

The Research on Media Bias

This chapter reviews competing theories and findings regarding media bias. Five different theories are reviewed, including the pro-government and pro-business biases, media pluralism, the liberal media bias, and the bad news bias. This review makes it clear that all the theories receive some level of support in empirical studies; hence, they must all be taken seriously when examining media bias. This chapter serves as a springboard into future chapters, familiarizing readers with the main findings of each theory.

Why Study the Media?

Media coverage of economic policy is crucial since most Americans have little direct contact with political leaders or government. Because of Americans' lack of direct experience with the policy process, media serve a vital role by providing political information. Most Americans do not converse with their senator or representative, or with the president. As a result, journalists are expected to serve as surrogates for the public, asking tough questions of political officials, the answers to which the public needs in order to be educated about government. Political leaders utilize media to communicate the promised benefits of their policy proposals to the public, and to convey the perceived drawbacks of their political enemies' proposals.

Perceptions of Media Bias

Public distrust of the media is rampant. In July 2013, the Pew Research Center reported that just 26 percent of Americans felt the media "get facts straight,"

compared to a high of 55 percent in 1985. Sixty-seven percent said that news stories “are often inaccurate,” compared to 34 percent in 1985. Seventy-six percent felt the media “favor one side” in reporting, up from 53 percent in 1985.¹ Other surveys find similar levels of public distrust. A 2011 survey from *The Hill* magazine found that 68 percent felt the media were biased, with respondents twice as likely to feel journalists exhibited a liberal over a conservative bias.² Another 2011 survey by Gallup reported Americans were more than three times as likely to claim the media share a liberal over a conservative bias.³ These statistics suggest the issue of bias occupies a prominent place in the public mind.

Media Bias: What It Is and Why It Matters

In *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann argued that biases in the information-gathering process matter because they influence “the pictures” people form “in our heads.” Lippmann argued that the world

is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.⁴

Bias in the news is important because it speaks to the quality of the informational environment in the United States, and whether Americans are able to form coherent, meaningful opinions regarding the political system. If a political party dominates the news, its adherents enjoy an advantage over their partisan opponents in influencing what issues the media cover (known as “agenda building”), what issues the public thinks about (known as “agenda setting”), and influencing *how* the public thinks about political issues (known as “priming”).⁵ Officials’ privileged position in the news does not guarantee they will influence public attitudes, but it at least provides them with an advantage in their efforts to persuade citizens.

Competing Theories of Bias

Many scholars have addressed media bias. They often disagree, however, about precisely *how* media are biased. The sections below explore the topic of bias in detail.

The Pro-Government, Indexing Bias

The pro-government bias theory portrays journalists as “indexing” their coverage to fit the range of views expressed by political officialdom.⁶ Much of this literature is devoted to analyzing coverage of foreign policy issues. In his study of the Vietnam War, Hallin found that coverage that was critical of the war grew during times of government discord:

In situations where political consensus seems to prevail, journalists tend to act as “responsible” members of the political establishment, upholding the dominant political perspective and passing on more or less at face value the views of authorities assumed to represent the nation as a whole. In situations of political conflict, they become more detached or even adversarial, though they normally will stay well within the bounds of the debate going on within the political “establishment.”⁷

In *Debating War and Peace*, Mermin examines media coverage of eight U.S. military interventions, finding that criticisms during each conflict appeared only when criticisms had already been expressed by government officials.⁸ Another review of U.S. foreign policy from 2001 to 2014 concluded that journalists typically restricted their reporting to those positions taken by Democratic and Republican officials.⁹

Zaller and Chiu distinguish between different forms of pro-government bias.¹⁰ These forms include: “source indexing,” whereby “reporters simply make the rounds among [official government] persons familiar with issues” and write “stories that summarize what they have been told,” and “power indexing,” in which “journalists may consider information newsworthy in proportion to its capacity to foretell or affect future events.” For example, Zaller and Chiu write that reporters “paid disproportionate attention to the statements of Bush administration officials” during Senate hearings over the 1991 Gulf War “because, far more than other witnesses at the hearings, these officials were in a position to determine whether the U.S. went to war or not.”¹¹

Bennett highlights the dangers of “politically managed” news that “provides little solid basis for critical thinking” by media consumers.¹² Bennett draws attention to “increasing limits on the content of news that stem from the manufacture and sale of news as a commercial product . . . [news] assignments are made increasingly with costs, efficiency, and viewer or reader reactions run with fewer concerns about informing the public.”¹³ Bennett expresses concern with the effects of corporate media monopolization on

the quality of news, but he does not express the more radical views of other scholars depicting journalists as propaganda agents of the state.¹⁴ Hallin and Bennett describe the media as “semi-independent” from government,¹⁵ while Herman, Chomsky, and McChesney depict media as the propaganda lapdogs of the government.¹⁶ Many other recent studies also claim that government officials are the main force driving news content.¹⁷

