

How to Detect Bias in News Media

Media have tremendous power in setting cultural guidelines and in shaping political discourse. It is essential that news media, along with other institutions, are challenged to be fair and accurate. Here are some questions to aid you in your quest for the truth.

We will be examining the following forms of news bias and how to identify them.

- ✓ **Word Choice**
 - ✓ **Omissions/Selection**
 - ✓ **Limiting Debate/Spin**
 - ✓ **Sources**
 - ✓ **Story Framing/Headlines/Names/Titles**
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Word Choice

How many ways are there to tell the same story?



Words are very precise building blocks that form the basis for all communicated ideas. They can hold truths or lies but are always the products of expression. People express themselves not only through what they say but also by how they say it. Diction (choice and use of words in writing) and syntax (structure of formation of phrases) allow an idea to be established in any number of ways: some are basic, others are luxuriously flamboyant, some reveal secondary thoughts, others betray hidden emotions. It's like the saying; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A whole sentence says more than simply what the individual words describe. Bias, in many forms, is not necessarily explicit in the words that have been used but can be recognized when seen in the fuller context that the words represent. Journalists do this by manipulating single words in such a way that whole sentences' meanings are subtly changed...and sometimes not so subtly.

- **What is the fundamental piece of information being presented?**
- **Is there an easier or less insinuating way to express that piece of information?**

Example 1:

Here are the headlines and lead paragraphs of two articles which came out on the morning of March 11, 2003. They are covering the *same incident*:

The New York Times 3/11/2003 Iraq forces suspension of U.S. surveillance flights UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) -Iraqi fighter jets threatened two American U-2 surveillance planes, forcing them to return to abort their mission and return to base, senior U.S. officials said Tuesday.	USA Today 3/11/2003 U.N. Withdraws U-2 Planes WASHINGTON (AP)-U.N. arms inspectors said Tuesday they had withdrawn two U-2 reconnaissance planes over Iraq for safety reasons after Baghdad complained both aircraft were in the air simultaneously.
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Word Choice Analysis:

Both of these stories are iterating the same piece of information: 'Surveillance flights in Iraqi air space were ended.' It is usually the case in journalism that more than one piece of information is squeezed into each clause. This is done both for stylistic reasons, and because journalists have a required amount of information that needs to be fit into limited real estate (time or space). However, as you can see, the decisions concerning diction, syntax, and what further information is added can lead to sentences being so altered from the basic idea that the same exact event can be depicted in two profoundly different ways. In the above example, the use of the word "forces" vs. "withdraws" and the phrase "Iraqi fighter jets threatened" vs. "Baghdad complained" impacts the way we read the articles.

Example 2:

The following examples are taken from the context of the 2003 conflict in Iraq:

St. Petersburg Times (Florida) 3/25/2003 The Red Cross, one of the few aid groups with staff operating in Iraq, hopes to negotiate access to the main power station, which is said to be under control of U.S.-led coalition forces . But neither local staff nor specialists in neighboring Kuwait have been cleared to go because of continued clashes.	Dar Al-Hayat 4/1/2003 Iraq said its troops were battling U.S.-led invasion forces inside Nassiriya and on the city's outskirts on Tuesday and inflicting heavy casualties.
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American Sources such as CNN have labeled the conflict the " War In Iraq "	Arab sources such as Dar Al-Hayat regularly call the conflict the " War On Iraq "
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Word Choice Analysis:

In many cases, the keywords of a sentence are manipulated to elicit an editorial comment without the reader being explicitly aware that an opinion is being stated. In this pair of examples, the difference of a single word changes the meanings to reflect opposing viewpoints. By changing the preposition "in" to the word "on," there is a subtle yet significant difference. In fact, by changing only one letter, the entire thrust of the military campaign changes from one of fighting dissidents within the political borders of Iraq to one of aggression against the entire nation.

Omissions

What gets covered? What gets neglected?

Omission occurs when important information is not reported or is reported incompletely. We can think of omission as being news that should have been reported but is left out of the news we read, see and hear. When important news is omitted, we get a skewed or biased perspective. Obviously no news organization can cover every newsworthy story from every possible perspective. But news organizations and their reporters do have an **obligation** to seek the truth and be reasonably comprehensive in their reporting. The information citizens need to make informed decisions comes, to a significant extent, from news organizations. If important stories are ignored, are reported incompletely, or present facts that are not adequately verified, then the obligation to seek the truth is undermined. In these cases the news that is omitted can be as important as the news that is published.

- **Does either article omit important information? If so, to what do you attribute the omissions?**
- **Are there questions either reporter should have asked that were not asked?**
- **Did the information for the story come from a single source or from multiple unaffiliated sources? Were multiple sources necessary for a full understanding of the story?**
- **Are you likely to have a different understanding of the issue depending on which of the articles you read? If so, to what do you attribute the difference?**

Here are two reports of a Harris poll on schoolchildren and violence:

Article #1

Los Angeles Times – July 20, 1993

59% of Schoolchildren Surveyed Say Handguns Are Easy to Get

Citing an emerging “gun culture” among school-age children, a new poll released Monday found that more than half the nation’s sixth-through 12th-graders said they “could get a handgun if they wanted one” and more than a third that they believe they could get it “within an hour.”

