

Reducing Partisan Bias in Political Reporting for a Better Informed Public

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Abstract

This study focused on bias in political journalism, attempting to find how political journalists today can improve the quality of their work for a better informed public. By collecting data from the literature currently available, gaps within said literature were found. Therefore, three experts within the relevant fields of political communications research, political journalism, and editing were asked the same questionnaire in an individual interview setting in order to resolve the unanswered questions. These interviews were used to further the information already available in the literature, while also attempting to fill in the research question gaps.

After the data was collected, it seemed that the biggest problem for current journalists is a lack of critical thinking in regards to every step of the writing process. Since bias has never been clearly defined within previous research, there are an abundance of different types of bias present in the media; therefore, the best journalists can do is be cognizant of their inherent biases as humans, and critically think about their decision-making processes every step of the way. According to the experts, bias is present from the types of stories deemed newsworthy, to the questions asked in interviews, the sources used, and how the story is worded. Although journalists have limitations such as deadlines and the willingness of sources to speak to the media, the amount of bias will be greatly reduced if journalists pause to think about why they make the decisions they do every step of the story writing process.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

This study focuses on the current political journalism environment and the bias that appears within the reporting. While there is a relationship between the government and the media, political journalism has become increasingly partisan, thus straying away from the foundations that journalism was built upon: reporting non-biased facts to inform an audience. “When campaign press strategists and handlers are not busy feeding the news corps, journalists may take up the slack by creating their own narratives. The prominence of stories created by the press, with or without help from opponent spin, may overshadow more insightful political analysis” (Bennett, 2009).

Background of the Problem

Journalism is centuries old, however, it wasn't until 1997 when the Committee of Concerned Journalists began to identify and clarify the principles of their profession. After four years of research, they narrowed it down to nine principles of journalism, including: journalism's first obligation is the truth, its first loyalty is to citizens, and it must serve as an independent monitor of power (American Press Association). Since then, political journalism has vastly strayed from those original principles.

There are ample studies and research done on the topic of bias in the media, as well as specifically bias in political journalism; this literature has shown that bias is evident and comes in a variety of different forms. The origin of bias in journalism was argued by Kelly (2013), “The recent expansion of media outlets has produced a [...] side effect: the rise of news sources with a partisan slant.”

Purpose of the Study

Since the introduction of a vast number of media outlets has caused a rise in the number of slanted news sources, thus straying from the original principles of the profession, it's important to conduct research on this topic for a variety of reasons. This study will not only recognize the bias present in news, but will also attempt to find a solution to the problem of partisan news for the sake of higher quality political journalism and a better informed public.

Setting for the Study

This study will be done as part of the data collection for a senior project at California Polytechnic State University located in San Luis Obispo, California. Interviews will be conducted with three experts in the field of political journalism and political research. The experts will be asked the same question set, which will be designed to answer the research questions laid out. The answers gathered are intended to fill in the gaps within previous literature on the topic of partisan bias in political journalism.

Research Questions

The study used the following research questions that were designed to answer the gaps found within the existing literature on the topic of partisan bias in political journalism. Each question was formed after investigating the existing information on this topic in order to attain additional relevant and necessary information from professionals in the fields of political journalism and political research.

1. How does the current media environment differ from the foundations of journalism?
2. Why do political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?
3. How much power does the mainstream media really have in swaying audience opinion?
4. What are some ways journalists have reported on politics biasedly?
5. How does framing affect an audience's perception of political reporting?
6. In what specific ways does a news organization's "slant" or "lean" affect their audience? (Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?)
7. How effective are "media watchdog groups" at reducing bias in mainstream media?
8. What are some ways journalists can own up to their inherent biases, and how can they reduce reporting in a biased manner?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined in order to clarify and assist the reader with some topical vernacular used within the remainder of the study.

Authority-Disorder Bias: when the news is preoccupied with order, along with related questions of whether authorities are capable of establishing or restoring it (Bennet, 2009).

Bias: a particular tendency, trend, inclination, feeling, or opinion, especially one that is preconceived or unreasoned (Dictionary.com).

Confirmation Bias: the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand (Nickerson, 1998).

Dramatization: the aspects of events that are reported tend to be the ones most easily dramatized in simple “stories” (Bennett, 2009).

Framing: the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing facts or judgments (Entman, 1992).

Fragmentation: when stories that are interconnected are reported on separately, and the larger picture at hand isn’t addressed (Bennett, 2009).

Outrage Discourse: discourse that attempts to provoke a primitive response from the audience, usually in the form of emotion such as anger, fear, or even moral righteousness (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

Partisan Bias: a bias in relation to a journalist’s political affiliation (Fico & Freedman, 2008).

Personalization: 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 (Bennett, 2009).

Organization of Study

Chapter 1 included the statement of the problem, background of the problem, purpose of the study, setting for the study, research questions, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 will identify trends found in research and current literature about different types of bias found within reporting. Chapter 3 will present the methodology of the study. In Chapter 4, the findings will be organized and presented based on the original research questions posed in Chapter 1. Lastly, Chapter 5 will include a summary of the findings in

the study as well as recommendations for political journalists in the industry so that they will be able to report on politics as free of bias as possible for a better informed public.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

As humans, inherent bias is impossible to escape; however, the foundations of journalism were built on the truth. Within the realm of political reporting, bias has become an issue and mainstream media has strayed away from the fundamental ideas that the journalism profession was built upon. Bias comes in many forms, and can have varying levels of affects on publics. There are already many studies done on how biased certain news sources are, the various ways journalists can insert their personal bias into the news they report, as well as the effects of bias on an audience, all of which will be reviewed and analyzed. This literature review will be used to lay a foundation for finding ways to reduce bias for a better informed public. Within these studies, there is a lack of further analysis on what can be done as journalists to reduce bias in reporting, as well as what audiences can do to be more aware of biases in the news they consume.

Media is constantly evolving, and with that comes changes in the way news is reported. In “Red News, Blue News: Political Consequences of News Bias,” Dimitri Kelly argues that the expansion of media sources has led to a rise in the amount of partisan-slanted media. Kelly honed in on the news coverage of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act and used survey data on an individual level in addition to data from local cable providers to conduct the study. After analyzing the data, Kelly said that while selective exposure leads to further polarization between the two parties, biased news tackles political apathy and leads to a more engaged audience. It should be no surprise, Kelly said, that an already-partisan audience leads to the creation of more partisan news. While looking at Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN, Kelly found that Fox News encouraged their viewers to form very specific beliefs about health care reform with a conservative

slant; MSNBC did the same with a liberal slant. CNN had relatively unbiased coverage, but its impact on public perceptions was limited because its partisan rivals (such as Fox News and MSNBC) are so popular.

Fico and Freedman (2008) analyzed eleven United States Senate races in 2006 focusing on structural and partisan biases. Structural bias is defined as bias produced by journalists' news values, their resources, work routines, and how much and which institutions they depend on; partisan bias is in relation to a journalist's political affiliation. Within their study, Fico and Freedman paid attention to whether a candidate was liberal or conservative instead of focusing on their party affiliation, because they felt it was a more descriptive variable. They chose to focus on the largest-circulation dailies with the assumption that they had the most resources to provide the fullest picture of each race. Their findings showed a majority of stories favored liberals, with only one in five stories rated as "perfectly balanced." Based on their hypothesized relationships, Fico and Freedman found that newsrooms with more women reporters produced stories that had less structural imbalance, although the relationship was weak. They concluded that although the imbalance was small in the 2006 election cycle, it had increased from a 2004 election cycle study and may increase in the future. Fico and Freedman said that news organizations weren't consistent in the commitment to fairness or balance in election coverage, at least not in the terms of the measures they used in their particular research project.

While Kelly argued that the more media outlets there are, the more slanted media there is. However, Fico and Freedman presented solid research of the beginnings of media bias, a decade before Kelly's research. The coverage in the current media

environment is biased, but Daniel Stone (2011) developed a new model of the news market after coming to the realization that people with opposing views see the same source as biased against their interests.

In Stone's model market, consumers and reporters both misinterpret information and have biased beliefs about others misinterpreting information. Stone shows that for some parameter values in equilibrium: a monopolist media outlet has a moderate reporter, but duopolist outlets have reporters on opposite sides of the spectrum; within the duopoly, consumers think their preferred media source is relatively unbiased, and the opposing reporter is relatively biased; while more consumers receive news via the duopoly, they may be less informed in the duopoly than the monopoly. Stone makes a few assumptions, including the "bias blind spot," which he defines as individuals being blind to their own biases, but being very aware of the potential biases of others. Stone focused on three types of "agents": reporters, firm owners, and consumers. Within that, each agent's bias is one of three different types—left-bias, right-bias, or no bias. This model implies that an increase in media competition may actually reduce consumers' information, despite increasing competition causing more consumers to receive news.

While the previous sources have proved that there is bias in the news, and consumers will think the opposing side's news outlet is more biased than their own, the question still remains: does biased news even matter? If there is no affect of bias news on its audience, then there's no reason to attempt to reduce bias within reporting. However, many sources find that biased news does have an affect on the public.

Oh, Park, and Wanda (2011) explored the idea of hostile media perception using survey data in 2000 and 2007, right before the presidential primary elections; both

surveys were via telephone and had over 1,000 respondents. They examined hostile media perception based on people's political affiliation and its strength, how engaged they are politically, and their media use in regards to election news. Unlike the studies before them, instead of focusing on one form of media, they focused on six: local television, network news, cable news, newspaper, radio talk shows, and the Internet. Their results showed that their first hypothesis was supported—both republicans and democrats feel that the media coverage of the presidential election was in favor of the other party in both the 2000 and 2007 sets of data. Their second hypothesis was primarily supported, and stated that strong party identifiers had more hostile media perception in comparison to their weak party identification counterparts. Their third hypothesis was again supported in both 2000 and 2007, in which electoral engagement was a significant predictor of hostile media perception. The information gathered in this study shows that those with strong political beliefs also perceive the media to be hostile towards their political party.

It's also important to take into account the way journalists are exercising bias while reporting, as there are multitudes of ways this can be accomplished. In Bennett's *News: the politics of illusion* (2009), four influential information biases are presented: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, the disorder bias. Personalization is when large events (such as a hurricane) are downplayed and the personal human anecdotes are reported on instead, which, Bennett argues, only scratches the surface of the actual event; personalization thus ignores the big event because a human anecdote is more relatable. Dramatization is when the simplest aspects of an event are reported on and dramatized into simpler stories than they actually are; the focus is short-term effects over the long-

term. Fragmentation is when stories that are interconnected are reported on separately, and the larger picture at hand isn't touched on. Lastly, the authority-disorder bias is when the media chooses to focus on the ability of authority to maintain normalcy after an event has occurred.

Bias has also been studied within the realm of network news coverage of the president. Groeling and Kernell (1998) addressed two problems with biased research in order to better research the problem themselves: the subjectivity of content analysis, and selection bias. They argue that the researcher will ultimately be faced with decisions while coding that may lead to biased results in addition to the limits of only selecting a set number of transcripts to study. After analyzing CBS, ABC, and NBC, Groeling and Kernell found that each network had their own, distinct approach in reporting on presidential approval ratings. NBC showed some evidence of bias, ABC's polling schedule had a weak relationship to the president's standing, and CBS reported on and polled both favorable and unfavorable changes in the president's approval ratings. Interestingly, CBS also ran far more polls than the other news organizations, which means they also are able to monitor changes in the president's approval rating more closely than the counterparts. This is an important addition to the research already presented as it shows one model doesn't work for multiple organizations—each one reports differently and has different results.

Another aspect of bias in the media is through the level of incivility in political discourse. Sobieraj and Berry (2011) analyzed specific language used in mainstream media blogs, talk radio and cable news as well as the affect that this discourse has on their audience. They define “outrage discourse” as discourse that attempts to provoke a

primitive response from the audience, usually in the form of emotion such as anger, fear, or even moral righteousness. This discourse is communicated through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents. The content variables they focused on were insulting language, name calling, emotional display, emotional language, verbal fighting/sparring, character assassination, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, conflagration, ideologically extremizing language, slippery slope, belittling, and obscene language. Sobieraj and Berry found that 89.6% of the cases included in this sample contained at least one outrage incident. To break it down further: 100% of television episodes, 98.8% of talk radio programs, and 82.8% of the blog posts had outrage discourse within them. While they found that conservatives, on average, display more outrage discourse, liberals are almost just as guilty; everyone does it, but conservatives do it a little bit more. Aside from studying the actual language used by reporters, another way to study bias is through tone as well as sources used.

In Schaefer and Fordan's study, they focus on tone, sources, as well as partisan or ideological biases. They analyzed content of news coverage of the State of the Union Messages from ABC, CBS, and NBC between 1982-2013. Schaefer and Fordan found that coverage showed sourcing imbalances that favored the President almost all of the time on all three networks. However, democratic presidents received more favorable coverage than republican presidents; although the republican presidents received less favorable coverage, they were more likely to receive an airtime advantage. Their last finding was that ABC was less biased and more balanced than both CBS and NBC. Schaefer and Fordan presumed that journalists may be attempting to balance the

institutional bias of the presidency with outside voices whom are critical, as well as trying to moderate the democratic bias of tone by using more republican sound bites.

Another way news may be biased is through the use of framing. In Lowry's 2008 study, they attempted to avoid subjectivity by objectively selecting network news stories to be analyzed and using computerized coding, while focusing on political bias in the mainstream media. Lowry used stories about stock market changes to determine news biases towards President George H.W. Bush and President Bill Clinton; Lowry argues that stock market fluctuations are objective indicators of presidential approval since the president gets most of the credit for a rise or fall in the stock market. Using nine research questions as the research guideline, Lowry found that the data supported the partisan bias (pro-Democrat/anti-Republican) bias, as well as a "bad news bias" in which there was a strong negative correlation between Dow Jones score changes and length of stories. When there was clearly negative economic news, it resulted in longer stories than positive news did. A better understanding of how journalists are reporting with bias will guide the research towards finding how to reduce bias in reporting for better journalism, and a better informed public.

If there aren't any effects on an audience consuming biased news, is it worth it for journalists to change their ways? According to Lindsay Hoffman (2013), audiences *are* affected. Hoffman studies the effects on peoples perceptions of media bias and its effects on themselves by gathering data from programs such as Hannity and The Daily Show. While this type of pseudo-news regularly features interviews with political officials, candidates, and celebrities, Hoffman focused on interviews that featured potential 2012 presidential candidates. Hoffman had randomly selected participants watch a 3-4 minute

clip of one of the shows and found that perceptions of the makers of the video, the interviewer, and interviewee differed depending on what program was viewed. Depending on what show was watched, a participant's perception of a candidate could be wildly different from another participant watching a different show—with such varying perceptions of the same candidate simply based on what show was watched, long term effects can't be proven but short term effects are evident.

