

How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda

In National and World News

The logic behind bias and propaganda in the news media is simple and it is the same the world over. Each society and culture has a unique world view. This colours what they see and how they see it.

News media in the cultures of the world reflect the world view of the culture for which they write. But the truth of what is happening in the world is much more complicated than what appears to be true in any culture.

To be a critical reader of the news media in any society, one must come to terms with this truth and read accordingly. Critical thinking is a complex set of skills that reverses what is natural and instinctive in human thought.

The uncritical mind is unconsciously driven to identify truth in accordance with the following tacit maxims:

“It’s true if I believe it”.

“It’s true if we believe it”.

“It’s true if we want to believe it”.

“It’s true if it serves our vested interest to believe it”.

The critical mind consciously seeks the truth in accordance with the following instinct-correcting maxims:

“I believe it, but it may not be true”.

“We believe it, but we may be wrong”.

“We want to believe it, but we may be prejudiced by our desire”.

“It serves our vested interest to believe it, but our vested interest has nothing to do with the truth”.

Mainstream news coverage in a society operates with the following maxims:

“This is how it appears to us from our point of view; therefore, this is the way it is”.

“These are the facts that support our way of looking at this; therefore, these are the most important facts”.

“These countries are friendly to us; therefore, these countries deserve praise”.

“These countries are unfriendly to us; therefore, these countries deserve criticism”.

“These are the stories most interesting or sensational to our readers; therefore, these are the most important stories in the news”.

Critical readers of the news reverse each of these maxims. This guide explains how to do this and thus reduce the influence of bias and propaganda on human thinking.

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Democracy and the News Media

Democracy can be an effective form of government only to the extent that the public is well-informed about national and international events - and can think independently and critically about those events.

If the vast majority of citizens do not recognize bias in the nation's news; if they cannot detect ideology, slant, and spin; if they cannot recognize propaganda when exposed to it, they cannot reasonably determine what media messages have to be supplemented, counter-balanced, or thrown out entirely.

On the one hand, world-wide news sources are increasingly sophisticated in media logic - the art of "persuading" and manipulating large masses of people. This enables them to create an aura of objectivity and "truthfulness" in the news stories they construct.

On the other hand, only a small minority of citizens are skilled in recognizing bias and propaganda in the news disseminated in their country. Only a relatively few are able to detect one-sided portrayals of events or seek out alternative sources of information and opinion to compare to those of their mainstream news media.

At present, the overwhelming majority of people in the world, untrained in critical thinking, are at the mercy of the news media in their own country. Their view of the world, which countries they identify as friends and which as enemies, is determined largely by those media beliefs and conventions of their society.

This slanted information is not a "plot" or a "conspiracy". It is simply a matter of educational background and economic reality. Journalists and news editors are themselves members of a culture. They share a view of the world with their target audience.

They share a nationalized sense of history and allegiance, often a religion, and a general belief system. An Arab editor sees the world differently than an Israeli editor. A Pakistani editor sees the world differently from an Indian one. A Chinese editor sees the world differently from an American one. The same is true of news reporters and other journalists.

What is more, news people work under severe time restrictions and limitations of space. It is hardly surprising that profound differences are reflected in news coverage from nation to nation and culture to culture.

In any case, only those who understand the conditions under which world media operate have a chance of controlling the influence of their national media upon them.

Our goal in this publication is to help our readers lay a foundation for transforming the influences of the media on their lives. It is in all of our interests to critically assess, rather than mindlessly accept, news media pronouncements.

Our hope is that we can aid readers to become more independent, insightful, and critical in responding to the content of news media messages and stories.

Myths That Obscure the Logic of the News Media

The media foster a set of myths regarding how they function. Believing these myths impedes one's ability to view the news from a critical perspective. They include the following:

That most news stories are produced through independent investigative journalism.

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That news writers simply report facts in their stories and do not come to conclusions about them.

That fact and opinion are clearly separated in constructing the news.

That there is an objective reality that is simply “reported” or described by the news media of the world.

That what is unusual, novel, odd, bizarre is news; what is usual is not.

Bias and Objectivity in the News Media

The logic of constructing news stories is parallel to the logic of writing history. In both cases, for events covered, there is both a massive background of facts and a highly restricted amount of space to devote to these facts. The result is that the overwhelming majority of facts are never presented at all.

If objectivity or fairness in the construction of news stories is thought of as equivalent to presenting all the facts and only the facts, objectivity and fairness is an illusion. No human knows more than a small percentage of the facts and it is not possible to present all the facts.

It isn't even possible to present all the important facts, for many criteria compete for determining what is “important”. We must therefore ask, “What has been left out of this article?”. “What would I think if different facts had been highlighted here?” What if this article had been written by those who hold a point of view opposite to the one embedded in the story as told?”

