

**Objectivity & Balance:
How Do Readers and Viewers of News and Information
Reach Conclusions Regarding Objectivity and Balance?**

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Public broadcasting is legally charged with “strict adherence to objectivity and balance.” Thus, its mission is firmly rooted in uniquely American normative expectations of the role of media and journalism in a democratic society. The public makes judgments about objectivity and balance within a historical context, but these concepts are often in tension with various interpretations. At the heart of these ideas, however, is the hope that media provide meaningful information that helps citizens navigate their lives in a democratic society and the hope that different voices are given a fair opportunity to be heard. Given the declining levels of trust in media, these expectations arguably are not being met. With less public confidence that social institutions in general function on behalf of the greater good, the causes of and solutions to the crisis of trust in the media have become deeply politicized. The public is more aware than ever of how news is made, and the online world has brought an explosion of media criticism rooted in a diverse range of political interests. Lacking a legitimated and trusted middle ground, there is a strong tendency to find bias in information that doesn’t conform to pre-existing viewpoints. The echo-chambers

of the blogosphere and growth in media watchdog groups have made media criticism an integral part of many citizens’ belief systems. In this White Paper, we summarize our findings from an audit of what is known about how people reach conclusions regarding objectivity and balance (as well as related terms) and make recommendations in response to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting call

for research related to these issues. Although the news environment has shifted greatly, research has focused on the traditional, institutionalized news media and has been slow to address new forms. The discourse surrounding news media performance often has implied that the media to which people respond are a monolithic institution. Of course, it is not, nor is it always possible to easily distinguish between the professional media and emerging forms of citizen journalism. With this caveat, we will emphasize how audiences in general respond to news and information, and how they evaluate it. We structure our White Paper in the following way:

1.

We provide context for our audit by reviewing key conceptual and theoretical issues in the study of news media performance. We then turn to discussing the terminology that has been used when describing news media performance.

2.

Next, we review research on how the public reaches conclusions about news media performance.

3.

Informed by our audit, we relate the research findings to public media programming.

4.

We conclude by making a number of recommendations about:

a.

How to collect and deliver news content within the context of objectivity and balance,

b.

How to monitor and evaluate objectivity and balance, and

c.

How to capitalize on public media's unique role in providing objective and

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Objective 1: Discussion about how the public reaches conclusions on issues related to objectivity and balance.

Objective 2: Review of the most relevant academic research on the issue, with references listed.

Contextualizing Media

Criticism Contextualizing Criticism

As media became more commercial and more concentrated in ownership, particularly post WWII, journalists began to operate more as insiders with respect to the national establishment, leading some to express concern about their elite status as not in keeping with the public interest. Hallin (1992), for example, argued that the rise of journalistic professionalism solved the problem of objectivity in part by choosing to reflect the inner discussions of government, with journalists themselves enjoying an insider status in return for accepting the ground rules of Washington. In time, this produced some undesirable groupthink tendencies. As the conservative movement grew in strength after the 1960s, the ideology of the "counter-establishment" branded this connection of media with the establishment as a "liberal" tendency (Rusher, 1988).

The publication of the book *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers* in 1986 by S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda Lichter brought special emphasis to examining the individuals producing the news, locating the blame for bias with these professionals and providing fodder for the "liberal media" claim. Though critics continue to support the claim of a "liberal media" by referencing the left-leaning (though by no means radical) political predispositions of journalists, research by Weaver et al. (2007) found

balanced news.

that nation-wide, journalists are more typical of the average American, but certain studies of journalists in large eastern cities (including *The Media Elite* survey of journalists at the elite media) show a predictable pattern of journalists favoring Democrats over Republicans, although even then, the attitudes are more conservative on economic issues than social. This location of blame at the level of the news producers leads conservative critics to demand greater "ideological" diversity in the newsroom (e.g. CBS News anchor Dan Rather was a particular favorite target of the right for his alleged liberal leanings).