The Louis Harris poll, sponsored by the Joyce Foundation in Chicago and prepared for the Harvard School of Public Health, found that 59% of the students surveyed nationwide said guns are easily obtainable, while 35% said it would take them less than 60 minutes to get one.

“Many young people in America today are immersed in what properly might be called a gun culture,” said pollster Harris.

Deborah Leff, president of the Joyce Foundation, a liberal philanthropic organization, said that the poll dispels the myth that gun violence “is a common problem only of urban minorities. The fact that guns permeate everyone’s life, including schoolchildren, is what is so disturbing about this poll.”

Leff said the findings reveal that guns are a staple commodity in nearly all demographic groups. She noted that students of all races reported easy access to handguns—blacks (72%), whites (55%), Latinos (69%) and Asians (47%).

Among the findings:

More than one in five (22%) of the students claimed that they carried a weapon to school during the last school year, with 4% saying that the weapon was a handgun.

Almost two in five (39%) said that someone they know personally has “either been killed or injured from gunfire,” while 9% claimed that they had fired a gun at someone.

A “hard-core” group of young people—about one in six of those surveyed seem inured to possession and use of handguns, said Harris. But, he noted, a majority would like to see an end to the gun culture....

Twenty-two percent said they would have a better chance of surviving a physical fight if they had a handgun.

The poll, which has a margin of error of plus or minus 3%, was administered by Harris pollsters in randomly selected classrooms in rural, suburban and urban public schools across the nation. The 12-page confidential questionnaire was answered by 2,508 students between April 19 and May 21.

Leff said that the poll was commissioned as part of a study aimed at raising awareness of gun violence as a public health issue.

The Foundation sponsored the poll because “you can’t expect kids to fix this situation, unless adults become more involved and informed on this issue,” she said.

Article #2

New York Times – July 20, 1993

Student Poll Finds Many Using Guns

A new nationwide survey finds startling numbers of students in the 6th to 12th grades who say they have shot at someone or have been shot at themselves.

The survey of 2,508 students in 96 schools across the country by the pollster Louis Harris, painted a bleak portrait of violence and fear among American schoolchildren. Some experts expressed doubts about that portrait, but the pollster defended it and the survey on which it was based.

Nine percent said they had shot at someone at some time; 11 percent said they themselves had been shot at in the past year. Nearly 40 percent of the students said they knew someone who had been killed or injured by a gun, and 15 percent said they had carried a gun within 30 days of the survey.

Several experts on guns were skeptical about the results, saying the figures were higher than those in any previous survey. They suggested either that the sample might have been skewed because it was conducted in just 96 schools, so a number of children in a single school could have known of the same violent incident.

“These estimates would imply numbers that dwarf those known to the police,” said Gary Kleck, a professor of criminology....

Several experts said they were particularly surprised by the finding that so many students said they had been shot at or had shot at someone. That figure is far higher than any previous survey. For example, Professor Kleck said, the 1990 National Crime Victimization Survey, conducted annually by the Census Bureau, indicates that at most 2 percent of students between the ages of 12 and 19 were the victims of crimes involving guns. In Gallup Youth surveys dating from 1981, 3 to 5 percent of teen-agers reported being personally assaulted by any means.

Another figure that struck several experts as high was the report that 15 percent of teen-agers said they had carried a gun within 30 days of the survey. A 1991 survey of 9th to 12th graders conducted by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention reported that 2.9 percent of students had carried a gun....

Whatever the numbers, it was clear from the poll that many students lived in fear of violence....

The misuse or misunderstanding of statistics can give us a distorted view of reality. One form of statistical information news organizations frequently use is polling. Polls have become an important part of our political and social discussions, often being used as evidence to promote or undermine a position or idea. One thing that makes them powerful is the appearance of scientific accuracy. Polling firms generally claim their results have a margin of error 3-5%. It is important to keep in mind that the results pollsters get often depend not just on the validity of the polling sample but also on the wording of the questions asked. Questions can be framed to ‘intentionally or unintentionally’ elicit certain responses. When reading poll results, check to see if the exact questions that were asked are included. If they are not, the apparent results of the poll should be treated with skepticism. If the questions are included, consider other ways they could have been asked. If you can easily come up with fairer or less biased way to ask the question then, once again, skepticism is in order.

Reporters should not simply pass on polling results to their audience without verifying the quality of the polling and noting any polling results that may call into question the current findings. As in their other reporting they have a responsibility, when reporting on poll results, to question and verify. If they don’t do so, important information gets omitted. Information that an informed citizenry needs.

Omissions Analysis:

According to the "Columbia Journalism Review" article excerpted above. "... over the years, there had been a series of conspicuous red flags pointing to shuttle unreliability" and that the news media failed to adequately report about these "red flags." There was some excellent reporting of the space program's problems in low circulation periodicals like the magazine "Science." Major news outlets were more likely to report problems in a fairly perfunctory manner with little or no follow up reporting. There was a tendency amongst many to take more of boosterish than an investigatory approach to coverage of the U.S. space program. The following headline from a 1981 article in the "New York Times" typifies the tone of coverage NASA tended to receive: "ASTRONAUTS CERTAIN OF SHUTTLE'S SAFETY."

