

Examining the "Liberal Media" Claim

Journalists' Views on Politics, Economic Policy and Media Coverage

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea that the mainstream media have a "liberal bias" has long been conventional wisdom. At various times, public figures from Richard Nixon to Newt Gingrich have all taken refuge in the claim that the "liberal" media were out to get them. A legion of conservative talk show hosts, pundits and media-watch groups pound away at the idea that the media exhibit an inherently "liberal" tilt. But the assertion is based on remarkably little evidence and is repeatedly made in the face of contradictory facts.

In particular, the conservative critique of the news media rests on two general propositions: (1) journalists' views are to the left of the public, and (2) journalists frame news content in a way that accentuates these left perspectives. Researchers and analysts have discovered persuasive evidence against the latter claim. Content analyses of the news media have, at a minimum, shown the absence of any such systematic liberal/left tilt; some studies have found a remarkably predictable press usually reflecting the narrow range of views of those in positions of power, as well as a spectrum of expert opinion that tilts toward the right.

But even some progressives have been willing to cede to conservatives the first point: that journalists' views are to the left of the public. Professionals in general, they observe, often have "liberal" leanings on social issues and there is no reason to expect journalists to be any different. However, they have also argued convincingly that the norms of "objective journalism" and the powerful corporate interests which own and sponsor the news media ensure that news content never strays too far, for too long, from protecting the status quo. You don't understand the corporate ideology of General Motors by studying the personal beliefs of the assembly-line workers, the

argument goes. Ideological orientation is introduced and enforced by those high in the organizational hierarchy who have the power to hire and fire, to reward and punish. Working journalists, despite their sometimes high visibility, usually do not call the shots in the nation's media corporations. (The documentary "Fear and Favor in the Newsroom" provides vivid illustrations of this situation.) Consequently, the private views of individual journalists often matter little.

Such an analysis of organizational dynamics is fundamental to understanding the news process. It, indeed, is a crucial argument that kicks the legs out from the conservative critique and gets at the more fundamental structural elements that set the news agenda. Still, this approach begs the question: are journalists really to the left of the public? This element of the conservative critique has not been adequately addressed; it's one reason why the "liberal media" charge gets repeated without serious scrutiny.

The small amount of current data on this issue may be due, in part, to journalist's resistance to answering surveys lest results somehow compromise their professional stance of objective "neutral" observers. This presents a challenge for researchers. Still, despite the methodological hurdles, this question is an interesting one and this report describes the results of one effort to examine this essential underpinning of the "liberal media" claim.

II. METHODOLOGY

In consultation with the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University, a 24-question self-administered survey was sent by mail to Washington-based journalists (n = 444) as specified below. The initial mailing was followed by a reminder postcard. A second copy of the questionnaire was later sent to non-respondents. Finally, reminder phone calls were placed to remaining non-respondents and replacement surveys were mailed as requested. Data was gathered from late February through April 1998.

A. The Survey

Journalists were asked a range of questions about how they did their work and about how they viewed the quality of media coverage in the broad area of politics and economic policy. They were asked for their opinions and views about a range of recent policy issues and debates. Finally, they were asked for demographic and identifying information, including their political orientation. (Complete survey questions and summary results can be found in Appendix B.)

B. The Target Population of Journalists

This survey was targeted at Washington bureau chiefs and Washington-based journalists who cover national politics and/or economic policy at US national and major metropolitan outlets. The intent was to represent the breadth of available media outlets, while realistically focusing on the largest and most influential of these national and major metropolitan outlets.

The *journalists* surveyed (who were not bureau chiefs) were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. They were listed in the Spring 1998 *News Media Yellow Book*.
2. They were listed in the "Assignment Index" portion of the *Yellow Book* under one or more of the following categories: "Congress," "federal government," "national affairs," "politics," "White House," "business," "consumer issues," "economics," or "labor."
3. They were based in the Washington, DC area as indicated in their *Yellow Book* listing by a telephone area code of either 202 (Washington), 703 (northern Virginia), or 301 (Maryland).
4. They worked for a national or major metropolitan US news organization that potentially reaches the general public.