Liberals were slower in coming to the media criticism table. By the time they did, the "liberal media" label was broadly accepted by the public, a successful result in large part of the conservative rhetorical strategy (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Liberals in turn have focused more on the ownership structure of media and the under-representation of public interest groups, women, and minorities. The irony is that "liberal" journalists have given greater credence to the conservative critique than the liberal counterargument, a function, it can be argued, of the fact that blaming journalists for bias at least grants them some professional efficacy that the ownership and political economy critique does not.

So how can the media be both conservatively and liberally biased? The answer lies in understanding the different kinds of explanations chosen

¹ All references are listed at the close of this document.

by different critics and assumptions about the proper role of media with regard to the state. The general discussion of media must be understood in the context of the politicization of American institutions in general. Higher education and science are among other realms where the ability of a professional discipline to produce a legitimated outcome has been brought into question. Indeed, efforts increasingly have been made to address such disciplinary matters – once under the control of professionals in those fields – within the political arena. Because public broadcasting receives government support, it is particularly vulnerable to these interventions. In journalism, this concern has led foundations and other groups to mount a revitalization of the profession from within, to forestall such outside intervention. Initiatives such as the Project for Excellence in Journalism have tried to reassert the fundamental values of the profession in view of external attack, including the importance of truth-seeking, verification, context, and proportionality. Within this context, a vocabulary for discussing the responsibilities and performance of the news media arose. The varied language we use to describe news media performance contains assumptions about what “good” news would look like. *Objectivity*, *balance*, *neutrality*, *plurality*, and *bias* are among the concepts used to evaluate news media programming. In spite of the rise of partisan-based, interest-oriented, and citizen journalism, these concepts still guide public discussion and are reviewed in the following section.

Normative Concepts

In their call for research, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting noted that “references to ‘balance and objectivity’ should be broadly defined to include related issues.” We found a number of related terms in our review. As we will discuss below, the choice of terms itself carries a host of assumptions about how reality can best be conceived and presented, with corresponding implications for media practice. So, to recognize this problematic aspect, we encapsulate all of these terms by referring to assessments of *news media performance*. Below, we review some of the major normative concepts that have been discussed.

1. Objectivity

Objectivity has been the ethos of 20th Century American journalism. And the Western model of journalism has found renewed traction in other parts of the world including Latin America and Eastern Europe, even as the impossibility of its achievement becomes more evident. As Zelizer, Park, and Gudelunas (2002) note, “...the public’s insistent demand for objectivity in the news and a naïve faith in its possibility keep bringing debates about the media back to an insistence on unbiased coverage” (p. 302). As an overarching concept, objectivity refers variously to a normative ideal (that journalism can reach the truth), a sense of detachment on the part of journalists, a set of practices designed to produce “truth” (reliance on officials), and an institutional framework, which has attempted to differentiate news from advertising, facts from opinion. In reviewing these dimensions, Hackett and

Zhao (1998) argue also that objectivity provides a way in public discourse of

evaluating press performance – that is how far news media stray from fairness and balance toward bias and partisanship. Donsbach and Klett (1993) found that journalists in Western liberal-democracies assigned objectivity four different connotations: absence of personal subjectivity, fairness in presenting the relevant sides, skepticism toward all of the sides, and providing factual context.

In pursuit of the truth, objectivity can be said to encourage a worthy goal to the extent that journalists seek to be fair, thorough, use verifiable facts, and step back from their own personal and organizational interests. Interpreted more narrowly, objectivity has been less useful or even harmful when it simply reinforces prevailing power relationships and conceals underlying taken-for-granted values. For example, the infamous 1950s McCarthy era saw journalists “objectively” reporting the Senator’s claims without challenge.

2. Neutrality

Neutrality is closely connected with the spirit of objectivity, in the sense of non-alignment. The journalist does not have a stake in one interest or another, but is able to stand apart and act on behalf presumably of the public interest (“a neutral broker”). In the spirit of representation, neutrality presumes a world apart from the perceiver, which can be reproduced. Rejecting this idea is the perspective that facts never speak for themselves, as neutral details, but are always enlisted in the service of whatever interest is paying the bill. Journalistic neutrality – avoiding or at least acknowledging conflicts of interest – is more achievable than

representational neutrality. Neutrality is increasingly irrelevant in the genres beyond hard news (e.g., some programming on 24-hour cable news channels).