It is impossible to know if better reporting would have made it possible to avert the Challenger disaster. It does seem reasonable to assert that what was omitted, from much of the coverage of the space shuttle program, made it more likely that such a tragedy would occur. Most instances of omission do not have the serious repercussions that this case does. But the failure to adequately report on important issues can and does have long term negative consequences. It can be difficult for consumers of the news to know when they are not getting the whole story. It is wise to watch out for boosterism or any other sign that the reporter is not casting a critical eye on that which he or she covers.

Limiting Debate

People in positions of power often try to use the media to promote their positions or their "spin" on events. Sometimes, especially in cases of national security, government officials have an interest in limiting or eliminating debate. They hope that their interpretation of events is accepted, rather than questioned, by the media. They would have us believe that their view of events should be shared by all right-thinking people. Sometimes the media, or at least some media, wittingly or unwittingly act as debate limiting agents. They accept the official position without adequately scrutinizing the assertions of those officials.

- **Is the claim made in the headline adequately substantiated in the text of the article?**
- **Does the reporter accept the official U.S. government position as fact or are there indications that he sought independent confirmation of official claims?**
- **Do you think the reporter is susceptible to being used by government officials to further their policies or do you think he demonstrates enough independent thinking to make that unlikely?**

- **Journalistic codes of ethics urge journalists to use anonymous sources as sparingly as possible. The writer of one of the articles below uses an anonymous source. Does it seem justified in this case? Is it clear why the source wanted to remain unnamed?**
- **Do you get the sense from reading the article that there may be more than one way to view the events? In other words, does the article serve to limit or eliminate debate? Do you think that's justified given the situation described?**

Example 1:

The following article deals with the 2003 War with Iraq:

The Washington Times -- 3/12/2003

SADDAM READY TO KILL IRAQIS

Rowan Scarborough

Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein is planning attacks on his own people in the event of a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and his top operative, a general nicknamed "Chemical Ali," has been put in charge of southern Iraq to quell any civilian uprisings, U.S. officials say....

U.S. military officials say there are increasing indications that Saddam will kill his own people and blame the atrocities on invading American forces. Bush administration officials reported last week that Saddam was planning to dress Iraqi forces in coalition uniforms and order them to kill innocents.

Mr. Rumsfeld suggested yesterday that Saddam is considering shelling civilians with deadly chemical weapons, as he did in 1988, killing up to 100,000 Kurds in northern Iraq. "His regime may be planning to use weapons of mass destruction against its own citizens, and then blame coalition forces," Mr. Rumsfeld said.

He recalled that during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, authorities ordered civilians into military command bunkers. In one instance, on Feb. 13, 1991, the U.S. forces bombed the Amiriyah bunker in Baghdad. Later, the United States discovered that Saddam's deputies had sentenced scores of civilians to their deaths by placing them on the bunker's upper level, above a command center. Baghdad displayed the dead bodies to the international press.

"When his regime begins claiming once again that coalition forces have targeted innocent Iraqi civilians, if that's to be the case, we need to keep his record in mind," Mr. Rumsfeld said. Saddam "will seek to maximize civilian deaths and create the false impression that coalition forces target innocent Iraqis, which, of course, is not the case," the defense secretary said.

President Bush, who is weighing a decision to order an invasion of Iraq, said last month that Saddam has authorized his most loyal troops, the Republican Guard, to use chemical weapons against coalition forces. A U.S. military official said that at least two Republican Guard divisions are believed to be armed at this moment with chemical artillery shells. The belief among military planners is that Saddam has nothing to lose in unleashing weapons of mass destruction, as the goal of the coalition troops is to capture or kill him and oust his hard-line Ba'ath party regime.

A sign that Saddam is serious about attacking civilians comes in reports from inside Iraq that Gen. Ali Hassan al Majid, or "Chemical Ali," has been placed in charge of military activities in southern Iraq. Considered a war criminal by human rights groups, Majid commanded the 1988 chemical weapons attacks on the Kurds. He also oversaw the brutal occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and 1991. After the 1991 war, he commanded the Republican Guard divisions that brutally put down a rebellion by Shi'ites in Iraq's southern marshlands.

"He is a senior adviser to Saddam. He is known as an enforcer for the regime," said a U.S. intelligence official, who asked not to be named. "He is used to put down uprisings and maintain order." This official said Saddam typically carves up the country into three or four regions during crises and then appoints hard-line lieutenants to maintain order. In Majid, Saddam has a loyal commander and his own blood relation — they are cousins — to watch over the southern oil fields around Basra and stamp out any Shi'ite rebellion. U.S. military officials report that it appears that Iraqi operatives have affixed explosive charges to southern and northern oil fields, in the same way that they sabotaged oil wells in Kuwait before fleeing the country in 1991.

Gen. Richard B. Myers, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, said the military will install a screening process to determine which Iraqi officers harm civilians. "The vetting process will reveal those who participated in war crimes and those who didn't," Gen. Myers said....

Limiting Debate Analysis:

It is often said that the "first casualty in war is the truth." While to some it may seem unpatriotic to challenge what our government is telling us in times of war, history should teach us that it is important to do so.

Example 2:

The following articles appeared on the same day in the New York Times. They are not written by the same reporter:

ARTICLE #1

New York Times -- 10/18/1965

**JOHNSON DECRIES DRAFT PROTESTS;
PRESSES INQUIRY**

He Fears Enemy will Doubt Nation's Resolve and
Fight Harder, Prolonging War

CONGRESS ALSO CRITICAL

Mansfield Asserts Marchers Are Irresponsible and
Hurt Vietnam Peace Efforts

Led by President Johnson, official Washington
erupted today with criticism of the nationwide
demonstrations last weekend against the war in
Vietnam.