The *bureau chiefs* surveyed in this project were chosen based on the following criteria

1. They were listed in the Spring 1998 *News Media Yellow Book*.
2. Their position was listed as "bureau chief" or its equivalent.
3. They were based in the Washington, DC area as indicated in the *Yellow Book* listing by a telephone area code of either 202 (Washington), 703 (northern Virginia), or 301 (Maryland).
4. They were at a US news organization that potentially reaches the general public and that has a listing in the *Yellow Book* with at least 10 staff people (including the bureau chief).

These criteria yielded a targeted population total of 33 bureau chiefs and 411 other journalists (total n = 444). Questionnaires were mailed to the entire targeted population.

C. Media Organizations Represented

The targeted population represents a broad range of news outlets, while at the same time focusing on the largest and most influential of these outlets. The criteria used for targeting journalists meant that smaller and less influential news outlets were not over-represented, a problem found in earlier research on Washington-based journalists. The criteria outlined above were successful in both generating significant breadth (journalists at 78 different news organizations were surveyed) while keeping the emphasis on the largest and most influential media (half of the surveys were sent to journalists at 14 news organizations).

The 14 news organizations that received more than 10 surveys each were (in alphabetical order):

1. ABC News /ABC Radio
2. Associated Press /AP Broadcast News
3. Bloomberg News
4. CNN
5. Knight-Ridder Newspapers/Tribune Information Services
6. Los Angeles Times
7. NBC News
8. New York Times
9. Reuters America, Inc.
10. Time
11. USA Today/USA Weekend
12. Wall Street Journal
13. Washington Post
14. Washington Times

D. The Respondents

Of the 444 questionnaires mailed, 141 were returned for a response rate of 32%. In terms of type of position held by the journalist, type of media outlets, and general size of media outlet, there was no statistically significant difference between respondents and non-respondents.

As Table 1 shows, the percentage of bureau chiefs, editors/producers, and journalists among the respondents was similar to their percentage in the targeted population as a whole. Thus, each level of the organizational hierarchy was adequately represented among the respondents.

Table 1		
Type of position	Targeted Population % (n)	Respondents % (n)
Washington bureau chiefs	7% (33)	6% (9)
Editors or producers	23% (100)	19% (27)
Reporters, correspondents and other	70% (311)	75% (105)

*Some individuals hold more than one title. They were classified in the response numbers based on their self-identification (see Question #18). They were classified in the sample numbers by the "higher" of the positions in their title.

Similarly, as summarized in Table 2, there was no significant difference between the types of media outlets (the news organization at which the journalist worked) represented among the respondents compared to their percentage in the

targeted population as a whole. Thus, each type of media outlet was adequately represented among the respondents.

Table 2		
Type of media outlet	Targeted Population % (n)	Respondents % (n)
Wires/news services	19% (86)	14% (20)
TV	19% (84)	17% (24)
Radio	5% (20)	6% (8)
Newspaper	41% (180)	46% (65)
Magazines, periodicals and other	17% (74)	17% (24)

Finally, because of their larger staffs, larger news organizations had more journalists who received surveys than did smaller news organizations. The number of journalists receiving a survey at a particular news outlet serves as a rough indicator of the size of that news organization. Based on the rough breakdown used in Appendix A and summarized in Table 3, there was no significant difference between the respondents and the targeted population in terms of the size of their news organization.

Table 3		
Journalists at News Organizations...	Targeted Population % (n)	Respondents % (n)
...receiving more than 10 surveys	50% (223)	50% (71)
...receiving 5-10 surveys	34% (152)	36% (51)
...receiving 3-4 surveys	5% (23)	6% (9)
...receiving 1-2 surveys	10% (46)	7% (10)

These results indicate that, on the dimensions examined here, there is no statistically significant difference between respondents and non-respondents. Thus, the respondents are a good representation of the targeted population as a whole.

