

## MEDIA BIAS:

### HOW TO SPOT IT—AND HOW TO FIGHT IT

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Over the past several years, the movement for media democracy has grown by leaps and bounds. Compare the level of activism that opposed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 to the 2003 public-comment period at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In the space of a few short years, the movement for media reform became much more popular and more unified. A combination of factors made this development possible, including (but not limited to) an independent media network that popularized the concerns of media activists, and the expansion of the Internet as an advocacy tool.

But underlying these developments is public frustration—even anger—with the state of major commercial media. Meager public-affairs and local programming, cookie-cutter radio formats, the near invisibility of quality children's programs, and the often inane chatter of twenty-four-hour cable channels, all contribute to the sense among everyday citizens that it is worthwhile to imagine real alternatives.

#### Going to the Source

There are different ways to measure or highlight the worst problems in mainstream journalism. One way is through qualitative criticism: identifying examples of poor reporting, neglected context, and the reluctance to challenge status-quo notions and conventional wisdom. Often this kind of case-by-case monitoring serves to identify larger patterns of media bias.

Another way to study media is to do quantitative research into media patterns. For example, over the years numerous "source studies" have been conducted that look at the audience the media are talking to when they cover important stories; the findings consistently point to a media environment dominated by official sources and establishment elites. This fact explains why corporate-friendly

economic policies are rarely challenged and substantive criticism of United States foreign policy is often overlooked, since guests who might challenge the two-party consensus are few and far between.

Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), the organization where I currently work as activism director, conducted a study in 1989 that still stands today as a model of media criticism. FAIR analyzed forty months of *Nightline's* programming, and found that the guest list was dominated by elite, conservative guests. The top four guests typified this trend: Nixon aide Henry Kissinger, Reagan official Alexander Haig and Elliott Abrams, and far-right evangelist Jerry Falwell. Of the top nineteen guests, all were men, all but two were white, and thirteen of the nineteen were conservatives. In total, 80 percent of the United States guests were government officials, professionals, or corporate representatives, while only 5 percent represented public-interest groups (peace groups, civil-liberties advocates, environmental organizations, and the like). When the show turned its focus to the economy, more than one out of three guests (37 percent) were corporate representatives; only one in twenty represented labor.

FAIR's study was widely covered by the mainstream media and elicited a response from ABC anchor Ted Koppel. This is a key part of FAIR's mission: to take the critique to the mainstream and hopefully to engage journalists—particularly those whose work is under scrutiny—in a discussion about what we consider to be their professional obligation of offering a more diverse discussion of major issues.

Unfortunately, the patterns revealed in the *Nightline* study can be found throughout the media. More recently, FAIR commissioned a study of one year of programming on the network newscasts (ABC *World News Tonight*, NBC *Nightly News*, CBS *Evening News*). The study analyzed over 14,000 sources appearing on network news shows in 2001 and found that:

- 92 percent of all United States sources interviewed were white, 85 percent were male;
- Where party affiliation was identifiable, 75 percent were Republican, and 25 percent were Democrat;
- Corporate representatives appeared about 35 times more frequently than did union representatives (a sad irony, given the state of the economy at the time of the study);
- Women made up 15 percent of all sources, and were rarely featured as experts.
- Racial imbalances in sourcing were dramatic: 7 percent of sources were black, 0.6 percent of all sources were Latino, 0.6 percent were Arab-American, and 0.2 percent were Asian-American. Out of a total of 14,632 sources, only one on-camera source was identified as Native American.

In other words, the network newscasts were largely populated by guests and experts drawn from the elite and powerful classes, while voices who might challenge their views were given severely limited access to the airwaves. Consequently, their perspectives remained largely unknown to the tens of millions of Americans who rely on evening newscasts for their information. This situation presents a dangerous problem for a democratic society: When important issues are under discussion, can a democracy properly function when critical ideas are excluded from popular debate?

### Restricting Debate on Trade and Health

The question of restrictions on discussions of trade and health is especially relevant when the establishment-supported "consensus" position on a controversial topic has been more or less agreed upon by leaders of both major political parties. In such cases, the media debate is essentially shut off, even when public-opinion polls suggest that elected officials and elite opinion-shapers are out of touch with everyday citizens. Economic and trade issues are prime examples. Take the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s. FAIR studied the sources available in news reports in the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from April through July 1993. The study found that out of 201 sources, only six (3 percent) represented the environmental movement. Not a single representative of a labor union was quoted during the four-month period. Spokespersons for all public-interest or civic-action groups—including ones who endorsed NAFTA—made up only 7 percent of named sources.

