

Name

Professor

Course

Date

Undue Influence: Media as Message

Anyone who recalls news coverage in the mid-20th century and compares it to today's reporting must certainly observe a remarkable and disturbing difference. News as such, which relied on setting out identified facts, has gradually given way to opinion, emotional rhetoric, and blatant bias. If in the past a reader of news could, from the first paragraph, learn the realities of an event, that same reader today must first wade through paragraphs of subjective viewpoints, and this is the definition of media in general today. What this then translates to is a need for the public to be mindful of its existence and consistently wary of whatever is reported as “fact,” because fact and fiction literally merge in modern media. Media has become the message itself, and the only counter to this is public awareness and sensible questioning.

Ironically, undue influence and bias are identified in the media through the processes neglected by that media: careful study and presentation of facts. Such research is not easy but, fortunately, presidential campaigns provide a useful means of actual measurement of media bias. This is due to the stages in which they occur as measurable in themselves, and the reality that ideology is associated with party; as Republicanism is conservative and the Democrats more liberal, any slant toward an ideology in the media is then identifiable (D'Alessio 60). A meta-analysis of the noted campaigns, between 1948 and 2008, reveals rising trends in television and newspaper reporting, and supports through logic and data how, consistently, incumbent

Republican candidates receive more coverage than challengers, and the news is far more critical of Republican candidates than of the Democratic (D'Alessio 93). Given the importance of the outcomes, it is then vital that the public be cautious in accepting media coverage as factual.

In terms of ethics, it may be argued that modern media has “rewritten” the traditional rules of journalistic objectivity. In the past the public could better trust to factual reporting from its news sources. Intense competition between media outlets, however, has led to actual editorializing being substituted for factual coverage of events, and this is illustrated by the media frenzy following the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Florida, in 2012. The reporting of the story in general was sensationalized, and most media outlets chose to present Zimmerman, the facts of the case aside, as a villain. For example, as Zimmerman was not arrested, MSNBC's liberal-oriented anchors wore hooded jackets, clothing identified with Martin, on camera, and blatantly denounced Zimmerman's freedom (McBride, Rosenstiel 195). Such a slant is unconscionable when the expectation goes to documented fact alone. Moreover, this kind of ethical license promotes equally outrageous emotional appeals to media audiences. As Martin was consistently presented as either an innocent boy or a troubled youth, racial tensions nationally were inflamed, and the media then further abuses its role.

Many nonetheless insist that ideas of media as biased are largely based on unreliable data. It is held, for example, that content analysis is notoriously difficult to measure, and that those seeking evidence of undue media influence “cherry pick” those stories and reports which serve their intents (Ruschmann 63). Nonetheless, there is no escaping the reality that, various slants aside, the news and media emphasize the emotional components of stories and, if cherry-picking occurs, it is simply because the biased accounts are there to be picked. Media influence is in fact pernicious, and because new facts are increasingly offered within media itself, revealing prior

stories, and from prestigious outlets, as unjustified or inaccurate. This influence as unjust and undue is blatantly supported by the power of the Fox networks, which research has shown as having influenced a quarter of all Americans into believing that the world supported a U.S. invasion of Iraq, which was not at all true (Ruschmann 62). Here, as elsewhere, the media is permitted to create the reality in the public mind, and this demands a public response. Society must accept that the days when it could rely on fact in the media are gone, and the public must then assume the responsibility of questioning whatever the media, in its many directions and slants, chooses to present.

Works Cited

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