For example, people commonly consider facts to be important to the extent that they have significant implications for them personally: Is any given event going to affect what they want, how much is it going to cost them, how is it going to influence their income, their living conditions, their leisure, their convenience?

How some given event is going to affect others, especially others far away and out of sight, is quite another matter. There is therefore a large divergence among the news media of the world as to what is presented as “significant” in the world.

The media focus on what their readers personally care about. Thus, even if their readers are irrational in some belief e.g. harbor some irrational hate. The media nevertheless will treat that hatred as rational.

Hence, when slavery was commonly accepted in the United States, the media presented slavery as “natural”. When the country became divided on the issue, the media followed suit.

Consider how news media treat what is “shocking” or “exciting” or “disgusting” or “delightful” to a social group. For example, a woman sun-bathing on a beach with barebreasts is commonplace on the French Riviera, and is therefore not condemned, and her behavior is not treated as “news”.

But the same woman would be arrested and punished for sun-bathing in a similar way at a beach in Lebanon. She would be condemned and her behavior treated as “news”. Or again, during the Olympics each country's news media focus their attention on those events in which their nation's athletes are expected to do well.

And when one of their athletes wins a gold medal in an event, this event is presented to the home audience as if it were much more important than the events in which they won no medals.

National audiences are thrilled by their victories and uninterested in victories of others. Human “objectivity” is an ideal that no one perfectly achieves. It requires a great deal of intellectual humility,

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knowledge of our extensive ignorance, and begins by freely admitting one's own point of view, as well as the need to consider competing sources of information and opinion when making important judgements.

The key point is this: There are typically multiple points of view from which any set of events can be viewed and interpreted. Openness to a range of insights from multiple points of view and a willingness to question one's own point of view are crucial to "objectivity".

Objectivity is achieved to the extent that one has studied a wide range of perspectives relevant to an issue, obtained insights from all of them, seen weakness and partiality in each, and integrated what one has learned into a more comprehensive, many-sided whole.

Each should serve to "correct" exaggerations or distortions in the others and to add facts not highlighted in the others.

To summarize:

Only some of the facts are highlighted in any point of view.

All points of view ignore or play down some facts.

No single point of view provides total understanding.

Understanding multiple viewpoints increases insight.

We gain in "objectivity" to the extent that we can put stories and narratives into a rich historical context, and comment on them from multiple points of view. For example, to understand the war between Britain and its colonies in North America, one must look at the events from at least three points of view: that of the British government, that of the colonial leaders, and that of the indigenous peoples.

To achieve objectivity, we need to:

1. Identify the point of view from which a given news story or historical account is constructed.
2. Identify the audience it is written for.
3. Recognize what points of view it is negating or ignoring.
4. Distinguish the raw facts behind the story from the interpretation and spin being put on those facts.

When we do this we are not as easily manipulated.

We are able to exercise greater independence of judgement. We get a greater sense of what elements of the story or account are most or least credible. Of course, it is hard to do any of these if we have not also discovered multiple sources for information and a way to determine when those sources are most credible.

Forms of Objectivity

"Objectivity" may appear in three ways. Two are genuine. One is a façade, a counterfeit of objectivity.

The Objectivity of Intellectual Humility

The first form of objectivity is based on the possibility of developing intellectual humility, knowledge of our ignorance. A critical consumer of the news knows the difference between hearing a story and verifying the truth of that story.

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A critical consumer of the news knows that what is presented as fact in the news may not be fact. It may be propaganda, misinformation, distortion, or half-truth. Knowing this, critical consumers of the news “bracket” what they hear, read, and see in the news.

Recognizing that they don’t themselves know the facts, they “suspend” belief. They take in information in a tentative fashion. For example, “objective” jurors will not come to a conclusion of guilt or innocence after hearing only one side’s case.

Unfortunately, intellectual humility is a rare quality in human life. The majority of people in the world have been exposed to a limited range of views and have been most influenced by the viewpoint dominant in their own culture.

As a result, they take themselves to be in possession of the TRUTH. This confidence is in fact proof of their lack of objectivity. They do not know what intellectual humility is, and they do not take steps to achieve it.

The Objectivity of Fair-minded, Multi-dimensional Thinking

A second form of objectivity goes beyond the first. It is based on intellectual humility and also on having done substantial intellectual work in reasoning within multiple conflicting points of view in addressing questions, problems, and issues of significance. It is connected to positive insight into the complexity and many-sidedness of most important world issues and large-scale conflicts.

Those who have achieved this state can insightfully role-play multiple perspectives on a multitude of issues. They can identify and weigh relative strengths and weaknesses within those perspectives.

They care comfortable playing the role of dissenter, though they don’t dissent for the sake of dissent. They reject party lines, sociocentric mind-sets, and intellectual conformity.

They are intellectually independent, are intellectually perseverant, and have intellectual integrity.