Other demographic characteristics of the respondents include:

- Male journalists (66%) outnumbered female journalists (34%) by about two-to-one.
- 89% of respondents were White, 5% Black, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 2% chose the category "other" when describing their race.
- Only 5% of the respondents were not college graduates. 50% had bachelor's degrees, 14% had some post-graduate training, and a full 31% had post-graduate degrees.
- Only 5% of respondents reported annual household incomes under \$50,000. 43% had household incomes between \$50,000 and \$99,999; 21% were between \$100,000 and \$149,999; 17% were between \$150,000 and \$199,999; and 14% had household incomes of \$200,000 or more.

III. RESULTS

This section reviews select results of the survey, including some comparisons with previous surveys of the general public. A full summary of results may be found in Appendix B. For a summary of results comparing journalists' responses to the public's response on similar policy questions, see Appendix C.

A. Views on the Quantity and Quality of Media Coverage

Journalists responding to the survey report high levels of satisfaction with the amount and quality of economic policy coverage provided by their own news organization. A full 76% of the journalists thought that their news organization provided "excellent" or "good" quality coverage in terms of giving the public information they need to make informed political decisions (Q#3a). Another 14% thought it was "fair" and 9% said it was "poor." A similar majority—75%—thought their own organization provided "about the right amount of coverage" of economic policy issues and debates, while 23% thought there was "too little coverage" and only 1% thought there was "too much" (Q#1).

Their assessment of *other* news media, though, was more varied (Q#3b). "Business oriented news outlets" received the highest grade for the quality of the information they give to the public; 80% thought it was "excellent" or "good." "Major daily newspapers," too, received a positive assessment, with 65% saying their coverage was "excellent" or "good." However, for every other type of media less than half of the respondents rated its coverage as "excellent" or "good."

A full 92% of responding journalists said the quality of economic policy coverage on broadcast TV networks was only "fair" or "poor," with just 6% saying it was "good" and not a

single respondent saying it was "excellent." (Even of those journalists working in television, a full 83% rated broadcast TV networks as "fair" or "poor.") Cable news services were judged by 63% of journalists to provide only "fair" or "poor" coverage of economic policy issues. (As a whole, journalists were still uncertain about internet sources with over half of them saying they didn't know or were not sure about the quality of their coverage.)

Q#3b. In terms of giving the public information they need to make informed political decisions, how would you rate the quality of economic policy coverage provided by each of the following sources?

	"excellent" or "good"	"fair" or "poor"
Business-oriented news outlets	80%	11%
Major daily newspapers	65%	35%
Public broadcasting	45%	46%
Weekly newsmagazines	40%	53%
Cable news service	32%	61%
Internet Web sites	15%	34%
Broadcast network TV news	6%	92%

Choosing from a list of possibilities, journalists thought that business misconduct (58%) was the topic to which the media overall paid "too little" attention (Q#2). This was followed closely by international trade agreements (53%) and labor misconduct (50%). The stock market (22%) was the item that journalists most often cited as being covered "too much."

B. Work Routines and Information Sources

Technology changes have clearly had an impact on the work routines and information sources of journalists. With contemporary technology, the news cycle is quite short for a large number of journalists. More than a quarter of them (26%) reported having a deadline more than once a day (Q#4). Another 55% usually had daily deadlines.

Electronic data services have become a staple source of information for journalists. 72% reported that they consulted Internet or other on-line services during a typical work day (Q#5). This was surpassed only by wire services (94%) and cable TV news (79%).

Q# 5: In a typical work day, which of the following resources do you consult, if any?