The Pro-business, Hegemonic Bias

Hegemonic theory (or “hegemony”) implicates media corporations in promoting upper-class business interests at the expense of democratic deliberation. Hegemony theory was developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the early twentieth century. Gramsci defined hegemony through a division between “coercion and consent,” with economic elites exercising leadership over subordinated groups and individuals through nonviolent means. Put bluntly, hegemony is defined by the use of propaganda and pro-business messages in pursuit of elite interests. Hegemony is “rooted in an economically dominant, or potentially dominant, mode of production” in which capitalist elites seek to exercise control over the thoughts of the masses.¹⁸ The role of the “dominant fundamental group” (economic elites), however, is not to force the masses into submission through violence; quite the opposite. In a free, open society, “consent is ‘historically’ achieved through the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production”¹⁹

Mansell explains that many studies focus on the “pressures toward commodification of news media and its consequences for the way in which power is distributed through the material conditions of the capitalist system.”²⁰ Reporters and editors are co-opted within a system that embraces capitalistic norms of economic production. Parenti and other political-communication scholars argue that media programming does not simply “reflect reality”; rather, it actively constructs reality in preference of one interpretation of the world over another.²¹ The “social construction” theme is elaborated upon in numerous works by Berger, Luckmann, and Tuchman, and others.²² Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson relate social construction theory back to hegemonic theory by arguing that many economic messages are “uncontested” by reporters, editors, and owners. They are “routine, taken-for-granted structures of everyday thinking” that “contribute to a structure of dominance” by business interests.²³

McChesney claims that hegemonic pressures influence the news, while faulting journalists for failing to adequately inform the public.²⁴ He elaborates:

There are two indispensable functions that journalism must serve in a self-governing society. First, the media system must provide a rigorous accounting of people in power . . . in both the public and private sector. This is known as the watchdog role. Second, the media system must provide reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day. No single medium can or should be expected to provide all of this; but the media system as a whole should provide easy access to this for all citizens.

“By these criteria,” McChesney argues, “the U.S. media system is an abject failure.” He points to the emergence of “the modern commercial press system” and “the severe contradiction between a privately held media system and the needs of a democratic society.” Journalism, following the rise of media “objectivity” in the twentieth century, has “three distinct biases built into it”: the overreliance on official news sources “as the basis for legitimate news,” the need for “a news hook or a news peg to justify a news story,” and the “smuggling in” of “values conducive to the commercial aims of the owners and advertisers.” McChesney contends that reporters are “oblivious to the compromises with authority they routinely make,” one example being efforts to equate the “spread of ‘free markets’ with democracy.”²⁵

Corporate ownership creates pressure on news organizations to censor news stories that criticize advertisers. Advertisers expect a regular stream of news content for outlets they advertise with that refrains from questioning their companies, products, or business practices. Investigative stories that expose corporate malfeasance or corruption deter businesses from future advertising with a news outlet. And the threat of censorship is not idle. Previous surveys of news editors and reporters found that these pressures are ever-present. Eighty percent of editors contacted in one survey said that advertiser pressure on their organizations and reporters was common, and 45 percent knew of instances when content was altered due to advertiser pressure.²⁶ Three-quarters of reporters surveyed knew of instances when advertisers sought to influence news content, and 44 percent were aware of instances when advertisers withdrew funding because of content they deemed objectionable. Forty percent of reporters admitted their news outlet succumbed to censorship due to advertiser pressures.²⁷ Self-censorship is also an issue of concern. Approximately one-third of journalists and news editors admit that avoidance of views critical of advertisers happens “sometimes” or is “commonplace,” while three-quarters admit to self-censoring stories to satisfy advertisers.²⁸

Aside from advertising pressure, scholars speak of “cultural hegemony” as a prominent feature of the mass media. In *Framing Class*, Kendall discusses media representations of social inequality, the working class, the poor, and the homeless. She identifies a divergence between favorable images of affluent groups, and less favorable images for the poor and less fortunate. The wealthy are presented as “like everyone else,” “caring and generous people,” “personify[ing] the American dream,” and playing the lead role in promoting the “gospel of materialism.”²⁹ Conversely, entertainment programming’s portrayals of the working class and poor are negative: workers and unions are greedy and affiliated with organized crime, the poor are caricatured as “white trash,” the working class is comprised of “buffoons, bigots, and slobs,” and blue collar workers are “out of work or unhappy at work.”³⁰

Kendall’s claims about class biases in the media are echoed by other scholars. Rollings’s study of television during the 1980s found that entertainment programs emphasized service and professional occupations “at the expense of the production sector.” Unions were “almost invisible on television” programs and were depicted as “violent, degrading, and obstructive” when they did receive attention.³¹ Additionally, Rollings found “the role that unions continue to play in improving the quality of life and of working conditions for workers is almost never illustrated.”³² This claim was repeated in Parenti’s documentation of how Hollywood films convey images of unions as coercive, criminal, and ineffective.³³