3.

Plurality

Pluralism is a key component of Western liberal theories of the press. Pluralism has been evaluated with respect to diversity in media outlets, in media professionals, and in the content itself. We assume media should correspond to the various interests and groups in society and are expected to reflect relevant social perspectives (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Pluralism developed in conjunction with the idea of objectivity and reflects the marketplace of ideas concept, in which society is best served by having power distributed among many competing interests. This can go astray if power is not distributed fairly, as is often assumed, and, even if presumed fair, media do not reflect that distribution.

Critical political economists dispute the ability of a market-based media to adequately reflect society, while liberal pluralism often gives little attention to *how* the media construct representations in their process of reflection and to *how well* they provide a forum for those interests to interact. Media come closer to indexing the range, or pluralism, within *elite opinion* than the rest of society (Bennett, 1990), but we shouldn’t go too far to assume they can be reduced to mere transmitters of structural power; they have their own relative autonomy. New media, to the extent they allow greater access to citizens and other groups, may more approximate the ideal of pluralism.

4. Balance

As suggested earlier, some of these normative concepts are at root philosophically inconsistent. As Hackett (1984) observes, the positivist underpinnings of objectivity suggest that truth can be approached if enough care is exercised to gather the relevant facts.

The notion of balance, however, suggests that the truth may be found by juxtaposing two competing truth claims, which may arise from completely different perspectives, the truth found statistically to lie somewhere in between. As a normative goal, balance is easier to achieve on the surface by putting two voices against each other – and, therefore, the more tempting path to objectivity.

Balance is a measure more associated with public service broadcasting, mandated for organizations like the BBC. McLaughlin (2008) argues that the BBC must be balanced as an institution, adapting to shifting societal viewpoints and ideologies in order to occupy the “center ground.” Thus, apart from such institutional goals, balance often refers to the more narrow representation of viewpoints within the programming. The goal corresponds to how print journalism often seeks to balance viewpoints within specific stories and how television pits one side against another on a program. In assuming that a mid-point may be found where the truth is in equilibrium, balance is closely tied to bias, which will be discussed shortly. Domke, Watts, Shah, and Fan (1999) define fairness and balance as “equal, unfettered treatment of individuals and groups on differing partisan preferences of journalists, and “structured” bias, resulting from more deep-seated media characteristics, such as between television and print.

sides of a topic” (p. 42). The balance idea has been appealing in academic research, because external benchmarks of evaluation are often not available – making equality of coverage of issue sides the default criterion.

5. Bias

As one of the more common derogatory charges, bias suggests that there is an agreed standard against which a message can be evaluated – or “balanced” around. With its denotations of “slant,” “diagonal,” and “oblique,” “on the bias” means diagonal to a designated line of direction. Popularized by best-selling media critics, such as the author of *Bias* (2002), Bernard Goldberg, the concept of bias has permeated the discourse, but it implies an unstated unambiguous standard of “truth.” This, of course, allows critics to identify their own standard relative to their particular interests and gauge media accordingly. The U.S. two-party political system is tailor made to this style of discourse, and leads to the notion that an even pairing of Democrat and Republican, with a non-partisan expert bridging the two, yields a truthful account, regardless of the relative merits of the positions advocated by the two sides or the relative support among the public enjoyed by the two.

This approach allows journalists to remain entrenched in their professional routines, no matter how wanting, to the extent that they are criticized by those sides and allowed to believe they are equally “balanced.” But Hofstetter and Buss (1978) usefully distinguished between “partisan” bias, resulting from Although given less recognition among the public, this latter form is at least as important as the former.