Bill D. Moyers, White House press secretary, told
newsmen . . . that the President was dismayed by the
demonstrations and had given his full endorsement to
the Justice Department's investigation of possible
Communist infiltration of the anti-draft movement.

On Capitol Hill, leaders of the Senate were even
more outspoken in their denunciation of the
demonstrators. The Senate majority leader, Mike
Mansfield of Montana, said that some of their actions
reflected a "sense of utter irresponsibility." He said
that the net effect would be to "undermine the
President" in his effort to end the war in Vietnam. . . .

Mr. Johnson is disturbed by preliminary reports of
Communist infiltration of the peace movement. He is
concerned, Mr. Moyers said, "that even well-meaning
demonstrators can become the victims of Communist
aggression."

The issue of Communist infiltration was raised
yesterday in Chicago by Attorney General Nicholas
deB Katzenbach. . . .

Mr. Moyers said that the Justice Department's
investigation had been initiated over the weekend by
the Attorney General, not the President. . . .

"I am sure," Mr. Moyers said, "that the President
feels the concern as strongly as it was expressed by
the Attorney General. . . .

According to aids, Mr. Johnson feels no personal
bitterness against most of the demonstrators. . . .

"One of the subjects he touched on this morning,"
Mr. Moyers said, "was to express surprise that any
one citizen would feel toward his country in a way
that is not consistent with the national interest."

He also showed concern, Mr. Moyers said, "that there
is this lack of understanding by a few of what we are
trying to do in South Vietnam in helping the people
of that country maintain the freedom and
independence that this rightly theirs."

The reaction on Capitol Hill was bipartisan. . . .

One of the most outspoken critics was the liberal
Republican Senator from California. . . .

He called those responsible for persuading young
people to avoid the draft "vile and venomous." The
effect of these demonstrations would be to "sow the
seeds of treason." . . .

Senator Frank J. Lausche, an Ohio Democrat,
asserted: Substantially these demonstrations are the
product of Communist leadership and countless
youth are in them not knowing they are following the
flags of the Reds."

He calls the demonstrators "yellow in color and
lacking in courage."

ARTICLE #2

New York Times -- 10/18/1965

ANTIDRAFT GROUP MAPS NEW EFFORT

Students for a Democratic Society drafted today a new master plan to enlist high school students in its anti-draft movement opposed to United States participation in the Vietnam War.

It also hopes to draw even more than it has on help from sympathetic professors even to the extent of asking them to refuse to cooperate with draft officials. . . .

Paul Booth, national secretary of the group, outlined its aims in an interview in the organization's headquarter, a warren of dank second-floor offices,

badly lighted and in wretched repair, on 63rd Street, in a Negro slum. . . .

Civil rights and left-wing posters adorn the walls along with some modern paintings. Of the posters, designed by Picasso, has a Communist hammer and sickle; it is signed by the Italian Communist party.

The groups program is based on the theory that student demonstrations are not enough. The group supported the rash of protests this weekend without taking credit for instigating them.

The Justice Department is making a national investigation of the "beat the draft" movement. . . .

Mr. Booth conceded that the organization had never banned Communists. But he said it would not tolerate undemocratic maneuverings. He repeated a statement yesterday that raising the Communist issue was a diversionary tactic.

Limiting Debate Analysis:

More than 50,000 Americans ended up dying in Vietnam. The number of Vietnamese killed was, of course, much higher. Many of those who were so critical of those protesting the war would, in time, come to oppose it themselves. While there were certainly communists active in the anti-war movement the focus on it that we see in these articles was not justified.

In publishing articles like the ones above the New York Times acted to limit the range of acceptable debate and perhaps helped prolong the first war the United States would lose.

Sources

What sources are used? How are they used?

- Is there any similarity in the sources cited?

- Can you get a sense of who gave this information to the reporter, or where they might have gotten it?

- If you answered yes to the previous question, then does that source provide enough information or is more needed to fully understand the situation?

Example 1:

Here is an articles covering the Panama Invasion of 1989, the bold formatting has been added:

The Washington Post
December 28, 1989

Despite Problems, Invasion Seen as Military Success;U.S. Operation in Panama Contrasts With More Muddled 1983 Action in Grenada

The U.S. invasion of Panama began inauspiciously early on the morning of Dec. 20 when a dozen planeloads of paratroopers missed the landing zone in one of the few tactical glitches of an otherwise successful military operation, **according to knowledgeable military and civilian sources.**

The immediate **after-action analysis of the complex operation** suggests that Operation Just Cause suffered from four shortcomings, none serious enough to undermine the **invasion's success**: the failure to capture Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega; a miscalculation of the tenacity of the Panamanian defenders; the potential for looting by Noriega loyalists and ordinary citizens; and the scattered parachute assault by the 82nd Airborne Division.

The overall success, **in military terms**, in choreographing the attack by 22,500 U.S. troops is already being contrasted to the more muddled 1983 invasion of Grenada, which led to a major reorganization of the American military command structure. The attack against Panama was the first test of the new organization, which gives controlling authority to the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the expense of the disparate services.