Sophistic Objectivity

The third form of objectivity is “sophistic”. This intellectual state results from studying a range of views with the overriding motivation to defend a predetermined choice. The mind-set is common in intellectuals who make their income, and achieve their prestige, as apologists for powerful interests.

The temptation to become an apologist for a well-established point of view or economic interest is enormous because money, position, and prestige are involved. Lawyers and politicians, as well as public relations experts, are typically ready to play such a role.

Most national news commentators routinely play such a role. They present positions consistent with a picture of the world shared by most of their readers or viewers. They are viewed by their audience as “objective” only to the extent that what they present reflects mainstream views.

The Perception of Bias in the Mainstream

Quite naturally, but uncritically, people think of those who agree with them as objective and those who disagree with them as biased. Thus, if news commentators present mainstream views with a liberal spin, they are viewed as “objective” only by the liberals in the audience.

If mainstream views are given a conservative spin, they are viewed as “objective” only by the conservatives in the audience. The media therefore present liberal or conservative slants on the news in accordance with their audience’s views.

Propaganda and News Story Writing

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines propaganda as “any systematic, widespread dissemination or promotion of particular ideas, doctrines, practices etc., to further one’s own cause or to damage an opposing one”.

Given this definition, there is no clear-cut dividing line between news story writing with a given cultural audience in mind, on the one hand, and constructing propaganda on the other hand.

Both systematically play down or seek to minimize the worth of opposing perspectives or points of view. The logical similarity is striking. Even historical writing can take on the character of propaganda when it is written to “glorify” or “demonize” certain groups by suppressing or ignoring information that does not support its preconceptions and favored ideology.

Because the word “propaganda” carries with it a negative connotation, suggesting deception or distortion, few news writers would admit that the word applies to their stories.

Yet the fact remains that if one receives most of one’s news from a single cultural or national source, the likely impact on the mind will be that of distortion and deception.

Most people, as a result, are trapped in one world view because they have received a steady diet of stories and accounts articulated from that perspective and have not seriously considered any alternatives.

This does not mean, of course, that a given world view is unvaried. Not everyone who shares a viewpoint agrees on every issue. Not every German agrees with every other German, yet a significant difference exists between those who see the world from a German perspective and those who see it from, say, a Japanese or a Mexican perspective.

What is more, though virtually every point of view carries some insight, it doesn’t follow that there is equal insight in all of them. It is usually much easier for people to recognize the truth of these tendencies when thinking about the news coverage in other nations or cultures - especially when those other nations and cultures differ greatly from their own.

Israelis easily recognize bias and propaganda in Arab coverage though they see little in their own coverage, and vice versa. When President George W. Bush of the United States gave a speech identifying Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “axis of evil”, his speech was favorably received by the majority of Americans.

It was taken as a follow-up of the President’s promise to “rid the world of evil”. A wave of patriotic fervor was sweeping the nation. The national news media had engendered a communal sense of rage.

For the overwhelming majority of Americans, the American government stands for high ideals - liberty, justice, democracy, free enterprise, and human rights. The President defending the country against its enemies with the might of its armed forces is an image inspiring patriotic emotions.

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The speech, however, was not received in the same way abroad. He was roundly condemned by the news media in Iran, Iraq, and North Korea and was also viewed as arrogant and out of touch with the complexities of reality by “allies” of the United States.

Here are some of the ways the French and German media conceptualized the speech to their national audiences:

In France, the afternoon daily *Le Monde* ran a front-page cartoon of Mr. Bush in battle fatigues and a headline saying, “Mr. Bush points out his latest enemies”.

A television editorialist on LCI, France’s 24-hour news station, said the speech belonged to ‘a sheriff convinced of his right to regulate the planet and impose punishment as he sees fit.’

In Germany, an editorial in the daily *Suddeutsche Zeitung* offered Chancellor Gerhard Schröder sympathy as he heads for Washington. “Poor Gerhard Schröder”, the editorial says. “It can’t be easy being the first grumpy European to appear at the throne of the freshly anointed American Caesar.”

Here is a sense of the news media coverage in Iran and North Korea:

Iran: “Bush intends to divert public opinion from the Middle East issue and to prepare the domestic grounds for continuing his support of Israel in its brutal oppression of the Palestinian nation”.

“North Korea’s official media scoffed at Mr. Bush for identifying the nation as among the world’s most dangerous. It said his “loudmouthed threat” was intended to justify an American military presence in South Korea.

Of course, in virtually every case it is easier to persuade people that “foreign” press coverage is biased than to persuade those same people of their own national press bias. Every nation’s press coverage of the “news” appears to the mass public of that culture as expressing self-evident truth - because the news is routinely presented within the world view of the mass public that “consumes” that news.

When trapped in a culture-bound view of the world, one thinks within a web of self-serving assumptions, thinking that it is others who use propaganda and manipulation while we, being honest and just, always give the other side its due.