	% "yes"
Wire services	94%
Cable TV news (CNN, MSNBC, etc.)	79%
Internet or other on-line services	72%
C-SPAN	59%
Fax services	48%
Cable business networks (CNBC, Bloomberg, etc.)	36%
News/talk radio	26%

Responding journalists rely most often on government officials and business representatives as sources for their stories on economic policy issues (Q#6). Labor representatives are

consulted far less frequently than business representatives and consumer advocates are even less likely to be consulted.

Q#6. How often do you talk to the following sources in your work on economic policy issues?

	% saying "nearly always"	% saying "often"
Government officials	51%	34%
Business representatives	31%	35%
Think-tank analysts	17%	47%
University-based academics	10%	38%
Wall Street analysts	9%	22%
Labor representatives	5%	30%
Consumer advocates	5%	20%

Most journalists (70%) said they had never been cut off from communication by a source upset because of something they or their news organization had reported about economic policy issues (Q#7a). Within the minority who had been cut off, it was government officials (76%), followed by business representatives (55%), and then labor representatives (32%) who were most likely to have given them the silent treatment (Q#7b).

C. Economic Policy Issues: Comparing Journalists' Views and the Public

Journalists were asked a series of questions regarding recent policy debates. Most questions were taken from, or very closely modeled after, questions that had been asked in national random surveys of the general public. That way, rough comparisons could be made between how journalists and the general public saw these issues.

1. Political Orientation

One of the basic findings of this survey is that most journalists identify themselves as being centrists on both social and economic issues. Perhaps this is why an earlier survey found that they tended to vote for Bill Clinton in large numbers. Clinton's centrist "new Democrat" orientation combines moderately liberal social policies (which brings criticism from conservative anti-gay, "pro-life" and other activists) with moderately conservative economic policies (which brings criticism from labor unions, welfare rights advocates and others). This orientation fits well with the views expressed by journalists.

Q#22. On social issues, how would you characterize your political orientation?	Q#23. On economic issues, how would you characterize your political orientation?
Left 30%	Left 11%
Center 57%	Center 64%
Right 9%	Right 19%
Other 5%	Other 5%

When asked to characterize their political orientation on social and economic issues, most journalists self-identify as centrists (Q#22 and Q#23). Of the minority who do not identify with the center, most have left leanings concerning social issues and right leanings concerning economic ones. This is consistent with a long history of research on profit-sector professionals in general. High levels of education tend to be associated with liberal views on social issues such as racial equality, gay rights, gun control and abortion rights. High levels of income tend to be associated with conservative views on economic issues such as tax policy and federal spending. Most journalists, therefore, would certainly not recognize themselves in the "liberal media" picture painted by conservative critics.

2. State of the Economy

The Washington press corps has often been accused of being an "elite" that is out of touch with mainstream Americans. As reported in the methodology section, journalists responding to this survey certainly did have very high household incomes, with over half living in households with \$100,000 or more in income, and one-third in households with \$150,000 or more income. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that journalists have a much more positive assessment of the state of the economy than the general public (Q#9). Choosing from a list of options, 34% of journalists said they thought economic conditions were "excellent" and another 58% said "good." Only 4% saw it as fair, and 1% rated it "poor."

When pollsters ask the same question of the general public—where the benefits of economic growth have fallen unevenly—far different views are found. A March 1998 Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll discovered that only 20% of the general public see economic conditions as "excellent," while 46% say "good." A full 27% describe it as "only fair" and 7% believe it is "poor."

3. Economic Priorities

When asked about a series of possible economic priorities for the federal government, 56% of journalists saw the need to "reform entitlement programs by slowing the rate of increase in spending for programs like Medicare and Social Security" as "one of the top few" priorities (19% said it should be the single highest priority) (Q#10b). Only 35% of the public felt similarly when polled by Greenberg Research Inc. in November 1996 (just 10% of the public saw this as the single highest priority.).

