have more to do with the marketplace, the nature of organizations, and the assumptions of news professionals than with individual bias. Critics of political bias ordinarily presume that the journalist should be a professional who tells the truth and that it is possible to do this without prejudice. But for those who emphasize framing, professionalism is as likely to be the disease as the cure.

Whether part of the problem or part of the solution, professionalism is a hallmark of the contemporary American press. In historical perspective, as the next chapter will show, there is nothing more striking than the transformation of journalism from nineteenth-century partisanship to twentieth-century commercial-professionalism.²⁵ A comparison of any leading metropolitan paper of 1995 with one of 1895 demonstrates instantly that today's news is shaped much more by a profes-

sional ethic and reflects fewer partisan hopes or fears than a truly political press. Reporters no longer march in step behind their publisher as they once did. The antipolitical, antipartisan perspective of professionalism is an essential feature of the contemporary press to understand. But what follows from a view of the press as "professional"?

Beginning in the early 1970s, sociologists and political scientists conducted studies, usually based on ethnographic observation of newsroom practices, which showed that media bias derives, not from intentional ideological perversion, but from professional achievement under the constraints of organizational routines and pressures; news organizations and routines produce bias regardless of media ownership or the outlook of individual reporters. The quest for objectivity itself, in this view, is a source of distortion.²⁶ Five kinds of distortion are frequently cited: news is said to be typically (1) event-centered, action-centered, and person-centered; (2) negative; (3) detached; (4) technical; and (5) official.

First, news tends to be event-centered, action-centered, and person-centered. News focuses on visible events, often conflict or violent conflict.²⁷ As Bill Frenzel, a Republican member of Congress from Minnesota, complained, "The press thinks it can only report events. Congress is not an event, it is a process. Either the press doesn't understand that, or it assumes the public doesn't understand it."²⁸ News tends to simplify complex social processes in ways that emphasize melodrama, that turn a complex set of phenomena into a morality tale of battle between antagonists, often between good guys and bad guys. Generally, clearly identified individuals personify or stand in for larger, more difficult to grasp social forces. One reason, among several, that the news

media were slow to cover the AIDS epidemic is simply that AIDS was "a slow-moving disaster," not a dramatic event of flood, fire, or earthquake suddenness.²⁹

The eventfulness of news is not something we are obliged to see as a failure—that is, a failure to dig deeply into social forces and social processes. It can be taken as an achievement, a social accomplishment in its own right and one we take so much for granted today that it has become invisible. It was not noticeable to provincial Britishers experiencing radio for the first time in the 1920s, as the radio brought distant public life to their villages. "I live in a dull, drab colliery village as far removed from real country as from real city life," one villager wrote in 1923, "a bus ride from third rate entertainments and a considerable journey from any educational, musical or social advantages of a first class sort. In such an atmosphere life becomes rusty and apathetic. Into this monotony comes a good radio set and my little world is transformed."³⁰ Into this world, the radio brought events. As British media scholar Paddy Scannell writes, "Whereas the public world beforehand was over the hills and far away, now it is close at hand and graspable. Its eventfulness enters into uneventful lives giving them new texture and substance."³¹ Whether liberating or stultifying, the event-emphasis is a characteristic feature of news.

Second, there is a tendency for news to be bad news. President Lyndon B. Johnson once complained about this to Henry Luce, publisher and editor of *Time* magazine. He waved the current copy of *Time* at Luce and exclaimed, "This week 200,000 blacks registered in the South, thanks to the Voting Rights Act. Three hundred thousand elderly people are going to be covered by Medicare. We have a hundred thousand young

unemployed kids working in neighborhoods. Is any of that in there? No. What's in here?" (His next remarks, according to the aide who reported the conversation, were not fit for delicate ears.) Luce replied, "Mr. President, good news isn't news. Bad news is news."³²

When things are going well, there seems less of a reason for a news story. The news instinct is triggered by things going badly. As Israeli media scholar Tamar Liebes writes, "Western journalism is a social warning system, exposing the exception rather than the rule, the deviant rather than the norm, disorder rather than order, dissonance rather than harmony."³³ Robinson and Sheehan found that television news covering the 1980 presidential campaign was neutral or ambiguous in its evaluation of candidates most of the time. But in the one story out of five that could be judged "positive" or "negative," coverage was negative 70 percent of the time (wire service news was more even-handed).³⁴ In 1992, television coverage of the three leading presidential contenders proved more negative than positive in every case, not because journalists are adversarial or nihilistic, but because they are professional.³⁵ News tends to emphasize conflict, dissension, and battle; out of a journalistic convention that there are two sides to any story, news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instances of relative calm. Reporters try to see through rather than observe politics. While this keeps them from being bamboozled by the politicians they cover, it strips political leaders down to their worst stereotypes, people possessing no motive but political advantage.