Audience perception can extend in other directions than what Hoffman proposed. In fact, Salmeen (2005) studied the news media in Kuwait and the audience's perception of the role that the media should play in society. It also looked at the audience's perceptions of the press' performance in subjects like citizen involvement. They surveyed 472 citizens, and results show that variables like higher income or education and more political involvement equal more support for watchdog-type media. However, it doesn't mean that they were more critical of the Kuwaiti media's performance of the watchdog role. Salmeen's study plays a role in the larger scheme of figuring out if reducing bias is even worth doing, and if so, how to reduce it; by showing that there is support for a watchdog-type of media from those with higher income or more education, as well as those more politically involved, leads to the belief that finding a way to reduce partisan bias and return to a media watchdog role may be worthwhile.

Peters' (2015) article analyzes HBO's "The Newsroom," a show that presents itself as fictional television. The study was based on 1,115 audience posts and discussions and 49 news articles, and Peters argues that the response to the "fictional" newscasts reveal a high amount of political skepticism about the actual news and news correspondents. The study finds that both the audience and journalists use "The

Newsroom” to “name and shame” news outlets, engage in confrontation in reference to politics, and use the language and “metanarratives” to define what good journalism is. However, Peters finds that while individuals may enjoy the critique, they often lack the critical thinking skills to go beyond the accusations of bias—this particular finding is useful as it shows that the critiques of media and those in the political realm may be shallow in comparison to the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate politics.

While a few studies have touched on balance, Hopmann, Van Aelst, and Legnante have an advantage because in addition to their own research, they backed their findings up to previous research done in western democracies. According to Hopmann et al, political balance can be defined according to a political system perspective or media routine perspective. Using visibility of actors, favorability towards and evaluations of actors, and issue coverage as news content measures, they found that western broadcasting often complies with a media routine perspective. The media routine perspective, according to Hopmann et al, is when the type of news that gets covered stems from journalistic norms. In addition, newspaper coverage is sometimes imbalanced according to both liberals and conservatives. Lastly, they argue that only a systematic analysis of explanations across periods of time and space make it possible to determine whether or not politically imbalanced news is the result of partisan bias.

A vast amount of research has been done on studying bias in political reporting as well as the affect on the audiences that consume this type of news. Kelly argued that one of the reasons why there is more partisan slanted media is due to the expansion of media sources, and Fico and Freedman added on to that by noting both structural and partisan biases; a majority of stories they studied favored liberals, and only one in five were

considered “perfectly balanced” on their terms. Schaefer and Fordan also studied balance in the media, and found that the media favored the president almost all of the time on every network they researched. However, democratic presidents received more favorable coverage than republican presidents, and republican presidents were more likely to receive more airtime. Stone came up with an interesting new idea for a market model in which consumers and reporters both misinterpret information and have biased beliefs about others misinterpreting information, giving a refreshing take on the current media environment.

Through this literary review, many examples of biases have been found. Bennett proposed four “most important” biases, which included personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and the disorder biases. In addition, Sobieraj and Berry, when focusing on “outrage discourse,” found that conservatives on average displayed more outrage discourse than liberals, but they all displayed a significant amount of it regardless. In Lowry’s study, particular attention was paid to ensure objectivity was reached through methods such as computerized coding, and both partisan biases, as well as the “bad news bias,” were found in relation to coverage of the Dow Jones when George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton were in office. Groeling and Kernell found yet another approach to researching bias, in which they analyzed CBS, ABC, and NBC and found that each network had their own, distinct approach to reporting on presidential approval ratings.

While the method of biased reporting varies, audience perception does as well. Salmon found that in Kuwait, those that were surveyed and had higher income or education levels, or a higher level of political involvement, were generally more supportive of the media playing a watchdog-type role in which they survey the

government and report based on their findings. When Hoffman randomly selected participants to watch different 3-4 minute clips from different news programs such as Hannity or The Daily Show, the results showed a significant difference in how the viewer perceived the interviewer, interviewee, and makers of the video depending on which program was viewed. In addition, Oh et al researched audiences' hostile media perception. They found that both republicans and democrats felt that the media was in favor of the other, opposing party, and those with strong party identification had a stronger hostile media perception than those with weak party identification. In addition, more electoral engagement was a significant predictor of hostile media perception. Another perspective to take into consideration is the media routine perspective, when the type of news that gets covered stems from journalistic norms. Interestingly, Hopmann et al found that western broadcasting often complies with this perspective.

Lastly, Peters researched audience members interactions social media posts for "The Newsroom" on HBO, and found that while individuals may enjoy critiquing the mass media and government, they often lack the critical thinking skills to go beyond their accusations. While a few of the aforementioned studies attempted to rid their research of subjectivity and bias themselves, these efforts could be taken further. In addition, none of the studies offered methods to rid the political reporting biases or how to improve the public's perception of the mass media; this is considered to be a major gap within research. Political media bias, the central topic of this research, is extremely important as it's become more and more of an issue with each passing presidential election. The journalism profession was founded on presenting the public with factual, bias-free

reporting, and the current media environment has strayed from the original principles of the profession.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter discusses the methods used to collect data for the study including: data sources, collection and presentation of the data, and delimitations.

Data Sources

For this study, three experts including a political journalist, an editor, and a political communications researcher were interviewed based on a questionnaire. This questionnaire was prepared with the original research questions in mind, highlighting bias in political journalism and how to report for a better informed public.

Participants

The expert political journalist selected for the interview was Patrick Howe, former investigative reporter and political correspondent in Washington D.C. as well as a political journalist for The Associated Press. The expert editor selected to interview was Camillia Lanham, editor of New Times, Inc., a well-respected newspaper in San Luis Obispo, California. The political communications researcher selected to interview was Bethany Conway; as an affiliate with the University of Arizona's National Institute for Civil Discourse, she specializes in researching the relationship between politics and mass communication.

Interview Design

The following questions were asked to each of the experts and served as the data for the study:

1. To what extent does the media use bias in political reporting?
2. How does the current media environment differ from the foundations journalism was built on?
3. What are some ways journalists use bias when reporting on politics?
4. Why do you think political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?
5. How much power do you think the mainstream media really has in swaying audience opinion?
6. How do you think framing affects an audience's perception of political reporting?
7. Many news organizations are said to have a "slant" or "lean" based on their reporting, slightly skewing the stories they report on to match an agenda. How do you think consuming this type of news affects an audience? Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?
8. How effective do you think "media watchdog groups" are at reducing bias in mainstream media?
9. In your opinion, what are some ways journalists can reduce bias in their own reporting? Are there any specific tactics journalists could implement that would reduce bias?
10. If your ideas for bias reduction became widespread within the mainstream media, how would the media environment change?
11. How would less biased reporting change audience perception?

Data Collection

The method of data collection for this study consisted of three interviews, one per expert. They were conducted during February 2017 and were approximately 45 minutes in length. While the interviews were conducted, each expert was asked the same questions from the questionnaire designed to answer the original research questions posed in order to gain insight into the current political media climate and steps to improve the current media environment for a better informed public.

Data Presentation

The data was collected during each interview through the use of a digital voice recorder; the interviews were then transcribed word-for-word. This method of data collection ensures that the data is collected in the most truthful manner possible.

Delimitations

There are limitations to this study based on the type of data collected, the interview process, and restrictions within the senior project guidelines of the Journalism Department at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. The data collected was quantitative, and only gathered opinions and insight from one expert from each field of expertise. Due to this constraint, the results are limited and cannot necessarily be generalized to the entire field of journalism.

In addition, time and resources were a large factor that played into fitting within the constraints of the Cal Poly Journalism Department; there was only a short ten-week time period to see the study all the way through, and there was no research-based funding or grants used to see this project to completion

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

This chapter will provide descriptions of the experts that were interviewed for the study, and summarize each respondent's answers to the interview questions. Due to the fact that the data was collected through interviews and then transcribed, it will be presented in the form of direct quotations and paraphrases. The answers to the interview questions will then be analyzed with regard to the original research questions and existing literature on bias in political journalism.

Description of Participating Experts in Related Fields

Political Communications Research: Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva

Dr. Conway-Silva is an awarded researcher, focusing on the intersection of mass media and political communications. She analyzes various factors that shape political news coverage and is an affiliate with the University of Arizona's National Institute for Civil Discourse. She's involved in many projects related to political communications, including a project on tolerance of incivility, which relates how variables such as online engagement, media consumption, and demographics play into the level of tolerance for political incivility. She has authored and co-authored numerous scholarly articles and has her doctorate in Communication. Before earning her doctorate, she was a journalist for The Arizona Daily Star and The Associated Press.

Political Journalism: Patrick Howe

Patrick Howe is a seasoned professional in the realm of political journalism. After working as an investigative reporter and political correspondent in Washington D.C. and

statehouse newsrooms, he has been featured in various accredited publications such as U.S.A. Today and The Washington Post. He covered Congress and the Clinton administration for the Arkansas Democrat Gazette, and covered politics and government for The Associated Press. He's won many awards, both at a state and national level, for his investigative reporting, public affairs reporting, and column writing among others. After double majoring in journalism and political science at the University of Minnesota, he earned his master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Editing: Camillia Lanham

After working in marketing and sales for a brewery in Montana, Camillia Lanham felt something was missing; her passions are writing and seeking out the truth, so it only made sense for Lanham to go back to school for print and photo journalism at the University of Montana. Since then, she's worked at many news organizations in both Montana and California. Before settling down as the managing editor New Times, Incorporated, she was also a staff reporter and managing editor of the Santa Maria Sun. She both writes for and manages New Times' newsroom, and has no problem confronting her colleagues when she senses bias.

Bias in Political Journalism Questionnaire

Each expert responded to the following questions about the current media environment and bias in political reporting:

1. To what extent does the media use bias in political reporting?

Question #1 was asked in order to set the tone of the interview and to get a general sense of the expert's opinion on the current media environment in relation to bias. The question was designed as an opening discussion point to clarify the experts' thoughts on the subject in general, while keeping the first research question in mind.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “[...] the problem lies with the fact that there’s no objective standard that we can compare to. Most [...] studies look at these case studies where they say everything is biased, either by comparing to reality, what does reality reflect, so to try to come up with some semblance of bias but in the end they basically say that everything is biased. A lot of folks have tried to come up with a metric for measuring bias. But in the end, bias has actually never been clearly conceptualized and operationalized in the literature believe it or not” (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: “People who do political journalism take this seriously, and they’re not given credit for that. Most of the attention to bias is in the mechanics of a story’s telling, but I think the real bias happens in what’s considered story-worthy” (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: “I think inherently, nobody’s unbiased which is something to be cognizant of. We all have biases, but I think the 24 hour news and the Internet has kind of muddied the line, especially in politics. That seems to be where the majority of where the biased discussions happen, based on political lines” (Appendix C).

2. How does the current media environment differ from the foundations journalism was built on?

Question #2 was designed to get a sense of what the expert considers the “foundation of journalism” while also comparing and contrasting it to today’s media environment in regards to bias in political reporting.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “What’s really interesting is that journalism in this country started as partisan, so this is not anything new. What’s happened now is that we’ve come full-circle. We’re back to that partisan circle of news, and what they call the neo-partisan era. What we’re seeing now is a corporatist or profit-motivated partisan news in that major cable news organizations now realize that niche media is profitable. So it’s, not at the behest of parties, but it’s more at the behest of profit” (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: “I think if you take a macro view of this, and you back way up, the earliest news in American politics was all politically biased. Then The New York Times steps in and starts charging ten cents per paper; ten times what these other papers were charging, and their entire business model was “This was new for people who were going to be judged within society for their informed opinions or not.” [...] When the economics are there, there still is a bit more objectivity” (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: “Yellow journalism was just alive in the 30s 40s 50s, it was alive in the 1800s, we definitely have yellow journalism alive and well here, on the central coast and “mainstream” media. So I don’t think yellow journalism has

ever really gone away, but I also think that media and journalism is kind of undergoing this renaissance right now” (Appendix C).

3. What are some ways journalists use bias when reporting on politics?

Question #3 was designed to specifically answer the fourth research question, as well as get an individual’s definition of bias and what ways they show up in current political journalism. This question specifically targeted getting a thorough and exact response from the experts.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “I think that that’s we’re talking about, one-sidedness on both sourcing and framing, but it’s also represented in these other biases. These biases [like] dramatization, personalization, ideological biases, fragmentation, authority-disorder, so ideological bias is not the only bias out there. I assume we’re talking mainly about ideological bias, so I would say journalists can engage in it to a certain extent through their decision making processes and the sources that they look to for information [...]. I think bias can be a decision that a journalist makes at a level of the subconscious where they’re not necessarily trying to be biased.”
- Patrick Howe: “Just picking stories is a form of bias, there’s also some bias in questioning, in which sources are selected” (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: “I think most writers, most reporters, go into stories with a set of questions in mind based on what they see the story to be, and it biases the conversation that you have. Even if you do feel like a story is a certain way, as the conversations start to happen and you start to do your research, being open to the

possibility that your stories may be open to change, that's the most important. If you pigeon-hole something into one line of questioning, that's all you're going to get out of it" (Appendix C).

4. Why do you think political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?

Question #4 was designed to flow from the previous question: first the experts were asked to answer what ways journalists use bias, and then this question followed up by asking what the intent of reporting with bias was. It was asked to gain insight into the mind of professional journalists, as all three experts have or are currently professionals working in the field.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: "I think conscious bias comes into play due to these routines that journalists get into and they're not necessarily trying to get into, purely because of time crunch" (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: "I think it'd be extremely rare in professional news organizations to think they were furthering a cause who was in the practice of true political journalism. [...] I think the selection of stories you can see bias, [but] I think people would be surprised at how un-biased most things that fall under the actual definition of news are" (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: "I guess when I think of political journalist, I think of someone who does a lot of analyzing, and you analyze with your own inherent biases. Like I said, everyone has bias and it's knowing you have that bias and recognizing it in your writing and in your line of questioning that makes a story less biased and more objective" (Appendix C).

5. How much power do you think the mainstream media has in swaying audience opinion?

Question 5 was asked to gain insight into the effects of mainstream media on the audience, because if the mainstream media has no impact on the audience, there would be no point in changing or improving the field of journalism. This question was designed to investigate the impact that mainstream media has on its public.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “That’s very dependent on individual characteristics and attributes. People who selectively expose are also the ones who are the most interested in politics. So it can result, I think over time, although there’s no real data. And the other thing is that it can have an effect on those who are still trying to make up their opinion. So the main thing is does is reinforce, but it could impact people who perhaps aren’t necessarily set in their ways” (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: “That’s probably an unanswerable and really interesting question. I guess you would have to say based on the evidence we have, mainstream media coverage can affect opinions of those that are open to their opinions being changed, and not otherwise” (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: “I think the majority of people watch or listen to shows on TV or on the radio that they already agree with. So if you look at things that way, then whatever their chosen source says, they’d be more inclined to be easily swayed by that person because they already believe what they say” (Appendix C).