Instead, 59% of the general public identified the need to "protect Medicare and Social Security against major cuts" as "one of the top few priorities" (a full 24% of the public saw this as the single highest priority). Only 39% of journalists felt the same (with 13% identifying it as the single highest priority) (Q#10a). While 12% of the public put reforming and slowing Social Security and Medicare "toward the bottom of the list," only 4% of journalists did (Q#10b). Journalists' emphasis on slowing entitlements contrasts sharply with the general public's emphasis on protecting entitlements.

When it came to health insurance, 32% of journalists felt that requiring employers provide health insurance to their employees should be "one of the top few priorities," while a larger 47% of the public did (Q#10d).

By far the biggest gap between the public and journalists, though, came with the issue of NAFTA expansion (Q#10c). Of journalists, 24% thought it was among the "top few" priorities to "expand the NAFTA trade agreement to include other countries in Latin America." Only 7% of the general public agreed. Indeed, a whopping 44% of the general public—compared to just 8% of journalists—put NAFTA expansion "toward the bottom of the list" of priorities.

In these issue areas, the claimed economic centrism of journalists is belied by a series of economic priorities that are actually to the right of the public, and which would bring opposition from groups on the left: labor unions, health care advocates, senior citizen advocates.

4. Environmental Laws

The one area in the survey where journalists could be considered slightly to the left of the general public was regarding environmental regulation (Q#11). When asked to choose between whether stricter environmental laws and regulations "cost too many jobs and hurt the economy" or "are worth the cost," 79% of journalists said such laws were worth the cost, while 21% disagreed. However, in an October 1996 poll by the Pew Research Center, only 63% of the public said such laws were worth the cost, while 30% disagreed. This result may not be very surprising since the economic cost of environmental regulation is often perceived to be carried by workers in the form of lost jobs—a problem which may not be of immediate salience for professional journalists.

5. Corporate Power

The general public is more critical of the concentration of corporate power in the United States than are journalists. When asked whether they felt "too much power is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies," 57% of the journalists agreed, while 43% felt they did not have too much power (Q#12). The numbers were quite different, though, when the Times Mirror Center asked the same question of the general public in October 1995. A full 77% of the public felt that corporations had too much power, with only 18% feeling that they did not.

6. Taxes

The centrist orientation of journalists comes through clearly when assessing Clinton's 1993 economic plan which modestly raised tax rates on the wealthy, countering the trend of reduced tax rates that they had enjoyed in previous years (Q#13). Nearly half (49%) of journalists thought this policy was about right, while 14% thought it went too far, and 18% thought it didn't go far enough. In stark contrast, when the public was asked a similar question in an ABC News/Washington Post poll in April 1993, 15% of the general public felt Clinton's policy went too far and a huge 72% felt it didn't go far enough. (10% volunteered that they thought it was about right.) Here again, the relative economic privilege of the Washington press corps may partly explain this contrast with the public.

7. NAFTA and "Fast Track" Authority

Compared to the general public, journalists have a distinctly more positive assessment of NAFTA's impact and are more likely to support granting the President "fast-track" authority to negotiate new trade agreements. 65% of journalists feel that NAFTA has had more of a positive impact on the United States, while only 8% feel it has had more of a negative impact (Q#14). But in a Hart-Teeter/NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll in July 1997, only 32% of the public thought NAFTA's impact was more positive, while 42% felt NAFTA's impact on the country has been more negative.

Perhaps as a result of these differing assessments of NAFTA's impact, journalists are more likely to favor granting "fast track" authority to the President to negotiate new trade agreements—authority opposed most forcefully by unions (Q#15). A full 71% of journalists favor such a policy, while only 10% oppose it. According to an October 1997 Hart-Teeter/NBC News/Wall

Street Journal poll, the rate of opposition to "fast-track" amongst the general public is over five times that of the rate amongst journalists. Only 35% of the public says it favors "fast-track." A full 56% oppose it. In the debate over trade, most journalists tend to agree with the corporate position on the issue, while most members of the public side with the critical views of labor and many consumer and environmental groups.