Others use propaganda and manipulation. We freely express the truth. This mind-set is not the product of conspiracy or intrigue. It is the natural and predictable outcome of national news media attempting to make a profit by presenting events in the world to a home audience.

Protecting the Home Audience from Guilt Feelings

The events for which news coverage is most taboo in mainstream media news are deeds that indict the home culture or society of ethical wrong-doing. Consider, for example, the extent of civilian suffering following the dropping of atom bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States military. Though some debate has taken place in the United States media on these acts, the United States mainstream media have presented little documentation of the enormous suffering caused by those events.

One might compare, for example, documentation of the suffering of civilians in German extermination camps with that of the Japanese populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when subjected to massive atomic radiation.

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Scanning the fifty years since the event, we found only one article in one American newspaper, the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, documenting in detail the suffering of the civilian population.

Here are excerpts, without the horrific details, from this editorial:

“in 1965 I spent a vacation in Hiroshima, Japan. My purpose: To interview the sick and dying 20 years after the atomic bomb was exploded over the city. I began the visit in the women’s ward. [What follows in the article are detailed images of suffering that American readers would find extremely painful to imaging their governemtn as inflicting].

The American reporter said to a Japanese victim, “But we dropped millions of pamphlets waring citizens to evacuate the cities”. He looked into my eyes. “No paper was ever dropped. No warning was ever given.”

We cannot, of course, attest to the truth or falsity of the allegation of the U.S. failure to forewarn the civilian population. But the significance is the almost complete absence of documentation of how the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered att he time and in the 50 years following the events.

The absence of documentation of these events by the American media is exactly what we would predict from a national mass news media. People do not pay for news that leads them to question the “goodness” of their own nation or makes them feel responsible for the large-scale suffering of others.

They pay to see the events of the world in a way that validates their values and allegiances.

Fostering Sociocentric Thinking

The key insight is this. The major media and press in all countries of the world present events to the world in terms that presuppose or imply the “correctness” of the ideology dominant in the country.

Our hope is not in changing the news media. News reporters and editors operate within a system of economic imperatives and constraints that dominate their work. Their audience is captive to an enculturated conception of the world.

As aspiring critical consumers of the mass media, we must learn to recognize that mainstream news is inevitably based ona sociocentric view of the world. We must learn how to recognize national and cultural bias.

There is no reason to suppose that the ideology dominant in o ur culture is more accurate or insightful than that of any other. Supposing that one’s own culture is exceptionally truthful in presenting its picture of the world is evicence not of insight but rather of ethnocentrism.

Sociocentrism is a fundamental characteristic of all countries and cultures. The news media function as unwitting agents of social coventions and taboos. Many examples of sociocentric thinking can be found in the mass media.

The media are an inherent part of the culture within which they function. And remember, those in the media must “sell” their stories. Their papers, news broadcasts, and magazines must be economically successful to remain in business.

Pressure to increase profits of media companies has not been an isolated phenomenon. Throughout the American economy, there is unprecedented pressure to maximize profits, putting shareholder value ahead of all other considerations.

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The corporations that own the news media are subject to all the business trends and economic demands that have reshaped American business in the 1980s and 1990s, affecting nearly every part of society.

Because much of the thinking within any given culture is sociocentric in nature to begin with, the news media have little choice but to package what they produce within a sociocentric framework.

The vehicles of large-scale social communication within a society invariably serve that society and advance its self-image. Biased coverage is the rule, not the exception.

The mainstream news media around the world are thus biased towards their country's allies, and prejudiced against their "enemies". They therefore present events occurring in the countries of their allies in as favorable a light as possible, highlighting their "positive" deeds while downplaying their negative ones.

When generating news stories about their "enemies", the opposite treatment invariably follows. Generating positive news stories about the admirable characteristics of one's enemies is unacceptable.

At the same time, negative stories about enemies are always popular, routinely generated and highlighted. The ability of a news consumer to identify these biased stories in action and mentally "re-write" them with an opposing bias is a crucial critical thinking skill.

With it, one sees slanted constructs everywhere in the news. And when one sees through the bias, its persuasive effect on the mind disappears.

Slanting Stories to Favor Privileged Views

Every journalist knows intuitively which terms to use when characterizing the favored and unfavored players on the world stage. We plan...they plot. We are clever...They are sneaky. WE form strategies... they conspire. WE have convictions...they have fanatics. We are proud... they are arrogant. We stand tall... they brag and bluster. We build weapons to defend ourselves...They build weapons to threaten us. We intervene...they invade. We are freedom fighters...they are terrorists. We violate treaties when they are obsolete... they violate treaties because they are irresponsible, untrustworthy, and unethical.

Journalists routinely select words that reinforce the prevailing views among the readership or audience for whom they are writing. Ironically, if news persons writing for a mainstream audience were to adopt views that significantly diverged from those dominant in their society and presented the news in accordance with those views, they would be considered "biased" and "irresponsible".