As we saw in the introduction, news can portray crime waves even when there is no increase in crime. The media are much less likely to highlight waves of civil harmony, even if

they exist. Sociologist Christopher Jencks observed that the chance of an African American's being murdered in the United States in 1985 was about the same as it had been in 1950, despite the considerable alarm about growing crime in America. "When crime declines, as it did in the early eighties, editors assume the decline is only temporary and give it very little air time. When crime increases as it did in the late eighties, both journalists and editors see it as a portent of things to come and give it a lot of play."³⁶

Third, news tends to be detached. Increasingly, journalists take a distanced, even ironic view of political life. In fact, they are enjoined to do so by both the tenets of their profession and the cynical culture of the newstroom. Obviously, this does not apply to the sports story that takes partisanship for granted, or the human interest feature that depends on human sympathy in the reporter's and readers' hearts, or investigative reporting that presumes a capacity for moral indignation. But in election campaign news, for instance, objectivity is the guiding principle, often religiously practiced. Robinson and Sheehan found journalists scrupulously avoiding color, bias, or judgment. They told CBS reporter Susan Spencer that their analysis of the entire corpus of CBS coverage of Senator Edward Kennedy's 1980 candidacy for president found that CBS did not once venture to draw so much as an inference from any aspect of Kennedy's positions on the issues. She replied, "Good."³⁷ U.S. journalists are typically proud of their skill in detachment.

This relates to a fourth tendency in American journalism—the emphasis on strategy and tactics, political technique rather than policy outcome, the mechanical rather than the ideological. Focusing on the technical side of politics enables journalists

to be professional, because they can remain apart from "the conflicts of interest, perspective, and value that are the dangerous stuff of political life."³⁸ Political reporters tend to be politics wonks rather than policy wonks, absorbed by "inside baseball" analysis rather than fascinated by the question of how the government should run the country. Their emphasis is on campaign strategy and tactics and on the prospects of candidates for winning, not on the candidates' policies or even on their capacity for leadership. In the 1980 presidential campaign, journalists made explicit evaluations of the candidates' qualities, leadership, or ideas in less than 5 percent of stories. Nonetheless, reporters felt free to judge candidates' likelihood of winning the election in more than a quarter of all stories.³⁹

Journalists choose the experts they rely on accordingly. When national television journalists seek out experts, they seek out those who can satisfy what media scholar Janet Steele dubs the "operational bias" of the press. In covering foreign policy, for instance, journalists want experts who know or are close to the key diplomatic players, who can authoritatively explain the policy choices at hand, and who are willing to make predictions about how events will unfold. They lean toward former public officials, retired military leaders, and think-tank policy adepts who frame issues in a narrow, technical way rather than scholars who have done primary research on the country or conflict at hand or leading religious spokespersons who would address issues in moral rather than strategic terms.⁴⁰ A study of reporting on national security in leading U.S. newspapers found only 1 story out of a sample of 678 that cited a religious source.⁴¹

News professionalism in contemporary political culture tends to be event-centered, negative, detached, and strategic,

but these qualities can take several forms. Take the time when President Ronald Reagan, after vacationing in California, flew back to Washington, D.C., but stopped en route in flooded Louisiana. There he made a brief radio broadcast from a flooded town, encouraging local citizens and promising federal aid. An AP photo, accompanying the *New York Times's* coverage, showed the President with a shovel, helping to fill sandbags. The *Los Angeles Times* headline read, "Reagan Pitches In to Help Flood Victims." The *New York Times* played the story straight and neutral. The *Los Angeles Times* began the same way, but in the sixth paragraph noted that this was just "the type of event Reagan's advisers constantly are on the lookout for." It was a chance to show the president "in a highly photogenic setting expressing concern for those in distress," and it came at "an opportune time for White House strategists" by drawing attention away from the "holiday with wealthy friends in Palm Springs." How could the *Los Angeles Times* veer away from straight reporting of the observable event to put it in the context of the president's public relations needs? This is exactly the kind of strategic and political framework that political reporters reach for and feel justified in providing on their own authority as close observers of political means and motives.⁴²