On the other hand, United States government representatives made up 51 percent of sources in the two papers, 62 percent of sources in the *Times*. They were overwhelmingly pro-NAFTA (81 percent), as were other government sources (mainly Mexican and Canadian) that made up another 11 percent of sources. In all, 68 percent of quoted sources had pro-NAFTA positions, with 66 percent in the *Times* and 71 percent in the *Post* in favor. Only 20 percent of the two papers' sources were opposed to NAFTA—24 percent in the *Times*, 17 percent in the *Post*. In other words, almost three times as many sources were defenders of NAFTA than were critics of the trade agreement in the reports of the *New York Times*; in the *Post*, the ratio was more than 4 to 1.

But try telling that to the media. In August 1993, the *New York Times* reported that business groups were stepping up their efforts on behalf of NAFTA "after months of letting unions and environmental groups dominate the debate." It makes you wonder which debate they were tuning in to—certainly it wasn't the one presented in their own newspaper. But the public was, in fact, much more divided over NAFTA; they just weren't able to see a reflection of that position in the mainstream media.

An issue like NAFRA is covered this way because the political and business establishments were nearly unanimous in their support of the "free trade" agreement. Therefore, journalists were less likely to include the perspectives of those who were erroneously seen as far outside the mainstream.

National health-care policy is another area where the majority position fails to elicit much media interest. In 1993, there was a serious debate about changing the health-care system in this country. The mainstream media, though, largely embraced corporate-friendly "managed care," a system in which private insurance companies provide medical care through giant HMOs. Some outlets announced early on that the media had won the debate: the *New York Times* editorialized that "the debate over health care reform is over" in October 1992. But that "victory" in such outlets as the *Times* had more to do with shutting out alternative proposals, such as a Canadian-style "single payer" system, which FAIR found to have received significantly less attention in the *Times* than its favored "managed care" option.

The media seemed to argue that they were merely paying more attention to options they determined to be more "politically viable." But this decision means that news judgments are based on elite preferences, not on popular opinion: the *New York Times*' own polling at the time had consistently found majorities—ranging from 54 percent to 66 percent—in favor of a tax-financed national health insurance.

But it wasn't just the *New York Times*. A panel discussion of managed competition on PBS's *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* included three government officials who were mainly supportive of managed competition and Dr. Steffie Woolhandler of Physicians for a National Health Care Plan, who supported a single-payer plan.

Near the end of the discussion, Robert MacNeil noted that Woolhandler was "in the minority"—to which she responded: "Robert, I'm not in a minority. Polls are showing two-thirds of the American people support government-funded national health insurance." MacNeil responded by insisting that single-payer was "considered impossible politically at the moment." Of course, that situation has plenty to do with the media's restricting debate on health care—even when the "unpopular" position is, contrary to elite wishes, quite popular.

### Journalists Go to War

In times of war, the tendency to severely restrict the boundaries of media debate actually gets worse. When FAIR studied the over 900 sources appearing on the networks' newscasts during the first two weeks of the Gulf War in January 1991, only 15 percent of those appearing on the screen were antiwar protesters, and only one of those 900 sources quoted was a national antiwar leader. This proportion paled in comparison to other groups—for example, seven professional football players were asked about the war on the nightly newscasts.

In the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, those patterns were largely unchanged. During what was perhaps the most important moment of the pre-war debate—the week before and after Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 5 address to the United Nations—the media's discussion of Iraq was dominated by current and former government officials, who made up 76 percent of all sources. At a time when polls showed that 61 percent of Americans wanted more time for diplomacy or inspections, only 6 percent of United States sources on the networks could be reasonably considered "skeptics" of the Bush administration's drive to war. Of the 393 sources appearing during those two weeks, just 3 were affiliated with antiwar activism.

Given that the mainstream media are so overwhelmingly dominated by official sources, one might hope that public broadcasting could offer a healthy alternative, showcasing perspectives that fall outside this narrow consensus. In fact, that is the very purpose of public broadcasting. Unfortunately, FAIR's source studies have revealed that national news offerings on PBS and National Public Radio (NPR) often mimic the same patterns found in mainstream corporate media. While public radio and television might theoretically exist to provide a home for voices that may otherwise be unheard, in reality they often end up repeating the offerings of corporate, advertiser-supported media. Environmental advocates, labor spokespeople, and other public-interest voices find themselves at the same disadvantage in "public" media as they do in commercial media.