If you think in accordance with mainstream views, you are a "responsible" thinker; if not, you are "irresponsible". The exception occurs, of course, if significant numbers of people in the culture hold conflicting views, as in the conflict between liberal and conservative perspectives.

In this case, both points of view are presented in both favorable and unfavorable terms. nevertheless, if one's views do not fall into either the mainstream liberal or conservative purview, one is dismissed as a "radical". Radicals are irresponsible by definition.

How to Obtain Useful Information from Propaganda and Standard News Stories

Obtaining useful information, even from propaganda and one-sided news stories, is possible but only if one learns to read, hear, or view them critically. This means that we must analyze the stories with a clear awareness of the point of view they embody, recognizing the attempt to influence our thinking and beliefs.

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One must analyze them as one analyzes one side of a multi-sided argument. One-sided presentations are not the truth pure and simple, though they contain at least part of the truth, the part that supports the side in question.

What is more, in standard news stories something of the opposing point of view is often mentioned, though, usually, in fine print, deemphasized in the last few paragraphs of the story, or couched in terms or quote marks, suggesting that the reader should dismiss it.

Critical readers recognize one-sidedness and seek out viewpoints that are dismissed or ignored. They also note which stories are highlighted e.g. on the front page and which are buried in the background.

Here are some key questions we should ask when analyzing and interpreting news stories:

Who is the intended audience?

What point of view is being privileged?

What point of view is being dismissed or played down?

How can I gain access to the point of view being negated?

Which stories are featured on the front page and why?

What information is “buried” in the article and why?

Steps in Becoming a Critical Consumer of the “News”

1. Understand the basic agenda of “news story construction”:

Always keep in mind that the ultimate purpose of mainstream “news story fabrication” is to sell “stories” for a profit to particular audiences, each with particular beliefs, values and prejudices. It is not to educate. It is not to be fair to all sides.

To sell news stories to an audience, one must carefully construct those stories in such a way as to engage intended readers, and reinforce or validate their beliefs, values, prejudices and world view.

Journalists typically come from those who share the beliefs, values, prejudices, and world view of the intended audience. The “slanting” of the story is then achieved “naturally”.

Constructing news stories for an audience requires that one determine:

- a) What the audience would consider a “story”.
- b) What about a story would be considered most relevant and what about it would be considered least relevant to the audience.
- c) How to construct “leads” or “headlines” for a story.
- d) How much space or time to give a particular story.
- e) How to relate the story to other stories and to the audience’s picture of themselves and their world.
- f) How to tell the story so it sounds “professional”

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2) Use one's knowledge of the logic of "news story construction", first to "deconstruct" stories in the news and then to "reconstruct" them imaginatively with alternative biases and slant.

One becomes a critical consumer of the news media, by understanding the agenda of the news media, the criteria the news media use in constructing the news. Skilled consumers of the news learn how to identify and assess national, social, and political emphases and agendas. They learn how to read between the lines and how to imaginatively recast stories-as-told into alternative stories-as-might-have-been-told from other points of view.

3) Learn how to define issues, access alternative sources both within and outside the mainstream, put events into historical perspective, notice and assess assumptions and implications.

Systematic questioning and assessment are crucial to critical processing of media messages.

4). Learn how to identify low-credibility stories by noticing vested interests or passion associated with content.

Stories are least credible when the interests of the producer or receiver of a story are involved or when the passions of a mass audience are involved. When a nation is at war, for example, stories about the war told by the nation's press are suspect, as all nations produce mass propaganda during war to build support for it. Stories about persons involved in taboo sexual acts would be another such case, because the "disgust" experienced by the reader would command telling the story in such a way as to justify that "disgust" as a reasonable response. Stories that arouse mass passions are typically highly one-sided in nature and thus should have low credibility to those who think critically.

Media Awareness of Media Bias

To what extent are the news media aware of bias and propaganda in their own constructions? This question does not have a definite answer. All journalists are aware that they are writing for an audience. It does not follow, however, that they have thought through the implications of this.

Certainly, some journalists are much more aware than others. In the United States, Israel is a favoured "ally", so mistreatment or abuse of the Palestinians by the Israelis is usually covered under the idea of "justified reprisal".

Fidel Castro of Cuba was viewed within the United States as an enemy, mainstream news writers routinely presented Castro and Cuba in a negative light, ignoring or explaining away any "achievements" of the Cuban government such as universal medical coverage and a low infant mortality rate.

If and when persons in the news media recognize patterns of news coverage such as these, they must be careful in writing about them - lest they themselves be labeled "irresponsible" and "biased".

Sensitivity to Advertisers

Every group within a culture is not equally important to the news media. National media are, of course, biased in favor of national culture, religion, dominant beliefs, and social values. But within any complex culture, some groups play a more powerful role than others within media logic.