8. Medical Care

As indicated above under "Economic Priorities," journalists are less interested than the general public in requiring that employers provide health insurance to their employees. Journalists are also less likely than the public to believe that the federal government should guarantee medical care for those who don't have health insurance (Q#16). While 43% of journalists felt that the government should guarantee medical care, a similar 35% felt that this was not the responsibility of the government. In contrast, a February 1996 New York Times/CBS News poll found that the general public supports government guaranteed medical care by more than a two-to-one margin (64% to 29%).

Policy Scorecard

On these issues journalists appear to be...		
	...to the left of the public	...to the right of the public
Protecting Medicare and Social Security		XX
The expansion of NAFTA		X
Requiring employers to provide health insurance to their employees		X
Stricter environmental laws	X	
Concern over concentrated corporate power		X
Taxing the wealthy		X
Impact of NAFTA		X
"Fast track" trade authority		X
Government guaranteed medical care		X

IV. CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE "LIBERAL MEDIA" MYTH

This survey shows that it is a mistake to accept the conservative claim that journalists are to the left of the public. There appear to be very few national journalists with left views on economic questions like corporate power and trade—issues that may well matter more to media owners and advertisers than social issues like gay rights and affirmative action.

The larger "liberal media" myth has been maintained, in part, by the well-funded flow of conservative rhetoric that selectively highlights journalists' personal views while downplaying news content. It also has been maintained by diverting the spotlight away from economic issues and placing it instead on social issues. In reality, though, most members of the powerful Washington press corps identify themselves as centrist in both of these areas. It is true, as conservative critics have publicized, that the minority of journalists not in the "center" are more likely to identify as having a "left" orientation when it comes to social issues. However, it is also true that the minority of journalists not in the "center" are more likely to identify as having a "right" orientation when it comes to economic issues. Indeed, these economic policy views are often to the right of public opinion. When our attention is drawn to this fact, one of the central elements of the conservative critique of the media is exposed to be merely sleight of hand.

This illusion has not been exposed here merely to replace it with an equally false mirror image of the conservative critique. Painting journalists as the core of the "conservative media" does not do justice to the complexity of the situation. Like many profit-sector professionals journalists tend to hold "liberal" social views and "conservative" economic views.

Most of all, though, they can be broadly described as centrists. This adherence to the middle is consistent with news outlets that tend to repeat conventional wisdom and ignore serious alternative analyses. This too often leaves citizens with policy "debates" grounded in the shared assumptions of those in positions of power.

Which brings us back to the conservative critique. It is based on the propositions that: (1) journalists' views are to the left of the general public, and (2) that these views influence the news content that they produce. Having now exposed the first point for the myth that it is, we are left with the issue of personal views influencing news content.

There are two important responses to this claim. First, it is sources, not journalists, who are allowed to express their views in the conventional model of "objective" journalism. Therefore, we learn much more about the political orientation of news content by looking at sourcing patterns rather than journalists' personal views. As this survey shows, it is government officials and business representatives to whom journalists "nearly always" turn when covering economic policy. Labor representatives and consumer advocates were at the bottom of the list. This is consistent with earlier research on sources. For example, analysts from the centrist Brookings Institution and right-wing think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute are those most quoted in mainstream news accounts; left-wing think tanks are often invisible. When it comes to sources, "liberal bias" is nowhere to be found.

Second, we must not forget that journalists do not work in a vacuum. It is crucial to remember the important role of institutional context in setting the broad parameters for the news process. Businesses are not in the habit of producing

products that contradict their fundamental economic interests. The large corporations that are the major commercial media in this country—not surprisingly—tend to favor style and substance which is consonant with their corporate interests; as do their corporate advertisers.

It is here, at the structural level, that the fundamental ground rules of news production are set. Of course, working journalists sometimes succeed in temporarily challenging some of those rules and boundaries. But ultimately, if they are to succeed and advance in the profession for any length of time, they must adapt to the ground rules set by others—regardless of their own personal views.