Some research suggests antilabor, antiworker messages are common in news reports covering laborers, strikes, and unions. Glenn claims that negative portrayals of unions are common when workers organize against corporate “free trade” agreements seen as detrimental to the working class.³⁴ Kollmeyer maintains that “negative news about the economy [has] disproportionately depicted events and problems affecting corporations and investors instead of focusing on the general workforce.”³⁵ Kollmeyer found a pro-investor, pro-corporate bias in his review of hundreds of stories in the *Los Angeles Times*: “articles reporting problems threatening corporations and investors” appeared in front-page stories far more frequently than “problems threatening workers,” while articles referring to corporate and investor reforms vastly outnumbered stories on reforms “designed to help workers.” The average word length of business stories was significantly longer than for worker-oriented stories.³⁶

News representations of labor are described as negative-to-nonexistent. Croteau and Hoynes examined the guest line up of *Nightline* and *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, finding that only 5.7 percent of the guests on *Nightline* were representatives of labor, public interest groups, or racial and ethnic

leaders.³⁷ On *Nightline* programs covering the economy, 37 percent of guests represented corporations, 17 percent were government officials, and only 5 percent represented labor. A similar pattern was found on *MacNeil-Lehrer* news programs.³⁸ For coverage of labor strikes, reporters highlight the futility strikes in general, framing them as harming consumers, as being potentially violent, with strikers as too militant, and with union officials as inadequately representing workers.³⁹ Tracy argues that strikes are characterized by depictions of employers as “victimized” due to workers’ harmful behavior. Management is “sincere” in its negotiating tactics, while unions are “underhanded.” Substantive grievances of the strikers are neglected, while government mediators with labor and management are depicted as self-sacrificing and optimistic about settling strikes.⁴⁰ Coverage of labor is also described as sensationalistic. Puette, Erickson, and Mitchell suggest that although strikes occur in only a minuscule number of cases in which unions negotiate contracts with employers, they account for between one-quarter to one-third of all union coverage.⁴¹

Studies suggest that economic factors influence the news in other ways as well. The size and relative profits of media markets influence reporting quality. Larger media markets are more likely than smaller ones to produce diverse media content to satisfy audience demands. As Althaus, Cizmar, and Gimpel conclude: “Big-city stations fly traffic helicopters and send large news staffs to do live stand-up reports from all around the market, while newscasts in the smallest markets are shoestring productions run by overburdened reporters.”⁴² Vining and Marcin find that news outlets are more likely to emphasize reporting with “lower production costs” and “qualities attractive to audiences and advertisers”—two groups that are highly desired by media corporations.⁴³ Dunaway finds that corporate ownership of newspapers produces less frequent coverage of politics, compared to privately owned newspapers.⁴⁴ Schaffner and Sellers conclude that increased corporate consolidation of media ownership leads to less extensive coverage of Congress.⁴⁵

Profit considerations drive production of the news. In *Market Driven Journalism*, McManus finds significant differences in midsized, large, and very large television news stations concerning efforts to cut news production costs. Large stations (having the most resources) are more likely to rely on outside fact checking “to ascertain newsworthiness,” and less likely to run stories “from [outside] promoters or other media firms . . . without leaving or phoning outside the typical newsroom.” Mid-to-smaller-size stations are less likely to do these things. McManus finds that inexpensive stories that are easily generated by conventional sources are more likely to be produced over expensive investigative pieces due to profit-driven concerns with minimizing operating costs.⁴⁶

Finally, some scholars claim that journalists marginalize social movements that are critical of corporate power. Solomon criticizes newspaper reporting of anticapitalist protests for oversimplifying protestors' messages, and for portraying them as "zealots" against international institutions such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization.⁴⁷ Giuffo criticizes reporters covering anti-corporate globalization protests for failing to provide context for demonstrators' motivations.⁴⁸ News stories are said to frame protests of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) as "against globalization," rather than as against *corporate* globalization. Adler and Mittelman find that media rely on a single definition of globalization as driven by business interests, as opposed to being driven by transnational protests against corporate globalization.⁴⁹

Goeddertz and Kraidy contend that media stress the "deviant" nature of anti-corporate globalization protestors, while editorials and columns are biased in favor of "free trade."⁵⁰ Analyzing the 1999 Seattle protest against the WTO, Boykoff found that more than 60 percent of the reporting featured a "violence frame," covering skirmishes between police and demonstrators, despite the protests being overwhelmingly nonviolent.⁵¹ Boykoff contends that media portrayals of dissident movements, whether "starkly negative" or critical "in much subtler ways," are nonetheless "agreeable to the elite power structure."⁵²

Do labor leaders and other nongovernmental actors appear regularly in economic policy reporting? And are they able to compete for space with business leaders and governmental officials? Are hegemonic messages dominant in reporting on public policy? I address all these questions in the next few chapters.

