

CHAPTER 2

News Content

Four Information Biases That Matter

It is a writer's obligation to impose narrative. Everyone does this. Every time you take a lump of material and turn it into something you are imposing a narrative. It's a writer's obligation to do this. And, by the same token, it is apparently a journalist's obligation to pretend that he never does anything of the sort. The journalist claims to believe that the narrative emerges from the lump of material, rises up and smacks you in the face like marsh gas.

—Nora Ephron

The following headline appeared in a blog post by a prominent media critic commenting on the 2008 presidential election: "Media's Myopic Obsession with Campaign Narratives over Events of Real Significance Does a Diservice to the Public."¹ In thinking about this, we need to be mindful that there is nothing inherently wrong with telling stories—far from it. Elections may be our most important national storytelling ritual, a time when we remind ourselves, with the help of candidates, what we stand for as a people, what our challenges are, where the next chapter of the national saga is heading, and who may best lead us there. But what happens when journalists, not candidates, do most of the storytelling?

As every American knows, the horse race is a classic election story. But few know that it arose well before the modern press system—in the time of Andrew Jackson when election communication was spread along the frontier through song and tall tales.² With the advent of scientific polling and the demand for 24/7 news—even when there isn't any—the horse race has turned into a tired journalistic formula that often obscures deeper understanding of the candidate issues and voter concerns. Journalists probably know that it is distracting and frequently misleading, but as National Public Radio analyst Cokie Roberts put it in one of her analyses of the 2008 contest: "Even the pollsters tell you not to focus on the horse-race and look at the other things . . . but the horse-race is irresistible."³

Early in the 2008 campaign, before a single primary vote had been cast, Hillary Clinton had practically been declared the winner by the national press corps—not just winner of the Democratic nomination, but the White House as well. *Saturday Night Live* even ran a skit of a candidate debate in which the host journalist told

the other candidates that they could be excused because Hillary had already been declared the winner by the press. The thin thread for the story was a barrage of early national polling done when few voters had formed solid impressions. When Clinton lost the first primary contest in Iowa, her fall from frontrunner status made for the next dramatic story: Clinton campaign in trouble. And so the election news drama goes . . .

If the horse race is the grand campaign narrative, each election displays its own collection of more personal stories about candidates that often seem somehow out of tune with events themselves. Many stories come from operatives working for opponents in efforts to raise doubts about the patriotism, character, or personal histories of other candidates. When campaign press strategists and handlers are not busy feeding the news corps, journalists may take up the slack by creating their own narratives. Thus, beyond Clinton's standing in the horse race, stories were also circulated about her hair (too severe? who does it?), her clothes (too many pants suits?), her laugh (was it too contrived or too uncontrolled?) and her emotions (lack of, displays of, did she cry?).

The prominence of stories created by the press, with or without help from opponent spin, may overshadow more insightful political analysis. Indeed, what Alterman was referring to in his blog post was a piece in the ABC News insider report *The Note* that described the Democratic race in Nevada as a contest between Barack Obama, who had just landed the endorsement of the largest labor organization in the state, and Clinton, who was said to be heading into the state "with the campaign narrative gusting at her back."⁴ It turns out that the news narrative may have been more important than the labor endorsement, as Clinton narrowly won the Nevada caucuses.

The perception that a candidate is a winner or a loser, or that she or he has personal strengths or issues, can sway undecided voters. In the process of creating the stories that convey these impressions, the press becomes something of an active player in the very events being covered. This chapter considers the constructed properties of many journalistic narratives as forms of information bias in the news. Recognizing these biases in the news can easily be lost in more heated discussions of presumed ideological bias among journalists.