Consider FAIR's 1990 study of the guest list of the PBS show *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*, which happened to coincide with the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Though the event was an absolute environmental catastrophe, the *Newshour* decided that one group wouldn't need to be part of the discussion of the oil spill: environmentalists. MacNeil/Lehrer had seven segments on the spill, but not one included an environmental representative. Some segments were limited to Exxon officials and friendly government officials, including one discussion that featured Alaska's governor counseling Exxon's chairman that he'd been too hard on his own company.

### The Big Question: Why?

If source studies like those conducted by FAIR offer a sense of who is appearing in the media, and which interests dominate the discourse, the obvious question is why things are this way. To answer that question, it makes sense to look at the ownership structure of the media and what pressures that structure might place on working reporters and editors.

In the past few decades, the news media have become big businesses, with media outlets becoming fully integrated into major corporations whose very existence relies on the ability to turn a profit for investors. Once subsumed into a corporation,

a newspaper or television station is expected to serve that corporation's goals just like any other part of the company; to expect otherwise would be illogical.

This situation creates a journalistic environment in which "making waves" by challenging corporate power is discouraged. There are advertisers to placate, and corporate owners who would not look kindly on a journalistic investigation into other aspects of a company's affairs.

These are more than theoretical concerns for reporters. In 1997, FAIR published a survey of investigative reporters and editors at TV stations around the country. Nearly three-fourths of the respondents reported that advertisers had "tried to influence the content" of news stories. Of these, 60 percent claimed that advertisers had attempted to kill stories, while 56 percent had felt pressure from within the station to produce news stories to please advertisers. In other words, it might not take long for a young reporter to understand how the game works.

Other polls of journalists have reached similar conclusions about the influence of owners: a 2000 survey of reporters, editors, and news executives found that about one-third reported that news that would "hurt the financial interests" of the media organization or an advertiser goes unreported, while slightly more of the respondents (41 percent) responded that they have avoided stories, or softened their tone, to benefit their media company's interests.

For the past few years, FAIR has released an annual report titled "Fear & Favor: How Power Shapes the News." The report gathers some of the year's most egregious examples of owner, advertiser, and government influence on the news. From CNN's decision to carry live coverage of the open and close of the NASDAQ stock exchange—not because it was newsworthy, but because NASDAQ was a sponsor—to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* reversing its editorial line on a new stadium for the Cardinals baseball team after the paper's owner bought a stake in the team. These examples illustrate the increasing pressures on journalists to use something other than journalistic judgment in deciding what gets covered and what gets left out. Reporters have long acknowledged the existence of such pressures; "Fear & Favor" is an effort to provide concrete, specific examples of this pervasive problem.

Most of the anecdotes in "Fear & Favor" have been reported at least once, but the greater number of everyday pressures on reporters remains unseen and unheard by the public. However, there are also occasions where these trade-offs between sponsors and sponsored are acknowledged in the open, suggesting a discouraging lack of respect for the "firewall" traditionally supposed to separate editorial priorities from those of advertising. *Time* magazine's special Spring 2000 issue was the culmination of the magazine's "Heroes for the Planet" series. The concept was to publish profiles of environmental activists and advocates, but there was a catch: the series had an exclusive sponsor, the Ford Motor Company. As *Time's* international editor explained, the series wasn't likely to profile environmentalists

battling the polluting auto industry. As he put it, "We don't run airline ads next to stories about airline crashes."

And as journalists work for expanding corporations with ever more sprawling interests, the very notion of journalistic independence is threatened. "News" programming is now regularly turned over to self-promotion for a company's other interests: theme parks, films, or entertainment programming carried on the same network. Thus NBC devoted several hours of its news program *Dateline* to the NBC sitcoms *Friends* and *Frasier*.

There's very little shame left, too; network executives hardly feel the need to say sorry, or to pretend that journalists should be exempt from shilling for the networks that pay their salaries. NBC News chief Neal Shapiro recently dismissed criticisms of this blurring of the lines between news and entertainment as "asinine." Perhaps more to the point, a former executive producer of network morning shows explained that these promotional tie-ins are practically a job requirement: "You'd be a fool not to do it. It's a business."

### How to Read the Media

This is not to suggest that all problems of modern journalism can be traced to who owns what, or even what the guest list of a given program or network looks like. Often, media analysis requires skillful critical thinking. When a skeptical reader or viewer is trying to make sense of a given story, here are some sensible questions to ask:

- Is the information in a given article accurate? Bad journalism doesn't necessarily have to be the byproduct of corporate ownership or advertiser pressure. But the most important media criticism should try to understand the difference between routine errors (misspelling, erroneous dates) and the errors that result from overreliance on official sources or the refusal to incorporate dissenting views.