The Rightward Drift of American Politics: Its Impact on the News?

One way in which pro-business biases may appear in the news is indirectly, via the rightward drift in American politics. If the political process and the actions of both political parties are increasingly defined by market policies that benefit the affluent, and if journalists defer to political officials who themselves defer to business interests, one may observe hegemonic biases in the news. Numerous scholars discuss how the American political system embraced hegemonic values from the 1970s through today. Hetherington documents the decline of liberal government policies from the early 1970s through the 2000s, arguing that the erosion of such policies produced great

public distrust of government, as officials became less concerned with promoting policies aimed at aiding the masses and disadvantaged.⁵³ Hacker and Pierson identify numerous changes in American politics favoring the affluent. These include: the growing power of corporate lobbyists via the electoral process, the embrace of “free market” ideology among political officials, the erosion of earnings for working- and middle-class families, the growing cost of living due to corporate interests in increasing profits from essential goods, the decline of American labor due to deindustrialization and failure to enforce labor law, and the targeting of tax cuts toward the affluent, at the expense of other income groups. These policies, Hacker and Pierson argue, create pressure on the masses while producing record inequality.⁵⁴ They also highlight the concept of “drift,” defined as “the failure of government to respond to new economic realities.”⁵⁵ Drift refers to government failure to prioritize policies that benefit nonelites. These policies include minimum wage increases at a time when working poor’s wages are declining due to inflation, efforts to protect and enforce labor laws against corporations assaulting unions and unionizing workers, and efforts to regulate growing costs of vital goods such as food, health care, and education.⁵⁶

Journalistic Norms: Pro-Government and Pro-Business Biases

Scholars find that journalists operate according to standardized routines, values, and norms in creating the news. Ryfe identifies journalistic practices that drive production of news, including balance, detachment, and objectivity.⁵⁷

Journalistic routines and norms may reinforce pro-government and pro-business biases. Sparrow argues that journalists routinely rely on official sources because of financial pressures to produce profits within the confines of daily deadlines. Privileging of officials is seen as standard operating procedure among reporters, who view government as the agenda setter in political reporting. Sparrow also cites market pressures as a major force on editors, who are encouraged to prioritize advertiser interests.⁵⁸ Bagdikian, Alger, and others discuss how advertising pressures ensure that media outlets promote mass consumerism as a dominant societal value.⁵⁹

Many of the classic observational studies of reporters in the newsroom frame journalists as biased in their reporting of political and economic issues. Tuchman’s study found that reporters did not spend significant time searching for nongovernmental sources, instead depending heavily on official sources.⁶⁰ Gans stressed the prominence of “known” sources, including presidents and presidential candidates, federal officials, state and local representatives, who dominate political stories. Conversely, “unknowns” sometimes make it into

the news, but in cases of extravagant or sensational events, depicted as victims of crimes or disasters, as voters, and sometimes as protestors. Reporters are committed to capitalism as a virtuous economic institution, and report stories within a continuum of expressible views that ranges from liberal to conservative.⁶¹ Little space remains in the news, Gans argues, for those outside this continuum of “legitimate” consensus and debate.

Gans claims that “[l]abor strikes are frequently judged negatively, especially if they inconvenience ‘the public,’ contribute to inflation, or involve violence.” Reporters share “an optimistic faith that in the good society, businessmen and women will compete with each other in order to create prosperity for all, but that they will refrain from unreasonable profits and gross exploitation of workers or customers.” “Class groupings” and “class differences are rarely reported,” and “notions of class conflict are outside the journalistic repertoire of concepts.”⁶² Fishman spotlights economic factors, such as increased story quotas on journalists, for encouraging a turn “to reporting pre-formulated and prescheduled events in anticipation of a speed-up of their production line.” Fishman suggests, “the overall economic logic of news reporting dictates the minimization of labor costs by understaffing the newsroom.”⁶³ Fishman, Tuchman, and Gans claim that journalists reinforce dominant economic ideologies and this focus fits well with a pro-business bias in the news.

Objectivity may play a key role in promoting official dominance of the news. Cook wrote of the “strategic ritual of objectivity,” with journalists tailoring their reporting to official agendas.⁶⁴ He argued:

In pursuing objectivity, reporters end up implicitly adding a particular bias to the news—a structural bias toward concentration on the events, ideas, preoccupations, strategies and politics of powerful officials. The gravitation toward officialdom is what enables the news media to be not merely political, but governmental.⁶⁵

Mindich defines “objectivity” as including an “ethic of nonpartisanship” in which “reporters must offer ‘both sides’ of each story.”⁶⁶ “Both sides” of a political issue are defined via official sources, which drive political reporting. Journalists seek to “balance” their stories by reinforcing a “sphere of legitimate controversy,” which is limited to the ideologies expressed by political officials.⁶⁷ “Balance[d]” journalism “serves the status quo,” as journalists have “embraced the idea that one can glean the truth by balancing quotes from figures of authority.”⁶⁸ Notions of journalistic “balance” and “objectivity”—when dependent upon political officials to set the news agenda—suggest a pro-government bias in the news.

