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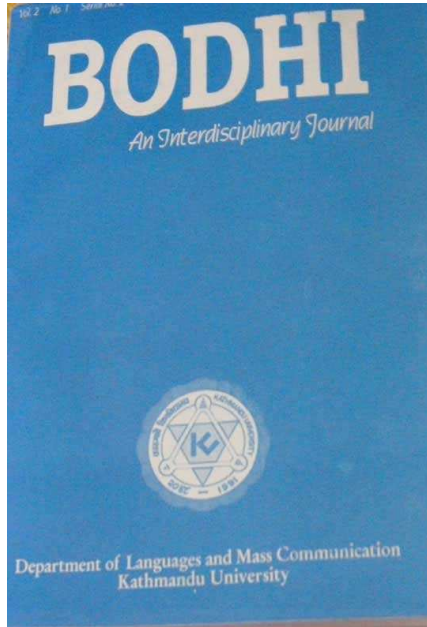
Research of Bias in Selected Journals: A Meta-Analysis

-- Vlastimil Necas

This article deals with the possibilities of the approach to the study of the issue of bias in selected journals in the fields of Journalism and Media Studies. It mainly focuses on two areas: first, on work with the term "bias" – how various authors define it and in what ways they study it; second, on identifying common characteristics within different researches – whether their aims or groundings are similar. The remaining parts of the article deal with three main streams of the research of bias which have been identified on the basis of the analysis of the studied research samples. Further, selected texts representing each of the defined groups are introduced in a greater detail.

In general, discussion of bias develops in two directions. Both lines agree that media (media products) demonstrate features of bias. However, the agreement does not go further than that. The first line (objectivist) claims that the media are biased and that prevention is possible through an application of appropriate production mechanisms and education of journalists[1]. The second line understands bias as an inherent part of a journalist's work and generally of human cognitive dispositions. A following discussion then rather reflects what forms a bias may acquire and whether it is more on a journalist's side or the audience's.

I begin with the definition of the bias. David Sloan (2007) gives a graphic example for the definition,

> …people understand bias in media primarily on the basis of their own beliefs. Conservatives think media incline toward liberals while liberals oppose that media are distinctly conservative. It seems that everyone complains about the media. Surprisingly it suits journalists. If both sides think they are biased in the opposite direction, it is a

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[1] See e.g. Hofstetter, 1978.

> clear evidence that they are in the middle, ergo unbiased.
> To a certain extent they are right. … One question
> however remains: Is the audience capable to reflect the
> presence of real bias in media texts? Defenders of the
> press may simply argue that the whole term only refers to
> the fact that people have the tendency to assess media on
> the basis of their own bias – the bias as such then has no
> support in reality but only in the minds of the audience.
> (p. 4)

Sloan also points out that if two parties understand bias
differently, it does not necessarily follow that there is no bias.

A conflict among various groups regarding the media bias (in
case they accept its existence as such) is also reflected in
different opinions concerning a definition of the term. Sloan
attempts to overcome such conflicts claiming that biased media
contents can be marked on the basis of the presence of specific
characteristics[2]. He nevertheless promptly adds that the
proposed characteristics are rather general and they can only
help to reveal the basic principles of bias (*ibid*).

Similarly, Richard Hofstetter (1978) in "Bias in television
news coverage of political events" speaks about bias in media
primarily in relation with political events, actors and issues.
According to Hofstetter, bias lies mainly in (1) unequivocal
lying, (2) deformation as a result of collecting, aggregating and
spreading certain facts and excluding others, and (3) non-
respect for basic values, beliefs and norms (p. 517). He admits
that these characteristics are more theoretical and not useful for
an empirical research.

Hofstetter further attempts to introduce a concept, namely
operationalization of bias. Its goal is to bridge the gap between

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[2] Prejudice, partiality, unbalanced selection or presentation, tendency
or inclination that prevents from a just and impartial attitude,
emotional preferences supporting one side only, preference that
deforms reality, personal unfounded evaluation, predisposition or
preference.

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a theoretical reflection and possibilities of a practical verification of bias. He puts that bias is characterized primarily by selectivity. As he points out, an accusation of a reporter's bias is often caused by a selective choice of facts in such a way which leads to an unbalanced and unjust representation of a given event (*ibid*). Hofstetter's definition of selectivity is very simple. It lies in a selection and accentuation of certain details from the whole. The selection then depends on a relevance of a given detail in relation to the whole and fully depends on a journalist's worldview. Simultaneously, Hofstetter states that relevance is closely connected with the term "newsworthiness".