For example, much news media profit comes from advertisers. These advertisers are not pleased if they, or the interests they represent, are cast in a bad light by the media they finance. Put another way, because news media outlets can select from among a large mass of potential stories, and cannot, in any

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case, carry more than a small percentage of what is available, they naturally choose to avoid or play down stories irritating to their advertisers.

A lot depends on the “splash” the story would make or whether it is already “out”.

Sensitivity to Government

National news media are always sensitive to the power of government. For one, national governments typically license and regulate news media by law. For another, much national news is “given” to news media through high governmental officials and agencies.

For these reasons, news media personnel hesitate to criticize the national government in certain fundamental ways. For example, if the national government names some other group or nation as an enemy, the national news media generally present the “enemy” as unfavorably as they can.

If the government attacks another nation militarily, the national news media line up like cheerleaders at a sporting event. The news media are typically apologists for the policies and acts of the national government.

An exception to this occurs when elements in the national news media are linked to a political party not presently in power. Their protection then comes from the power and interests represented by the opposition party.

They then are beholden to the views and beliefs of their political supporters. In the United States, particular news outlets are sometimes more influenced by the Democrat or Republican parties, but both parties unite around the same basic world view and beliefs of the broader society.

Both identify the same countries as friends or enemies; both are responsive to major economic forces and concentrations of wealth and power. The basic logic is always the same. The media are presenting the news within a point of view.

The point of view represents interests affecting media profitability and deeply entrenched in social ideology. The news media always focus on profit, though that focus is obscured and kept in the background.

The national television networks have trimmed their reporting staffs and closed foreign reporting bureaus to cut their owners’ costs. They have tried to attract viewers by diluting their expensive newscasts with lifestyle, celebrity, and entertainment features, and by filling their low-budget, high profit, prime time “news magazines” with sensational sex, crime, and court stories.

Sensitivity to Powerful Interests

News media sources try to maximize their profit while minimizing costs. Investigative journalism is more expensive than pre-packaged stories. Realizing that their position of power within the culture is threatened if they fail to maintain a favorable public image, powerful economic interests continually invest in marketing their image to the public.

There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between powerful media sources and powerful economic interests. This is true in virtually all nations. Powerful interests such as manufacturing, communications, agriculture, weapons producers, airlines, the criminal justice industry, construction, banking, auto, insurance, public relations and advertising, broadcasting, and entertainment - all are involved in shaping the daily news in their interest.

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Governmental agencies and persons in positions of power in the executive, legislative, judicial, military, and intelligence communities are all involved in shaping the daily news in their interest. Religious groups, professional groups and other groups organize around vested interests and invest heavily in shaping the daily news in their interest.

From the Great Depression in the 1930s through World War 2 and the beginning of the cold war in the 1950s, reporters seemed to reflect establishment views more often than they exposed the failings and foibles of the powerful.

They seldom challenged government news management or the press agency of private business and the entertainment industry. Because most people's fundamental source of information about the world comes through the mass-media, favorable news media coverage is a significant variable in achieving a favorable public image.

Sensitivity to Competitors

News media provide the news in light of the news other media outlets focus on. When some of the major outlets treat a story as "big", the others typically pick up so as not to be viewed as deficient in coverage. Major media move as one "herd", following the leaders slavishly. National and international coverage differ very little from one newspaper to another within any given country.

The Bias Toward "Novelty" and "Sensationalism"

The "news" typically is constructed with a systematic bias in favor of reporting what is novel, bizarre, sensational, or odd. What happens everyday - no matter how intrinsically important is often sacrificed. But great social problems typically are embedded in day-to-day events that are repeated thousands of times.

The individual events underlying them are often not dramatic or "odd", but pathetically common. On the one hand, if a large bank systematically overcharges millions of customers a small amount of money, it succeeds in stealing millions of dollars.

But such a practice probably will not be considered news. If a solitary bank robber makes off with 10,000 dollars, on the other hand, that will make the news. If millions of children are bullied in schools every day, and suffer lifelong damage from that experience, that probably will not be considered news.

But if a child has sex with another child at school, that will be considered news. If millions of children go to bed hungry every night all over the globe, that is not news. But if one school serves caviar during the school lunch, that is news.

If someone and children are sold everyday in an international slave trade, that is not news, but if a solitary teacher has a sexual relation with a student, that is news.

Manipulating critical consumers of the news is difficult because:

They study alternative perspectives and world views, learning how to interpret events from multiple viewpoints.

They seek understanding and insight through multiple sources of thought and information, not simply those of the mass media.

They learn how to identify the viewpoints embedded in news stories.

Richard, Paul; Elder, Linda (2006). *The Thinker's Guide to How to Detect Media Bias and Propaganda*. Third Edition. Foundation for Critical Thinking

They mentally rewrite news stories through awareness of how stories would be told from multiple perspectives.