Summary. Although there are differences between the reviewed terms, they all

share a concern for understanding the news media's performance. They all suggest a search for fairness – that social groups and leaders should receive a chance to speak, that positions receive a bearing, and that this chance not be corrupted by inappropriate pressure, suppression, or conflicts of interest.

Public Perceptions of News Media Performance

Although several of the previous normative concepts point to actual media content and to journalists themselves, a number of terms have been used to refer to public perceptions of news media performance.

- *Credibility* is intimately connected to *audience perceptions*; as Tseng and Fogg (1999) note, “credibility is a perceived quality; it doesn't reside in an object, a person, or a piece of information” (p. 40). In other words, **media may be objective and fair by various accepted standards, while still being regarded as not credible by the audience.** Credibility has been connected theoretically and empirically with judgments of trustworthiness and expertise. Media credibility has been measured with survey items asking the public to report their beliefs about bias, trust, fairness, and accuracy (see an overview in Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003).

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In the aggregate, trust in the media has plummeted (Moy & Pfau, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2005). In 1985, 89 percent of the public had a favorable opinion of network television news and 81 percent had a favorable opinion of major national newspapers. In 2007, only 71 percent had a favorable opinion of network television news and 60 percent had a favorable opinion of major

- *Expertise* refers to “a communicator's qualifications or ability to know the truth about a topic” (Metzger, et al., 2003, p. 297)

- *Trustworthiness* refers to “perceptions of the communicator's motivation to tell the truth about a topic” (Metzger, et al., 2003, p. 297).

- *Media skepticism* is a related concept that also emphasizes audience perceptions. Media skepticism is “the degree to which individuals tend to disbelieve or discount the picture of reality present in the mass media” (Cozzens & Contractor, 1987).

These terms are used throughout research on how the public reaches conclusions about news media performance; we turn to this research in the following pages. We organize the research in the following way:

1.

We first review individual factors that influence public perceptions.

2.

We then turn to factors in the media that can influence public perceptions of news media performance.

national newspapers (Pew Research Center, 2007). At the same time, people have developed fragmented beliefs about *which* media outlets they perceive as more trustworthy (Pew Research Center, 2004). Conservatives, liberals, Democrats, and Republicans are consuming different news outlets on the basis of their political beliefs (Stroud, forthcoming).

Individual factors influencing public perceptions of news media performance

A host of individual factors are related to people's perceptions of the news media's performance.

Summary: Individual Characteristics Related to Assessments of News Media Performance

1.

Political leanings affect how people evaluate news performance.

2.

People like media that favors their own views.

3.

If people distrust one institution, they are likely to distrust others, too.

4.

Discussion of politics with likeminded others leads to less favorable perceptions of news performance.

5.

Media use is modestly related to assessments of news media performance.

1.

Partisanship/political ideology

As news media performance has become politicized, news audiences are increasingly responding to news media based on their political beliefs. In general, Republicans and conservatives tend to trust the mainstream media less

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2.

Perception of source as likeminded

Research on how people process information consistently shows that people selectively judge information based on their political views. With respect to politics, for example, research on the first televised debate in 1960 confirmed that Democrats thought Kennedy won while Republicans

than Democrats and liberals (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Eveland, & Shah, 2003; Jones, 2004; Lee, 2005).

This is not to say that the media necessarily are liberally biased nor is it to say that Republicans and conservatives are always more apt to find media messages as more biased. There are several reasons that such a conclusion may be hasty.

First, **charges that the media have a liberal bias have been more prevalent and publicized than charges that the media have a conservative bias**

(Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999) while systematic analysis of media coverage has not revealed consistent evidence of a liberal bias (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999).

Second, those with strong political beliefs – both Democrats and Republicans – are more likely to perceive the media as biased against their viewpoint (Eveland, & Shah, 2003; Gunther, 1988; Jones, 2004; Lee, 2005). Third, there are differences in how partisans assess individual media outlets. For example, strong conservatives find CNN to be more liberally biased than others while strong liberals find Fox News to be more conservatively biased than others (Turner, 2007).

thought Nixon did. What arguably has changed since this time is how vocal the public and other critics have become in expressing their views about media.