How is it possible to measure bias? According to Hofstetter,

> bias should be observed with the assistance of a greater number of tools. It is a derivation of certain measurements, an attribute of measurement of selected units of analysis – a program, article, paragraph, sentence or topic. The precondition of the presence of bias is the occurrence of certain principles within the studied attributes. It is thus possible to speak about bias, in case these principles are unjust, unbalanced, or incomplete. (p.522)

He also defines three dimensions of bias: time, amount of coverage and the level of analysis. He considers the measurement of bias within a longer period of time as the most productive (*ibid*). His concept of operationalization of bias thus lies in observing certain aspects of selected variables in a longer period of time. The reader, however, cannot learn from the text what these variables are in particular, what the given attributes look like, or how to identify the principles that refer directly to the presence of bias.

An academic dispute of Glasgow Media Group (GMG) vs. Martin Harrison serves as a graphic illustration of different attitudes to bias and the main areas of disagreement. Researches in operationalizations of bias face the problem of definition and operationalization of the term as such, as well as the issue of the possibility to prevent researchers' bias, if this is possible at all.

The dispute began in mid-1970s when GMG published the first title in its *Bad News* series (1976). Some public figures then complained about an analysis of the British news coverage, which was focused primarily on the economy and industry and accentuated the possible distortion of events. The result of GMG's work can be summarized as follows: "It found that British TV news, across all channels, was remarkably similar, was heavily biased against the perspective of organized labour and that, overall, TV news offered viewers a highly selective picture of the world" (Quinn 457). Two volumes followed: *More Bad News* in 1980 and *Really Bad News* in 1982. They were all the cases of the thematic analysis of news, in which GMG proved ideology-lading of television news journalism by detailed analysis of media outputs. According to GMG, newscasters operated on the boundary of transgression of legal norms: "television is biased to the extent that it violates its formal obligations to give a balanced account" (cited in Quinn, p. 458).

A reaction that aroused the highest attention came from Martin Harrison in 1985. In his work, he did not aim at a replication of GMG's works but on a revision of the methods and evidence utilized by GMG. He then challenged the methodology and impartiality of the GMG members substantially. In Harrison's view, they failed fatally as they systematically suppressed evidence which did not correspond with their hypotheses. They purposefully selected and accentuated evidence in their analyses, which supported their visions while they did not include examples capable of questioning the whole project. GMG was dubbed by some as an "unscientific leftist" group. A charge came up that they acted in the interest of the Trade Unions and the Labour Party (Quinn, 2006, pp 459-60).

Members of GMG defended themselves and disputed Harrison's arguments and, primarily, the transcripts that Harrison had at his disposal and which were, according to GMG's statement, incomplete. Harrison agreed that he could ask GMG for their primary materials, he however obtained the

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data from the newscasters instead, that had manipulated the transcripts according to GMG. The debate ended somewhat inconclusively. Some Harrison's arguments were accepted, but the incompleteness of the data he dealt with decreased the substantiality of his reservations. It remains a fact that GMG had been encountering an adverse attitude from the newscasters from the start.

The genuineness of data and applied methods in the case GMG vs. Harrison presents one level of the dispute. There is another aspect to the debate that can be identified as important. A research of bias may become a highly political and politicized issue. If it is possible to take legal and political action on the basis of the definition of basis and the subsequent analysis, then there is the risk of strong politicization and, paradoxically, also the risk of bias of the researchers and thus of their research.

Based on a selected sample of journals, the following part studies an approach to bias by academic research, which areas are accentuated and to which of the theoretical suppositions it is inclined to.

Methodology

The point of our interest was the analysis of the methods of the research of bias in selected journals. I primarily dealt with the following aspects:
- How authors define bias.
- On what level bias is studied.
- What the types of media texts are.

I studied the contents of a total of seven leading journals[3] in the last ten years, i.e. from 1997 to 2007. In total, I analyzed 37 articles dealing with bias, or articles in which the term "bias" is

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[3] *European Journal of Communication*, *Gazette*, *Journalism*, *Communication Research*, *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, and *Media, Culture & Society*.

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used. The key that I utilized to select the relevant texts arises as a question. The presence of the term "bias" in the keywords of an article was the main filter. However, bias is not the main topic of a published text in all cases. For example, some of the selected articles mainly deal with the sphere of cognitive psychology. Nevertheless, the issue of bias has its place in such articles, as it appears in the title, among the keywords, or repeatedly in the body of the text.

Results

On the basis of the study of selected journal articles I distinguish three main areas of the research of bias. One, it is present on the level of the **production of media contents** (analysis of organization, a journalist's conscious or unconscious bias); two, in the **analyses of media contents** (contents analyses dealing with the bias in the contents in relation to selected topics or events); and three, there is the sphere of articles dealing with the **reception and processing of media texts** (audience analyses).