Agenda Building—Applied to Pro-Government and Pro-Business Biases

Scholars express concern that media bias is difficult to measure and demonstrate. There is concern with how to demonstrate whether news reporting represents “a fair representation of reality.”⁶⁹ Groeling asks whether bias can be adequately measured with regard to the process in which reporters focus on certain stories over others. Measuring bias can be difficult since “a researcher would have no idea” what potential stories a reporter was exposed to or not. Could a reporter be selecting some stories over others, in accord with one type of bias as opposed to some other bias? Fortunately, this problem is not as intractable as it first seems. Direct interactions between researchers and reporters have produced a number of studies suggesting that certain biases—such as the pro-government and pro-business biases—affect the newsgathering process. While I argue that pro-government and pro-business biases are apparent in news content, evidence suggests that these biases also influence what types of stories are marginalized or ignored. Journalists and editors admit to censoring stories that criticize advertisers for fear of losing advertising profits. On another level, I argue that market-based ideas dominate public policy news. This means that more progressive policy views do not receive much attention in the news, since these positions are embraced by neither political party. They are filtered out of policy discussions. These views may not be observed in the news—speaking to Groeling’s concerns—but their omission is evidence of pro-business bias.

Evidence suggests that the pro-government bias also influences how policy issues are *not* reported. “Agenda building” refers to the process by which some political issues are heavily emphasized in the news, while others are neglected, due to the priorities of political officials. Numerous studies explore how the agenda-building process influences news content.⁷⁰ Some studies document how human rights violations in countries allied with the U.S. government rarely receive attention in the news, while violations in countries designated enemies of the state receive sustained coverage.⁷¹ Research also concludes that, on economic policy, journalists consult some sources far more than others in deciding which stories to report and which to neglect or ignore. One survey of reporters, for example, found that political officials and business representatives were consulted most often when journalists decided what constituted legitimate economic news, while other political actors—academics, labor union representatives, and members of public interest groups—were rarely consulted.⁷² In sum, there is little reason to suspect that pro-government and pro-business biases do not influence journalists, whether one is talking about how some stories are selected and reported, or how others are marginalized or ignored.

“The Liberal Media”

Some scholars and pundits claim that media are biased *against* business and Republican interests, while favoring liberal-Democratic ones. Conservative pundits attack journalists for slanting their reporting in a liberal direction on domestic and foreign policy.⁷³ Sutter challenges the claim that corporate advertising pressures help censor stories that criticize business and conservative interests, suggesting instead that such criticisms *attract* viewers—thereby contributing to media corporations’ profits and bottom line.⁷⁴ Many pundits’ attacks on “the liberal media” are derived from scholarship and watchdog groups claiming to have uncovered evidence of bias.

The liberal media claim, while popular among pundits and the public, is not without challenge. Numerous pundits and scholars question alleged liberal dominance of the media.⁷⁵ One meta-analysis of various studies of media bias concluded that liberal media bias claims were not validated by available research. Examining presidential election coverage, the meta-analysis found that positive and negative media coverage in television and print was evenly split between Republican and Democratic candidates. The meta-analysis found that across numerous elections, “conservative elites’ claims of liberal media bias appeared in campaign news coverage when the Republican candidate was receiving relatively favorable coverage.”⁷⁶ Other studies of media coverage also find no evidence of liberal or conservative bias.⁷⁷ Some research suggests a conservative bias in the news, while others claim that bias varies depending on the economic context.⁷⁸ For example, Lee’s analysis of economic reporting from 1958–2004 concludes that ideological biases in the news varied depending on factors such as inflation, unemployment, and which party was in government.⁷⁹

Other scholarly research finds that coverage is biased against conservatives. In *The Media Elite*, Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman surveyed reporters and editors from major news venues, comparing their ideology to that of business leaders. Reporters and editors were characterized as liberal on social issues, and conservative on economic issues, although less conservative on economic issues than business leaders. Reporters and editors were also more likely to describe themselves as liberal, and more likely to cite liberals as reliable sources on welfare reform, liberal consumer groups as more reliable on consumer protection issues, and environmental activists as more reliable on pollution and environmental issues. Reporters were more likely to vote in elections for Democratic candidates as well.⁸⁰ Journalists’ Democratic leanings were also reinforced in more recent surveys.⁸¹