They analyze news constructs in the same way they analyze other representations of reality, as some blend of fact and interpretation.

They assess news stories for their clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, and significance.

They notice contradictions and inconsistencies in the news, and often in the same story.

They notice the agenda and interests served by a story.

They notice the facts covered and the facts ignored.

They notice what is presented as fact, that is in dispute.

They notice questionable assumptions implicit in stories.

They notice what is implied, but not openly stated.

They notice which implications are ignored and which are emphasized.

They notice which points of view are systematically put into a favorable light and which in an unfavorable light.

They mentally correct stories reflecting bias toward the unusual, the dramatic, and the sensational by putting them into perspective or discounting them.

They question the social conventions and taboos being used to define issues and problems.

Is it Possible for the News Media to Reform?

To provide their publics with non-biased writing, journalists around the world would have to first enter empathically into world views to which they are not at present sympathetic. They would have to imagine writing for audiences that hold views antithetical to the ones they hold.

They would have to develop insights into their own sociocentrism. They would have to do things that we have suggested are done by critical consumers of the news. The most significant problem is that, were they to do so, their articles would be perceived by their public as “biased” and “slanted”, as “propaganda”.

These reporters would be seen as irresponsible, as allowing their personal point of view to bias their journalistic writings. Imagine Israeli journalists writing articles that present the Palestinian point of view sympathetically. Imagine Pakistani journalist writing articles that present the Indian point of view sympathetically.

The most basic point is this: Journalists do not determine the nature and demands of their job. They do not determine what their readers want or think or hate or fear. The nature and demands of their job are determined by the broader nature of societies themselves and the beliefs, values, and world views of its members.

It is human nature to see the world, in the first instance, in egocentric and sociocentric terms. Most people are not interested in having their minds broadened. They want their present beliefs and values extolled and confirmed.

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Like football fans, they want the home team to win, and when it wins, to triumph gloriously. If it loses, they want to be told that the game wasn't important, or that the other side cheated, or that the officials were biased against them.

The media world we inhabit is without exception a world of "spin". So said the Wall Street Journal on May 7, 2004. As long as the overwhelming mass of persons in the broader society are drawn to news articles that reinforce, and do not question, their fundamental views or passions, the economic imperatives will remain the same.

The logic is parallel to that of reforming a nation's eating habits. As long as the mass of people want high-fat processed foods, the market will sell high fat, processed foods to them. And as long as the mass of people want simplistic news articles that reinforce egocentric and sociocentric thinking, that present the world in sweeping terms of good and evil, the news media will generate such articles for them.

The profit and ratings of news stories with their fingers on the pulse of their readers and viewers will continue to soar.

Is the Emergence of a "Critical Society" Possible?

In 1906, in the concluding chapter of his classic book, *Folkways*, William Graham Sumner raised the possibility of the development of "critical" societies, by which he meant societies that adopt critical thinking as an essential part of their way of life.

Sumner recognized that critical thinking "is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances. He recognized education as "good just so far as it produces a well-developed critical faculty".

People who are educated in the critical habit of thought cannot be stampeded... they are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made by one side or the other.

They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens. No country or culture in the world routinely fosters education like this.

The detection of bias and propaganda in the news media is possible only for those willing to be diligent in pursuing news from multiple sources representing multiple alternative cultural and national standpoints. It is possible only for those who, in their reading and thinking and judging, are willing to swim against the tide.

Dominant and Dissenting Views: Finding Alternative Sources of Information

To find sources of information supporting the dominant views within a culture is not difficult. The problem for most of us is finding well-thought-through views that question the mainstream news. In the former Soviet Union, for example, it was hard to gain access to views that critiqued the Soviet line.

It is always a minority of thinkers motivated to look beyond the dominant views who dig beneath the surface and bring forward what is unpleasant or painful to the majority. Critiques of society within a society are typically hard to come by.

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Of course, the main point is that every society in the world today has mainstream and dissenting views. And it is important to recognize that we are not saying that dissenting views are correct and mainstream views are incorrect.

There are insights to be gained from all major conflicting world views. What is most important is to locate both mainstream and dissenting views. The ideal, for any given important issue, is access to a full range of views, as expressed by their most skilled and insightful defenders.

One faces two problems: 1) to locate a full range of views, and 2) to locate well-informed spokespersons for each major position in the spectrum.

Let us look at the United States. American mainstream views can be found in any of a large number of major American newspapers. Locating dissenting views within nations and cultures is more difficult, depending on the extent to which dissenters are forced to go “underground”.

The best general source for the views of important dissenters is through the scholarly magazines and presses of the world. In some cases, one can locate publications dealing with issues in greater depth than the mainstream news.

Of course, all sources of news and commentary should be read critically, carefully analyzed and assessed, and used as vehicles for intellectual independence, as sources for part of the truth, not as vehicles of THE TRUTH. The ideal is freedom from any one point of view or perspective.