There remains a fourth element, which supposedly stands outside the concept of bias but is nevertheless tightly linked to it. It is the **social reality**. The definition of this element differs in the individual researches, but it remains valid for all instances that it constitutes a certain frame of reference for the analysis of bias. For example, when Michael O'Connell in his article "Is Irish Public Opinion towards Crime Distorted by Media Bias?" deals with the level of bias in the media image of violence, he uses official crime statistics as his frame of reference to identify the differences. The situation is similar in the case of referring to violence on women (see below). A combination of the specified areas is then characteristic of the sample of articles which I studied. For example, together with the analysis of the audience, an analysis of media contents is conducted or a frame of reference is referred to; a production analysis is connected to the inquiry of the final contents, etc. (see fig. 1)

Fig. 1: Bias Research Areas

production

contents   audience

social reality
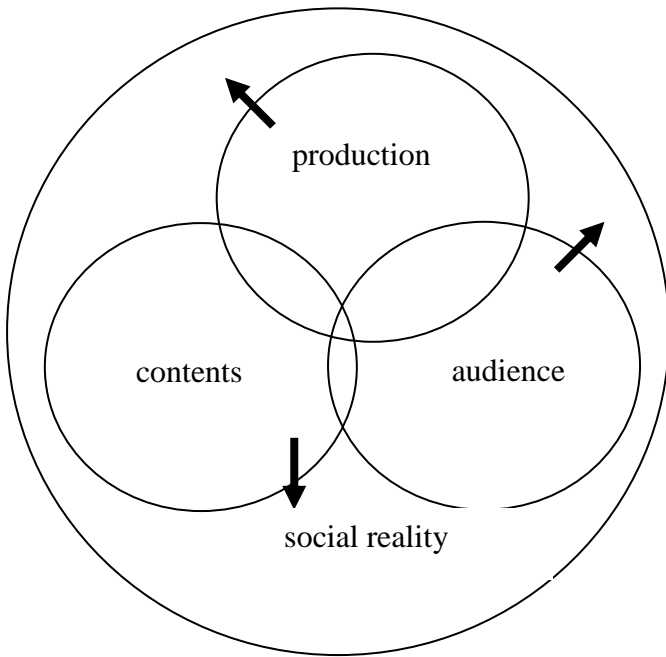
Bias in Media Production

Articles dealing with bias on the production level represent the least numerable group in the sample. There are perhaps several reasons. A relatively high cost of conducting such research may be among them. Nevertheless, researches of the audience tend to be similarly costly and they are present in the sample in an incomparably greater number. Methodological difficulties of such research may be another reason, especially in comparison with content analyses.

Frank Esser's study is a typical representative of the first group of researches. It deals with the differences between the Anglo-Saxon and German organization of the newsroom. It is the only article in the sample that can be identified as a pure

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organization analysis of bias. In his "Editorial structures and work principles in British and German newsroom," Esser compares English and German newsroom organization, describes their characteristics, and the causes and effects of the different models of practice. In the conclusion of the article he shows that a different newsroom organization structure is reflected, among other things, in a different level of bias. According to Esser, Anglo-Saxon newsroom can be characterized by two specific organization principles – division of labor and the central newsroom. Work in the newsroom is clearly divided and there is an obvious difference between a reporter and editor's or editor-in-chief's tasks. Similarly, existence of a central newsroom is typical in Britain. These two organization principles are reflected in two work principles – a clear separation of news from commentaries and a high level of control on the editors' part.

On the other hand, a low level of labor division and decentralization is typical for a German newsroom. The author calls it a "holistic" organization. A German journalist functions as a reporter as well as an editor. As a result of such organization, news items are distinguished from commentaries in a formal fashion (e.g. names of sections), but do not come out of newsroom processes. The control on the part of editors is thus distinctly smaller in German newsrooms as there is logically a greater measure of autonomy of individual journalists. The author concludes from the observed differences that "The Anglo-Saxon editorial structure seems better prepared for keeping the journalists' personal beliefs, values and attitudes out of the newspaper's content" (Esser, 1998, p. 395). This aspect may have a positive impact on the quality of media text, but on the other hand these control mechanisms may result in the limitations of a journalist's freedom. In this context, Esser mentions Curran's distinction between a relatively open and relatively closed media organization as discussed in his "Culturalist perspectives of news organizations": "'Open' organisations (most newspapers) use editorial control as a filter system and mechanism for quality control; 'closed'

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organisations (partisan tabloids) use it as an instrument to trim and bias content" (*ibid*).