Personal biases of reporters may translate into professional biases in reporting. The Pew Research Center’s 2013 study of same-sex marriage media

coverage concluded that while 63 percent of news stories were “mixed” in their outlook on same-sex marriage, 29 percent were supportive, and just 8 percent were opposed.⁸² Another Pew study from 2008 found that media coverage of the presidential primary elections favored Democratic over Republican candidates.⁸³ Other studies produce similar findings. Kuypers’s review of 116 U.S. newspapers found that journalists marginalized far-left, moderate, and conservative views, in favor of “a narrow brand of liberal bias.”⁸⁴ Lowry concluded that reporting on economic issues was more positive during President Clinton’s two terms than during President Bush’s terms.⁸⁵ Schiffer’s analysis of newspaper coverage of Senate election campaigns during the 1980s and 1990s concluded that news stories expressed a “slant” in favor of Democratic candidates.⁸⁶

Other research challenges claims that entertainment programs exhibit a pro-business bias. The conservative Media Institute examined two hundred primetime programs on the three broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), concluding that “two of three businessmen are shown as foolish, greedy or criminal, and that almost half of all work activities performed by businessmen involve illegal acts.”⁸⁷ Thomas and LeShay concurred with the Media Institute’s findings, arguing that fictional programs on the major networks “routinely” portray the “upper class” as “engaging in a greater amount of negative behavior” than the “working class.” The authors qualified their study, however, explaining that it is “wealth, not business leaders,” that “has consistently been portrayed negatively in popular media.”⁸⁸

The highest-profile recent study to allege a liberal media bias was authored by political scientist Tim Groseclose. Groseclose argues that American journalists lie far to the left of the public. His study measures news references to liberal and conservative think tanks, research groups, and activist and advocacy organizations, comparing that reporting to Democratic and Republican references to these groups in the *Congressional Record* database. Measuring “political quotients” for both a wide variety of media outlets and members of Congress, he found that reporters were more likely than members of Congress to cite liberal groups in the news.⁸⁹ Groseclose’s study, however, was also contested by political scientists and media scholars regarding alleged methodological flaws and unrealistic measurement expectations.⁹⁰ By itself, Groseclose’s study does not definitely “prove” liberal media bias, but it does suggest that discussions of liberal bias remain highly relevant.

Distrust of “the liberal media” is related in significant part to the consistent efforts of conservative media pundits to convince cable and radio audiences that journalists are biased. Constant discussion of bias is correlated with growing perceptions of bias, so conservative pundits’ fixation on this

issue seems to be fueling perceptions of bias.⁹¹ Furthermore, bias is often in the eye of the beholder, with conservatives perceiving liberal media bias more often than liberals. This trend appears to be due in large part to the sustained conservative campaign to convince conservative Americans of such a bias.⁹² Scholars should not ignore these trends in popular commentary and in public thought, especially when powerful forces such as political officials and pundits are responsible for driving them.

Pluralism and Citizen Empowerment in the News

The “pluralist” model of reporting claims that media include a diversity of sources, governmental and nongovernmental, in the news. Variants of the pluralism theory argue that the media empower citizens throughout the news production process. Dahl stood at the forefront of the pluralist school of American politics. In *Who Governs?* Dahl studied a single urban locale, New Haven, Connecticut, in an attempt to understand the nature of power in the city’s governing structure. He was concerned with whether “the way in which political resources are distributed encourage oligarchy or pluralism?” Within a pluralist democracy, Dahl claimed, “the relationship between leaders and citizens . . . is frequently reciprocal: leaders influence the decisions of constituents, but the decisions of leaders are also determined in part by what they think are, will be, or have been the preferences of their constituents.”⁹³

While Dahl did not emphasize nongovernmental actors in the political process, an emerging literature focuses on whether reporters allow for different interests, including labor groups, business interests, public interest groups, and other nongovernmental actors, to gain meaningful access to the news. News coverage of the anti-corporate globalization movement is described as pluralistic because of the significant influence exercised by protest groups. Rojecki sketches a picture of “a much more favorable media environment for the anti-globalization movement” than previously thought, tracing an “initial focus on surface features [of the 1999 WTO protest]—costumes and stunts,” that “quickly deepened to the underlying issues they symbolized.” Rojecki highlighted reporters’ interest in attacks on the WTO as “undemocratic,” “cloaked in secrecy,” “pandering to business interests,” and characterizations of the organization as intent on global “domination,” “imperialist intervention,” and promoting “profits uber alles.”⁹⁴ Other studies of anti-corporate globalization protests presented evidence of favorable coverage for groups challenging corporate power, even allowing protestors to overshadow government and business officials in some instances.⁹⁵

Public interest groups' success in receiving media attention appears to be influenced by the strength of the groups in question. Thrall emphasizes that interest groups' success in gained media coverage is based on groups' size and economic resources. A group's level of news coverage depends on factors such as money, staff size, reputation, expertise, and name recognition.⁹⁶ While many interest groups are at a disadvantage due to difficulty in raising large sums of money, many are able to compensate for this weakness by attracting larger numbers of members—in the process securing greater media attention. Recent examples of public interest group successes in gaining media attention include: Occupy Wall Street, the 2011 Madison Wisconsin labor protestors, the Tea Party, environmentalists, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and protests in New York City and Ferguson, Missouri, over police brutality.