Putting Journalistic Bias in Perspective

Many people blame the problems with our information system on ideological or partisan biases of journalists themselves. Polls show that growing majorities of people believe that reporters introduce their own political views into the news and generally do not even get the facts straight. According to polls taken by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, vast changes occurred in public regard for the press over the last two decades. Even though public confidence in the press began its steep decline by the mid-1980s, a majority (55 percent) still felt that news organizations at least got their facts straight most of the time. This figure dropped to 37 percent in the late 1990s. Meanwhile perceptions of press

fairness—the belief that news organizations generally deal fairly with all sides in news accounts—plunged to a stunning low of 27 percent toward century's end.⁵ The patriotic tones of press coverage immediately after 9/11 lowered perceptions of bias below 50 percent for the first time in years. However, the return to normal news was accompanied by the familiar drumbeat of press criticism from politicians and media critics alike, and perceptions of bias hit the 60 percent level by 2005.⁶

Survey results do show that many journalists are more liberal than the general population.⁷ Where conventional wisdom breaks down, however, is with the assumption that the personal politics of reporters translate into the political content of their journalism. In an experimental study in which journalists were asked to imagine how they personally would cover hypothetical stories, the ideology of reporters had only a small effect on their professional judgments.⁸ And, in reality, journalists do not work in hypothetical situations in which they have free reign over how to cover a story. The vast majority of individual journalists would have trouble getting consistent ideological slants past editors and owners throughout the news industry who are there to enforce norms of balance and fairness. The few notable exceptions, such as *FOX News*, which slants conservative, and *MSNBC*, which slants more liberal, are marketing those viewpoints consciously.

For the most part, constructing an attention-grabbing story is more important than introducing political slant in the news. Consider two cases of long-term coverage of prominent politicians that runs counter to the “liberal journalist” thesis. For example, most observers regard news coverage of the Reagan presidency (1981–1988) as generally favorable to Reagan and his “Republican revolution.” Even when journalists attempted to take critical stances, they were often diffused by skillful White House press management and by Reagan’s media-friendly personal charm—earning Reagan titles such as “The Great Communicator” and “The Teflon President.” By contrast, Bill Clinton’s presidency (1993–2000) witnessed some of the most stormy and combative press relations and news coverage of the modern era. As discussed in Chapter 4, Clinton’s press relations contrasted sharply with those of the Reagan administration, both in terms of failing to develop daily coordinated communication strategies and in excluding reporters from the everyday work routines and social life of the White House. Not long after Clinton’s first election, a national press corps that probably voted heavily for him anointed conservative Republican leader Newt Gingrich “the most exciting politician” in a generation. The same press pack later turned on Gingrich.

George W. Bush ran the whole gamut of news drama. Administration news spin from the aftermath of 9/11 through the early years of the Iraq War was reported faithfully by most of the mainstream press. Such successful news management helped Bush reach the highest recorded levels of public approval. That peak followed the Hollywood-style news coverage of his triumphant “top gun” jet landing on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* and his declaration of an end to major combat in Iraq. Yet all that stood between Bush and a shift to more damaging news coverage was his failure to address the human emergency following

Hurricane Katrina, followed by rising political opposition among Democrats in Congress pointing out the political instability and chaos in Iraq.

Ideological bias cannot explain these mercurial news patterns. Nor is such bias likely to seep through a code of professional ethics that emphasizes impartiality as a core value. This code may be fraying in some areas due to the economic pressures favoring sensationalism, or in cases such as *FOX News*, where bias has become a financially successful formula. For the most part, however, when reporters lose their perspective, there are editors to correct them. Reporters are small cogs in large business organizations that have a vested interest in producing a marketable, neutral product. As journalism scholar Everette Dennis put it:

... profits are central to the media; the news is more and more driven by market forces and market segmentation. Deliberately or even innocently alienating a portion of the audience through unfair and biased coverage of candidates and causes would be self-destructive. More important, it would be absolutely unacceptable to publishers, broadcast executives, and owners, who, last time I checked, were still running the show.⁹

What accounts, then, for the popular perception that members of the press introduce a liberal bias into the news? Above all, when it comes to politics and its emotional core of values, bias is largely in the eye of the beholder. This generalization is supported by research showing that people in the middle see the press as generally neutral, whereas those on the Left complain that the news is too conservative and those on the Right think the news has a left-leaning bias.¹⁰ Popular perceptions of bias are swayed beyond what we might expect just from the distribution of personal political positions because of long-standing conservative campaigning against the so-called liberal media.

