

LIBERAL BIAS IN THE *SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE*

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to determine whether the *South Bend Tribune*, in its coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign, exhibited an ideological bias. Analysis showed that it demonstrated a liberal bias. This paper considers the meaning and manifestations of bias as it applies to newspapers, gives background on the newspaper industry, explains the methodology of the study, and details the findings. It concludes with a consideration of the implications of these findings.

BIAS IN THE PRESS

Did the *South Bend Tribune*, in its coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign, exhibit a liberal ideological bias? An analysis of its headlines, photographs, and placement of articles demonstrates that it did.

Two contradictory notions about the press co-exist in our society. One is the idea that the press is (or at least tries to be) objective and even-handed in its coverage. The other is that the press is made up overwhelmingly of liberals who promote the Democratic ideology and slight that of Republicans. Journalists generally deny this, citing studies that found little evidence of bias, at least in major newspapers (Stempel and Windhauser 895; Stevenson and Greene 115). Nevertheless, a sizable group of the public continues to hold such a belief. A poll published on September 25, 2000, found that 52% of the public believes that their newspaper favors one candidate, and that among those who do perceive bias, almost two-thirds feel that "Al Gore has been the press's favorite son." The author adds, "Surprisingly, it's not just Republicans who feel this way" (Mitchell 1).

How is bias defined in regard to newspaper coverage of political campaigns? Mantler and Whiteman call it "the systematic differential treatment of one candidate, one party, one side of an issue over a period of time" (16). Kenney and Simpson define it as "a pattern of constant favoritism," and describe it as occurring "when one candidate or party receives more news coverage and more favorable coverage over an extended period of time" (349).

BACKGROUND ON THE NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY

When considering possible examples of bias, it is useful to know some basic facts about the newspaper industry. First, the owners and the editor of a newspaper determine what goes into it. The owners, of course, have the ultimate say, and the editor must accommodate their preferences. On a day-to-day basis, however, the editor is the person who decides what the newspaper prints. Second, reporters and editors must deal on a continual basis with deadlines and with space limitations. A newspaper staff does not have the luxury that a magazine staff has, of making sure before it goes to press that everything is perfectly balanced and presented. Because of these limitations, some examples that appear to show bias may be unintentional. To zero in on any one article and cry "Bias!" may be unfair (although some examples are so blatant that it is tempting). However, when a newspaper shows a pattern over a period of time of favoring one candidate or party, it is reasonable to conclude that the newspaper is exhibiting bias.

Three concepts that come into play in newspaper bias are gate-keeping, agenda-setting, and framing. Gate-keeping refers to the fact that it is journalists who make the initial decision about what news gets covered. Space limitations prevent their covering everything. If the media do not cover a topic or occurrence, only people locally involved will know about it; the public at large will not. Agenda-setting, a related theory, concerns the ability of the media to affect the public's perception of a topic's importance by controlling the amount of coverage the topic receives (McCombs and Shaw 177). When a topic is given a lot of coverage, people assume it is important. In the words of noted media scholar Bernard Cohen, "[The press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful

in telling them what to think about" (13). Framing is the viewpoint or perspective from which a story is told (Missouri Group 15). A story told from a Democratic perspective is likely to sound different than the same story told from a Republican perspective.

These three aspects of the media make it nearly impossible to achieve totally objective reporting. Even a newspaper that strives for objectivity will necessarily fall short of the goal. For a newspaper that chooses to slant its news, gate-keeping, agenda-setting, and framing greatly simplify the process. During an election campaign, journalists can decide how much coverage to give a candidate, what interpretation to give campaign occurrences, and how favorably to present the candidate (Joslyn 100-101). They can run more articles about one candidate than the other. They can place articles about the preferred candidate in a favorable position (such as the front page) and bury the ones about the other candidate somewhere inside, a technique which not only implies that the information on the front page is more important, but also cuts down on the number of people who even notice the other article. A newspaper can also portray a candidate according to a theme, which occurs "when the press persists in interpreting the meaning of newsworthy events in a particular way over a period of time" (Joslyn 107). Photographs can indicate bias if a newspaper shows a pattern of using unfavorable photographs of one candidate but not of the other (Kenney and Simpson 349). Many of these techniques have been evident in the *South Bend Tribune*.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was a content analysis of each issue of the *South Bend Tribune* (a daily newspaper serving St. Joseph County, Indiana) over a two-month period, extending from September 9, 2000 to November 8, 2000 (the day after the election). Only news articles were considered; the opinion and editorial pages were excluded since they are by definition non-objective. During this time, the *South Bend Tribune* ran 156 articles about the presidential election. Each was analyzed in regard to its headline, photograph(s), and placement. The headline category included any sub-headline, as well as any material featured in a box or as an excerpt in bold print. It should be noted that the content of the articles was *not* part of this study, except indirectly: Content was checked to see whether it was accurately reflected by the items that were being analyzed. Since assessing for bias is a subjective process, each item was rated by a second coder.