As it follows, even this brief summary of Esser's work, both types of organizational structure have their advantages as well as disadvantages. The author further attempts to decide which of the structures is more capable to prevent a pervasion of a journalist's personal attitudes and opinions into the newspaper contents. Here, we arrive at the term "bias" identified by Esser with the term "partisanship" (*ibid*) who distinguishes two types of it in this context – a personal and organizational bias (*ibid*).

Personal bias is a result of personal attitudes and opinions of a journalist that influence his or her reporting decisions (writing style, assessment of an event's newsworthiness, selection of subtitles and pictures).

Organizational bias is the overall tone of political news coverage of a newspaper that is determined by editors and management. The most apparent manifestation of an organizational bias are endorsement processes in the time before elections, which is common in Anglo-Saxon countries, but it is not so in Germany.

It is thus possible to identify British media as relatively closed organizations which manifest a greater measure of organizational bias. On the contrary, the organizational structure of German media is "more 'open' which means (1) the organizational bias is much less explicit and (2) the editorial structures are less able to prevent personal bias from getting into the paper" (Esser, 1998, p. 399). As a result, German print media are equally partisan as the British. Their contents are biased, but they differ in the type of the bias. In Anglo-Saxon newsrooms, it is editors and managers that have substantial influence due to a more rigid and hierarchical organizational structure, while in the case of German press, it is a journalist's personal attitude (or bias) which is decisive.

Bias in Media Content

The most numerous subgroup of researches followed in this article puts the main accent on the research of bias in the resulting media texts. As it is mentioned in the above part of the text (see fig. 1), a reference to "social reality" is rather frequent, or results of a research are transformed to the level of production. Thus, some authors thus, consciously or unconsciously, commit a methodological fault when they try to articulate conclusions about characteristics of media production from an analysis of media content.

McManus and Dorfman (2005) in "Functional truth or sexist distortion" study stereotyping of partner violence on women in media. The article is an example of the analysis of bias in media content. The authors branch from two opposing concepts. They label the first as "functional truth" and define it rather opaquely as "an account of issues and events reliably describing social reality" (p.43). Further, we learn that it is connected with an everyday journalistic practice, and that reporters and editors primarily rely on accuracy and impartiality of information in their effort to approach the truth. According to the authors such attitude is more focused on the process of media text production (rules of work with information, ethical codes). However, we do not learn much more about the concept. In relation with their research of partner violence on women, McManus and Dorfman summarize "functional truth" into two characteristics: one, news reporting should avoid and disrupt sexist stereotypes about violence on women; two, news coverage of this kind of violence should be the same as far as frequency and depth are concerned as with other comparable crimes.

The concept of "functional truth" is operationalized in this way so that it could be used for an analysis of particular media texts dealing with violence on women. It is here where I see the weak spot of the work and thus also a possible distortion of the acquired conclusions. According to the authors themselves, the concept of "functional truth" is rather applicable for studying

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media production and the modification aimed at the utilization of the concept for the content analysis. I consider the modification and application of the findings from the production analysis (e.g. routines, gatekeeping) disputable. The authors in their analysis further observe whether partner violence on women is represented less frequently and more superficially than other crimes; how often the victims are presented as initiators of violent behavior; how often the guilt of the charged male perpetrators is belittled. They used content analysis of two dailies from one year[4] to answer these questions as they studied all texts dealing with violence. The final sample included 5,200 articles. The results show that during the study period, partner violence was represented less frequently and more superficially than other kinds of violence. The analysis did not, however, confirm that women were marked as the initiators of domestic violence. And in the case of the third question, it was not confirmed either that the guilt of male perpetrators of violence on women was belittled. What is the position of the concept of bias in this approach? The authors write about bias in the context of the detachment of media content from "real" (i.e. un-biased) state of things. If a media representation of the observed phenomenon does not correspond with the chosen definition of reality, it is then marked as biased – in this sense terms such as distorted or deformed representation would be more appropriate. The term "bias" as such is understood as a distortion or misrepresentation of reality by the media. This presumption implies a thesis that media are capable of a true representation of social reality. The fact that it does not happen is, in this case, a result of the fact that journalists work "for large, publicly-traded corporate news media whose boards of directors are dominated by elite white males" (McManus and Dorfman, 2005, p. 58).

It follows from the text that according to the authors, bias is not a quality of the resulting media texts but rather a set of influences that enter the production process. Bias then results in

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[4] *San Jose Mercury News* and *Los Angeles Times* in 2000.