Both conservatives and liberals tend to be upset with the press, but in the modern era, conservatives have raised charges of liberal bias more effectively as a tool of governing. More than 30 years ago, Richard Nixon charged the press with favoring liberal intellectuals and leftist activists in covering the war in Vietnam and failing to report the views of the great “silent majority” of Americans who favored his policies. Because the Right has waged its press bias campaign so effectively, relatively few voices from the Left actually get into the mainstream media. For example, media critics such as Noam Chomsky tend to be heard only in alternative press outlets outside the mainstream.¹¹

Even though conservatives are more inclined to publicly attack the news, media criticism groups do exist on both the left and the right, and they continue to muster plenty of evidence for dueling charges of political bias. The reader might be interested in comparing the news criticism of the leading conservative organization, Accuracy in Media (AIM), with that of the leading liberal one, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). The AIM Web address is www.aim.org; the FAIR Web site is located at www.fair.org.

To be sure, fluctuations in the political content of the news do exist, but they tend to be unsystematic (i.e., the swings in emphasis on messages or political

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figures are not all liberal or conservative). Such political content fluctuations can almost always be explained by factors outside of the ideological thinking of individual journalists.¹² Everette Dennis has summed up the endless debate over ideological bias in the press as “pointless and repetitive,” concluding that “The media, alas, are centrist, determinedly so.”¹³ To this, I would add that as the political bounds of conflict within government shift, the center may move. Thus, the “center” was more to the Left in the 1960s and has swung to the Right in recent times, and these swings may reflect more the power balance in Washington than the general politics of the American public.

What's Wrong with Press Bias and Political Partisanship?

Even if the contradictory perceptions of press bias were somehow true, they should not cause so much concern. We might even welcome an avowedly partisan press of the sort that thrived before the rise of commercial newspapers in the 19th century. The point of this discussion is simply to suggest that much of the popular thinking on the press today actually gets in the way of understanding more important information problems with the news about politics. It is unrealistic to think that the news could somehow report the truth in a way that everyone would see. This common fantasy about political reporting overlooks the fact that emotionally charged value clashes and contradictory information are at the core of politics.

The role for the press that the founders of this country imagined was far removed from the fantasies harbored by many people today. Thomas Jefferson imagined that communities would have many partisan news sources—not that any individual would achieve balance by reading them all. The path to public understanding in a society rich with competing partisan information was described in the famous Hutchins Commission report on the American press more than a half century ago:

Nor was it supposed that many citizens would subscribe to all the local journals. It was more likely that each would take the one which would reinforce his prejudices. But in each village and town, with its relatively simple social structure and its wealth of social contacts, various opinions might encounter each other in face-to-face meetings; the truth, it was hoped, would be sorted out by competition in the local marketplace.¹⁴

As the Hutchins report made clear, we no longer live in such a world. Even 50 years ago, it was clear that competing partisan news sources were not commonly available and that people did not live in close-knit communities where they would deliberate until reaching higher understandings of situations. For better or worse, the news has become distilled into highly uniform reports that present themselves as neutral, and from which people are expected to draw their own personal conclusions—generally without confronting fellow citizens with whom they disagree.

The Hutchins Commission also noted that this change from the democratic model of the press on which the nation was founded places important responsibilities on the contemporary press. In particular, news organizations should attempt to challenge dominant points of view that are dominant simply because they are better publicized by government or interests. Those news organizations also need to go out of their way to bring into their reporting the perspectives of diverse voices from communities who have little opportunity for face-to-face deliberation. Unfortunately, the news system fails to live up to these responsibilities much of the time. The result is that citizens lack the perspective and deliberation necessary to reach confident personal understandings, much less public consensus, about many important issues.