RESULTS

The results are tabulated in Table 1. The consensus was that 16 of the 156 articles could indicate possible bias. Of these, 14 could be considered favorable to Democratic candidate Al Gore and/or unfavorable to Republican candidate George W. Bush. Only two could be interpreted as favorable to Bush and/or unfavorable to Gore.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

BIAS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Neutral	140	89.74%
Favorable to Gore	14	8.97%
Favorable to Bush	2	1.28%

Table 1: Analysis of bias in headlines, photographs, and placement of articles covering the 2000 presidential campaign.

In addition to the preponderance of pro-Gore articles over pro-Bush articles, a theme became apparent. Gore was portrayed as capable and confident, surrounded by cheering supporters on his inevitable march to the White House. Bush was portrayed as a lightweight, a bumbling challenger who was fighting a losing battle and who had to work hard at the things Gore was good at, such as debating.

This theme was shown in two ways. The first involved headlines and their accompanying bold print quotations. These were used in some articles about Bush to put a negative spin on neutral or even positive events. One example is "Tough decisions facing Bush even after solid week on the stump" (A4). (The word *solid* was used in the sense of *good* rather than *full week*.) Putting "tough decisions" into this headline partially negates the positive words that follow. Another example is an area in bold print next to the headline "Gore calls for use of oil reserves" (A1). The bold print says, "Inside: Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush reached out to stay-at-home moms with an appearance on 'Live with Regis' with a 'Survivor' survivor and a man who breaks pieces of wood with his head. Page A3." This has the effect of linking Bush with a group which commands scant respect in our society (stay-at-home moms), and a man who breaks pieces of wood with his head, which is also unlikely to convey a positive image. To add insult to injury, the article was actually on page A4, not A3.

The other way the "Gore is a winner-Bush is a loser" theme was carried out was through the choice of photographs. Two different trends appeared. One involved using photographs that portray Bush as having to work harder at the campaign than Gore. An example is a photograph of Bush with his back to the camera and his shirt soaked with sweat ("Tough Decisions" A4). Another shows him practicing for a debate, in an untidy room ("FBI Expands Probe" A10). The photograph of Gore positioned on the facing page ("Intense Preparation" A11) shows him sitting relaxed and confident on a patio chair, with two people listening attentively to him.

The second trend of photographs occurred four times between October 5 and November 3. Bush is shown alone or with another politician. Gore, in these issues, is shown surrounded by crowds of supporters: one strongly evoked images of the Messiah with the crowds reaching out to Him to be healed ("Bush, Gore Spar" A1). The four photographs on the next page are examples of this trend.

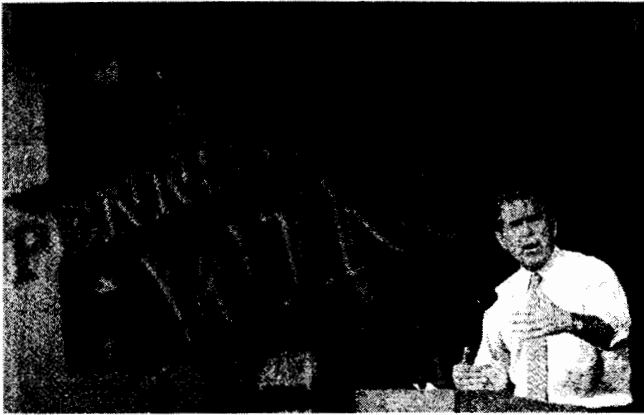


Figure 1: "Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the Republican nominee, speaks Wednesday at a rally at West Chester University in West Chester, PA., the day after his debate with Democratic nominee Al Gore." (Source: *South Bend Tribune*, October 5, 2000, page A1)



Figure 2: "Vice President Al Gore, the Democratic presidential nominee, greets supporters Wednesday in Warren, Ohio, the morning after his debate with GOP nominee George W. Bush." (Source: *South Bend Tribune*, October 5, 2000, page A1)



Figure 3: "Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush and his brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, look out from their bus as they arrive inside an auditorium for a rally at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Brandon, Fla., Wednesday." (Source: *South Bend Tribune*, October 26, 2000, page A1)