6. How do you think framing affects an audience’s perception of political reporting?

Question #6 was designed to specifically ask about one type of bias that's often overlooked or hard to find: framing. This question was asked to directly answer research question five.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “There are studies that suggest that the way an article is framed can influence our perceptions of a given issue. If you frame protesting as “free speech,” or you frame it as “civil disobedience,” but framing will rarely move us. It may change the aspects of the issue that we think about, but it rarely changes our opinions; however, it can absolutely influence the attributes we think about” (Appendix A).
 - Patrick Howe: “If we talk about something a certain way, you know, that frame is going to come out in the way we talk to sources and the way we question, in the questions we ask. That does happen, and people do pick up on that, but I don't think that well-formed opinions would be swayed” (Appendix B).
 - Camillia Lanham: “I think you can make anything sound like it's to your advantage if you frame it right. I can have people from two different sides read the same story and come away with two different things. “Oh, they were for us.” “Oh no, they were for us!” Taking two opposing views from the same story, so people read and consume news with a filter. They're going to take what their filter tells them to take out of the story, no matter how you present it” (Appendix C).
7. Many news organizations are said to have a “slant” or “lean” based on their reporting, slightly skewing the stories they report on to match an agenda. How do

you think consuming this type of news affects an audience? Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?

Question #7 was designed to directly answer the sixth research question. By asking the experts about the less noticeable ways that news organizations push an agenda, it was able to elicit responses specifically towards this type of present bias. Adding the subconscious versus conscious probe allowed the experts to think deeply about how this type of bias affects (or doesn't affect) an audience.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “The slant and lean are really about reinforcement. And there’s been some talk about this thing called the “boomerang effect” too. Not only can it reinforce our opinions, but if we see something that is completely against our viewpoint, we get so pissed and so angry that we actually move further away from it. I think it’s possible that we see something so far from our opinion that we get so worked up and move even further away from the other side” (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: “We know that one of the most predictable parts of brain science are these cognitive biases where we seek out what we want to see. So I think that there’s no doubt that the media coverage that includes some of news that feeds into peoples biases is large, but it doesn’t mean that all media is biased” (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: “The biggest problem with framing a story in a certain way is it makes a conversation about the issue less inclusive. Like we want the community to talk about things that are important, and broaden the conversation about those

things, whatever they are, but we don't want to steer the conversation in one direction or another. You just want to open it up" (Appendix C).

8. How effective do you think "media watchdog groups" are at reducing bias in mainstream media?

Question #8 was designed to point out a fairly unknown method that is currently around to keep media bias at ease, and to get expert opinion on how plausible this method is. While the concept of media watchdog groups is not a mainstream concept, this question was intended to not only answer the seventh research question, but also to set up the following interview questions.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: "Media are going to operate like they're going to operate" (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: "I don't know, does anyone really pay attention to them? Probably some academics look at those kind of things. [...] I guess the end result is that I don't think these watchdog groups are ever going to do anything like form opinions or persuade reporters or anything" (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: "I could imagine that those companies are so big that it doesn't matter. I think that they're too far-gone. I just think that their reputations precede them and I don't think anything's going to change that. You know though, news is a for-profit industry and consumers could change it, simply by lowering the ratings or, in a sense, it's not one group but the greater public that could change a news organization that size" (Appendix C).

9. In your opinion, what are some ways journalists can reduce bias in their own reporting? Are there any specific tactics journalists could implement that would reduce bias?

Question #9 was designed to allow the experts to come up with their own methods of bias reduction within the media, and political journalism specifically. While it doesn't directly answer any research questions, it was meant to set up the following questions and let the experts think of best case scenarios.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “Based on my research, I’d say think very deeply about sourcing. Think about it, make really reasoned and evidence-based decision as to why you should include one source over a different one. It also requires slowing down, but it also requires sources being willing to speak to journalists. So it’s not always the journalists’ decision. They are, to a certain extent, working to the behest of their sources, or working on the timeline of their sources” (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: “They could probably think a lot about the idea of “what’s a story idea.” To me, that’s the single biggest driver of bias, and it’s unexamined basically. If you break it down, a lot of it boils down to what we think is normal and what we think isn’t normal. If you can get people to recognize that they’re thinking that something is a story just because it’s abnormal to them, then maybe they would think twice, or at least seek to prove that it’s unusual” (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: “You just have to be cognizant of where your biases are and understand where you’re at as a person and when you look at your own things, you look at it with the intent of weeding that stuff out. When you’re entering a

story and you just see one angle, you have to open yourself up to the possibility that there are other things that can be said about the same thing” (Appendix C).

10. If your ideas for bias reduction became widespread within the mainstream media, how would the media environment change?

Question #10 was designed to answer the eighth research question, as well as tie into the last interview question; this allowed the experts to further expand on their ideas for bias reduction, now posing what change they would expect to see if their ideas went into effect.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “I think that the kind of reporting that we’re talking about...the good reporting...is already happening. But if I think if these approaches to sourcing and discourse within articles became widespread (my research) we would see a greater horizontal breadth in sources, greater variation in sourcing, and also greater substance I would hope” (Appendix A).
- Patrick Howe: “I don’t know if it would change at all because there’d still be a massive economic incentive to have click bait/sensationalistic headlines. You’d almost need a complete economic change. Being optimistic, here are the solutions that could fix it: if we settled into an economic model that was largely subscription based or non-profit, you’d have an NPR model basically, then you might arrive at a place, and you could even throw in advertising in there as long as it wasn’t numeric based, but advertisers who agree just to be associated with the publication because of the credibility that they bring to it. If you had those three economic changes: subscription, advertising that’s paid as a block, and non-

profit status overall, I think people could settle into a pretty robust five or six national news organizations that most people would look at and think that they were trustworthy. And then, some of the bullshit would start to filter out” (Appendix B).

- Camillia Lanham: “I think it would change the stories we tell. If you like look at the same story in the Wall Street Journal versus The New York Times, the headlines are different and the way they tell their stories are different. That’s not saying that it’s bad journalism, or the stories are super biased, that’s just saying that editorial minds look those over and make choices based on who they are as publications, and so while I don’t believe they should tell the same exact story, I don’t think the stories should be that different” (Appendix C).

11. How would less biased reporting change audience perception?

Question #11 was designed to wrap up the interviews, as well as provide a question that would give fairly conclusive answers. It provided a full-circle interview: starting with the extent of bias in political reporting, and finishing with how less biased reporting would change audience perception.

- Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva: “If journalists recognized biases, if they put together something as they see as conforming to the extent that it can to this idea of objectivity and verification, is that going to have an effect? I would say probably, there are some people that you can’t bring in. You can’t coax them into having a real unbiased discussion. But, for others I think there are people that care about the other side and want to listen to all arguments and come to what is a reasoned

decision. People are also cognitive misers and monitorial citizens; we don't want to process a whole lot of information, we really just want to take the easy way out, and we really want to just internalize these blatant cues that help us come to a decision. But on the other side of that there are people who put in the concerted effort to figure it out" (Appendix A).

- Patrick Howe: "We still can't control what people read, and they'll still read what makes them feel good and makes them believe what they already believe to be true. I think the ultimate solution is economic, and if there were a broader menu of news organizations that didn't have an economic incentive to sensationalize, to basically try to just get more clicks, then you could at least have a middle stratum that almost anybody could say "These are credible, these are trustworthy news organizations" (Appendix B).
- Camillia Lanham: "I think people read stories with a frame of mind, so I don't know that more of less-biased stories would change how they're consumed" (Appendix C).

Bias in Political Journalism Research Questions

For this project, the following eight research questions were created for the study to determine when partisan journalism started, what tactics are being used, and if or how journalists can reduce bias in their reporting for a better informed public from experts in the fields of political reporting, political communications research, and editing.

Research Question 1: How does the current media environment differ from the foundations of journalism?

- “Though the volume of content has increased dramatically, people’s cognitive processing abilities have not, making it unavoidable that people will have to be selective about their exposure to media. The effects of individuals’ consumption choices alter the media landscape by encouraging news providers to tailor themselves to narrow slices of the population” (Kelly, 2013, p. 1).

Research Question 2: Why do political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?

- “Since consumers trust ideologically like-minded reporters, media firms have incentives to hire reporters whose ideological beliefs match those of consumers” (Stone, 2011, p. 257).
- “When there are contrasting views over issues, especially issues as heated as the conflict between Palestine and Israel, it is hard to expect journalists to cover the issues in a completely balanced way, partly because of the complex historical causes of these issues and partly because news consumers perceive the content of the coverage differently” (Oh, Park, & Wanda, 2011, p. 40).

Research Question 3: How much power does the mainstream media have in swaying audience opinion?

- “In an age when audiences are simultaneously fans, consumers, citizens and publics, what is interesting about The Newsroom is that it provides the

infrastructure, impetus and conditions for audiences to feel they can participate in evaluating journalism, not just in terms of the show but as a broader social institution” (Peters, 2015, p. 611).

Research Question 4: What are some ways journalists have reported on politics using bias?

- “Structural bias is produced by journalistic news values, work routines, organizational resources, and news organization dependencies on other institutions. Partisan bias is produced by journalist political orientations subverting news organization norms for impartiality in conflict coverage. Both these biases affect how stories balance the claims of conflicting partisans” (Fico & Freedman, 2008, p. 2).
- “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” (Bennett, 2009, p. 40).
- “Outrage is used frequently [...] in reference to a particular form of political discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g., anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents, who may be individuals, organizations, or entire communities of interest (e.g., progressives or conservatives) or circumstance (e.g., immigrants). Outrage sidesteps the messy

nuances of complex political issues in favor of melodrama, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, and improbable forecasts of impending doom” (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 20).

- “The two main areas of interest are tone of coverage and “sourcing” usage of the president and opposition. For source usage, the expectation is that, using the index measure, ideally each newscast should be balanced, or at least, the number should be evenly distributed between the president and the opposition over the time frame of the study. For tone, the expectation is that if there is balance, the finding should be close to zero on this measure when source assertions are averaged” (Schaefer & Fordan, 2014, p. 281).

Research Question 5: How does framing affect an audience’s perception of political reporting?

- “The pathbreaking work of Iyengar and Kinder (1987), for example, demonstrates how network news can prime viewers to evaluate the president’s performance on some issues but not on others” (Groeling & Kernell, 1988, p. 1082).
- “Regardless of what the various studies conclude about partisan news bias, for most people in the reading or viewing audience, perception is reality. In other words, if they believe the media are biased, then they react or do not react, or believe or disbelieve, accordingly” (Lowry, 2008, p. 484).

Research Question 6: In what specific ways does a news organization’s “slant” or “lean” affect their audience? (Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?)

- “Scholars and pundits alike have lamented that American media and politics are in a "crisis of confidence" where citizens are opting out, journalists are succumbing to pressures, and politicians game the media” (Hoffman, 2013).

Research Question 7: How effective are “media watchdog groups” at reducing bias in mainstream media?

- The answer to Question 7 proved to have gone unanswered in the previously written literature. Relying on answers the expert sources provided in their interviews will be able to answer this question to its fullest potential.

Research Question 8: What are some ways journalists can own up to their inherent biases, and how can they reduce reporting in a biased manner?

- The answer to Question 8 proved to have gone unanswered in the previously written literature. Relying on answers the expert sources provided in their interviews will be able to answer this question to its fullest potential.

Bias in Political Journalism Data

For this study, it was important to see what the three experts with professions relating to this topic had to say because there are gaps within the current information available on this topic. In order to gather this data, three experts were interviewed for this

study: Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva, a political communications researcher, Patrick Howe, a political journalist, and Camillia Lanham, an editor of a newspaper. They were each asked identical questions that were designed to answer the original research questions in individual interview settings. The following tables present the experts' answers with their individual perspectives on the original research questions.

Research Question 1: How does the current media environment differ from the foundations of journalism?

This research question was studied in a response to the literature on bias in political journalism that currently exists. Not many researchers have discussed this topic, but the consensus between those that have is that with technological advances like the Internet along with the 24-hour news cycle, individuals have more choices than ever for their news and will be selective about their exposure to media (Dimitri, 2013). This causes news organizations to want to tailor their news towards niche audience interests.

This question was studied in order to gain insight on the beginnings of bipartisan media, and how the field of journalism has changed over time. It became obvious after reading the literature that not many researchers have provided answers as to why the field of journalism has gone through phase, including becoming more bipartisan. This question was asked to clarify the timeline of journalism as well as the root of the problem at hand.

Table 1 summarizes the answers to this question from the experts, which were all fairly consistent with each other. All three of the respondents gave an answer that was similar to: journalism began as partisan, and although it's gone through various phases such as the journalism of verification, the type of media today has come full-circle. There

is such a wide variety of media today, but bipartisanship is present just as it was when journalism began.

Table 1

Foundations of Bipartisan Journalism

Respondent	How it differs from the foundations of journalism
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	It's come full-circle; started partisan and it's neo-partisan now.
Patrick Howe	Earliest news in American politics was partisan; but when the economics are there, there's objectivity.
Camillia Lanham	Yellow journalism was alive in the 30's and is still alive today.

Research Question 2: Why do political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?

This research question was studied in order to find out the motives of political journalists when producing partisan or biased news. "Since consumers trust ideologically like-minded reporters, media firms have incentives to hire reporters whose ideological beliefs match those of consumers" (Stone, 2011).

This question was designed to investigate the reason political journalists insert bias into their reporting instead of relying on strictly fact. The literature on this topic reflects views that put emphasis on media firms hiring reporters who ideologically

align with their audience (Stone, 2011), but also the idea that people will perceive stories based on their own inherent biases (Oh, Park, & Wanda, 2011, p. 40).

Table 2 shows that every respondent had a different answer to this question: Conway-Silva blamed it on routines and deadlines, and Howe argued that his coworkers were all extremely professional, but what they consider newsworthy is a form of bias that may be hard to get rid of. Alternatively, Lanham argued that political journalists play the role of analysts, and analyzing is done with inherent biases.

Table 2

Motives of Political Journalists

Respondent	Why journalists insert bias into political reporting
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	Conscious bias comes into play, journalists rely on routines and get into time crunches.
Patrick Howe	Story selection is a form of bias, but most political journalists take their jobs very seriously.
Camillia Lanham	Political journalists analyze a lot, and analyzing is done with an individual's inherent biases.

Research Question 3: How much power does the mainstream media have in swaying audience opinion?

This research question was studied in order to see if it would even be worth journalists' efforts to change their reporting styles for a better informed public. If the

mainstream media has no effect in swaying audience opinion, there would be no reason to change the current way journalists operate. Although it is difficult to measure opinion changes solely based on media, “Regardless of what the various studies conclude about partisan news bias, for most people in the reading or viewing audience, perception is reality. In other words, if they believe the media are biased, then they react or do not react, or believe or disbelieve, accordingly” (Lowry, 2008).

The question was studied to get a brief opinion from each expert in how far audience opinion could be changed, based on their expertise. After delving into changes within the journalism industry and motives for journalists to report with bias, it was important to gain insight into how much power the mainstream media has in swaying their audience.

Table 3

Power of Mainstream Media

Respondent	How much power mainstream media has in swaying audience opinion
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	It depends on the data, but what it mostly does is reinforce already held beliefs; could change opinions of those who aren't set in their ways.
Patrick Howe	It can affect opinions of those who are open to their opinions being changed, but not otherwise.
Camillia Lanham	People consume media that already aligns with their beliefs, so they would be more inclined to be swayed by their favorite figureheads.

Research Question 4: What are some ways journalists have reported on politics using bias?