The general preoccupation with finding the most dramatic (which is often the best spun) story, rather than the best understanding of a situation, produces little information diversity in mainstream news reporting. For example, a comparative study of journalists in five nations found that American journalists may be the freest in the world—at least they cited fewer limits on their reporting than their counterparts in other democracies. American reporters, however, also made the narrowest range of choices about how they would cover various hypothetical news situations.¹⁵

A Different Kind of Bias

The general focus of this chapter is on a deeper but less obvious sort of news bias—one that favors dramatic and personalized aspects of events over more complex underlying political realities. The result of focusing on individual actors and the dramas swirling around them is to make many political situations seem fragmented and confusing. Audiences are often left hanging, waiting for daily story updates about disorder and the restoration of authority, normalcy, and control, rather than installments on news narratives that reveal the politics behind the events.

Consider how one news organization reported that iconic moment when President Bush landed on an aircraft carrier to declare “mission accomplished” shortly after the invasion of Iraq:

When the *Viking* carrying Bush made its tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* off California yesterday, the scene brought presidential imagery to a whole new level. Bush emerged from the cockpit in a full olive flight suit and combat boots, his helmet tucked jauntily under his left arm. As he exchanged salutes with the sailors, his ejection harness, hugging him tightly between the legs, gave him the bowlegged swagger of a top gun.¹⁶

Similar images cycled through the news for weeks afterward.

Consider some of the other choices news organizations had for framing the aircraft carrier landing story. (*Framing* involves choosing a broad organizing theme for selecting, emphasizing, and linking the elements of a story. *Frames* also

draw attention away from other elements in a situation, much as a picture frame encourages us to look inside it and pay less attention to things on the outside. *Frames* are thematic categories that integrate and give meaning to the scene, the characters, their actions, and supporting documentation.)¹⁷

One possible frame might have pointed out the incongruity of attaching a Hollywood "top gun" image to a president with a checkered military service record. Yet the news tendency is to *personalize* stories along the most dramatic and visually immediate plot lines. Thus, the president appeared as the top gun, and for a brief Hollywood moment, the war seemed over. This frame choice made it difficult to introduce counter-frames showing that fighting continued, even as the president spoke.

These overly simplistic news framing decisions favor personal-level *drama* (or melodrama) over more complex realities and made it difficult to challenge administration claims that the liberation of Iraq had been accomplished, or that the war itself was a sensible strategy to fight terrorism. Such framing choices leave connections between surface events (the carrier landing) and underlying realities of situations (what was happening on the ground in Iraq and the impact on terrorism) *fragmented*.

The news could have focused the framing on the behind-the-scenes Hollywood aspects of the whole episode, exposing the ways in which the government hires television directors and public relations professionals to influence public perceptions—something that used to be called propaganda. Yet, the path of least resistance was to ignore the backstage context and fill the news frame with a well-staged White House dramatic production starring the president. The Hollywood moment also made for a nice chapter ending in the classic news *authority-disorder narrative*: a promise of return to normalcy—"Mission Accomplished."

As months dragged into years, the framing offered by the administration did not sit comfortably alongside continuing disturbing reports of U.S. battle casualties and civil chaos in Iraq. Yet journalists who tried to shift the framing of the conflict away from White House communication strategies were accused of liberal bias and of being unpatriotic. When reality finally became too much to displace, the administration simply reframed its story in terms of "Saddam Hussein was a very bad guy, and the world is better off without him," or "Would you rather fight the terrorists here or over there?" For their part, the Democrats failed to offer journalists much of an opportunity to open the news gates to bigger questions, apparently fearing public disapproval if they challenged a popular president (who was popular in part because of the absence of news challenges). As a result, only 34 of 414 stories told by ABC, NBC, and CBS on the build-up to and rationale for the Iraq War from September 2002 through February 2003 originated outside the White House.¹⁸

What were people to think? The polls reported at the opening of Chapter 1 show that most citizens accepted what they saw dominating the news and generally supported administration framing even months after the situation in Iraq deteriorated. One aspect of this public response was a poor factual grasp of the situation. The backdrop of disturbing events eventually led opponents in

government to surface and prompt news organizations to introduce more competing frames into the Iraq story, but the risk of such sudden frame shifts is that people feel deceived and even less sure about what to believe. Such frame shifting and fragmentation may contribute to a public that is increasingly cynical and disillusioned with politics and government.¹⁹