Figure 4: "Democratic presidential candidate Vice President Al Gore and his running mate, Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, exchange a handshake Wednesday after a campaign rally in Jackson, Tenn." (Source: *South Bend Tribune*, October 26, 2000, page A3)

A commentary by Kenney and Simpson on biased photography is worth noting:

Photos that make a candidate appear favorable are routine because politicians have so much control over how they present themselves to the media. We expect to see candidates smiling, waving, and flashing signs of victory. Publication of photographs that make a candidate appear unfavorable, therefore, are unusual. When editors select an image that makes a candidate look weak, immoral, or inactive, then readers should question why that particular image was published. When a pattern develops of negative images of one political

party and not of the other, then photographic bias appears. (349)

It is clear that such a pattern has occurred in the *South Bend Tribune*. These portrayals are a subtle form of bias that may be even more dangerous than overtly biased text, because readers are less likely to realize that they are being influenced.

IMPLICATIONS

There are implications to a newspaper's slanting its portrayal of candidates, either deliberately or inadvertently, in such a way as to support its preferred political ideology. First, consider the political makeup of St. Joseph County. Voter

registration is approximately 50% Democrat, 25% Republican, and 25% Independent (St. Joseph County Voter Registration Office). Given that so many residents consider themselves neither Democrat nor Republican, one could ask about newspaper coverage of third party candidates. Few articles in the study made much, if any, mention of these candidates, with the exception of a flurry of articles concerning the possibility that Ralph Nader of the Green Party might siphon off enough potentially Democratic votes to make Al Gore lose. The issue of third party candidates illustrates a continuing dilemma for newspapers: balancing news value with social responsibility. Third parties, with no realistic chance of winning, aren't really considered *news* by the press. The effect of this example of the gate-keeping function of the mass media is compounded by the fact that increased coverage of third parties would most likely improve their chances for success. In any case, third party candidates are surely of interest to many St. Joseph County residents. Although coverage of these candidates is beyond the scope of this study, other researchers may wish to examine third party coverage.

Second, consider how the *South Bend Tribune's* portrayal of Gore and Bush might have influenced the election results in St. Joseph County. The vote totals there were as follows:

Al Gore (Democrat)—47,703
 George W. Bush (Republican)—47,581
 Harry Brown (Libertarian)—665
 Pat Buchanan (Reform Party)—611
 Other (including write-ins
 for five other candidates)—381
 (St. Joseph County Election Clerk)

This was an election dominated by swing voters, those uncommitted voters whose choice could go either way. Only 122 votes separated Bush and Gore. There is a distinct possibility that the *South Bend Tribune* might have made the difference in who won in St. Joseph County. Since Indiana as a whole went Republican, this would not have made a difference in the outcome of the presidential race. It may, however, have made a difference in non-presidential races, especially since it is possible in this county to vote a straight Democratic (or Republican) ticket with one pull of a lever. Even in a Democrat-controlled county, voters deserve even-handed, objective news coverage as they strive to make up their minds. The results of this study suggest that voters did not get that kind of coverage from the *South Bend Tribune*.

A limitation of this study is that two months' worth of articles may constitute too small a sampling on which to base a conclusion. Future researchers may want to expand on the study to determine long-term trends in the *South Bend Tribune*. It is also possible to question whether a relatively low percentage of biased articles could significantly affect voting results. However, it should be noted that this particular two-month period was a crucial time because it was just prior to an election in which the race was very close. These articles were published at the very time that undecided voters were

making up their minds. Of the 156 articles presented to these voters, one in 78 implied that Bush would be the right choice. One in 11 articles implied that the best choice would be Gore. Only 122 votes out of 95,284 separated the winner from the loser. It will never be known whether the pro-Gore articles affected the result, but the possibility certainly exists.

The results of this study may not constitute proof that the *South Bend Tribune* was biased in favor of Gore, but they do suggest that readers have reason to be wary. Is a newspaper within its rights to slant its coverage? Yes, it is. It has been said that "the Constitution guarantees a free press, not a fair one" (Barone 34). However, readers too have rights. For any person who wants the right to make his or her own choices based on objective information, the results of this study suggest that one should assess very carefully the picture of reality that the newspaper--or any other mass medium--presents.

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JENNIFER FISHER is a junior majoring in Mass Communications/Journalism and minoring in Political Science. This paper was written for Y317, *Voting, Elections, and Public Opinion*. "I became interested in the topic of media bias because, as a swing voter who in 28 years of voting has sometimes chosen Republican, sometimes Democrat, and occasionally third party candidates, I wanted to know whether the newspaper was influencing my decisions."