This question was studied in order to continue the conversation about bias in politics, this time focusing on the different types of bias that are present in journalists’ practices. Within the literature, researchers have discussed many different types of bias, including structural bias (Fico & Freedman, 2008), outrage discourse (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), and tone of coverage and sourcing usage (Schaefer & Fordan, 2014). In addition, Bennett (2009) spoke of four pertinent forms of bias: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and authority-disorder bias.

This question was used to gain insight into the various ways researchers have attempted to describe bias since it has not ever really been pinned down, as well as to get perspective from the experts that were interviewed.

Table 4 shows that the experts had fairly different answers to what they consider to be bias in reporting. While Conway-Silva had many examples of bias presumably due to her research background, How and Lanham had more specific examples of what they consider to be bias.

Table 4

Different Types of Reporting Bias

Respondent	Different types of bias
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	One-sidedness with sourcing and framing; dramatization, personalization, ideological biases, fragmentation, authority-disorder, ideological...all have to do with decision-making

	processes
Patrick Howe	Picking stories, what questions you ask, and which stories are selected
Camillia Lanham	Most reporters go into a story with a set of questions in mind based on where they see the story going, and it biases the conversation

Research Question 5: How does framing affect an audience’s perception of political reporting?

This question was studied to gain more specific insight into the types of bias that show up in political reporting by getting more specific and focusing just on framing.

While there is not an overwhelming amount of research about framing, “The pathbreaking work of Iyengar and Kinder (1987), for example, demonstrates how network news can prime viewers to evaluate the president’s performance on some issues but not on others” (Groeling & Kernell, 1988, p. 1082). According to the literature, framing tells the audience what parts of issues are important.

By focusing on framing, it allowed the experts to critically think about a particular type of bias. As shown in Table 5, each expert had a different opinion on the topic.

Table 5

Influence of Framing

Respondent	Framing influences an audience by...
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	Framing will rarely change opinions, but will change the aspects of an issue that an audience will think about.

Patrick Howe

Well-formed opinions won't be swayed by framing

Camillia Lanham

Two people from opposite ends of the political spectrum will see two different things. People consume news with a filter regardless of framing.

Research Question 6: In what specific ways does a news organization's "slant" or "lean" affect their audience? (Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?)

This research question was studied in order to see how more subtle forms of bias, such as a "slant" or "lean" affects an audience. "Scholars and pundits alike have lamented that American media and politics are in a "crisis of confidence" where citizens are opting out, journalists are succumbing to pressures, and politicians game the media" (Hoffman, 2013).

The second part of this question was designed in order for the experts to ponder whether or not change (if happening at all) is consciously happening within the minds of the audience, or whether it is done more subtly. This half of the question was also intended to get a subjective response from the experts as it is near-impossible to measure subconscious changes in attitudes. Table 6 shows a consensus between Conway-Silva and Howe over the subconscious or conscious effects of persuading audiences; both experts note that only conscious effects can be measured.

Table 6

Slant/Lean

Respondent	How does “slant/lean” affect audience?	Subconsciously or consciously?
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	Reinforces opinions; “boomerang effect”	Can only measure conscious
Patrick Howe	People like confirmation biases	Can only measure conscious
Camillia Lanham	Don’t want to steer conversation, just want to open it up	Don’t know

Research Question 7: How effective are “media watchdog groups” at reducing bias in mainstream media?

This question was studied in response to a gap in the literature as this had previously gone unanswered. Therefore, the answer will rely on the answers from expert sources that were provided in their individual interviews. Table 7 shows a unanimous opinion: media watchdog groups have little to no effect on the mainstream media because the mainstream media is too large and will operate the way they want to operate.

Table 7

Media Watchdog Groups

Respondent	Effectiveness of media watchdog groups
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	Media will operate like they’re going to operate
Patrick Howe	Won’t be able to change mainstream media
Camillia Lanham	Mainstream media is too big, reputations precede them

Research Question 8: What are some ways journalists can own up to their inherent biases, and how can they reduce reporting in a biased manner?

This question was studied in response to a gap in the literature as this had previously gone unanswered. Therefore, the answer will rely on the answers from expert sources that were provided in their individual interviews.

Table 8 shows each expert has a very different method on how to reduce bias in reporting, however all require journalists to critically think about decisions they make at various points in the story-writing process.

Table 8

Bias Reduction Techniques

Respondent	Bias reduction techniques
Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva	Think deeply about sourcing; make reasoned and evidence-based decisions; slow down
Patrick Howe	Think about why a story idea is newsworthy (normal vs. abnormal)
Camillia Lanham	Be cognizant of biases, stay open to stories changing

Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendations

Summary

This study was performed in response to the public's reaction to the current media environment, particularly towards political journalism. To many, the way the mainstream media is currently operating is a problem, so this study was meant to gain insight into the ways bias is present in journalism and how it affects their audiences, ultimately attempting to find ways that journalists can reduce bias in their reporting for a better informed public.

To comprehend the types of bias present in the mainstream media and how political journalists can improve the current media environment, one expert in each field was interviewed based on a single questionnaire designed to answer the following research questions for the study:

1. How does the current media environment differ from the foundations of journalism?
2. Why do political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?
3. How much power does the mainstream media have in swaying audience opinion?
4. What are some ways journalists have reported on politics using bias?
5. How does framing affect an audience's perception of political reporting?
6. In what specific ways does a news organization's "slant" or "lean" affect their audience? (Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?)
7. How effective are "media watchdog groups" at reducing bias in mainstream media?

8. What are some ways journalists can own up to their inherent biases, and how can they reduce reporting in a biased manner?

Each research question was expanded on and/or slightly altered to create pertinent questions for interviews with each respondent. The questionnaire produced a variety of responses that were tied to the literature on bias in political reporting.

Discussion

By analyzing the data collected in Chapter 4 in addition to connections made between the experts' responses during the interview process and the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2, it is possible to make conclusions regarding the following original research questions:

Research Question 1: How does the current media environment differ from the foundations of journalism?

The three experts had fairly similar responses to this question, noting that journalism began as a partisan business, creating propaganda for the political groups. They each spoke of yellow journalism and compared it to the current media environment, however, Conway-Silva said that journalism is currently in a neo-partisan era (rather than simply partisan), and Howe mentioned that economics-centered journalism will always have objectivity.

The literature reflected a similar perspective. "Though the volume of content has increased dramatically, people's cognitive processing abilities have not, making it unavoidable that people will have to be selective about their exposure to media. The

effects of individuals' consumption choices alter the media landscape by encouraging news providers to tailor themselves to narrow slices of the population" (Kelly, 2013, p. 1).

Overall, it's possible to conclude that there are more similarities between current journalism and its beginnings than originally thought. Journalism began as a partisan practice, and while there have been eras of journalism such as the journalism of verification that focused on pure fact, the current media environment reflects partisanship due to the wide variety of media outlets, including niche media in which news providers tailor themselves to their audiences.

Research Question 2: Why do political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting?

This question, regarding motives of journalists, gathered mixed responses from the experts. Conway-Silva blamed routines and time crunches, and Lanham said many political journalists analyze content. Interestingly enough, Howe argued that, while political journalists he worked with took their jobs very seriously, the biggest form of bias he saw (and continues to see) was based on what the journalists consider newsworthy.

The literature also showed some conflicting theories. Stone (2011) said, "Since consumers trust ideologically like-minded reporters, media firms have incentives to hire reporters whose ideological beliefs match those of consumers" (Stone, 2011, p. 257)." On the other hand, "When there are contrasting views over issues, [...] it is hard to expect journalists to cover the issues in a completely balanced way, partly because of the

complex historical causes of these issues and partly because news consumers perceive the content of the coverage differently” (Oh, Park, & Wanda, 2011, p. 40).

Overall, it seems that there are multiple reasons journalists insert bias into reporting. There are factors out of their control, such as deadlines, routines, and audience perception; there are also factors within their control, such as the stories they choose and the extent to which they analyze the news.

Research Question 3: How much power does the mainstream media have in swaying audience opinion?

There was, to a degree, some consensus between the experts. Conway-Silva said that it's dependent on the individual, although there is no real data; while those who have strongly held beliefs often have their views reinforced through selective exposure, those that are undecided are more open to being persuaded. Howe mentioned something similar, and said that those that are open to change are more likely to be persuaded, and Lanham said that those that are selectively exposing themselves to like-minded content are more likely to be persuaded by those news anchors they trust.

Within the literature, Peters (2015) argued that audiences now play multiple roles including fans, consumers, citizens, and publics, which allows further evaluation of journalism than ever before.

So while those individuals that selectively expose tend to be more passionate and well informed, it is harder to sway their opinions, which is why more reinforcement occurs. Therefore, the mainstream media is really only able to sway audience opinion when the audience has low investment in the issue.

Research Question 4: What are some ways journalists have reported on politics using bias?

There is an abundance of ways journalists use bias in reporting, and each expert gave a different answer. Conway-Silva mentioned many different types, such as: choosing sources, framing, dramatization, personalization, ideological biases, fragmentation, authority-disorder, and even just decision-making. Howe stressed the importance of choosing stories and deeming them newsworthy, in addition to bias within questioning and selecting of sources. Lanham, on the other hand, emphasized the way reporters go in to writing a story with a set frame in mind, thus steering the interview conversations and how the story is written.

There is an overwhelming amount of information within the literature, some ideas cross-over with the ideas provided by the experts. According to Fico and Freedman (2008), “Structural bias is produced by journalistic news values, work routines, organizational resources, and news organization dependencies on other institutions. Partisan bias is produced by journalist political orientations subverting news organization norms for impartiality in conflict coverage. Both these biases affect how stories balance the claims of conflicting partisans.” In addition, Bennett (2009) focused on four biases previously mentioned by Conway-Silva: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and the authority-disorder bias. Sobieraj and Berry (2011) stressed the importance and abundance of outrage discourse in order to attempt to sway audience perceptions, and Schaefer and Fordan (2014) focused on tone of coverage and how sources are used.

Overall, it is easy to conclude that there are many ways that bias is and can be used throughout the journalistic writing process: from deciding what is worth writing

about, all the way to the type of language you use or how the story is framed in a specific direction.

Research Question 5: How does framing affect an audience's perception of political reporting?

The experts had fairly different answers to this question. Conway-Silva cited studies that suggest that the way an article is framed can change perceptions of a given issue, noting that it changes the aspects of an issue we think about more than it actually changes opinions. Howe said that framing usually makes an appearance through the sources used and the way questions are asked, but that framing would not change well-formed opinions. Lanham on the other hand, said that she often experiences people from opposite sides of the political spectrum reading the same story and coming to very different conclusions.

Within the literature, Iyengar and Kinder's 1987 study demonstrated how network news could prime viewers to evaluate the president's performance on some issues but not on others. In addition, "Regardless of what the various studies conclude about partisan news bias, for most people in the reading or viewing audience, perception is reality. In other words, if they believe the media are biased, then they react or do not react, or believe or disbelieve, accordingly" (Lowry, 2008, p. 484).

There are similarities between the expert responses and the literature. Overall, it seems that framing cannot influence audiences' attitudes, but it can definitely affect which aspects of an issue the audience thinks about.

Research Question 6: In what specific ways does a news organization’s “slant” or “lean” affect their audience? (Does it persuade them? Subconsciously or consciously?)

In response to this question, there was some overlap in responses from the experts. Conway-Silva mentioned that the slant or lean of an organization reinforces opinions, and Howe expanded on that idea by adding that while people seek out news that aligns with their views, that does not mean all media is biased. Lanham continued to reiterate that it is important to keep the conversation open and not attempt to steer it in one direction.

Within the literature, Hoffman (2013) said, “Scholars and pundits alike have lamented that American media and politics are in a "crisis of confidence" where citizens are opting out, journalists are succumbing to pressures, and politicians game the media.” Hoffman insinuated that citizens are choosing not to pay attention, or to not critically think about the news their consuming, which would thus not affect the audiences’ opinions or attitudes.

Overall, a news organization’s slant or lean mainly just reinforces already existing beliefs rather than dramatically changing attitudes.

Research Question 7: How effective are “media watchdog groups” at reducing bias in mainstream media?

There was an overwhelming consensus to this question from the experts: media watchdog groups will not change the way mainstream media is going to operate, because the mainstream media is too large of an entity.

There was not any existing literature on the impact of media watchdog groups, so in order to answer the seventh research question, relying on the experts is a must. Therefore, media watchdog groups do not and will not impact the way the mainstream media functions.

Research Question 8: What are some ways journalists can own up to their inherent biases, and how can they reduce reporting in a biased manner?

This question allowed for the experts to come up with idealistic ways for journalists to do their jobs, therefore the experts all had vastly different responses; however, they all revolved around journalists taking a step back and thinking about their decisions every step of the way. Conway-Silva said to critically think about sourcing and make evidence-based decisions, while Howe stressed thinking about why a certain story is deemed newsworthy. Lanham said to be cognizant of biases and understand that as humans, there are inherent biases that are difficult to get away from.

There was no literature available to answer this research question, so the study must rely on the experts' answers to these questions. Therefore, the most important thing for journalists to do in order to reduce bias in their reporting is to critically think about their decisions throughout every step of the story-writing process, and not to fall prey to the routines and comfortability journalists are sometimes apt to.

Recommendations for Practice

After completion of the study, a significant amount of data has been collected and analyzed on the topic of bias in political journalism, and whether or not change needs to

happen for a better informed public. Given the information, it is important to highlight the findings from the study in order to present it to future and current professionals within the fields of political communications research, political journalism, and editing. The biggest finding that came from the completion of the study was that bias comes in many forms; in order to improve the quality of journalism for a better informed public, journalists need to engage in more critical thinking throughout every step of writing a story.

If journalists began thinking critically about the stories they consider newsworthy, the interview questions they ask, the sources they speak to, and how they write their stories (including the words they use), the quality of journalism would improve overall. While Patrick Howe said, as a professional, his political journalist co-workers took their jobs very seriously, there is a wide range of media available today and not all journalists act the way Howe's coworkers did and still do. Remaining aware of biases each journalist has while they write stories will prevent extremely biased reporting from becoming the new norm. Journalism has gone through many phases, however professionals in the journalism industry should be wary of where the profession is currently heading and remain critical thinkers throughout their career.

Study Conclusion

In conclusion, given the general findings of the study from both the experts and current literature, more studies need to be done on bias in political journalism and how journalists can improve upon their practices. The study presented a wide array of information and knowledge from the several experts in related fields that were

interviewed, and their qualitative data gave a unique perspective on bias within political journalism. The data collected shed light on how complicated of an issue bias in the media is, and also indicated that the audience plays just as heavy of a role as journalists do in the type of media they consume. Journalism is a business, and if audience members seek out biased content, it will motivate journalists to continue to produce that content. Whether a professional in the field or a consumer of media, being aware of the inherent biases humans have is an important and necessary step in critically thinking about the news media available in our society today.

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Appendix A

Interview Transcripts: Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva

The following interview was conducted to get expert opinions from a political communications research perspective based on a questionnaire about bias in the mainstream media and political reporting.

Interviewer: Emily Holland
Respondent: Political Communications Research Assistant
(Dr. Bethany Conway-Silva)
Date of Interview: 2/27/17

Interview Transcription:

Emily Holland: So, to what extent does the media use bias in political reporting?