The paradox is that journalists complain about the scripted and staged events they cover, but they seem unable to find other ways to write stories or to replace the cynical tone with perspectives that might help citizens become more engaged. As a result of these and other factors, large numbers of people actively avoid politics, while watching the media spectacle with a mixture of disbelief and disapproval. Meanwhile, more people escape from public affairs and political participation into ever-more personalized media worlds that one observer has likened to the gated communities and suburban enclaves into which many people have physically migrated in society.²⁰

Communication scholar Shanto Iyengar offers a condensed view of news framing biases and why they matter by saying that most news is episodic rather than thematic. *Episodic news* parachutes the journalist and the audience into the middle of an already developed situation and puts the focus on the people who are in trouble or in conflict. To put it in our terms, such news is personalized, dramatic, and fragmented; it often tells stories about social order and disorder. By contrast, *thematic news* looks beyond the immediate human drama to explore the origins of problems and the larger social, economic, or political contexts in which the immediate news story has developed. Iyengar's research shows that episodic news, which is the most commonly encountered form of reporting, particularly on television, leaves people with shallow understandings of the world around them. For example, viewers of episodic coverage tend to hold the people at the center of news stories responsible for the problems and conflicts that surround them, rather than see more fundamental social, political, or economic causes at work.²¹

Iyengar's work suggests that the news is an important link in a chain of poor reasoning about social problems. If individuals, alone, are held responsible for problems ranging from poverty and crime on the domestic scene to population explosions and wars on the world stage, then politicians and voters are unlikely to find workable solutions to these problems through their public communication process. The key problem with most news, in this view, is that when personal and dramatic elements isolate or fragment a story from larger social, historical, or political context, the news fails to offer a basis for learning and generalizing. It is often in such cases, in fact, that some variation on the authority-disorder plot comes into play as a substitute for a larger point to a story.

Why is there so little innovative coverage that might stimulate citizen engagement with events as they are happening? This chapter takes a close look at news content. The concern is with information biases that make news hard to use as a guide to citizen action because they obscure the big picture in which daily events take place. In addition, they often convey a negative or cynical tone about politics that undermines citizen motivation for digging deeper to learn more or become

engaged. Although many Americans are caught up in dead-end debates about ideological news bias that is less dangerous than commonly assumed, few are noticing other information biases that really are worth worrying about. A more sensible approach to news bias is to look for those universal information problems that hinder the efforts of citizens, whatever their ideology, to take part in political life. The task for the remainder of this book is to understand the U.S. public information system at a deeper level. Fortunately, most of the pieces to the news puzzle are right in front of us. For all of its defects, the news continues to be largely a public production, with government press offices, media organizations, and popular tastes all available for inspection. The openness of the system may be its saving grace when we turn to questions of reform later in the book.

Four Information Biases That Matter: An Overview

Our expectations about the quality of public information are rather high. Most of us grew up with history books full of journalistic heroism exercised in the name of truth and free speech. We learned that the American Revolution was inspired by the political rhetoric of the underground press and by printers' effective opposition to the British Stamp Act. The lesson from the trial of Peter Zenger has endured through time: *the truth is not libelous*. The goal of the history book journalists was as unswerving as it was noble: to guarantee for the American people the most accurate, critical, coherent, illuminating, and independent reporting of political events. Yet Peter Zenger would probably not recognize, much less feel comfortable working in, a modern news organization.

Like it or not, the news has become a mass-produced consumer product, bearing little resemblance to history book images. Communication technologies, beginning with the wire services and progressing to satellite feeds and digital video, interact with corporate profit motives to create generic, "lowest-common-denominator" information formats. In particular, four characteristics of news stand out as reasons that public information in the United States does not always advance the cause of democracy: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and the authority-disorder bias.