How successful are labor unions and their members and representatives at gaining attention in the news? Labor union membership fell to historic lows by the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, but studies suggest unions were at times successful in garnering sympathetic media coverage. One example is the 1997 UPS strike. While the duration of strikes is historically a significant factor for unions when it comes to receiving increased media coverage, public outreach efforts—as seen in the UPS strike—may also matter.⁹⁷ In his study of the 1997 UPS strike, Martin presented evidence that “many mainstream news media dropped their typical consumer-oriented frames for telling stories about labor and instead presented a range of opinions about the status of part-time workers in the economy [a major complaint of UPS workers was the shortage of full-time jobs available from the company], the years of downsizing at U.S. corporations, and the question of fair wages.”⁹⁸ As Martin found, however, labor victories (such as at UPS) may be episodic, limited to specific events, and failing to challenge long-term hegemonic trends in the news.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, Martin's study suggested that workers can successfully organize in order to receive more sympathetic news coverage. Similarly, Ryan's analysis of the UPS strike concluded that coverage represented a collective victory for labor, exploring how workers came together to exploit various “cracks” or “narrow opportunities” in news reporting, promoting a positive image of labor as needing a raise and deserving fairer working conditions.¹⁰⁰

Kumar's study of the UPS strikes adds more nuance and depth to previous studies, yet still suggests there is room in the news for nongovernmental actors. In the strike, Teamsters succeeded in “breaking through” to mainstream America, gaining sympathy from the public, although there was some resistance from various media.¹⁰¹ Kumar found *USA Today* and NBC to be

the least sympathetic to the UPS strike, relying overwhelmingly on shallow coverage that failed to examine strikers' grievances. The *Washington Post* and CBS were somewhere in between—not necessarily antagonistic to strikers but not emphasizing worker grievances either. Finally, the *New York Times* and ABC were the most open to workers' interests, although hardly crusading for their cause. The *New York Times* was more likely to quote Teamster sources, for example, than *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*, while ABC was more likely to stress the public's sympathy with strikers. NBC was more likely to emphasize sporadic picket line violence, in a sensationalistic manner.¹⁰²

Beyond strike coverage, other pluralistic studies suggest significant space in reporting for citizen groups. Berry presented evidence that interest groups play an important role in influencing the news. He sampled television newscasts in the mid-1990s from ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC, finding that interest groups were referenced 847 times in the 295 newscasts, or 2.9 times per newscast.¹⁰³ Citizens groups were included in newscasts even more often than business groups or trade associations.¹⁰⁴ Berry concluded that, based on his results, there is an “enormous over-representation of citizen groups” in news coverage, despite the fact that “they are but a small part of the lobbying population.”¹⁰⁵

Grossmann also presents evidence of a significant public interest group presence in the news. He argues that “advocacy organizations and the media rely on one another to set the political agenda and engage in debate over major public issues.” Factors such as the “size of the political staff” and “membership” for interest groups, “the age of the organization,” and the “breadth of its agenda,” are significant predictors of media attention.¹⁰⁶ Berry's and Grossman's findings reinforce the pluralist theory by suggesting that citizen group activism results in greater attention to their messages in the news.

Finally, other research suggests news outlets fulfill a pluralistic function by “giving the public what it wants” in political reporting. These scholars describe a “demand side” model of reporting, arguing that consumer demand for news content drives the creation of content. Studies by Hamilton, Gentzkow, and Shapiro suggest that news outlets tailor the alleged slants in reporting to readers' ideological preferences, while Hamilton suggests that the decline of traditional “hard news” stories is the result of declining public interest in such stories.¹⁰⁷ In *The People's News*, Uscinski claims that public political preferences cause ideological biases in the news.¹⁰⁸ Changes in American partisanship (the percent of people identifying with one party or another) produce a change in how often journalists report issues that are more likely to be “owned” by one party or the other. Issue ownership refers to certain issues that are seen as more credibly dealt with by one party. For example,

civil liberties and welfare issues are deemed the province of Democrats, and national security and law and order issues are “owned” by Republicans. Uscinski’s findings suggest that journalists empower the public to influence the types of issues appearing in the news and how they are reported.

The Bad News Bias

The final theory claims that a bad news bias pervades the news. This theory contends that journalists are heavily critical of government, overemphasizing negativity in political stories. Officials supposedly encounter difficulties promoting their agendas in the news, due to the critical coverage produced by reporters.