For example, a *U.S. News & World Report* profile of Attorney General John Ashcroft attempted to dispel some of the "myths" about his tenure. "Derided as a religious zealot by some," the magazine explained, "Ashcroft has never invoked religion in policy or procedural discussions, say colleagues, who add that they have never even seen him pray." But shortly after he took office, a front-page article in *The Washington Post* described daily prayer meetings that Ashcroft was holding at the Justice Department, a move that, the *Post* reported, alienated some staff members who saw it as coercive.

Not all media outlets are created equal, of course. Some journalists and commentators have a long history of distortion and inaccuracy and FAIR has seized

opportunities to correct the public record when their misinformation hits the airwaves. FAIR's fact-checking of journalists such as ABC's John Stossel, talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh, and Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly has drawn serious attention to their dishonest reporting.

- Is there missing context that might undermine the premise of a given article or television segment? This possibility is closely related to journalism that relies on a narrow set of elite experts. In reporting about Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction, for example, how many articles discussed United States support for Hussein in the 1980s? After the United States-led coalition occupied Iraq in March 2003, did reports about the dismal state of the Iraqi infrastructure mention the effects of United Nations sanctions on that state of affairs? The ability to pose difficult questions at difficult times is essential to meaningful journalism.
- Which experts are quoted—and, in turn, who isn't allowed space to weigh in? Is there a political significance to these patterns? As noted above, these patterns do not often mirror the political debate in the country as a whole. The media debate is often a very different creature, excluding ideas that have not been embraced by the elite. As the conditions of the United States occupation of Iraq worsened for Americans and Iraqis, growing numbers of Americans called for a total withdrawal of United States troops from the country. That opinion hardly penetrated the media debate, where it was derided as a "cut and run" strategy.
- When TV news shows feature a point/counterpoint debate, what political spectrum is offered? For years, FAIR has critiqued the left-right debates that pit a bonafide conservative with a centrist or lukewarm liberal (prompting one of FAIR's favorite slogans: "I'm not a leftist, but I play one on TV."). Sometimes the playing field is tilted even further; FAIR staffers have participated in debates that pit three conservatives against FAIR's progressive perspective. The subject? "Liberal" media bias, of course.
- Are media simply reinforcing the establishment line on a given topic, even though there may be no reason to believe that it is correct? When the Democratic presidential contender Howard Dean noted that the capture of Saddam Hussein would not make Americans any safer from terrorism, the media and political establishment pounced on him for expressing such ideas out loud. Yet it would have been very difficult to argue that he was incorrect.

Asking these questions (and many others) while reading or watching television is likely to reveal some very interesting patterns. FAIR's work demonstrates that knowing how to read (and read through) media spin is often just a matter of knowing which questions to ask. The next step is giving people a way to do something about it.

### Getting Active

Understanding the challenges to building a viable democratic media movement can be disheartening. When we're asked if FAIR's existence has made the media "better," the answer is difficult. Considering the rise of such conservative outlets as Fox News Channel, the dominance of right-wing voices on talk radio and on the nation's op-ed pages, and the tilt in favor of powerful business and economic interests in most news programming, the answer might appear to be no.

But FAIR understands that many of the problems with media are deeply entrenched and will change only with time and concerted effort. And FAIR's history, in fact, is filled with examples of successful media activism. From the start, FAIR's progressive critique of mainstream media penetrated into mainstream media discussions. FAIR's studies of *Nightline* and NPR elicited responses from those outlets. Even news organizations that might be considered ideologically hostile to FAIR's message sometimes agree with our research. After FAIR's 2001 study of the guest list of the Fox News Channel's *Special Report* newscast, the anchor Brit Hume conceded that we had a point, telling the *New York Times* that "if it is a reasonable question, and we find that there is some imbalance, then we'll correct it."

So what can citizens do when media misrepresent important information or events? We can act together to put pressure on a given outlet to correct the record. When the *New York Times* dramatically downplayed the size of the crowd at a major antiwar rally in Washington, D.C., in October 2002, FAIR activists called on the paper to do better. The result? Three days later, the paper revisited the event, with a more accurate accounting of turnout. While the paper did not print a formal "correction," it is clear that the second, more accurate report would not have happened without the input from FAIR activists.

