

The Thinker's Guide

For Conscientious Citizens

on

How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda

In National and World News

by

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Based on

Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

Dear Reader,

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 colors what they see and how they see it. News media in the cultures of the world reflect the world view of the culture they write for. 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.”

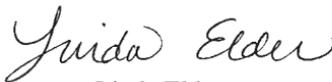
Mainstream news coverage in a society operates with the following maxims:

- “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 Mini-Guide explains how to do this and thus reduce the influence of bias and propaganda on the mind.



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Democracy and the News Media

“Nothing could be more irrational than to give the people power and to withhold from them information, without which power is abused. A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.”

James Madison

Democracy can be an effective form of government only to the extent that the public (that rules it in theory) 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 their 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 (and the traditional 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 (German, French, Mexican, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indonesian, Russian, Algerian, Nigerian, North American, etc.). 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 different from an Israeli one. A Pakistani editor sees the world different from an Indian one. A Chinese editor sees the world different from an

American one. The same is true of news reporters and other journalists.

What is more, news people work under severe time restrictions (in constructing their stories) and limitations of space (in laying out or presenting their stories). 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 influence 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
- 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 (the actual "news") that is simply "reported" or described by the news media of the world (our news media writers reporting on this objectively; the media of foreign enemies systematically slanting and distorting it)
- 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 those facts. The result in both cases is the same: 99.99999% of the "facts" are never mentioned at all (see Figure 1).



Figure 1

What Happens in the World on Any Given Day

If objectivity or fairness in the construction of news stories is thought of as equivalent to presenting all the facts and only the facts ("All the news that's fit to print"), 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 (even if one did know them). It isn't even possible to present all the *important* facts, for many criteria compete for determining what is "important." We must therefore always 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?"

Critical Consumers of the 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.
- They mentally rewrite (reconstruct) 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 (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 represented as fact (that is in dispute).
- They notice questionable assumptions implicit in stories.
- They notice what is implied (but not openly stated).
- They notice what implications are ignored and what 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 the 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 journalists 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. 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.

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 media world we inhabit is without exception a world of ‘spin’”

The Wall Street Journal
May 7, 2004

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 and 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 (with the reader's views and passions treated as good and those of the reader's conceived enemies as evil), the news media will generate such articles for them. The profit and ratings of news sources 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 a 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.”

“The critical habit of thought,” he says, “if usual in a society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. People educated in it cannot be stampeded...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 on 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 as perceived by Sumner. As things now stand, such education is the rare