The bad news theory is supported by numerous scholars. Cohen claims that coverage of presidents has become increasingly negative over the decades.¹⁰⁹ Patterson contends that reporting on elections from the 1960s through the 1990s grew progressively more negative in covering candidates. Increasing negativity produced an increase in voters’ skepticism of the candidates.¹¹⁰ Studies of election advertisements and news coverage also document growing negativity.¹¹¹ Other research links consumption of news with increased negativity on the part of audiences. Hetherington finds evidence of a “negative economic news bias dating at least to the Carter presidency.” In the 1992 presidential election, he concludes, “the more news voters consumed and the closer they followed the campaign through the media, the worse their retrospective assessments of the economy were.”¹¹² Another study finds that the frequency of negative reporting on the economy is linked to the unemployment level, the rate of change of unemployment, and fluctuations in inflation.¹¹³

According to bad news scholars, journalists limit political leaders’ policymaking powers. For example, media critics attack journalists for supposedly undermining support for U.S. wars. The conservative Media Research Center reviewed coverage of the Iraq war from the major broadcast networks, and concluded that reporting was “overwhelmingly pessimistic,” with terrorist attacks “the centerpiece of TV’s war news.”¹¹⁴ Another study by Baum and Groeling depicted television news as overrepresenting within-party criticisms of the president, and underrepresenting across-party praise for the president during times of war. Overreporting of within-party disagreements, they contend, turns members of the president’s party against the president, since these partisans see within-party attacks as novel and noteworthy, in contrast to criticisms coming from the other party, which are seen as less interesting “cheap talk.”¹¹⁵

Research on domestic policy reporting also claims a bad news bias. Groeling claims that journalists overreport criticisms occurring within the president's party on domestic policy. Criticisms from within the president's party account for most of the comments about the president in the news.¹¹⁶ Because of this negativity, Groeling claims that unified party control of government is, paradoxically, detrimental to the president's agenda.¹¹⁷ Attention to the news, he finds, produces growing public cynicism toward the president's party, undermining its ability to govern.¹¹⁸

Other studies implicate journalists in disseminating bad news. Lichter and Noyes emphasize the dominance of "hate campaign journalism," which is aided by the "media's persistent negativism."¹¹⁹ Lichter and Noyes evaluate the tone of television network economic coverage during the 1992 presidential campaign, concluding that "negative assessments of the state of the economy outweighed positive ones—in election and non-election stories alike," with negative economic evaluations accounting for 87 percent of all economic assessments.¹²⁰ Kerbel claims that bad news overwhelmed good news in presidential campaigns from the 1980s onward, with television news becoming more critical, more sound-bite-oriented, and increasingly scandal-oriented.¹²¹ Farnsworth's and Lichter's analysis of presidential campaigns from 1988 to 2000 concluded that negative media assessments of candidates increased from 1988 to 2000, overshadowing positive assessments. News stories became less issue-oriented, with sound bites being increasingly critical of presidential candidates.¹²²

Another type of bad news research suggests that journalists fixate on strategic angles in news stories, thereby fostering public cynicism. Cappella and Jamieson argue that strategic news frames are increasingly common, and that these frames prime audiences into accepting cynical assessments of the political process. Strategic frames "draw the audiences' attention to the motivations of the people depicted . . . with the focus of strategic coverage squarely on winning and losing and the self-interest implied by this orientation, the traits activated are likely to be negative ones indicative of artifice, pandering, deceit, staging, and positioning for advantage—in general, mistrustfulness."¹²³ In other words, strategic news frames foster increased public cynicism toward government.¹²⁴ Such cynicism is thought to be a direct product of the bad news bias.

Finally, some research in sociology and political science suggests that a bad news bias is prominent in reporting of economic trends, crime and anticrime policy, and in the war on terrorism. According to Lowry, news stories on negative economic trends are significantly longer than stories on positive economic developments.¹²⁵ Research on reporting of crime finds that

journalists overestimate the frequency of crime in their stories. Their fixation on crime coincided with official efforts to “get tough on crime” in the 1980s and 1990s, despite evidence suggesting that violent crime rates were either holding steady or declining. Entertainment programs also oversaturate audiences with violent images, and exaggerate the number of murders that occur compared to the actual murder rate.¹²⁶ “Cultivation” research concludes that heavy media consumers—particularly heavy television viewers—are more likely to be distrustful of others and to overestimate the crime rate, likely because of programming saturated with violence.¹²⁷

Regarding terrorism, numerous studies identify the prevalence of fearful rhetoric among political officials. These studies spotlight the influence of fearful rhetoric in quieting public dissent against government and building support for U.S. foreign policy.¹²⁸ In summary, the above findings suggest that a bad news bias, whether related to crime or terrorism, works to reinforce official agendas.

Evaluating Alternative Theories of Bias

Each of the five theories of bias might account for media coverage of economic policy debates. Whether one (or a few) of the theories is more helpful than others in predicting news coverage can only be determined by empirical inquiry. I am aware of no systematic scholarly effort to assess all five theories alongside each other, and with regard to economic policy issues. By looking at more than twenty years of economic policy debates, I address this gap in media research.