Of course, the image of human generosity in Reagan's gesture was undercut by this attention to political motive. Was the *New York Times* derelict in failing to provide the strategic and political context the *Los Angeles Times* offered its readers? Or was the *Los Angeles Times* unduly cynical? Was this a case where the show-biz president, struggling in the polls in a weak economy early in 1983, could help himself while genuinely helping the community? Perhaps the *Los Angeles Times's* stance of assertive

political expertise went too far, but it has come to be accepted as a legitimate alternative to the deferential objectivity of the *New York Times* story. This is the general range of possibility in which political reporting operates today. Reporters and editors seek what feels to them like a comfortable path between steno-graphic objectivity on the one hand and assertive professionalism on the other.

The fifth tendency in the news is that it is official and dependent on legitimate public sources, usually highly placed government officials and a relatively small number of reliable experts. News is as much a product of sources as of journalists; indeed, most analysts agree that in the dance of reporters and their sources, the sources generally lead.⁴³ Does this contradict the observation that professionalism leads to negative news? Not really. We can distinguish the routine news from official sources that occupies most of the paper most of the time from the more occasional news in which official pronouncements are questioned or undermined by accidents, scandals, leaks from other officials, or the ironic reservations of the journalist. In any event, officials remain the subject of news as well as its source, even though news often entangles them in negative coverage.⁴⁴

Officialness makes the news statist, that is, it contributes to a tendency to cover state voices rather than civil ones, to bow to the state's sense of national security, however narrow or self-serving it may be, to seek to be patriotic as well as truthful, and sometimes patriotic rather than truthful when the two conflict. Not only is this true of imperial Japan, where the Japanese news agency's motto was "Patriotism through Journalism." It has been true in the United States as well. When pacifist Oswald Garrison Villard published the text of secret Allied

treaties during World War I in the *New York Post*, few other papers picked up the story, and the *New York Times* condemned Villard's action. In World War II, the press failed to report the increasingly detailed and authorized evidence of the ongoing Holocaust. This had several causes, but one was certainly that the press in both London and Washington accepted the assurances of government officials that focusing on the Jews could sidetrack the paramount aim of winning the war.⁴⁵

Event-centered, negative, detached, technical, and official: in this view, the problem with the press is professionalism, not its absence. Professionalism produces its own characteristic angle of vision, and it can be argued that it is one that helps reinforce a view of politics as a spectator sport. It tutors readers in the cool and professional gaze that sees through policy pronouncements and rhetorical appeals and focuses on the strategies and tactics of the political trade. The "implied reader" of election news is a consumer in the political supermarket, someone with the time, interest, and attention to comparison-shop, to read the lists of ingredients on each package, to check the store's information on unit pricing, to attend to advertising as a form of information while learning to discount it as a type of propaganda. This ideal political consumer will then make a reasonably rational preference for one candidate or the other. The trouble is that he or she will not have any incentive for turning that preference into a vote. The careful reader and watcher of the news might well be moved to stay at home, interpreting the lesson from contemporary campaign reporting to be "a pox on both your houses."

However, this is largely speculation. While there is some evidence to support this view, we do not really know how much

the cynical underrow of political reporting influences its audience and how much it partakes of a broader culture of cynicism that the news audience already shares.⁴⁶ What, more generally, can we say about the influence of the news on its audience?

First, even when there is a demonstrably causal influence, it is important to identify what the causal agent is. If it is information from official sources, and if the media are primarily neutral transmitters of the information, then there is in fact a media effect, but one that masks the real influence—that of the source of the information. The media can be the messenger and little more.

Consider sociologist Todd Gitlin's book *The Whole World Is Watching*, the best account of the influence of media on social movements. Gitlin's study of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the major student organization of the New Left and the anti-Vietnam War movement, is widely taken to be a key illustration of the power of media framing or bias in affecting society. But this conclusion is in fact equivocal. On the one hand, Gitlin shows that news coverage of early SDS activism contributed significantly to the rapid growth of the organization. Such is the power of information: by simply distributing the news that SDS existed, news reports made the phone ring off the hook at SDS headquarters. But this is not the main emphasis in Gitlin's study or in the commentary on it. Gitlin's emphasis is on framing. He argues that later news coverage of SDS "trivialized" and "marginalized" the students' efforts and contributed to the breakdown of a relatively resource-poor movement. Buffeted by the growth of richer and more "legitimate" protest efforts of conventional liberals opposed to the Vietnam War, SDS lost control of the antiwar movement. Gitlin may be