"It looked to me like this was as good as we get with so many units involved, unless you practice this specific operation a lot more," **said a knowledgeable Army officer.** "At the battalion level and below, there probably wasn't much difference between this and Grenada. But at higher levels, there were a whole lot less warts on this than in Grenada."

Part of the reason for fewer "warts," **according to military officials**, was the extensive contingency planning that preceded the Panama invasion, compared to the hastily drafted plans for the Grenada assault six years ago. "There were minor things, like the airdrop in the wrong place," **one U.S. official said** yesterday. "But there were not the massive stupidities we had in Grenada."...

..."The old plan wasn't serious," **said a U.S. official** familiar with the proposal. "This plan was serious. It was a massive operation-getting all the Military Airlift Command resources in from all over the world."...

...**The U.S. assault** on a series of Panamanian defense strongholds **was designed to disorient and frighten** Noriega's troops into surrendering or fleeing, rather than surround the forces and provoke them into firing back, leaving both sides with more casualties, **according to several military officials.**

"**The assumption was these guys** {the Panama Defense Forces} had a job-they **were not serving in the military as a career or dedication to their country,**" **said one U.S. official.** "We thought that if there was a lot of noise outside of the front door, they would go out the back."

Instead, many of the troops stood their ground and waged dramatic firefights with the Americans, and many of those who did flee **"took their weapons and went into town and started looting and sniping," said the official.**

"The one hole you could criticize, was that with the frontal attack, we paused and let them disperse," the official added.

One Army officer yesterday said that several U.S. paratroopers were wounded when a group of PDF soldiers feigned surrendering with their hands raised, and then threw a grenade. Four of the Panamanians were killed by return fire.

The **"biggest killer"** in the U.S. arsenal, according to one officer, was the AC-130 gunship, a slow-flying airplane armed with a Gatling gun; after the AC-130, the Apache helicopter gunships probably have been credited with the most kills, he added.

A week after the assault was launched, U.S. troops have captured or detained about 80 percent of the 3,500 troops that are the military contingent of the 16,000-member PDF, military sources said.

American military officials have been surprised by the massive stockpiles of weapons discovered in warehouses and other locations throughout Panama. U.S. forces have uncovered about 78,000 weapons thus far and estimate a few thousand more weapons may be found...far greater numbers have been found in huge caches, raising new questions about possible arms sales by Noriega to other Latin American nations, military and congressional sources said.

The most obvious shortcoming of the military operation was the failure to find and capture Noriega, who was on the run for five days, then evaded the U.S. intelligence nets and walked into the guarded Vatican embassy in Panama City...

U.S. officials familiar with the military plans **said it was Noriega's alleged drug-trafficking connections that first began to persuade American military authorities in Panama** to consider Noriega more than a diplomatic nuisance. When President Bush gave the military a major new role in the nation's drug war last spring, Southern Command authorities concluded they could not wage their drug mission without "openly recognizing the Noriega problem," one official said.

In addition, the military in recent months had become increasingly intolerant of PDF harassment of U.S. military officials in Panama. The failed coup attempt against Noriega Oct. 3 and embarrassment over the slow U.S. reaction to the incident spurred senior military leaders to draft a new contingency plan for attacking Panamanian forces, according to military and congressional sources. The killing of a U.S. Marine and assault against a naval officer and threats against the officer's wife on Dec. 16 "was the last straw" that gave Bush and the military the opening to launch the invasion, officials said.

Congressional leaders are already planning hearings on the invasion, and are expected to raise questions ranging from military tactics to civilian deaths caused by the large application of military force...whether there was a legitimate military need for all four military services to participate in the operation-including the use of such exotic weapons as the Air Force F-117 "stealth" fighter plane.

Consider the following

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What Sources Are Used?

Very often in journalism it is not the actual reporting that is biased but rather the very sources of themselves. Leon V. Sigal was one of the first researchers to look for bias by studying the sources used by reporters. He, and a number of others, determined that it is **more objective to look at who the sources are instead of trying to interpret what the sources are saying.**¹ In 1973, he published his findings from a survey taken from thousands of samples of page-one articles spanning 20 years (1949-1969) from The New York Times and The Washington Post.²

He classified all channels of information into three categories: Routine, Informal, and Enterprise (the categories are broken down in the chart below). After analyzing the stories which used only one source, stories which used multiple sources (divided into one primary channel and one or more secondary channels) and all stories together, he reported **two major discoveries**:

Channels of Information for News in the Times and Post Combined-All Stories (N=2,850)			
Routine	58.2%	Official proceedings	12.0%
		Press releases	17.5
		Press conferences	24.2
		Nonspontaneous events	4.5
Informal	15.7%	Background briefings	7.9%
		Leaks	2.3
		Nongovernmental proceedings	1.5
		News reports, editorials, etc.	4.0
Enterprise	25.8%	Interviews	23.7%
		Spontaneous events	1.2
		Books, research, etc.	-
		Reporter's own analysis	0.9

1. More than half of the stories relied on routine channels (this includes the majority of single-source stories and the majority of primary sources for multiple-source stories).