When HBO turned the Gulf War book *Live from Baghdad* into a film, they portrayed a piece of wartime propaganda as if it were true. The film strongly suggested that a discredited anecdote—the story of Iraqi soldiers removing Kuwaiti babies from incubators—had actually happened. After FAIR activists contacted HBO, the company added a disclaimer to the film's release on DVD.

Many media analysts and writers think that one of the right wing's most successful strategies has been to complain about the bias of "liberal media." In truth, many conservatives don't actually believe in such a bias, but they do understand the political effectiveness of claiming that one exists. Over the course of two decades, they have forced media to internalize the "liberal bias" critique, and in some cases to overcompensate in order to try and prove the critics wrong. This strategy ("working the refs," as Republican National Committee chair Rich Bond once described it) has certainly contributed to some of the media successes of the conservative movement in recent years. In short, many reporters and editors

know that someone out there is "watching." Part of FAIR's effectiveness is to act as a counterweight to conservative critics of the media—though, as distinct from most of those critics, FAIR's goal is not media representing only "our" progressive views, but inclusive and diverse media that reflects a wide range of opinions.

FAIR's activism also focuses on media policy. For example, for the last several years, FAIR has generated thousands of letters opposing the FCC's attempts to redraw media ownership rules in favor of corporate media owners. FAIR has also taken the media to task for its industry-friendly coverage of issues concerning ownership of media.

### Challenging Hate Speech

FAIR has also challenged the hateful rhetoric of certain radio talk show hosts, exposing their bigotry and using activism to draw attention to their hate speech.

In 1996, FAIR documented numerous instances of racism and bigotry on the *Bob Grant Show*, broadcast on Disney-owned talk radio station WABC in New York City. Grant frequently called African Americans names like "savages," a term he applied very widely: "I can't take these screaming savages, whether they're in that A.M.E. Church, the African Methodist church, or in the street, burning, robbing, looting" (4/30/93). Grant prayed for basketball star Magic Johnson to "go into full-blown AIDS" (10/1/92), and he said that the black victim killed by a white mob in Howard Beach, Brooklyn "got what was coming to him" (12/9/92). Grant's preferred response to a gay-pride march: "Ideally, it would have been nice to have a few phalanxes of policemen with machine guns and mow them down" (6/29/94).

FAIR's campaign focused on getting Grant and Disney to answer for the divisive and hateful rhetoric on the show. FAIR asked Disney to publish its policy regarding on-air racial slurs and to add anti-racist programming that would serve as a kind of counterweight to Grant. After FAIR succeeded in getting some mainstream media attention to Grant's bigotry, he was fired from the station. Though FAIR's goal was not to get Grant fired, the campaign focused attention on a very simple idea: unanswered racial slurs and calls for violence are not a healthy part of public discourse.

Of course, media bigotry did not end with Bob Grant. The San Francisco-based talk radio host Michael Savage promoted the same kind of hatred, referring to "turd world nations" and calling the Million Mom March in favor of gun control the Million Dyke March. Savage's racism and homophobia didn't seem to get him in trouble with the mainstream media. In February 2003, MSNBC hired Savage to host a weekend talk show. In announcing the hire, MSNBC president Erik Sorenson described Savage as "brash, passionate, and smart" and promised that Savage would provide "compelling opinion and analysis with an edge."

As with Grant, FAIR helped to publicize Savage's hate speech and encouraged

activists to write to MSNBC about its programming decision. These activists made Savage's bigotry an issue for MSNBC executives. After he hired Savage, Sorenson told a newspaper that the statements cited by FAIR and other groups "are not appropriate for MSNBC. . . . Those kinds of statements will not be permitted. And if they do happen, they won't happen more than once."

It didn't take long. That July, Savage was booted off the air for telling a caller, "You're one of the sodomites. You should only get AIDS and die, you pig." Because of activism, Sorenson had made a zero-tolerance pledge, and was forced to keep it.

For close to twenty years, FAIR has been dedicated to the notion that understanding patterns of media bias and exclusion could be popularized. Part of what motivated FAIR's founders was the hope that a genuine media movement could become an integral part of the larger progressive community for social justice. It has always been FAIR's contention that winning on the media front leads to larger victories. By that measure, we think the future looks bright. More and more citizens have joined the battle for media democracy. Despite the efforts of the media giants, low-power radio stations are springing up around the country. The Internet is now an effective activism tool. And, most importantly, people are becoming savvier about detecting media bias and spin. Citizens are speaking up and demanding a more aggressive and independent media, while at the same time supporting independent and alternative media.

As in most struggles, the odds are not in our favor. But that didn't stop those who came before us, and it will not stop us either.