right that media framing contributed to the disintegration of SDS, but there is no real evidence one way or the other. It is easier to see how the early, rather sympathetic coverage could have hurt SDS more than the later, marginalizing coverage did: The early coverage was an advertisement for SDS that brought in many new members. These members displaced the old guard and shifted the orientation of SDS from an agency of the organized left to a coordinating center for a mass student movement. New members were more volatile, more impatient, and less politically seasoned. The shift to a new leadership fractured the organization. Perhaps it was the influence of new members inside SDS rather than later condescending news coverage from outside that made the organization implode.

This interpretation is consistent with the information Gitlin provides. He shows that the media exercised influence in distributing to the general public the information that a new national organization was taking direct action to protest the Vietnam War. But he focuses his analysis on a framing rather than an informational effect, pointing out that the press treated SDS protests as trivial and marginal. If I am right, the media hurt SDS less by framing it negatively than by reporting its existence in a straightforward manner, bringing it throughs of new and inexperienced members. The usual internal bickering of left-wing, splinter-prone groups did all the rest.

Another example: In the 2000 presidential election, Ralph Nader ran as a candidate for the Green Party. The Green Party has never elected a president. It has never elected a candidate to the House or the Senate, nary a governor nor a candidate for statewide, let alone nationwide, office. There are good reasons,

then, that the news media might have chosen to spend little or no time covering Nader. On the other hand, Ralph Nader is arguably one of the most influential public figures of America's past half-century, a pioneer of the consumer movement, a stalwart critic of the corporate establishment, a tireless and inventive crusader for the little guy. To have Nader heading the Green Party ticket energized sentiment on the left, put the Green Party ticket on the ballot in forty-four states, and led to poll ratings as high as 5 percent nationally. How should the press have responded?

Nader complained both during and after the election that the media systematically ignored him. "No matter what our campaign tried or accomplished, the media remained stuck in a cultural rut, covering the horse race and political tactics of [Al] Gore and [George W.] Bush rather than the issues."⁴⁷ The *Washington Post*, Nader observed, could find space for 750 words to cover a Gore family vacation, but could not send a reporter across the street to cover a Nader press conference on Social Security. When the Nader campaign did get coverage early in the campaign, reporters "consistently viewed it as an occasional feature story—a colorful, narrative dispatch from the trail with a marginal candidate" (p. 102) rather than a hard news story about campaign issues or events. Toward the end of the campaign, when it became clear that the outcome would be extremely close, Nader voters became part of the horse-race story and reporters repeatedly asked Nader if he was a "spoiler" whose persistence in the campaign would throw the election to George W. Bush.

Was there bias here? Nader certainly thinks so: "No democracy worth its salt should rely so pervasively on the commercial

media. And no seriously pro-democracy campaign will ever get an even break, or adequate coverage, from that media" (p. 154). But at the same time Patrick Buchanan, a prominent national figure on the right, was representing the Reform Party that (with businessman Ross Perot as its leader) had won nearly 20 percent of the vote in 1992. Buchanan was not getting any more coverage than Nader. The reporters and editors were not betraying a direct conservative political bias. They were not acting out of political ideology but rather out of what Gitlin calls a "little tacit theory." Their little tacit theory was something like this: "Our job is not to determine campaign issues or to promote political dialogue across the whole spectrum of ideas but to give the public a fair-minded account of the candidates who have a reasonable chance of becoming president. Nader might well be right that major-party candidates like Al Gore and George W. Bush disagreed on too little and buried too much of what really mattered to public life, but who is to say? Reporting that is not the job of the press, at least not in the news columns. Our political system coughed up Gore and Bush as the viable candidates in 2000; our task is to cover that, not to change it on behalf of Nader's views or Buchanan's or our own views of what the real issues are."

Is this little tacit theory correct? Who knows? The point is only that it is a theory, one view of journalistic responsibility among several, and one ordained by traditions and routines and tacit assumptions. Journalists made a choice, even if it seemed to them a perfectly obvious and apolitical choice. That it may have been an entirely conscientious choice is beside the point. If the press had held to a different theory of reporting and of presidential politics, and if reporters believed it their obligation to

get vital issues aired and not simply to follow the staged events and speeches of the leading candidates, they might very well have covered Nader differently or used Nader as a way to raise broader issues.