Becoming an Independent Thinker

To detect bias and propaganda in the news media requires a commitment to thinking for oneself. The process of becoming an independent thinker is furthered significantly by reading the writings of famous dissenters, thinkers who in their day questioned the mainstream view.

Buried, Ignored, or Underreported Stories

Of the millions of events that take place in the world on any given day, only a tiny percentage of them, a couple of hundred, are made into “news” stories, for a given culture. The stories selected typically confirm the dominant cultural viewpoint of the society.

Stories that disconfirm the dominant cultural viewpoint are ignored, underreported, or “buried”. Stories that are buried in the reporting of one culture, however, may be front-page news in the reporting of another.

This phenomenon is intensified when there is conflict between cultures. In this case, when the same event is covered, it is conceptualized very differently. For example, in wartime, each side tells the story of the conflict to its home audience in self-serving terms.

Hence, though both sides commit atrocities, each side’s media highlight only the atrocities of its enemy, while suppressing, denying, or minimizing its own. Each side conceptualizes itself as representing the forces of good - decency, justice and so on, and its enemies as representing the forces of evil.

The predictability of this self-serving function of mass media is highlighted in research into the mutual “image of the enemy”. Enemy-images mirror each other - that is, each side attributes the same virtues to itself and the same vices to the enemy.

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“We” are trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable, and humanitarian; “they” are treacherous, warlike, and cruel. The enemy-image acts like a distorting lens, which overemphasizes information that confirms it and filters out information that is incompatible with it.

Thus the media play up incidents of an enemy’s treachery or cruelty, and ignore examples of humanitarian or honorable behaviour. Every citizen in the world needs access to news sources and commentary that question the self-image maintained by the home culture through its own mass media. No culture lives up to the image it projects of itself. How inconsistent the “self-serving” image is with “reality” is a matter for the critically well-informed public to judge.

Most consumers of the news media do not know how to bring forward “buried” information. They do not know how to read the news critically. Most have never seriously questioned their country’s self-image.

Therefore, they see no reason to seek out dissenting stories or to question highly nationalistic self-portraits. They cannot, therefore, exercise that higher patriotism that comes only through recognition of the vital need for constructive criticism; the patriotism that helps a country become more of what it has promised to be.

Using the Internet

The Internet can be used to locate both mainstream and dissenting views from virtually any country in the world. Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) is a good source for discovering persons whose views are being forcibly suppressed.

The organization publishes a quarterly news magazine focused on exposing the violations of human rights by nations all over the globe. It’s called Amnesty Now. A second example of the sort of important resource one can locate on the internet is “Statewatch”. Statewatch serves as a watchdog organization and database whose goal is the monitoring of state and civil liberties in the European Union.

To get a sense of its thoroughness, Statewatch has compiled 25,500 entries in its database since 1991, containing news features, sources, and reports. It publishes Statewatch, six times a year, in addition to pamphlets and reports.

A third example is CovertAction Quarterly, whose goal is to document the involvement of intelligence agencies in actions violating human rights, and international and national laws. This publication documents acts typically “disowned” by countries sponsoring them. Their sources are freelance investigative journalists, scholars, and former agents.

Another strategy is to search the Internet under descriptors such as “Japanese perspectives”, “Asian perspectives”, “Chinese perspectives”, “African perspectives”, “Central American perspectives”, “Islamic perspectives”. This should help you locate a range of cultural and political standpoints.

Additional Alternative News Sources

Below are some non-mainstream scholarly sources of news, and background for the news.

Harpers: www.harpers.org

In These Times: www.inthesetimes.com

The Progressive: www.progressive.org

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Z Magazine: www.zmag.org

Counter Punch: www.counterpunch.org

AlterNet: www.alternet.org

Common Dreams: www.commondreams.org

The Multinational Monitor: www.essential.org/monitor

The Nation: www.thenation.com

The Guardian: www.guardian.co.uk

Mother Jones: www.motherjones.com

The Village Voice: www.villagevoice.com

Free Speech TV : www.freespeech.org

Project Censored: www.projectcensored.org

Learning to detect media bias and propaganda in the national and world news is an art that takes extended time to develop. Yet it is also an art essential to intellectual responsibility, integrity, and freedom.

As one develops in this art, one experiences a progressive shedding of layers of social indoctrination and ethnocentricity.

In the end, of course, each of us must decide for ourselves what to believe and how to act. We can do this critically or uncritically, rationally or irrationally, egocentrically or fair-mindedly.

We can either tacitly accept our social conditioning and its accompanying ideology, or we can make a deliberative conscious choice to grow beyond that conditioning. The choice is ours. No one can legitimately make that choice for us.

If we choose to go beyond our social conditioning and think for ourselves, we can become free persons and conscientious citizens.