Bethany Conway: Okay, so I think this is a difficult question to answer and I'll probably say that to all of the questions on your list. And the problem lies with the fact that there's no objective standard that we can compare to...there's no "this is the perfect objective article and this is what it's going to look like." There's no consensus as to what constitutes what's unbiased, objective purely objective news. And there's also controversy over whether or not objectivity is something obtainable, right? So the controversy with going "oh, is the media biased?" is going "well what's the point of comparison?" So, remember that piece I had you read in class? It was the Gilens and Hertzman piece that looked at coverage of the Telecommunications Act. So the reason that that piece, that's looking at media bias, is so famous and I always make my students read it, is that it's one of those really rare occasions where you do have a point of comparison in that he was comparing those newspapers with no television holding, those with some, and those with a great deal. And so, there was this point of comparison, these newspapers that didn't have any interest in television news. So he had that objective standard...well, supposed objective standard. That's the one that he characterized as the objective standard. But, most other studies look at these case studies where they say everything is biased, either by comparing to reality, what does reality reflect, so to try to come up with some semblance of bias but in the end they basically say that everything is biased. A lot of folks have tried to come up with a metric for measuring bias. In the most famous and controversial one, it came from political scientists Groseclose and Miylo. And they tried to look at citations, so is the press citing an equal amount of basically partisan think tanks, and using that to come up with some sort of a metric. But it was a complete, well, it's highly controversial and highly criticized. So long story short, it's very very hard to measure bias. So, in the end, bias has actually never been clearly conceptualized and operationalized in the literature, believe it or not.

EH: Do you think you kind of based your research off of that study?

BC: No, so what I tried to do...there's this famous scholar named Entman, Robert Entman, he's at George Washington University, he's amazing. He's the father of framing. Framing as originally conceptualized was Khaneman and Tversky and gain/loss frames, but Entman is the father of framing as we apply it to news coverage. He was actually the chair on the panel that I presented on at ICA, and I was presenting on trying to bring framing theory and try to apply networks, and I was like "Oh my god Robert Entman's here and he's the chair" and he got sick and didn't show up and I was so sad.

EH: No!

BC: Because I really wanted his feedback. So I was like "damn it!" I actually just submitted that piece for publication.

EH: Nice.

BC: But so what he says, is that sometimes when we look at bias we're looking at distortions of reality, right? Does news reflect reality? Sometimes, we're looking at are both sides being represented? And sometimes, when we look at bias, we apply it to decision-making on behalf of journalists. And he says that we really need to get away from the idea of bias as a distortion of reality, because that's very very hard to quantify. And try to look at bias, more along the lines of representation of both sides, and I don't think he necessarily means equal representation, but fairness in representation, which is also hard to quantify. So he says forget distortions of reality, look at representation of both sides and look at the journalistic decision-making process. So I think my research on sourcing kind of gets at both of those things in that I am looking at viewpoints coming from different sides of the aisle, and I'm also thinking about the journalistic decision-making process that results in the type of sources that we see in news. So I would say, I think, so that's what I would say. Bias is a very hard concept to measure and we can't necessarily just say "oh, the media is biased." I think that if we were, it's also based on the medium in question. I personally would say that cable news, if we're talking about bias, this is happening with cable news. With newspapers, I wanna say not as much. With radio it depends, we got Rush Limbaugh, absolutely biased, and then we have NPR! So I think that there's probably a little bit of it in every news organization and every media, but the extent of bias differs.

EH: Why do you think there's more bias in media like cable news as opposed to newspapers?

BC: Well, that kind of gets us to answering how the current media environment differs from the foundations of journalism. I just gave a lecture, actually really interesting last week, about the eras of journalism. And what's really interesting is that journalism in this country started as partisan. So this is not anything new. And what's happened now is that we've come full-circle, and we're back to that partisan circle of news, and what they call the neo-partisan era. But it's different, because the original era of partisanship, what we saw were parties, right? Media that was being produced, and funded, on behalf of political parties to get people to vote. What we're seeing now is a corporatist or profit-

motivated partisan news in that major cable news organizations now realize that niche media is profitable. So it's, not at the behest of parties, but it's more at the behest of profit. I mean, Fox News gets the highest ratings of all cable news organizations, so it is working. So, it just depends on whether or not you consider that partisan era of journalism to be the foundations of journalism in our country, or if you consider later the discipline of verification emerged, which happened in the early 1900's when we started to see news organizations first move away from partisanship and move towards sensationalism with the penny papers and kind of tabloid journalism. Hertz, and Pulitzer, and their infamous feud, right? Which later spawned this sort of discipline of verification when journalists decided, and it was incorporated into the discipline and teachings of journalism, that we should adhere to this objective model. So it really depends what you consider to be the foundation, if you consider that to be the foundation, this idea of discipline of verification, that I would say that this is still happening, the discipline of verification is still alive and well, but the way that that discipline of verification has changed, are that things are becoming harder and harder to verify. Not just because there's so much freaking information out there, but there's crowdsourcing, and the Internet, and social media, so it's becoming harder to verify in that way, and it's also that journalists are putting less emphasis on verification in the 24 hour news environment. It's about getting out the story first, and we have this information let's put it out there, and they don't take as much time, they don't have the luxury, to engage in the same type of verification. Even print news, because they all have this online presence, so all of their stories go online before they're ever featured in print. So it's both the partisan news aspect is at behest of profit, but also the lack of verification that's emerging is also because of profit, which has pushed and changed journalistic routines. And what's really interesting about cable news, which is why I'm really interested in them...well, I'm really interested in them first of all most of the bias is happening there, but also, this comes from a really good book by Kovach and Rosenstiel it's called "Blur," is that in cable news, journalists are not only not engaging in verification, but they're also very passive in their reporting, in that they bring these sources on and sources are really able to direct the conversation, and say whatever they want. And because there's no time for the journalist to have checked what they're sources just said, Kelly Anne Conway can say Bowling Green Massacre without any pushback. When she said that in CNN, the show host just moved on and he didn't take the time to stop and say "what was that?" because he had to continue the conversation. So you definitely see this passive way that journalists are operating. So this lack of verification is resulting in some biased stuff appearing in cable news, this niche partisan showing up in media is resulting in a great deal of partisanship, and lastly I would say that more so in ever, journalists are engaging in analysis, which was not typical. Before the age of television, they would mainly see what was happening because people couldn't see it. And now we can see it! And we can see it on social media! The cop in LA that grabbed the kid the other day, all of us saw it, we don't need it described for us because we all watched it. So what we need or what they think we need then, is analysis. And I think people tend to conflate fake news with analysis, and biased news with analysis. Just because you're getting analysis from a Pulitzer prize journalist from The New York Times who's been covering politics for twenty years doesn't mean that you're getting fake or biased news. But, the fact that they put their expert opinion on it, and engaging in this expert analysis, I think also has people

thinking that the news is biased. To go back to your first question, I think bias is almost better measured as a perceptual variable. Like what do people perceive as bias? Rather than what is actually biased...because the latter question is the more important thing, perhaps.

EH: I've been seeing this more and more, people posting these unverified sources on social media, and using the excuse that the media is biased, so they have to go out and find their own sources. And it's like well....none of these sources are verified and they lack the credibility that say, The New York Times has.

BC: Yeah, that's really scary. And what's interesting that I don't think a lot of people are talking about is that Trump calls the media fake, and he craps on the mainstream media and craps on The New York Times, but then he cites them regularly in his speeches. He won't say "based on an analysis by The New York Times, this is happening" he'll be like "the other day I read that crime is up." Which, crime is up in the United States within the last year, but we're actually at the lowest rate of crime since I believe the late 1960's, early 1970's, so we have very low crime rates now even though there has been an uptake in the last year. So he'll cite that stuff, and he'll also make claims that we have the highest crime rate ever, which is completely untrue, but he'll use newspaper data to support his assertions, but then he'll call the news media fake which is crazy to me.

EH: Okay, so what are some ways journalists use bias when reporting on politics?

BC: Well, if bias is not a distortion of reality, then it's really about sourcing and representation of both sides. SO I think that that's where, we're talking about one-sidedness on both sourcing and framing. And I don't, but it's also represented in these other biases. These biases we talked about in PolyCom, dramatization, personalization, ideological biases, fragmentation, authority-disorder. So ideological bias is not the only bias out there. I assume we're talking mainly about ideological bias, so I would say journalists can engage in it to a certain extent through their decision making processes and the sources that they look to for information, which is why I'm doing this project that I'm doing, to figure out how bias is represented in the way that journalists go about finding sources. And I don't think that it's necessarily always a conscious thing. You know? I think bias can be a decision that a journalist makes at a level of the subconscious where they're not necessarily trying to be biased, right?

EH: Definitely.

BC: And I think conscious bias comes into play due to these routines that journalists get into and they're not necessarily trying to get into, purely because of time crunch.

EH: I also just feel like as human beings, bias is inherent to have. Do you think it's even possible to be completely objective?

BC: That's a really good question. When I was at the university of Arizona, I was on this huge multi-million dollar grant funded by the NSA, and it was about bias mitigation

through interactive gaming. The point was, the NSA felt that they needed to be able to train their operatives and employees to realize when they were using bias in their decision-making processes because it's an inherent part of human processing. It's just the way we operate. What we found is that if you do make people aware of the biases we have, and we did that through interactive gaming where they had to make decisions and then we would ask why they made that decision, and tell them that they were operating based on this bias, and this is what the bias is, we had the fundamental attribution bias, and what we found is that if you make people aware of the biases they're employing, they can, to a certain extent, refrain from using them. I don't think they go away, so perhaps if journalists are made aware of the way the biases are operating in the newsroom, they could say a "oh wait, I need to think twice about that" kind of thing.

EH: Totally, very cool. Why do you think political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting? I think you've kind of already answered this, just based on time crunches and routine, but if you have more to say feel free.

BC: Pretty much that's what I was going to say, yeah.

EH: Okay, cool. That's what I thought but I wanted to make sure. How much power do you think the mainstream media really has in swaying audience opinion?

BC: This is another tough question that's very dependent on individual characteristics and attributes. So if you look at the persuasion literature, you know that it's very hard to pull someone from one side or another. We never really change attitudes, it's very very difficult. There are arguments to be made for incremental change in that if you're close to someone's original attitude or belief, but just far enough to where they don't see it as completely counter to their opinion, you can kind of pull them in your direction over time. That's, there's never really been any large-scale studies on this because that requires panel data, and money, and a lot of time, but yeah. We're rarely pulling people from one side to another, so mainly what we're doing most of the time is reinforcing opinions. And that can be really important too, though. We talked about selective exposure in the classroom, and those people who selectively expose are also the ones who are the most interested in politics. So it can result, I think over time, although there's no real data... polarization in the American electorate was happening way before selective exposure was possible to the extent that it is now. So there's really no way of saying "oh, the media made people polarized" or... that's the chicken or the egg debate. But it can exacerbate polarization I think. And the other thing is that it can have an effect on those who, are still trying to make up their opinion. So the main thing is does is reinforce, but it could impact people who perhaps aren't necessarily set in their ways. And I think that if you look at the agenda setting literature, which has a really long history, meta analysis after meta analysis has shown that the media do influence as we see as what are the most important stories of the day. That perhaps that's more important. The media doesn't necessarily tell us what to think, was the original argument. But they can really tell us what to think about. And when things like terrorism and national security are emphasized over and over and over again, I think that that can also sway the public. Not necessarily their position on it, but how important they think it is and how obtrusive they think it is.

EH: Wow, okay. How do you think framing affects an audience's perception of political reporting?

BC: Okay, so moving on from the agenda setting effects, the media can absolutely tell us what to think of as important or what the important issues of the day are, moving on to framing, does the media tell us how to think? There are studies that suggest that the way an article is framed can influence our perceptions of a given issue. If you frame protesting as free speech, or you frame it as civil disobedience, but framing will rarely move us. It may change the aspects of the issue that we think about, but it rarely changes our opinions. But it can absolutely influence the attributes we think about. There's controversy in the literature: "is second level agenda setting the same as framing?" And I think that there are, it's a very blurred line, but I absolutely think that framing can affect the particulars of an issue we choose to think about. But it is, once again, very much dependent on individual attributes so two very important individual attributes that have been brought up are cognitive networks, so basically how much prior information do we have about an issue and how educated are we on an issue? Generally when we're more educated on an issue we're more easily able to take the information in front of us and incorporate it into our cognitive structure, so that has an effect. If we're more educated on an issue, while we're more able to incorporate it, it may make us more resistant, and then once again very much depending on pre-determined beliefs and values.

EH: Okay, cool.

BC: I love this, this is so much fun.

EH: I know, I love that you're so passionate. Okay, many news organizations are said to have a "slant" or "lean" based on their reporting, slightly skewing the stories they report on to match an agenda. How do you think consuming this type of news affects an audience? And do you think it persuades them consciously or subconsciously?

BC: Yeah, so I think, going back, I really think it's about reinforcement. The slant and lean are really about reinforcement. And there's been some talk about this thing called the "boomerang effect" too. And there's not a lot of support for it in the literature but it hasn't been studied in a long time. So not only can it reinforce our opinions, but if we see something that is completely against our viewpoint, we get so pissed and so angry that we actually move further away from it. And there's actually little support for this in the literature, that the boomerang effect can happen, but I don't think it's inconceivable. I think it's possible that we see something so far from our opinion that we get so worked up and move even further away from the other side.

EH: Do they suggest that that only happens when someone already has very strong beliefs about something?

BC: Yeah. You have to have a very strong belief on something for a boomerang effect to occur. So yeah, most of the time we see reinforcement, it's possible that sometimes we

may even see a boomerang effect, but we're very rarely seeing blatant change. And as far as the subconscious versus the conscious, we can only really measure the conscious. The black box that is the human mind, it's very hard to get in there. So I don't really know.

EH: So do you think if someone reads the same story on the same subject from multiple sources, they'll get the full picture? Or will there always be something missing?

BC: Yes, there will be because the way that you decode the message is what counts, and I think bias is really a perceptual variable. It should be studied on both sides, but when it comes to effects we really need to study how individual attributes influence perception because the hostile media bias is a theory that has been supported. You can read an article, a democrat and republican can read the same article, and both perceive it as biased. So it's really about how we decode the message. So even if you give someone something from Fox News, NPR, and MSNBC, they're going to really take away from it what they want.

EH: So is this just a lose-lose situation for journalists? Because no matter what you do people will be perceiving the stories the way they want?

BC: So, how would less bias reporting change audience perceptions? That's basically what you're asking? If journalists recognized biases, if they put together something as they see as conforming to the extent that it can to this idea of objectivity and verification, is that going to have an effect? I would say probably, there are some people that you can't bring in. You can't coax them into having a real unbiased discussion. But, it depends, for others I think there are people that care about the other side and want to listen to all arguments and come to what is a reasoned decision. So I don't think that, everyone is always going to see the media as biased so we should give up, because for those people who really care and really want to dig in deep, that kind of journalism is always going to be needed. And people are also cognitive misers and monitorial citizens. We don't want to process a whole lot of information, we really just want to take the easy way out, and we really want to just internalize these blatant cues, peripheral cues that help us come to a decision. But on the other side of that there are people who put in the concerted effort to figure it out. So I think, the thing is in today's media environment all these types of journalism exist, the journalism of verification, the journalism of partisanship, and the journalism of interpretation, which is more along the lines of analysis rather than just facts. So um, all of these things exist and they're catering to all the different sub-populations and so we're always going to need the journalism of verification.