2. Nearly one half of routine channels were U.S. Officials (92% of whom were Executive Branch Officials). This meant that from 1949-1969, a substantial **majority of stories** in the two most influential

newspapers in the country **came from the Official White House Spokesmen**. One-third of all reports were printed without any follow up sources.³

One broad implication, made by Sigal, was that the news medium (aptly named) acts a mediator, “between the officialdom and the citizenry of the United States.”⁴ He likened it to a pipeline connecting a reservoir to a city. A few drops might evaporate or get redirected, but the effects of the pipeline are insignificant in comparison to the source of the water, the reservoir. It would be easy to pass judgment on the US Government but it is enough to simply say that it is deceptive to the public when newsmen rely too much on routine channels. By doing so, they are **leaving much of the task of selecting the news in the hands of their sources**.

It is worth remembering that Sigal’s findings were calculated from sources which are now over 30 years old. Sigal, himself, acknowledged a visible trend towards less news gathering from routine sources, and more from enterprising channels (most notably interviews). However, there are more recent studies which also prove news entities are often **dependent on a limited base of sources**.

Charles D. Whitney and Brown et al. both concluded (in 1989 and 1987, respectively) that government officials are used more than any source in print and broadcast news.⁵ Noam Chomsky reported in his 1988 indictment of the mass media, *Manufacturing Consent*, that **white males associated with elite institutions are the most frequently used sources**. This is confirmed in studies by liberal media watchdog group, FAIR, in 1990.⁶ This same study, along with that previously mentioned by Whitney, observes that **women, representatives of civil rights, human rights and labor groups are grossly underrepresented**. Since women make up over half of the US population, this inequality casts doubt on the supposition that the media acts as an objective mirror through which societal events are reported.

Such accusations are summarily rejected, and a uniform explanation is given for all documented evidence of bias in news composition, ad nauseam: white males associated with elite organizations are cited as sources so much because they are the most newsworthy.

Such a claim is difficult to refute because so many high positions of power and influence (those which determine policies and set events in motion) are held by said white men. Even though this explanation does not seem to fully justify the lack of other sources, it is equally important to consider the consequences of the media’s dependence on these routine channels. The biggest danger of passively reporting whatever official line is coming from a press-release or press-conference is this: **you can't be certain you are not being misled**.

The following two excerpts, from articles one week apart, used the same source. This demonstrates the ease with which an untruth by a US Official can be printed as fact. The media had no choice but to report what was said, in complete faith that they were being told the truth.

The Associated Press, March 23, 2003 Sunday

WASHINGTON -- War has brought little change to the regulated, by-the-numbers life of President George W. Bush.

He is not worried or plagued by doubts, aides say, and is hewing closely to his usual routines and habits even as American bombs pelt Baghdad and allied tanks dash across the Iraqi desert.

"The president is following his normal routine," Mr. Bush's spokesman, Ari Fleischer, said before the president left to spend the weekend, as he has often throughout his term, at the secluded Camp David presidential retreat in the silence of Maryland's Catoctin Mountains.

He has been working out almost every day, and a longtime Bush aide said he also seems to be sleeping well, is sticking to his diet and even giving up desserts as he tries to shave seconds off his running time.

Since the air war's opening runs Wednesday night, Mr. Bush has been formally briefed on military operations several times a day and informed of crucial developments as they occur. **And never a big TV watcher, he isn't following television news accounts closely as the dramatic events unfold.**

The New York Times, Elisabeth Bumiller, March 29, 2003, Sunday

WASHINGTON, — George W. **Bush was standing three feet from his television screen in his cabin at Camp David last weekend**, absorbed in every detail of the news from Iraq, when a correspondent came on to report that the president of the United States, according to White House officials, was not glued to the TV.

Mr. Bush started laughing, said his close friend Roland Betts, who was with the president at the time.

"He is just totally immersed," Mr. Betts said in an interview. Mr. Betts said that he and Mr. Bush talked of little else but the war over two days at Camp David last weekend, and that the president regularly turned in to the cable channels for updates on Iraq. When Mr. Bush saw something that concerned him, Mr. Betts said, he picked up the phone to tell Condoleezza Rice, his national security adviser who was at nearby cabin, to look into it.

...

In the opening days of the conflict, **White House officials were so eager not to personalize the war** as a Bush revenge match against the dictator who tried to assassinate his father that Ari Fleischer, the **White House press secretary, at first suggested that Mr. Bush was not even watching the enormous blasts on live television** of the first bombs thundering down on Baghdad. Mr. Fleischer said later that the president had indeed been watching television. The reality is that the war now dominates the White House and the president's life.

If the White House is willing to mislead about something as insignificant as this, one could wonder how much *isn't* being revealed. There is a greater need for dependence on other sources outside the official line. No one argues that the best source for information on something like a military operation would be an officer in the armed forces. However, a greater effort to find secondary sources and commentary from people with assorted backgrounds and experience is needed for the media to become less of a conduit for governments and official institutions and start reporting stories as they are seen from more than one perspective.

How are sources being used?

- Who is being quoted?
- Is there any mention of opposing viewpoints?
- Are there a lot of quotes/interviews about only one side of an issue?
- Are the quotes expressing a biased viewpoint which, in turn, are left unchallenged by the reporter?

Article #1

The Jerusalem Post
September 22, 2002

HEADLINE: Arafat refuses to give up fugitives. IDF tightens hold around Mukata

BODY: Isolated and confined in the only building left standing in the dust and rubble of his Mukata government complex in Ramallah, a defiant Yasser Arafat told reporters yesterday he refuses to surrender to Israel's demand to hand over some 50 fugitives inside the building with him.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer each spoke with top Palestinian officials over the weekend and rejected their requests to ease the siege of Arafat's compound.