Was there framing? Yes, of course. Did it hurt Nader and Buchanan? That is plausible. By how much? No one has any idea. There are other systematic biases in the news media. There is a bias toward glorifying journalists themselves. Journalists at work operate not only to maintain their social relations with sources and colleagues, but to glorify their cultural image as journalists in the eyes of a wider world. Television news reporters deploy experts in stories not so much to provide viewers with information but to certify the journalist's "effort, access, and superior knowledge."⁴⁸ They also visually and verbally establish their own authority by suggesting their personal proximity to the events they cover. Regardless of how the news was in fact gathered, it is presented in a style that promotes the illusion of the journalists' proximity to powerful, even mystically powerful, sources and sites.⁴⁹

The media are biased toward conventional over dissident opinions, toward science over religion, and toward upper-status and upper-income groups over the poor. They display a bias toward what sociologist Herbert Gans describes as the core values of American journalism: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, and moderatism.⁵⁰ These unquestioned and often unnoticed background assumptions govern the way news in the United States is gathered and framed.

There is a racial bias toward people who look like the majority of journalists over people who do not. *Washington Post*

reporter and past president of the National Association of Black Journalists Vanessa Williams asks why the killing of a white middle-class person generates more news coverage than does that of a black lower-class person. She answers, "Because the people who make decisions about what is newsworthy more readily identify with victims who look like them and live like them and are utterly frightened or outraged when bad things happen to them. The coverage reflects that fear and outrage."⁵¹

Fifty years ago, racial bias was direct, open, obvious, and unembarrassed. In the past half-century, it has become a more complicated matter. Even the point Williams makes may have more behind it than she suspects. One of the key features of news, after all, is unusualness. Even if half the staff of a metropolitan daily were African American, the relatively common incidence of homicide as a cause of death among African Americans and its relative rarity among whites could explain the disparity in news coverage without reference to racial bias at all. Black journalists as well as white ones would recognize that the more unusual incident is more newsworthy. Now, why is murder more common among blacks than whites? That is a vital question, and surely it has to do with several centuries of racism, but it would be rare for any journalist to explore such a question as part of ordinary news reporting.⁵²

Robert Entman argues that local television news reinforces what he calls modern racism—a general antiblack sentiment and resistance to black political demands, combined with a general view that racism has been eliminated. He found in a study of local TV news in Chicago that blacks appear most often as alleged criminals. He also showed that the way a black candidate for county office was portrayed on television reinforced racism.

The black candidate was presented as preoccupied with self-interest, whereas white political actors were more often pictured as oriented to the public interest. Coverage emphasized the black candidate's angry rhetoric, the whites' calm rationality (unlikely as this may sound for any aspect of Chicago politics). Why the contrast? Entman speculates that the sources of this portrayal are twofold. Underdogs are forced by their subordinate position to adopt a kind of loud, histrionic, even uncivil style. This contrasts with the conventions of public behavior that middle-class journalists take as legitimate. The underdog is forced to attack, where the incumbent can appear reassuring and complacent. It may also be that African American culture tends to favor a more emotional linguistic style than does middle-class white culture. African American politicians often play to the anger of their core constituency as well, which may rally blacks while raising the suspicions of whites. This all suggests that the broad structure of American racism and cultural differences, not any unique complicity of the news media, leads to negative portrayals of the black politicians.⁵³

INFORMATION EFFECTS, aura effects, and framing effects cannot be sorted out fully. For our purposes, it suffices to say that they exist and that sometimes they make a real difference in the world, a difference that merits the attention of scholars and critics. It is plausible to argue that the news media's insistent negativity and attention to moments of danger, stress, and conflict alter and heighten public awareness and fear of risk. It makes sense to argue that the news media inform people, that they identify and consolidate community, orchestrate a public conversation, and play important specialized roles in the political

system, from screening candidates to serving the purposes of government officials who carefully release and withhold information to shape public policy.

At the same time, it is not very plausible to hold that the media, in general, make people more conservative or more liberal. Nor is it plausible to see the media as generally preventing or promoting social change. The media do not routinely legitimate or delegitimize governmental institutions. What's important to keep in mind is that the influence of news is cultural. It can relay a certain body of information and a set of attitudes toward that information to people who are open to receiving it, but it cannot reward or punish the audience for taking the information to heart. This does not make the news unimportant. It simply makes the news a subtle, cultural influence on human affairs, not an overt force controlling society.