Personalization

If there is a single most important flaw in the American news style, it is the overwhelming tendency to downplay the big social, economic, or political picture in favor of the human trials, tragedies, and triumphs that sit at the surface of events. For example, instead of focusing on power and process, the media concentrate on the people engaged in political combat over the issues. The reasons for this are numerous—from the journalist's fear that probing analysis will turn off audiences to the relative ease of telling the human-interest side of a story as opposed to explaining deeper causes and effects.

When people are invited to take the news personally, they can find a wide range of private, emotional meanings in it. However, the meanings inspired by

personalized news may not add up to the shared critical understandings on which healthy citizen involvement thrives. The focus on personalities encourages a passive spectator attitude among the public. Whether the focus is on sympathetic heroes and victims or hateful scoundrels and culprits, the media preference for personalized human-interest news creates a "can't-see-the-forest-for-the-trees" information bias that makes it difficult to see the big (institutional) picture that lies beyond the many actors crowding center stage who are caught in the eye of the news camera.

The tendency to personalize the news would be less worrisome if human-interest angles were used to hook audiences into more serious analysis of issues and problems. Almost all great literature and theater, from the Greek dramas to the modern day, uses strong characters to promote audience identifications and reactions in order to draw people into thinking about larger moral and social issues. American news often stops at the character development stage, however, and leaves the larger lessons and social significance, if there are any, to the imagination of the audience. As a result, the main problem with personalized news is that the focus on personal concerns is seldom linked to more in-depth analysis. What often passes for analysis are opaque news formulas such as "he/she was a reflection of us," a line that was used in the media frenzies that followed the death of Britain's Princess Diana. Even when large portions of the public reject personalized news formulas, as during the chaotic journalistic and political preoccupation with President Clinton's personal sexual behavior, the personalization never stops. This systematic tendency to personalize situations is one of the defining biases of news.

Dramatization

Compounding the information bias of personalization is a second news property in which the aspects of events that are reported tend to be the ones most easily dramatized in simple "stories." As previously noted, American journalism has settled overwhelmingly on the reporting form of stories or narratives, as contrasted, for example, with analytical essays, political polemics, or more scientific-style problem reports. Stories invite dramatization, particularly with sharply drawn actors at their center.

News dramas emphasize crisis over continuity, the present over the past or future, and the personalities at their center. News dramas downplay complex policy information, the workings of government institutions, and the bases of power behind the central characters. Lost in the news drama (*melodrama* is often the more appropriate term) are sustained analyses of persistent problems such as inequality, hunger, resource depletion, population pressures, environmental collapse, toxic waste, and political oppression. Serious though such human problems are, they just are not dramatic enough on a day-to-day level to make the news until they produce crises that trigger the authority-disorder narrative (discussed later).

Crises are the perfect news material because they fit neatly into the dramatization bias. The "crisis cycle" portrayed in the news is classic dramatic fare, with rising action, falling action, sharply drawn characters, and, of course, plot resolutions.

By its very definition, a crisis is something that will reach dramatic closure through cleanup efforts or humanitarian relief operations. Unfortunately, the crisis cycles in the news only reinforce the popular impression that high levels of human difficulty are inevitable and therefore acceptable.²² Crises in the news are often resolved when situations return to "manageable" levels of difficulty, yet underlying problems often continuing to grow. The news is certainly not the cause of these problems, but it could become part of the solution if it substituted illumination of causes for dramatic coverage of symptoms.

As in the case of personalization, dramatization would not be a problem if it were used mainly as an attention-focusing device to introduce more background and context surrounding events. Drama can help us engage with the great forces of history, science, politics, and human relations. When drama is used to bring analysis to mind, it is a good thing. When drama is employed as a cheap emotional device to focus on human conflict and travail, or farce and frailty, the larger significance of events becomes easily lost in waves of immediate emotion. The potential advantages of drama to enlighten and explain are sacrificed to the lesser tendencies of melodrama to excite, anger, and further personalize events. Thus, the news often resembles real-life soap operas, only with far more important consequences.