EH: Okay, and it seems like it's kind of hard because you have the bias from the journalism, but on another end you have the biases of the audiences that are looking at the story with the frame that they already have. So I almost wonder, even if we had a completely non-biased news story, I know we were talking about it in the PolyCom class that people will get bored.

BC: Oh yeah, just the facts, no storytelling. The journalism of interpretation, which came about after the journalism of verification rose and we started to get into this kind of

analysis, really focuses on journalists as storytellers. And as soon as you become a storyteller, you move away from just giving people facts. But some of the best journalism, in my opinion, came from those folks. Tom Wolf, Tom McPhee, these amazing journalists who told you a story and kept you engaged. But I think journalists can be storytellers, and be very good storytellers, and still tell the truth or give all sides of the picture, so I definitely see a place for storytelling in news.

EH: Okay, cool. So, how effective do you think “media watchdog groups” are at reducing bias in mainstream media?

BC: This is something I’m really unfamiliar with. Are you talking about like fact checking, Politifact?

EH: Yeah, yeah. I guess if they’re not working now, do you think if they became a bigger entity would it have an effect or do you think the media is so big and so independent that it wouldn’t even make a difference?

BC: I would say media are going to operate like they’re going to operate. But there is a researcher at the University of Austin, Talia Stroud, and she’s started at UT Austin what is the “Engaging News Project.” She’s partnering with newsrooms across the country, and performing academic studies on the way that they’re reporting, on their audience perceptions and responses, and then providing that information back to that news organization. So that’s not necessarily a watchdog group per se, but it is a group that’s interested in the way that the media are conducting themselves, doing research, and then giving that research back to them so they can then evaluate it and then make decisions in the newsroom. For example, the way that comment sections operate has been one of her big things: why do people use comment sections, what do they want to get out of them, how they want the comment sections to be overseen and how do they want them to operate? That’s one of those things that she can then take back to the news organization.

EH: That kind of seems like a large-scale version of the research you did with the gaming. Studying people and then approaching them with their biases.

BC: Yeah, and I think watchdog groups are a little different because they operate from a political stance. The bias-mitigation project, the engaging news project, those are scientific studies that should, if done correctly, should have no political goals or subjectivity. So as far as the watchdog groups go I can’t really say, but really good research projects that engage with media practitioners could be very beneficial.

EH: In your opinion, what are some ways journalists can reduce bias in their own reporting? Are there any specific tactics journalists could implement that would reduce bias?

BC: Based on my research, I’d say think very deeply about sourcing. Don’t just go to your Rolodex and go “let me call the same person, let me call the person that always

answers.” Think about it, make really reasoned and evidence-based decision as to why you should include one source over a different one.

EH: Smart choices, not easy choices.

BC: Exactly. And it also requires slowing down, but it also requires sources being willing to speak to journalists. So it’s not always the journalists’ decision. They are, to a certain extent, working to the behest of their sources, or working on the timeline of their sources. You know how it is when sources don’t freaking call you back and you’re like “God! I need this quote!”

EH: Don’t tempt me, I will call you seven times!

BC: Yeah! So really think about the types of sources you use, and try to incorporate people other than political officials, especially in national news. My research suggests that political officials are dominating; they’re still to this day dominating. And I get that they can give authoritative perspectives but there are other perspectives out there that are not being represented. So I’d say sourcing is a really important part of it. And then my other research, that you’ll get into next quarter, on the framing, what I have found is that journalists make decisions about what sources they’re going to use, and then make decisions about how they’re going to take all of that information and put it together into a cohesive narrative. Right? Tell a story. And what I have found is that when journalists create a dialogue within coverage, it’s a symbolic dialogue, yes, it’s not real communication amongst sources, but it’s a symbolic dialogue in that one source says this, and then other is kind of able to react in a way and then there’s a rebuttal and then someone else is brought into the conversation and there’s this kind of structure to this, it’s almost like a network of communication that happens. I have found that it results in more substantive coverage. Rather than saying “this person said this, and then this person said this and then that person said, and then that person said,” and it’s over. Not just thinking about what sources you’re going to use, but when you take that information and put it all together, think about how you might create a dialogue within coverage that allows people to really walk away with some substance. And so I found that in my research, and after we finish this project next year we’re going to start looking at the effects. So I can say “Oh look, if journalists approach the organization of their sources this way, it results in more substantive coverage” but I can’t say then that that automatically the reader is going to walk away with more information, right? Or recognize that there’s more dialogue here than there is in another piece, so now I need to move to the next step, which is to look at the effects. But just based on my content analysis, it’s something journalists can do.

EH: Awesome. So if these ideas for bias reduction became widespread within the mainstream media, how do you think the media environment would change?

BC: In the piece I just submitted today, about the networks in individual news articles, I say “are journalists going to read this and think yeah, let’s do this?” Probably not. What we do doesn’t really get out of the Ivory Tower. But I think that the kind of reporting that we’re talking about the good reporting is already happening. And I don’t know how

widespread it is, but if I think if these approaches to sourcing and discourse within articles became widespread (my research) we would see a greater horizontal breadth in sources, greater variation in sourcing, and also greater substance I would hope.

EH: Yeah, okay. I kind of have this vision of what a national journalism crisis conference would look like...

BC: Ha! That would be so great. I'm sure journalists are talking about these things.

EH: But I also feel like since they operate so independently, no one will want to cooperate with their competitors, because it's all so money-driven.

BC: Yeah, and not only are they not going to want to collaborate, but the reason real investigative reporting and journalism that takes time and effort has fallen by the wayside, is because it's expensive. So I think probably it's not just about journalists going "oh, I need to do these things" it's about people recognizing that good journalism takes money. And so there not only needs to be good journalism, but in order for this to work, we also need to change our mentality as consumers and recognize that we need to pay for journalism. And so people can sit there and shit on news media all they want, fake fake fake fake fake, but then when you ask them "when was the last time you paid for a subscription to a newspaper? When's the last time you donated to NPR?" You know, 9 times out of ten people are going to say "oh, I don't remember." So people bash the media all the time, but then they're not willing to pay for good coverage.

EH: It's so frustrating not having that ethical standard of journalism, and then realizing that it's a business and everyone's there to make money. It's such an important job that should have standards to it laid out, but if it's just money driven, no one is driven to have those standards.

BC: Yeah, yeah. And you also read that Iyengar et al piece, this kind of capitalistic, for-profit media that we have here is not present in many European countries. There are places out there where news isn't for-profit, and people are more educated, and people are more knowledgeable. So I think we're in a very particular type of media society. And what's interesting is that BBC, which was used as a middle point in that study, is becoming more and more like us. It's becoming less government subsidized and more for-profit. The BBC has been clashing with the British government for a very long time. And it's just like in our country, when you have people like Mitt Romney say things like "I'm going to defund Sesame Street and I'm going to defund public media." You're starting to hear it from folks in the UK as well.

EH: Is BBC trying to operate as an independent media?

BC: They're both, I believe. They get some of their funding from the government, and some of their funding from subscription services.

EH: Do you think there's an expectation to....

BC: ...Move further, move away from government subsidies. Because if they can't rely on the government, they have no other choice, they have to. It'll be interesting to see what happens in the future, especially as kind of that right-wing movements that we're seeing here are happening in European countries as well. So, you know what, Nick Corey was in our classroom, the photographer from the central coast, I don't know if you've met him but he comes around the journalism department a lot...

EH: Oh, the name sounds kind of familiar.

BC: ...but he was talking about (and I totally think he's right) that perhaps, these salacious attacks on the media by the president, and this growing idea that the media is fake, that rather than resulting in the demise of the media, it may really result in a change or a reinvigoration of media and media practitioners who really feel that a free press is essential to a democracy, and that they're needed. So perhaps it could actually result in a reinvigoration of journalism, and good journalism. And you know, we've seen subscriptions to The New York Times are up. Even though Donald Trump says "the failing New York Times" when literally, their subscriptions are at the highest point in the last decade, but he'll call them failing. In fact, you should watch the first episode of the new season of John Oliver, he talks about "how to operate in a Trump era" and how to combat this anti-truth climate. It also talks about how he might, we know Trump watches Fox News, we know that's the first thing he does in the morning based on his Tweeting, because a segment will air and he'll immediately Tweet about it, so John Oliver was saying he's going to pay for commercials that are going to air during Fox News time...

EH: Oh my God, that's hilarious.

BC: And the commercials are a guy who's trying to educate Donald Trump about issues of the day, and I was like "yes this is perfect!"

EH: I wish I was rich so I could do things like that.

Appendix B

Interview Transcripts: Patrick Howe

The following interview was conducted to get expert opinions from a political journalist perspective based on a questionnaire about bias in the mainstream media and political reporting.

Interviewer: Emily Holland
Respondent: Political Journalist
(Patrick Howe)
Date of Interview: 2/28/17

Emily Holland: To what extent does the media use bias in political reporting?

Patrick Howe: Like....to what extent does it occur?

EH: Yeah, to what extent is it present.

PH: My old saw, I guess I want to say two things. One: I worked as a political reporter for most of my career for about a dozen years I was doing pure politics basically, in Washington D.C. and statehouse newsrooms. And one of the things I think people don't accept or acknowledge, or journalists aren't given credit for, is that in that entire time, it was considered absolutely inappropriate for any political reporter to say something that revealed a bias. They might have had gallous humor, and all kinds of things making fun of different factions, but I know I work with conservatives and liberals, or I guess I suspect I do, and it just was never appropriate within the culture to talk about it. And people who do political journalism take this seriously, and they're not given credit for that. So I guess I would say that, in my own opinion, the way bias comes into play, it's not....it's not happening in the defacto instinctual ways we use words, if we talk about something a certain way, you know, that frame is going to come out in the way we talk to sources and the way we question, in the questions we ask. That does happen, and people do pick up on that, but to me the biggest source of bias is what we decide is a story. So most of the attention to bias is in the mechanics of a story's telling, but I think the real bias happens in what's considered.....stories in general are what's unusual, what's an exception to the norm, and so that whenever you see someone come up with a story idea, you can see your mind at work right there because they're saying "this is a story because this isn't usual" and often, I see just the story ideas themselves as essentially communicating a bias because they find this weird or abnormal when really, if I think if they did a little work, and a little data work, and looked at the totality of society, they might just talk themselves out of stories.

EH: Totally. So then, how does the current media environment differ from the foundations journalism was built on? Did journalists 30, 40, 50 years ago have less bias than journalists today or has it stayed pretty equal?

PH: Okay, so another long answer, sorry. So I think if you take a macro view of this, and you back way up, the earliest news in American politics was all politically biased. All the newspapers were controlled by different political factions, and they would buy most of the subscriptions and help control a lot of the advertising, so there was no assumption that this was, that news should be unbiased. It was meant to serve certain audience's interests, you know. And that changed, really, with The New York Times stepping into yellow journalism. We saw a period of sensationalistic journalism, of the penny press, where people were wholesale making shit up. So those papers weren't so much serving, although they did serve political biases, but they were also just driven by sensationalism. They just wanted to move a lot of papers. And The New York Times stepped in, so there was the time of the penny press, well The New York Times steps in and starts charging ten cents per paper. Ten times what these other papers were charging, and their entire business model was "this was news for people who needed to make economic decisions about the news. This was new for people who were going to be judged within society for their informed opinions or not." So that idea of an objective truth reflected in journalism was an economic model. And even still today, you see, there's all kinds of news organizations who are considered "above and beyond the fray," and these are Bloomberg, and to a much lesser extent these days Reuters, law kind of publications, the ones that serve people who pay for information that they then act on professionally, even the Wall Street Journal to some degree, and again, you could even throw them into the political press, but they don't seem to get the same flack that others do. It's the same thing, when the economics are there, there still is a bit more objectivity.

EH: Well yeah, because I feel like when you're dealing with numbers you can't really lie about that.

PH: Yeah, well I don't know if you've ever seen a Bloomberg News Terminal. They had these great business model where they didn't sell the news, they sold the terminals. They sold these weird looking green screens, but those things are full of these little economic calculations that you can make, so Bloomberg would just send you news, but they would also send you these massive data files that stockbrokers, mostly, could start cutting with keyboard shortcuts, they could get all of this economic data. So it was truly this idea of unbiased news. They did and still do reports, but there was this mass of data that people could just cut and use to serve them. Maybe it's gone sort of gone full-circle then. We really have almost the days of the penny press again, where the economic model for much of good journalism is in free fall, and it's being replaced with an economic model

that rewards clicks. It really is, not a penny press anymore, but a fraction of a penny press because that's what we get per eyeball on news. So we do see a lot of, you were rewarded with misleading news. If you can have clickbait, or whatever you want to call it, it works. And it's one of the only economic models that is working right now for most of news. So we are kind of right back there. And my hunch, is that the solution to this will be a stratification of news. Where we will see a handful of sources that we'll look to as trustworthy, and a whole bunch that are just "well, it's free so buyer beware"

EH: So do you think if that larger stratification of news, if that was all just straight fact, would journalists just stop making money of there wasn't that excitement, or lean, or clickbait aspects to it?

PH: Well we're in a search for a new economic model. Right now, you know, let me think if I can bring this down on a small level. I think that like right now, two of our most clicked on stories on Mustang New right now, are short little news stories one about a guy who walked threw a glass window at the Rec Center, it had like 30,000 hits or something like that. And that compares to some of the stories that we do that we think are really quite important, might get 300 or 400 hits. So that, there's an exponential difference right there. And another one that got way way more hits was the "punch a Nazi" story. We had that neo-Nazi guy distributing propaganda get punched by somebody, and that went national and I haven't checked the latest stats, but I think that might've even exceeded the other one. So you can have a ton of those stories that have 500 or even 1,000 viewers, but the Internet rewards those little oddballs that attack a lot of eyeballs. And even those 30,000 ones aren't even that big of a deal, when we had that roof collapse I think we had 750,000 views on a YouTube video in a day. So that's an economic model, so if you're basing your economic model on clicks, if you get one of those where you get 750,000, and suddenly you could have hundreds and hundreds of really solid, respectful, democracy-serving stories, and you could just look at this and say "well shit." And we're not going to do that, and most news organizations don't, but you almost have to applaud those that resist the temptation of just pursuing those because the economics are vastly in favor of stories like those. We think of click bait as a little nuisance and "haha," but it's the only viable economic strategy right now.

EH: Well it's hard because at the end of the day, journalism is a business. But it's also this huge ethical beast

PH: Or you could put it a different way, in that it serves an enormously important societal function, and yet, it's a business whose business model is in free fall. So until that free fall arrests itself and we remake it, I think we're going to continue to see huge problems. As a political reporter, I never experienced a day in my life when conservatives didn't

call news biased. It's been part of the playbook from day one. Since Nixon at least, if not before, it's been part of the playbook, so that's not a surprise to me to see that happening in our current political climate, but I have to say as someone who's out of the daily practice and watching it, I'm absolutely horrified at what I see today. I don't know how news consumers today would pick and choose, and one of the most frequent questions I get from people is "who do you actually trust?"