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stereotypes, frames and inaccuracies, which are identifiable characteristics of the presence of bias in a text production. The authors however do not accentuate the difference in their analysis and the question remains whether they are aware of it as they confuse the two levels in several parts of the text.

Bias in Audience Research

The third area is constituted of researches that mostly combine public opinion polls and content analysis, or possibly references to social reality. Contrary to our expectations, this subgroup of researches is relatively large.

The study by Michael O'Connell (1999) also connects public opinion polls with an analysis of media content. It approaches a classical understanding of research in agenda-setting. O'Connell formulates the basic thesis of his research in the very beginning: "Despite relatively low crime rates, the Irish public believes itself to be experiencing a law and order crisis" (p.191). According to him, the imbalance may be explained by a distorted image of criminality in the media.

Ireland is among the EU countries with the lowest crime rates. According to the measurements of the European Council, Ireland has the lowest number of crimes per thousand inhabitants (twenty-six) and also the highest rate of solved criminal deeds of all EU member countries. Public opinion polls however show that the public is convinced that the total number of crimes is on the rise, especially violent ones. This tendency finds its resonance in legislative changes (e.g. a successful referendum allowing stricter treatment of the accused of certain criminal offences from 1996). O'Connell asks a logical question why the public considers the problem so important that it feels threatened by a greater danger. A representation of violence in the media serves as one of the possible explanations: "Media distort the reality of crime by creating a biased and extreme portrayal of the problem and the public comes to believe and adopt this view" (p.193).

The aim of a content analysis is to describe characteristics and types of "deformations." All issues of four Irish dailies[5] within a period of two months put together the studies sample. On the basis of an analysis, the author defines "… four biases in the press representation of crime" (p.194).

- Bias 1: *Imbalance in the number of news about extreme and violent crimes ratio*: "Typical crimes in the Irish press appear rarely in the official crime statistics and typical crimes in the official figures appear rarely in the Irish press account of crime" (p.197).
- Bias 2: *It follows from comparisons of press news that serious and extreme crimes are attributed a higher news value*. The author proves that the more frequent a category of offences in a society is, the less room they have in the media. Such inverse proportion is valid in the opposite direction, too, which partially confirms Bias 1.
- Bias 3: *Reports about crimes emphasized victims' vulnerability and aggressors' strength*. It follows from the analysis that press editors prefer interpretations that enforce the stereotype based primarily on a gender basis. Victims are represented as vulnerable and defenseless women, while the attacker tends to be a strong man.
- Bias 4: *Articles about criminal offences are too pessimistic*. The author analyzed opinion columns in this respect and he states: "Overall the image of crime in both styles of commentary articles was a generally negative and pessimistic one, with strong themes of moral mini-panics in the warning of catastrophic tones used in describing trends and the wider picture" (p.205).

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[5] *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Press*, *The Star* and *The Evening Herald*. A total of 2,000 articles.

O'Connell summarizes the most important results of the research as follows: "However, the explanation offered here, that sensational media accounts of crime lead to an overly pessimistic, fearful and extreme public perception of crime, either directly or in a cumulative effect fashion, finds support in the available data" (p. 208).

O'Connell's method of work with the concept of bias places him to a group that primarily focuses on the media content analysis. In this case it includes an overlap with public opinion polls; its attitude also reminds us of classical researches of agenda-setting processes (see e.g. Funkhouser 1974, Shaw and McCombs, 1977).

Conclusion

The study of bias encounters two basic levels of dispute. The first one is based on different gnoseological and normative conditions. On the gnoseological level, the basics of the various approaches may be reduced to the dichotomy of subjectivism against objectivism. The differences then lead to various ideas about and normative requirements for media production. The second level of the dispute or difference is connected with differing methods of the study of bias, that is to say the possibilities of operationalization and verification. Here, the answer is present to the question, how to identify bias in media content? Is the phenomenon quantifiable? Which aspects of media texts should we observe to discover a possible bias?

As this article shows, a study of bias, as well as its definitions and areas of interest differ and they can do so in key aspects. However, yet another frame of interpretation is at hand, which follows from the initial dispute between GMG and its opponents. There is a more interesting problem than a research of bias itself, which is the inquiry into the question to what extent the concept of bias may become a tool of promoting and achieving researchers' own political and ideological situatedness.

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Appendix
List of Analyzed Articles

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Chapin, J. R. (2000). Third-person perception and optimistic bias among urban minority at-risk youth. *Communication Research,* 27 (1). SAGE.

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of 'popular' science journals, 1980 to 1997. *Journal of Communication Inquiry,* 23 (2). SAGE.

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