One of the things that makes the news dramatic—indeed, that may even drive news drama—is the use of visuals: photos, graphics, and live-action video. These elements of stories not only make the distant world seem more real, they make the news more believable. In many ways, particularly for television, the pictures may help editors and reporters decide which stories to tell and how to tell them. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with emphasizing visuals in news production. In fact, it might be argued that thinking visually is the best way to engage the senses in communicating about society and politics. There is often, however, a tension between not reporting important stories that are hard to picture and reporting possibly unimportant stories simply because they offer great visual images. The discussion in Chapter 7 explains the economics of editorial decisions to start with the pictures and then add the words. The selection of news stories primarily because they offer dramatic images is one of several important reasons the news is often so fragmented or disconnected from larger political or economic contexts that would provide other ways to tell the story.

Fragmentation

As noted, the emphasis on personal and dramatic qualities of events feeds into a third information characteristic of the news: the isolation of stories from each other and from their larger contexts so that information in the news becomes fragmented and hard to assemble into a big picture. The fragmentation of information begins by emphasizing individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings. The fragmentation of information is further exaggerated by the severe space limits nearly all media impose for fear of boring readers and viewers with too much information.

As a result, the news generally comes to us in sketchy, dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the causes of problems, their historical significance, or the connections across issues. It can even be difficult to follow the development of a particular issue over time as stories rise and fall more in response to the actions and reactions of prominent public figures than to independent reporting based on investigation of events. In addition, because it is difficult to bring historical background into the news, the impression is created of a world of chaotic events and crises that seem to appear and disappear because the news picture offers little explanation of their origins.

The Authority-Disorder Bias

Whether the world is returned to a safe, normal place, or whether the very idea of a normal world is called into question, the news is preoccupied with order, along with related questions of whether authorities are capable of establishing or restoring it. It is easy to see why these generic plot elements are so central to news: they are versatile and tireless themes that can be combined endlessly within personalized, dramatized, and fragmented news episodes. When the dramatic restoration of normalcy is not a plausible frame for an event, the news may quickly challenge authority itself, perhaps by publicizing the latest scandal charge against a leader or by opening the news gates to one politician willing to attack another.

In the past, it could be argued (as earlier editions of this book did) that the news more often resolved the authority-order balance in favor of official pronouncements aimed at "normalizing" conflicted situations by creating the appearance of order and control. A classic scenario of politics, according to political scientist Murray Edelman, is for authorities to take center stage to respond to crises (sometimes after having stirred them up in the first place) with emotionally reassuring promises that they will be handled effectively.²³ Today's authorities still play out their parts, but the news increasingly finds ways to challenge the pronouncements of officials and the presumption of order in society. In short, the biggest change in portrayals of authority and order in the news since earlier editions of this book is that the news balance has shifted away from trusted authorities providing reassuring promises to restore chaotic situations to a state of order or normalcy. Normalizing stories continue to appear, of course, but a growing news trend is to portray unsympathetic, scheming politicians who often fail to solve problems, leaving disorder in their wake. Much of this shift may be due to politicians themselves, who have embraced greater volumes of negativity and attack, in part because they make the news and get the (short-term) attention of citizens. Local news has streamlined the authority-disorder formula even further by reporting anything that looks like mayhem.

What is the evidence for the proposition that news is more negative and less likely to paint reassuring pictures of the return to normalcy following dramatic crises and scandals? Recall the research discussed in the last chapter suggesting that, for reasons having more to do with the news business than with

external realities, the following changes have been charted in news content in recent years:²⁴

- Increased levels of mayhem (crime, violence, accidents, health threats, freeway chases, and other images of social chaos).
- Greater volume of criticism of government, politicians, and their policies, and less focus on the substance of policies.
- Higher journalistic tone of cynicism and negativity.

In an industry competing for fickle and shrinking audiences, images of disorder can be amplified through subtle emphases in news writing. For example, is the traditional American family *threatened* by the increase in single-parent and two-working-parent households, or is the family in America simply *changing* in these ways as part of the normal course of social change?

