

The Thinker's Guide to
For Conscientious Citizens on
**HOW TO DETECT
MEDIA BIAS &
PROPAGANDA**
In National and World News

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

FOURTH EDITION

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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 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.”

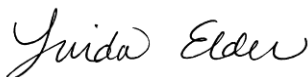
Mainstream news coverage in a society operates with the following maxims:

- “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

“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 differently than an Israeli editor. A Pakistani editor sees the world different from an Indian one. A Chinese editor sees the world differently or as 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.

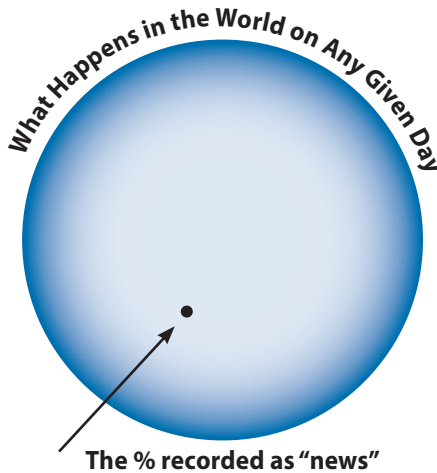
Myths That Obscure the Logic of the News Media

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 diagram below).



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?”

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.

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 (mass fear, anger, hatred, patriotism, etc.). When a nation is at war, for example, stories about the war told by the nation's press (including all explanations of it) are suspect, as all nations produce mass propaganda during war to build support for it. Stories about persons involved in taboo sexual acts (approved in other societies) would be another such a 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 ("Nudists Arrested," "Sexual Predator Condemned"). 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 definitive 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 favored "ally," so mistreatment or abuse of the Palestinians by the Israelis is usually covered under the idea of "justified reprisal." Because Fidel Castro of Cuba is viewed within the United States as an enemy, mainstream news writers routinely present 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. News media, therefore, avoid generating stories that negatively feature major advertisers. Put another way, because news media outlets can select from among a large mass of potential stories, and cannot, in any case, carry more than a small percentage of what is available, they naturally, all other things being equal, choose to avoid or play down stories irritating to their advertisers. There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern. A lot depends on the "splash" the story would make or whether it is already "out."

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 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.