EH: Well who do you trust?

PH: I'm very establishment. I like to read The New York Times and Washington Post, but I also read a lot of the data sites like Quartz and Fox, I listen to NPR and think they do fantastic work, but I don't do any television news, I don't like it. I ignore most of the stuff on the internet, I have a lot of super wonky sites that I'm interested in, but even in the mainstream sites I'm picking and choosing, and some of it I think is over the line. I see a lot of news based on social media and I think it's completely useless. If I wanted to follow that guy on Twitter, I would've followed him on Twitter. You're not doing me any good by telling me about what people say on Twitter. I think that it's a huge and growing category of news that I think is completely worthless. It serves no societal function.

EH: So do you think that these news organizations are using bias or inflating stories to get those clicks on stories they deem important? Like instead of just doing straight click bait articles, they'll take an important topic and use bias or spin it in a way to make it more interesting?

PH: Well those are two different ideas, really...

EH: I feel like people like to read news that align with their ideologies and world views, so if you make a story biased towards one party...

PH: That's absolutely true. In almost any, I'll go back to a little data story I did some work with back in the peak of the drought. I just happened to be looking at the cities that were the most and least efficient users of water in California, and I made a scatterplot of it. And a scatterplot allows you to see correlations and trends. The question that I had in my mind is "are richer cities more likely to use more water?" I think I had just been to Beverly Hills, and it was green and it was gorgeous, and I was like "oh my God." So I wondered, are richer cities using a lot more water than everybody else? And I happened to be in this data project at the time so I plotted it all out. And it turned out, no! It was a shocking answer, when you plotted it all out, there were a lot of rich cities that were very frugal, and a lot of very poor hours that were very propagate, and it really didn't match

very well and yet, the top and bottom of my data set were Beverly Hills was number one, and Compton, which is very poor, used some of the least amounts of water. And sure enough, The New York Times did this story, and what'd they do? They focused on Beverly Hills and Compton. It was basically an untrue, by focusing on the outliers they were telling something that was untrue. The big roundabout way of answering my question is that if I wanted to get a ton of clicks on something, I could almost always do it by choosing that outlier that I was most certain would ping those emotional responses in some of my viewers. I've seen this as a tried and true strategy on the right, particularly in conservative type of media, but now I'm seeing it over and over with people on the left as well. They're just getting worked.

EH: Alright, I'll stick to my questions so I don't get too off topic. What are some ways journalists use bias when reporting on politics?

PH: I guess I kind of answered this when I answered the other question...

EH: Just picking stories is a form of bias...

PH: Picking stories, there's also some bias in questioning, in which sources are selected....

EH: So basically every step?

PH: Yeah, I mean, I could break it down to a very specific example. The public relations industry is far bigger than journalism itself now, right? And they work in sympathy, particularly with time-pressed lazy journalists. So if I wanted to do a story on, lets say, about how pregnant quadriplegic veterans aren't getting the help they need...I'm making this up obviously. It would be really difficult for me to find a great source of a pregnant quadriplegic veteran. But! Suddenly there's like an organization whose goal is to further the help of pregnant quadriplegic veterans, so my first step might be to call that place and they might just connect me with that exact source I need. Now that's not a very good sample of that group of people, there may be twenty for every one that's connected to this and believes in whatever she wants to push, there may be twenty pregnant quadriplegic veterans who say "no, I'm doing great and I'm so grateful and frankly I don't think the government should be in this business." But that's not how I found my source, I found them because I didn't know how to find them and this group put me in touch. And I would guess that a huge percentage of those really touching anecdotes that you might see that lead off so much news are really, they come to journalists that way. So there's one very specific example of how bias goes into a story.

EH: Yeah, thanks for that. Why do you think political journalists insert their own bias into their reporting? And if you don't think they do, feel free to tell me why.

PH: Well like I said, I believe most political journalists really try hard. I think they're really committed to the practice of objectivity, and at least the ones I worked with in my career, I saw take this very very seriously. I think it'd be extremely rare in professional news organizations to think they were furthering a cause who was in the practice of true political journalism.

EH: So are you just speaking for newspaper organizations, or are you also speaking for more broadcast-based organizations like Fox and CNN?

PH: Well I didn't work closely with broadcast people, I worked closely with NPR people both in Washington and at the state level, and I thought they followed the same type of ethics as we did, but I, you know I think I've seen that if you look at the actual news coverage of stories, when you look at the actual coverage from Fox versus these others, I think studies have shown that the day to day stories don't seem to be all that particularly biased. again, I think the selection of stories you can see bias, presentation on both CNN and Fox, they now both spend far more time than energy talking about the news than reporting the news, so I think if you were able to somehow isolate the news coverage even on those sites we deem to be particularly biased, I think you'd find that mostly pretty within the ballpark of what's considered fair. I think people would be surprised at how un-biased most things that fall under the actual definition of news are.

EH: Yeah, I think a lot of the bias probably lies in source use and journalists taking the role of analyst instead of reporting. I think on a lot of broadcast there are pundits or commentators who, to the average person, just look like journalists or an expert, but the analyzing and then who you choose to have on your show.

PH: Again, you see bias as an economic model. In part, because it's way less expensive to have people talk about the news than it is to actually have a bureau in Beirut. Just having some guy come on and talk for a while costs pennies versus the opposite. But then there is also, at the highest level, the things that get amplified the most, are those things that provoke their core audience.

EH: How much power do you think the mainstream media really has in swaying audience opinion?

PH: That's probably an unanswerable and really interesting question. We could focus in on even today's, I just saw a poll that Donald Trump had record disapproval ratings but they're almost entirely within the area of Democrats and Independents.

EH: Shocker.

PH: Yeah, right? But it is a shocker, because it's far worse than any president before, Democrat or conservative. They almost have always gotten a sort of grace period, but amongst his core, people who self-identify as Republicans, he was up at 85%. Among his core, he's been considered to be doing very well. So you've seen a ton of mainstream media coverage that's mostly very negative. He hasn't been able to get his cabinets through, he's already had someone quit, he had an executive order that didn't roll out as he planned, pushback from the courts and things...it's been a problematic start for him but it doesn't seem like that's effecting opinions among his core support. So I guess you would have to say based on the evidence we have, mainstream media coverage can affect opinions of those that are open to their opinions being changed, and not otherwise.

EH: Yeah. Many news organizations are said to have a "slant" or "lean" based on their reporting, slightly skewing the stories they report on to match an agenda. How do you think consuming this type of news affects an audience?

PH: We know that one of the most predictable parts of brain science are these cognitive biases where we seek out what we want to see. I think it's undeniable, even if we pretended there was no bias in media coverage but it was a broad spectrum that people would seek out that which confirms their pre-existing beliefs. So it has a huge effect cumulatively, but that doesn't mean there is bias. If you presented them with a spread with Brussels sprouts on one end and chocolate cake on the other end and all they eat is chocolate cake, you haven't offered them too much chocolate cake, they ate the chocolate cake, right? So I think that there's no doubt that the effect that media coverage that includes that some of news that feeds into peoples biases is large, but it doesn't mean that all media is biased.

EH: It's interesting because there's always going to be that broad spectrum of news, especially now with the internet, but how do you make people care enough to read that middle ground news? People are going to be lazy and they want to read things that match their viewpoints.

PH: Right.

EH: So, is it the journalists' fault? Or is it the consumers' fault for being lazy and not wanting to...

PH: True. I have tons of conversations in any given situation; I'm sort of the "representative of journalism" to people at parties or wherever I'm talking to someone. And they always say like "Why didn't the media do a better job covering these things? Why didn't *the media* do a better job of covering..." and then I'll say "Well, give me an example." And then they'll give me a detailed example! And I'll say "Well where did you learn that?" "I read it in The New York Times!" and I'll say "Well it sounds like they did an excellent job! You know that fact because you read it in the media!" What they really mean is that other people didn't read it. What the hell are we supposed to do about that? That's not my fault, it was there, it was out there, what they're really upset about isn't about media coverage or lack of, it's how their peers are responding to it (or not). They use media as a proxy for society and that's not really appropriate. Even when we use the term media, who do we mean? Do we mean social media? Do I mean "The Bachelor"? Cosmo Magazine? But when I think about it, I'm thinking of this core group of trusted news purveyors. And that's not necessarily what they mean.

EH: Yeah. How effective do you think "media watchdog groups" are at reducing bias in mainstream media?

PH: I don't know, does anyone really pay attention to them? Probably some academics, look at those kind of things, but if I was to tell you, Emily... I have a sense of maybe where you are on the political spectrum, and if I was to tell you that Fox News stories are unbiased, we've studied it and came to the conclusion that there's no bias outside a kind of reasonable error rate or something, would that matter? Would you go away and say "Okay, that watchdog group did this cumulative study and they coded everything and it was really great. Okay, I was wrong! Guess Fox News isn't biased."

EH: Well to be honest, sometimes I read Fox News just to see what other people are thinking...

PH: But again, you're saying "other people" like meaning "the biased people." My point is, you wouldn't be convinced by that watchdog group.

EH: Yeah, I guess. My point is that on Fox you have to be careful, because when they're reporting that's one thing, but when you have these radicals on doing opinion pieces and people can't tell the difference, that's why I think people get bad reps. They'll have people like Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh on and spew whatever comes out of their

mouths, but their stories from what I've seen aren't that bipartisan. They're more centrist that people initially think.

PH: Yeah, I guess the end result is that I don't think these watchdog groups are ever going to do anything like form opinions or persuade reporters or anything.

EH: I think the media might be too big for them to ever make an impact. Since there's no real ethical standards that have been set nationwide for journalists, it's a business and it's free form and everyone's competing with everyone, so no one has standards to meet...

PH: I think there are standards. The verifiable fact is a standard. Yes, story selection happens and there's bias in that...this is kind of where we are right now. There's almost this pushback against verifiable fact, but really that's the hallmark of journalism: to give facts that are verifiable and provable. To me, that's the baseline of good journalism. When I get upset, I'll let everything else wash over me...I don't care how you frame it or whatever, but no. You don't get to make up the fact, and you should prove it. It should be something we should all agree it's provable.

EH: So, you've kind of changed my interview questions based on your answers, but that middle strata of news that you were talking about earlier, what are some ways they could reduce bias in their reporting?

PH: Give me an example, like Huffington Post or something?

EH: Yeah, so the original question was In your opinion, what are some ways journalists can reduce bias in their own reporting? Are there any specific tactics journalists could implement that would reduce bias? But from what I heard earlier, the people you worked with were doing a pretty good job.

PH: Yeah, and I think that's provable. I think that the work that most journalists do, who are professional journalists, you would find that they made efforts. You could never tell the whole truth in journalism, you can only tell the best truth that's available in that news cycle, right? And I think that by and large, you'll find that whatever the leanings of their news organizations, working journalists at the professional level aren't doing that. Like what could they do to do better? They could probably think a lot about the idea of "what's a story idea." To me, that's the single biggest driver of bias, and it's unexamined basically. Like people, news values come from this sort of cultural wash-through. You could start asking these student journalists who, a couple years ago had never written a story, and you start getting this group-think about what's a news story. If you try to boil it down, if they tried to tell you why it is, but we try to pass on these values in newsrooms

and it's just "that's a story, that's not a story." But if you break it down, a lot of it boils down to what we think is normal and what we think isn't normal. If you can get people to recognize that they're thinking that something is a story just because it's abnormal to them, then maybe they would think twice, or at least seek to prove that it's unusual. But usually you don't even see that level of work being done.

EH: Okay. If your ideas for bias reduction became widespread within the mainstream media, how would the media environment change?

PH: I guess, it's a very loose and squishy idea for bias reduction. I think we would...I don't know if it would change at all because there'd still be a massive economic incentive to have click bait/sensationalistic headlines. Every day, I get click baited into a story that's a very neutral report but the headline is completely different. You'd almost need a complete economic change. Being optimistic, here are the solutions that could fix it: if we settled into an economic model that was largely subscription based or non-profit, you'd have an NPR model basically, then you might arrive at a place, and you could even throw in advertising in there as long as it wasn't numeric based, but advertisers who agree just to be associated with the publication because of the credibility that they bring to it. Kind of like an old fashioned print publication. If you had those three economic changes: subscription, advertising that's paid as a block, and non-profit status overall, I think people could settle into a pretty robust five or six national news organizations that most people would look at and think that they were trustworthy. I think my hunch is that most people would say, the Trump administration might disagree, but most people would say The Associated press is trustworthy. And I think they would say that because their economic model doesn't encourage any of this crap that the untrustworthy does. They basically serve news organizations. They're a service that sells itself to other news organizations. I think the solution is an economic solution, and if we had four or five of those kind of places that would be the right way to go. I think The New York Times eventually becomes a non-profit, Washington Post right now they're having a big experiment with Jeff Besos owning it and trying a bunch of different things with it, but I think that caliber of news organization eventually has to become non-profit. And then, some of the bullshit starts to filter out.

EH: Yeah that always confused me, the Trump administration is so pissed off at the media but then they're taking away government funding for NPR.

PH: I actually don't agree, I think government shouldn't be involved. I think that's an inherent conflict of interest and I think NPR is incredible that it's resisted that. I think a really good non-profit philanthropy and some self-sustaining economic models are a better solution.

EH: Okay, just to finish up, how would less biased reporting change audience perception?

PH: Well if they, we still can't control what people read, and they'll still read what makes them feel good and makes them believe what they already believe to be true. I think the ultimate solution is economic, and if there were a broader menu of news organizations that didn't have an economic incentive to sensationalize, to basically try to just get more clicks, then you could at least have a middle stratum that almost anybody could say "These are credible, these are trustworthy news organizations." Also, if I were remaking news, I would get rid of opinion pages. I think The New York Times is really idiotic for having an opinion about The New York Times. It's ridiculously archaic. The Associated Press has no opinion pages, it is just news. But it's a holdover from the political press, and you see that in The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, everyone does it. And even to my disappointment, even USA Today, probably the newest national newspaper, even they created a newspaper and made a huge commentary section. And they are popular, but I would divorce those ideas. I would have a media brand simply about commentary, and a media brand that's simply about objective news. So you can't blame people right now when they see media bias, because it's true! New York Times is biased. I think there's probably something to be said about their story selection, but it's clearly biased in its editorial pages as well. So does Wall Street Journal. That's where the hope for getting rid of bias lies in economic change.

Appendix C

Interview Transcripts: Camillia Lanham

The following interview was conducted to get expert opinions from a editing perspective based on a questionnaire about bias in the mainstream media and political reporting.

Interviewer: Emily Holland

Respondent: Editor
(Camillia Lanham)

Date of Interview: 2/28/17

Emily Holland: Okay, so I guess the first question is how did you get into journalism?