As news organizations take greater dramatic license with news plots, the elements of authority and disorder are often mixed to achieve the greatest dramatic effect. A typical example comes from a local newscast in Orlando, Florida, where Channel 6 announced an "exclusive" and promised a report from their "live truck" at the scene. The newscast opened with the anchor describing "A shocking scene in a Lake Mary neighborhood tonight. A home surrounded by crime-scene tape. A death police are calling 'suspicious.'" As the anchor spoke, the screen flashed the words "Neighborhood Shocker." Cut to the reporter live from the scene who further dramatized the death of a 66-year-old woman by saying that police did not know what happened. As if to document this claim, the reporter interviewed a police officer who said that there were no signs of violence, forced entry, or robbery. Although this statement could easily have supported either an order or a disorder plot for the story, the local news format clearly favored playing the murder mystery/shocker plot. The reporter announced that the police planned an autopsy the next day and did not know what they would find. The live feed ended with the reporter saying that, in the meantime, they "want to keep a very tight lid on what happened. . . . Live in Lake Mary, Nicole Smith, Channel 6 News." The next day, it turned out that the woman had died naturally of a heart attack. So much for the "Neighborhood Shocker." As one observer noted, "Journalism Shocker" would have been a more appropriate on-screen warning.²⁵

Whether or not most events fit the authority-disorder plot, it is easy enough to make them fit. A news show with a regular feature on government waste or consumer rip-offs will, of course, find good examples of these things every time the feature is scheduled. Also, because the economic formulas (discussed in Chapter 7) that drive news content seldom feature the good things that government is doing, there is little good news.

The following case study shows how to spot some of these biases in a news story, after which we will return to our discussion for a more detailed look at the four information biases to help bring them into sharper focus.

Case Study: How George W. Bush Got His Swagger

Let's return to the previously quoted passage from the *Washington Post's* coverage of President Bush's dramatic aircraft carrier landing discussed earlier in this chapter:

When the *Viking* carrying Bush made its tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* off California yesterday, the scene brought presidential imagery to a whole new level. Bush emerged from the cockpit in full olive flight suit and combat boots, his helmet tucked jauntily under his left arm. As he exchanged salutes with the sailors, his ejection harness, hugging him tightly between the legs, gave him the bowlegged swagger of a top gun.²⁶

This news event was covered around the world and replayed time and again in the American media. It was hailed by journalists, politicians, and public relations professionals as one of the great publicity events of all time. Communication consultants who reviewed the coverage cited journalists' lavish praise for the event as "the mother of all photo opportunities," "the greatest photo-op of all time," and "the kind of attention that other politicians can only dream of," among other accolades.²⁷ "It has a huge visual impact," said an admiring Michael Deaver, who created news images for Ronald Reagan, adding, "This is a powerful, powerful visual, not only of Bush as commander in chief, but of his strength as a world leader."²⁸

What was the connection between the "top gun" image of the president and his qualities as a leader? How did that iconic military moment sit with Bush's own military record? And how would the dramatic claim that major fighting was over in Iraq play out as the war turned into a continuing guerilla conflict? The short answer to these questions, as noted earlier in the chapter, is that well-crafted news images often stand on their own, disconnected from more complex realities. A more provocative answer is that the Bush top gun moment was not just about the war in Iraq. It was also the culmination of a long-running campaign to shape Bush's leadership image.

Most of the public attends only to the most often repeated images in the news. It takes a news junkie such as the author of this book and some of its readers to find the occasional moments when news becomes more reflective. A careful decoding of political coverage often reveals, amid the spin, an occasional analysis showing that journalists are onto the news game, and capable of revealing it for what it is. One such *New York Times* feature article examined the carrier landing as part of the larger news management operation of the Bush White House, without ever asking why the news is so prone to fall for productions that are clearly staged to make news:

Pres[ident] Bush's "Top Gun" landing on the deck of [the] carrier *Abraham Lincoln* is only [the] latest example of how his administration is using [the] powers of television and technology to promote [the] presidency like never before; officials of past Democratic and Republican administrations marvel at how this White House never misses [an] opportunity to showcase Bush in dramatic and perfectly lighted settings; in fact, [the] White House has stocked its communications operation with people from network television who have expertise in