The operation, code named "A Matter of Time," was launched on Thursday night in response to the Tel Aviv suicide bombing attack that killed six and wounded scores. It is aimed at isolating the Palestinian leader and destroying the remaining symbols of the Palestinian leadership, which Israel claims is irrelevant.

Late last night, the IDF began demolishing a the five- story operations building standing next to Arafat's office. The IDF used loudspeakers to tell an estimated 200 people holed up inside the compound that they must evacuate because a large explosion was going to take place. A military official said the message was intended to persuade them to leave quickly, with as few mishaps as possible. Israel Radio reported that the Palestinians inside, including Arafat and some 50 men wanted by Israel, have made no signs of obeying the IDF demands. The radio reported that the IDF strategy was to only leave standing the building that Arafat was occupying.

The Palestinian Legislative Council Speaker Ahmed Qurei called Sharon and asked him to ease Arafat's conditions. Qurei told Sharon that Israel needs Arafat, because he is the only Palestinian with whom Israel could conduct negotiations.

Sharon replied that the siege would continue until some 50 wanted terrorists inside compound are turned over to Israel. He said Arafat has to end all aid to the terrorist groups and that he could not be a partner in negotiations.

"We are ready for peace but not for capitulation and we will not give up Jerusalem or a grain of our soil, which are guaranteed to use by international law," Arafat said in a statement to the Wafa agency.

Israel has declared it has no intention of harming the Palestinian leader it holds directly responsible for the recent terrorist attacks that have claimed nine Israeli lives, but demands that the 50 fugitives involved in terrorist activities "with blood on their hands" surrender to the troops outside.

So far 32 Palestinians, none of whom appears on the list of fugitives, have surrendered and have been taken for questioning by security forces, with some already being released. Israeli security officials estimate that there are approximately 200 people inside the office building with Arafat, and noted that the electricity and water supply is working.

"We estimate they have food but in talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials since the beginning of the operation, it was made clear that if they require food and medication it will be supplied to them. In addition army medical teams are posted outside the building and ready to check anyone that leaves it," one official said.

Troops were confronted with slight resistance when gunfire erupted between armed Palestinians and soldiers. Two Force 17 members were killed.

By yesterday morning IDF explosives had destroyed four of the five main buildings used as officers' and living quarters, the main meeting room where the Palestinian Legislative Council convened 10 days ago, and IDF bulldozers had demolished 11 caravans.

Security forces found over 60 Kalashnikov assault rifles and sniper weapons, ammunition clips, and hundreds of bullets, pipe bombs, and telescopic sites in the meeting hall before it was destroyed. Bulldozers began to demolish the western wing where the offices of the governor of Ramallah were once located.

Yesterday morning a tank shell landed on the floor above the office where Arafat sat, showering him with dust but causing no harm. A trench and barbed wire were reportedly placed by soldiers around the remaining structure where the Palestinian leader is confined.

Soldiers with megaphones periodically called on those inside to leave the building, adding that those not related to terrorist activities will be free to return home.

In addition, the IDF imposed curfews and a closure on the West Bank and tightened blockades around the major towns and cities.

Reports from some of the Palestinians inside the building with Arafat claimed that the IDF had demolished water pipes and the main kitchen, but said there was enough water in rooftop tanks and food to last for a few more days. The Palestinian leader was confined to the second floor offices after a tank shell destroyed the stairs leading to the ground floor and the walkway that connected his building to the adjacent wing was demolished, isolating him from some of his guards in the other wing.

By last night, the IDF was breaking through one of the walls of the compound, Palestinian sources said. They warned that the building was likely to collapse.

Peres received calls from European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller, whose country holds the EU rotating presidency, and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

Arafat's deputy Muhammad Abbas reportedly also called Peres and Ben-Eliezer to ask them to pressure Sharon. According to Palestinian reports, Ben-Eliezer rejected a request by Abbas to visit Arafat.

"We cannot tolerate a situation in which anyone can come and kill us," Peres told Solana. "This IDF operation is taking place because the Palestinians lack anyone taking responsibility for eliminating acts of terror."

Peres said Arafat has not given real authority to PA Interior Minister Abdel Razal al-Yahya and called upon Arafat to appoint a prime minister who would be responsible for day-to-day issues, including security. He said the only reason Israel had 40 days of relative quiet was the IDF's presence in Palestinian cities.

Moeller complained to Peres that Israel has an "obsession with Arafat" that has delayed progress in Palestinian reforms, including the appointment of a prime minister.

US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice called Sharon on Friday urging him not to harm Arafat, and US Ambassador Daniel Kurzer was supposed to meet with Sharon last night, Palestinian sources said.

Palestinians were said to be disappointed by the UN Security Council decision to delay discussions of the Israeli siege of Arafat till tomorrow.

Senior diplomatic sources in Jerusalem said that even though Hamas perpetrated Thursday's attack in Tel Aviv, Arafat bears full responsibility, because US President George W. Bush declared after September 11 that countries will be held responsible for terror emanating from their borders.

"The PA can't blame Hamas, because they did nothing to stop it," one official said. "If they are the leaders of the Palestinians people which they claim to be, they have to take care of it. They can't have it both ways."

Ben-Eliezer spoke with Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher and assured him that Israel has no intention of harming Arafat, but the operation would continue until the fugitives give themselves up.