Camillia Lanham: Oh man, um, so it's kind of a long story but I was in marketing for a brewery and was thinking of going back to school and felt like I was missing a piece of myself when I was doing marketing. You're just selling one thing basically, and it doesn't always feel like you're selling the truth if that makes sense. So when I went back to school I was looking for something that combined some of my passions, one of which is writing, which say what you will about journalism, it is writing, and that "truth." Because I feel like truth is very important in relationships and like, in life in general, so that's what I was always looking for – like "what's the truth here?" So I went back to school for journalism.

EH: For your undergrad?

CL: Yeah, for undergrad. I was 26 when I went back to school, and got my degree in 2 and a half years. I went to the university of Montana, got my first job and it sucked...had a really bad experience and almost quit journalism. Then I was looking for a job and ended up at "The Sun"....

EH: I have an internship there next quarter!

CL: Great! Joe's awesome. Yeah, so I'm actually working really closely with them right now because he's a new editor. Anyways, I started there four years ago and just kept getting raises and promotions and now I'm here!

EH: That's awesome! Okay, so personally, in your experience, to what extent do you think the media uses bias in reporting?

CL: So I think inherently, nobody's unbiased which is something to be cognizant of. I know as a reporter it's something we're always talking about in the newsroom. If someone's speaking too passionately about something I have to say "Hey, you may want to temper that when speaking to so-and-so" but it's something we're all very aware of. We all have biases, but I think the 24-hour news and the internet has kind of muddied the

line, especially in politics. That seems to be where the majority of where the biased discussions happen, based on political lines. Nothing is black and white in politics, and that all propagated, through, started through 24 hour news, I think, and then moved to the Internet.

EH: I know, I think it's funny when you're watching something like CNN and they say something is "Breaking News" and then it ends up being something Trump said four days ago. Then they'll continue using the term "breaking news" throughout the show and what does that do? From my experience all it does is aggravate the audience and make something seem more important than it actually is, which is almost a type of bias in itself.

CL: Sure!

EH: There just seems to be so many ways you can skew news. So, how do you think the current media environment differs from the origins journalism was founded on?

CL: So I think journalism has undergone many seismic shifts over the last couple hundred years. I mean, yellow journalism was just alive in the 30s 40s 50s, it was alive in the 1800s, we definitely have yellow journalism alive and well here, on the central coast and "mainstream" media. I say that in quotes because "The media" can be whatever you say it can be. So I don't think yellow journalism has ever really gone away, but I also think that media and journalism is kind of undergoing this renaissance right now. I would say that the big newspapers like The Post and The NYT and even the LA Times to some extent are undergoing this renewed vigor and just doing their jobs better than they did 8 months ago. You know what I mean?

EH: Yeah.

CL: I think people are starting to realize the importance of good journalism now more than ever just because of all of those things that were "revealed" to be lies during the campaigns, which totally existed before that it just became a mainstream belief that there were lies being propagated online and on TV shows and stuff like that. So I don't know, I just, as much as a headache and as hard as it is right now being a journalist right now because everyone's telling you you're full of shit right now, people are actually trying to consume news with more of a brain than they used to and I think journalists are invigorated to give the truth more so than they were even 8 months ago.

EH: What are some ways you think journalists use bias when reporting?

CL: I think most writers, most reporters, go into stories with a set of questions in mind based on what they see the story to be, and it biases the conversation that you have. And to a certain extent, you should have x, y, and z questions when you're looking at a story, but I've always been the time to approach the story with an open mind. "What's your story going to be about?" "Well I don't know yet, I haven't interviewed my sources yet."

EH: So not going into the story with a specific angle?

CL: Right. And even if you do feel like a story is a certain way, as the conversations start to happen and you start to do your research, being open to the possibility that your stories may be open to change, that's the most important. Because if you pigeon-hole something into one line of questioning, that's all you're going to get out of it. If you only go into story getting quotes from X and Y and you don't ask Z, you're only going to get the story that X and Y want to tell you. Does that make sense?

EH: Yeah, totally. I never really thought of it like that. In school, you're usually told to go into it knowing exactly what you're reporting on...

CL: Yeah, I mean, you should understand the subject.

EH: Yeah, do background research and stuff like that, but going into a story not with a specific angle is an interesting way to go about it.

CL: Okay, let's take for example, a story I just wrote about the dunes. Yeah I have certain things in mind about what I think the story would be about, but as I did the research I realized it was so much more complicated than I originally thought. There are so many more players than those who always get interviewed for that story, so I sought out the players that didn't get interviewed for those stories normally, with other points of view other than "air pollution for the dunes bad" or "I just want to be an off-roader and off-road, screw everyone else." That's not necessarily how everyone thinks, that's just all that's been portrayed so far because those are the loudest voices. So I saw my job as trying to find the voices that...

EH: hadn't been reported on yet?

CL: Yeah.

EH: Cool. Okay, so why, I guess we already kind of talked about this, but why do you think political journalists insert their own bias into reporting?

CL: I guess you can't not with politics. I don't know, politics is so... I guess maybe that's what people are looking for from a political journalist. They're sort of looking for... I guess when I think of political journalist, I think of someone who does a lot of analyzing, and you analyze with your own inherent biases. Um, but then again, not all political journalists are bias, and I wouldn't say that the people that run those talk shows are political journalists, I would just say they're talk show hosts. You know what I mean?

EH: Yeah, commentators or something along those lines. So you do think it's possible to report on politics without bias?

CL: Sure. Like I said, everyone has bias and it's knowing you have that bias and recognizing it in your writing and in your line of questioning that makes a story less biased and more objective.

EH: Do you think journalists should be upfront with their biases to their audience?

CL: It depends, I guess. You know, so I'm not a republican, but I have a friend who is, and she was very active in the race for the 24th district. She invited me to a some things and I went to a couple for a candidate, and I decided I couldn't report on that race anymore. Not because I was for or against that candidate, but because I was too close to that race because of my friend. And so I pulled myself out of that, but if I had reported on that I feel like I should say, upfront, "Editor's Note: I've been to several get-togethers with so-and-so," you know what I mean?

EH: Yeah, totally. So it's like situational.

CL: Yeah.

EH: Okay, cool. How much power do you think the mainstream media has in swaying audience opinion?

CL: Woah, that's a tough one. I think the majority of people watch or listen to shows on TV or on the radio that they already agree with. So if you look at things that way, then whatever their chosen source says, they'd be more inclined to be easily swayed by that person because they already believe what they say.

EH: So more of reinforcing already-formed beliefs rather than creating new ones? Okay. How do you think framing affects audience perception of political reporting?

CL: Framing like what?

EH: Like the way that they frame the story. Like if Fox and CNN report on the same story in vastly different contexts. The easiest example would be like a story on abortion, one source will use the term "unborn baby" and the other source will use the term "fetus" or "clump of cells" or something like that.

CL: I mean, framing matters for sure. I think you can make anything sound like it's to your advantage if you frame it right. You could say the same thing about bias.

EH: Do you think people pick up on those sorts of things when they're consuming news or do you think it's more subconscious?

CL: No, I don't think people care. This is me having been in the industry for a while, but I think...maybe that's changing. I've had more people ask me how to tell the difference between biased or fake stories. Like I've had people ask me "How can you tell if this is bias? How can you tell the difference? What are things I should be looking for?" I think people are reengaging with media in a different way than they did before but I also think people don't care. I can have people from two different sides read the same story and come away with two different things. "Oh, they were for us." "Oh no, they were for us!"

Taking two opposing views from the same story, so people read and consume news with a filter. They're going to take what their filter tells them to take out of the story, no matter how you present it. So if somebody from one side can take one thing and someone from the other side can take the opposite, we've done our job I guess.

EH: So when people are consuming news, they're reading it with their biases already in tact, and that's affecting how they consume it?

CL: Totally, yes. 100%

EH: So do you think there's more power in the journalists framing the stories, or the audience's bias when reading it?

CL: I would say the inherent bias in the audience, but I'd say they're equally important. Like as a journalist you're telling the story that exists, not the story that you want to exist.

EH: Yeah, that was a good line. So, uh, many news organizations are said to have a "slant" or "lean" based on their reporting, slightly skewing the stories they report on to match an agenda. How do you think consuming this type of news affects an audience? Can you expand on what was said earlier?

CL: I don't know, I think we kind of already went over it, but, the biggest problem with framing a story in a certain way is it makes a conversation about the issue less inclusive. Like we want the community to talk about things that are important, and broaden the conversation about those things, whatever they are, but we don't want to steer the conversation in one direction or another. You just want to open it up. So by framing it, you're steering the conversation I guess. By just putting the story out there, or telling the story that hasn't been told yet, you're opening it up to the community. And I guess as a community newspaper, that's a much easier concept to hold true to than someone who's working at a national level.

EH: Yeah, you know how they have like 5 big companies that own conglomerates that sometimes filter down all the way to local news? Do you think that affects the way that even the smaller papers report on things just because they're potentially owned by a bigger company that does have an agenda?

CL: You could argue that, yes. People say The Tribune doesn't run X, Y, and Z stories because they're afraid to, because McClatchy, let's say. That might not necessarily be the case, but you don't know for sure whereas I know for sure I can run what I see as appropriate news. And while I get pushback, editorial integrity always wins here, where that might not be the case at larger papers. I worked at a paper that was owned by a larger conglomerate, they owned several several papers in the Northwest, and they basically forced us to publish a story that they didn't want us to publish.

EH: Okay, interesting. I always wondered if that type of stuff happened so that's interesting to know...

CL: But that's just one example, like I don't know how McClatchy operates, I've never worked for a McClatchy paper.

EH: Yeah, definitely. Okay, how effective do you think "media watchdog groups" are at reducing bias in mainstream media?

CL: Like who, like CGR?

EH: Yeah, do you think mainstream media even cares about those types of groups? Or do you think that the media is such a big entity at this point that it doesn't even matter?

CL: I think CNN and MSNBC and Fox, they're just, they don't care. Maybe they care if they get a Pulitzer, I don't know. That's hard because I've never worked for a big company before but I could imagine that those companies are so big that it doesn't matter.

EH: Do you think it's possible for a group to form that would make an impact on big companies like that?

CL: I don't. I think that they're too far-gone. I just think that their reputations precede them and I don't think anything's going to change that. Ha, doom and gloom. You know though, news is a for-profit industry and consumers could change, simply by lowering the ratings or, in a sense, it's not one group but the greater public that could change a news organization that size. Because for-profit is the name of the game, so...

EH: Do you see the general public ever caring enough to make moves like that?

CL: I think people are starting to, I mean it's hard because before 24 hour news became a big thing, like after the OJ trial and after 9/11, there were talk shows. Conservative talk radio was big, if you look back at the history, conservative talk radio drove the Clinton "scandals." I put that in quotations because not all of them were scandals, some of them were made up. SO, there's always going to be something I guess. Sort of depressing.

EH: I know, it's okay though, you gotta be a cynic. In your opinion, what are some ways journalists can reduce bias in their own reporting? Do you think there are any specific tactics journalists could implement that would reduce bias?

CL: Like I said, you know, you just have to be cognizant of where your biases are and understand where you're at as a person and when you look at your own things, you look at it with the intent of weeding that stuff out. When you're entering a story and you just see one angle, you have to open yourself up to the possibility that there are other things that can be said about the same thing. I don't know, it's hard.

EH: Could you see anything large-scale being implemented like a nationwide journalism crisis convention where everyone gets together? Or do you think that's impossible?

CL: I don't know, that's hard. Journalism sort of operates by its own rules that nobody else really understands. The average consumer has no idea about what goes into an average story, or how a story is made, or what it takes to tell a story with un-biased framing. Nobody really understands that unless you're in the journalism world. So I think it would take a bunch of individuals, a bunch of individual journalists coming together to say "we want to make sure we're doing all of these things."

EH: As a reporter, how do you sit down and write a story and think "well, every single word I write is going to affect how this is perceived." I couldn't imagine writing a story and being able to flawlessly go about not using any language that's unbiased.

CL: Well, I think there's a certain benefit to calling a spade a spade. This is the discussion we've been having in the newsroom. We wrote a story about a planning commissioner pick who is a climate change denier. He doesn't believe in environmental regulation. So, we argued for twenty minutes about the lede. Does he call himself a climate change skeptic? Does it bias the story by putting that in the lede? At what point is calling a spade a spade bias the article? Are we really calling a spade a spade? I mean, this is a conversation we literally had in the newsroom last Wednesday. So, I think, if you're putting something in a headline to spark or pull a certain emotion out of people, or to get them to read the story, that's one thing, but if you're calling somebody a climate change skeptic when that's actually what they are, then are you editorializing? I don't think you are.

EH: Was he a self-proclaimed climate change denier?

CL: Totally, and it's news because of everything that's been happening. And he's making decisions that have to do with all of these things that have to adhere to environmental regulations so it's totally relevant.

EH: Yeah, totally.

CL: But some would argue that just by putting that in the paper you're biased. So it depends on where you stand. Just kind of an interesting case study.

EH: Yeah, definitely. Let's see... If your ideas for bias reduction became widespread within the mainstream media, how would the media environment change? So I guess from what you've told me, if every journalist went into every story with an open mind, and without knowing their angle without interviewing people, how do you think the media environment would change?

CL: I think it would change the stories we tell. So if you like look at the same story in the Wall Street Journal versus The New York Times, the headlines are different and the way they tell their stories are different. That's not saying that it's bad journalism, or the stories are super biased, that's just saying that editorial minds look those over and make choices based on who they are as publications, and so while I don't believe they should tell the same exact story, I don't think the stories should be that different. Like, we're a weekly, so we don't get to do the daily stuff. So we get beat on stories a lot, so we go back and

say “Okay, what’d they miss? Where can we go deeper? Where’s the nugget that was missing?” It’s not a different story, it’s just a deeper story. And so, I just, I mean, I don’t know. Looking at the headlines from those two major publications just really made me think that that’s crazy.

EH: Do you think people would get a full picture if people read the same story from two opposing sides? Or will there always be something missing?

CL: There’s always going to be information missing. You can’t get everything into a story, but you can consume as much as possible. I read like four or five publications on a regular basis and each story on the same subject gives me a little bit more information so I can round out how I feel about something. I think the more you consume, the better, personally.

EH: You can never limit yourself to one source because you’ll never know what else is out there.

CL: And one reporter may dig up something different than another reporter.

EH: How would less biased reporting change audience perception?

CL: I don’t know. Like I said, I think people read stories with a frame of mind, so I don’t know that less biased stories would change how they’re consumed. It’s just kinda how I feel.

EH: Do you think there’s anything to do with bias that we didn’t cover?

CL: So I always tell my writers, “People can say what they want about us, but it shouldn’t have merit. If people say they’re biased, they’re obviously allowed to think that, but we should give them no merit to stand that claim on. We need to be impeccable in the way we do our reporting and the way we tell our stories, they can’t be untrue, they can’t be biased, we need to talk to as many people as they can.” Because the way that things are right now, journalism like ours is super important. Because we can go deep, but if everyone views us as a liberal newspaper, we’re only reaching the people that want to consume us, but we should be reaching the people that maybe don’t want to consume us but have no choice because the stories are that good and that important and that true. That’s what I think everybody should strive for.