

Environmental Case Study

Don't Believe Everything You See or Hear on the News

For most of us, access to news is becoming ever more abundant and ubiquitous. Internet web logs comment on events even as they're happening. Cable television news is available around the clock. Live images are projected to our homes from all over the world. We watch video coverage of distant wars and disasters as if they are occurring in our living rooms, but how much do we really know about what's going on? At the same time that media is becoming more technically sophisticated, news providers are also becoming more adept at manipulating images and content to convey particular messages.

Many people watch TV news programs and read newspapers or web logs today not so much to be educated or to get new ideas as to reinforce their existing beliefs. A State of the Media study by the Center for Journalistic Excellence at Columbia University concluded that the news is becoming increasingly partisan and ideological.¹ The line between news and entertainment has become blurred in most media. Disputes and disasters are overdramatized, while too little attention is paid to complex issues. News reports are increasingly shallow and one-sided, with little editing or fact checking. On live media, such as television and radio, attack journalism is becoming ever more common. Participants try to ridicule and demean their opponents rather than listening respectfully and comparing facts and sources. Many shows simply become people shouting at each other. Print media also is moving toward tabloid journalism, featuring many photographs and sensationalist coverage of events.

According to the State of the Media report, most television stations have all but abandoned the traditional written and edited news story. Instead, more than two-third of all news segments now consist of on-site "stand-up" reports or live interviews in which a single viewpoint is presented as news without any background or perspective. Visual images seem more immediate and are regarded as more believable by most people: after all, pictures don't lie, but they can give a misleading impression of what's really important. Many topics, such as policy issues, don't make good visuals, and therefore never make it into TV coverage. Crime, accidents, disasters, lifestyle stories, sports, and weather make up more than 90 percent of the coverage on a typical television news program. If you watched cable TV news for an entire day, for instance, you'd see, on average, only 1 minute each about the environment and health care, 2 minutes each on science and education, and 4 minutes on art and culture. More than 70 percent of the segments are less than 1 minute long, meaning that they convey more emotion than substance. People who get their news primarily from TV are significantly more fearful and pessimistic than those who get news from print media.

Partisan journalism has become much more prevalent since the deregulation of public media. From the birth of the broadcasting industry, the airwaves were regarded and regulated as a public trust. Broadcasters, as a condition of their licenses, were required to operate in the "public interest" by covering important policy issues and providing equal time to both sides of contested issues. In 1988, however, the Federal Communications Commission ruled that the proliferation of mass media gives the public adequate access to diverse sources of information. Media outlets no longer are obliged to provide fair and balanced coverage of issues. Presenting a single perspective or even a deceptive version of events is no longer regarded as a betrayal of public trust.

A practice that further erodes the honesty and truthfulness of media coverage is the use of video news releases that masquerade as news stories. In these videos, actors, hired by public relations firms, pose as reporters or experts to promote a special interest. Businesses have long used this tactic to sell products, but a recent disturbing development is placement of news videos by governmental agencies. For example, in 2004, the federal Department of Health and Human Services sent video stories to TV stations promoting the benefits of the recently passed but controversial Medicare drug law. The actors in these videos appeared to be simply reporting news, but, in fact, were presenting a highly partisan viewpoint. Critics complained that these "stealth ads" undermine the credibility of both journalists and

Environmental Case Study

Don't Believe Everything You See or Hear on the News

public officials. Kevin W. Keane, a Health Department spokesman, dismissed the criticism, saying this is "a common, routine practice in government and the private sector." In 2004, the federal government paid \$88 million to public relations firms and news commentators to represent administration positions on policy issues.

How can you detect bias in a news report? Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What political positions are represented in the story?
2. What special interests might be involved here? Who stands to gain presenting a particular viewpoint? Who is paying for the message?
3. What sources are used as evidence in this story? How credible are they?
4. Are statistics cited in the presentation? Are citations provided so you can check the source?
5. Is the story one-sided, or are alternate viewpoints presented? Are both sides represented by credible spokespersons, or is one simply a patsy set up to make the other side look good?
6. Are the arguments presented based on facts and logic, or are they purely emotional appeals?

We need to practice critical thinking to detect bias and make sense out of what we see and hear. Although the immediacy and visual impact of television or the Internet may seem convincing, we have to use caution and judgment to interpret the information they present. Don't depend on a single source for news. Compare what different media outlets say about an issue before making up your mind.