Speaking on Channel 2 on Friday, Ben-Eliezer said "tactically speaking it would be a mistake to expel him." In an interview on Channel 1, he said: "We don't intend to harm him physically, but to ensure he is isolated from his people... He is the main obstacle."

Article #2

The Observer
Guardian Newspapers Ltd.
September 22, 2002

HEADLINE: Arafat helpless as Israel tears down his people's flag: Jonathan Steele in Ramallah watches the final humiliation of the besieged Palestinian leader in a move that drew condemnation from Britain and France

BODY: IT WAS precisely 1.28pm yesterday when Israeli troops emerged on the roof of what had once been the proudest building in the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority and unceremoniously hauled down the Palestinian flag.

As Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, was holed up powerless and humiliated in his private offices a few feet away, the disappearance of the flag from above the meeting hall where he had once received the US Secretary of State Colin Powell and other foreign dignitaries marked Israel's final repudiation of the Oslo agreement, which it had signed on the White House lawn nine years ago.

It also launched a new international crisis that could widen the splits between the Bush administration and European governments, already visible over US plans to attack Iraq. The US is backing Israel's action while Britain and France condemned it as unacceptable. In a statement last night the Foreign Office said: 'We understand Israel's need to take steps to protect itself from terrorist attacks, but this siege is not the answer. It will not solve the problem of Palestinian violence; peace can be achieved only through all parties returning to the negotiating table, not by military action.'

In the meantime all efforts to promote reform and new elections in the Palestinian territories, let alone find a way to resume peace talks, are on hold.

The Oslo agreement, the greatest achievement of Bill Clinton's presidency, recognised the Palestinian Authority as an interim government on the way to a Palestinian state and Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories. Now it is in tatters.

'There you are, that's the proof,' said Abdullah Injum, a middle-aged electrician, as we watched from under a vine-covered trellis in his garden a hundred yards away while troops raised the blue and white flag of Israel where the Palestinian flag had been. 'Arafat is not the problem for the Israelis. They want to eliminate the Palestinian, issue, pure and simple.'

'The Israelis first invaded the compound several months ago, but this is the first time they have put up their flag. I feel pain to see it,' said his wife, Kawther.

While the political humiliation tightened, the physical pressure on the besieged Palestinian leader and the few dozen people left in the compound with him was also intensifying. Giant excavators clanked and smashed into brick walls, their huge metal teeth wrenching at roof parapets and window frames.

A walkway that once connected Arafat's private quarters with the meeting hall was torn from its moorings. The pipes taking water into his rooms were churned up. Tanks pointed their gun-turrets at his building, the only place where the Palestinian flag still flies. 'The siege is moving fast and is very aggressive,' said an Arafat aide whom we contacted inside the building by mobile phone.

'Everyone is staying in the room where they are. There are snipers everywhere. If you leave the room, they will shoot at anyone visible. We still have electricity, but the water is gone. We shall soon run out of drinking water and food,' he added.

A photographer in the building with Arafat said the 73-year-old leader was showered with dust when a tank shell hit the floor above him but he was unhurt.

Israel started tightening the noose on the Palestinian leader after two suicide bombings on successive days last week that killed nine people, ending a six-week lull in attacks. At a stormy Cabinet meeting on Thursday night, the Government decided to 'isolate' Arafat, even though he has condemned suicide bombings and recently approved a statement denouncing them as alien to Islamic values and urging all Palestinian militant groups to do likewise.

While promising not to harm Arafat, Israel accuses him of harbouring militants in the compound, including Tawfik Tirawi, his intelligence chief, and Mahmoud Damra, head of Force 17, the Palestinian leader's bodyguard unit.

With Arafat vowing not to give them up or surrender himself, and the Israelis insisting that they will not relax the pressure on the last building in the compound until their demands are satisfied, the prospect of a long siege is looming.

The US position will be crucial. Nabil Abu Rudeineh, an aide to Arafat, said after contacts with various foreign governments he had been told that 'the Americans have told the Israelis to stop'.

'They have stopped shooting,' he added. 'But the bulldozers are still demolishing everything. The Americans should be aware that what Israel is doing and Washington's backing for Israel is endangering the interests of the US in the region.'

Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, said Israel should 'bear in mind the consequences' of its action. He gave support to the Israeli demand for the surrender of the militants by adding 'the Palestinians have responsibilities to make certain that they prevent attacks, halt attacks and arrest the militants who are responsible'.

While the siege tightened, a day-long curfew turned Ramallah, the capital of the Palestine Authority, into a ghost town.

The crisis has only served to enhance Arafat's support. He was embarrassed 10 days ago when the Palestinian parliament almost passed a vote of no confidence in his government, alleging corruption by many Ministers who are his cronies. Ministers resigned en masse to forestall MPs going ahead with the vote.

Now Arafat's political position has been strengthened. 'It's not a matter of whether I love or hate Arafat,' said Abdullah Injum. 'He is the symbol of our national identity. I don't think that destroying his compound will solve the Palestinian issue.'

'Arafat is paying a heavy price for rejecting Sharon's type of peace. After Oslo, for years there were no suicide operations in Israel.'

'But the result was more confiscation of land and more new settlements. Now Israel is trying to justify their position by calling Arafat a terrorist.'

Consider the following:



Sources (Used with permission under a Creative Common License):

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