In general, people believe that sources sharing their beliefs are less biased and more trustworthy; Sears (1968) argued that “the perceived truth value of supportive communications is greater than that of nonsupportive material” (p. 785). Evidence supports the idea that likeminded information is judged to be

more convincing and legitimate in comparison to contradictory information (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Miller, McHoskey, Bane, & Dowd, 1993). This pattern is related to the *hostile media phenomenon*, the finding that public perceptions of the media vary such that partisans on both sides of an issue perceive “neutral” media coverage of the issue to be biased against their own viewpoint (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In other words, when reading a putatively neutral political article, Democrats would perceive the article as biased in favor of Republicans and Republicans would perceive the article as biased in favor of Democrats. In this respect, **any effort by a news organization to be perceived as completely unbiased is a futile quest.** Gunther, Christen, Liebhard, and Chia (2001) discussed an expanded notion of the hostile media phenomenon that applies to non-neutral sources, the *relative hostile media phenomenon*. Namely, when presented with either neutral or non-neutral media coverage, “people in a partisan group will see the slant of news coverage ... as more disagreeable or at least less congenial than will those in the opposing group” (p. 300-1). If media coverage is biased in

9 others have not found that those who are more politically attentive display increased hostile media perceptions (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998).

3.

Distrust of other institutions

Trust in the media is correlated with trust in other democratic institutions. Indeed, both trust in government and trust in media have declined over the past several decades (Pew Research Center, 2004). Specifically, people who

one direction, therefore, likeminded partisans may perceive the coverage as neutral while opposing partisans may see it as hostile.

Gunther and Liebhart (2006) explain that this occurs because

“opposing partisans see the same content but disagree about the valence of that content. Consider, for example, rivals in a court case during the judge’s instructions to the jury. Both the defendant and the plaintiff might listen to a particular comment—a comment that a disinterested party would consider neutral or impartial—and both may think ‘that observation makes my case look bad and is going to influence the jury in favor of my opponent.’” (p. 451).

When reading the same article, partisans can come away with very different impressions of the valence of the content.

Even knowledgeable people are not impervious to the hostile media phenomenon. Some conclude that perceptions that the media are hostile to one’s perspective are more common among those who are more invested in an issue or knowledgeable about an issue (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), but are more distrustful of the government and politics also are more distrustful of the media (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lee, 2005). This may indicate that media trust and governmental trust are indicators of an underlying distrustful attitude; people are either generally distrustful or not (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001).

This relationship may be unique to certain contexts. The relative trustworthiness of these institutions

differs across countries. A 2006 BBC/Reuters/Media Center poll, for example, found that citizens of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany all have more trust in the media on average than they have in the government. In other countries (e.g. Nigeria, Indonesia, India, and Brazil), however, citizens have more trust in the media than in the government. This suggests that different government and media systems may yield different impressions of the media, making comparisons across countries challenging (although the relationship may still hold true).

4.

Discussion of politics with likeminded others

Although individual differences help to explain who finds the media more or less trustworthy, interpersonal factors also can influence perceptions of media. Those who discuss politics with likeminded others are more likely to perceive that the news media are biased against their views (Eveland & Shah, 2003). This is particularly true for self-identified Republicans who discuss politics more frequently with conservatives (Eveland & Shah, 2003).

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story they perceive to be biased. For example, imbalanced stories (stories emphasizing one side of a controversial issue) not only lead audiences to conclude that the story is biased but also to believe that the news organization producing the story is less credible (Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004). Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia (2001) found evidence that “people believe the news coverage they are exposed to, however small and unrepresentative a sample it might be, is

5.

Media use

There is a modest relationship between media trust and media use. Although Tsfati and Cappella (2003) found that mainstream media skepticism was related to lower levels of mainstream news viewing and higher levels of non-mainstream news viewing, the relationship was not strong. Kiouisis (2001) found a small relationship between perceptions of newspaper credibility and newspaper reading, but no relationship between perceptions of television news credibility and television news viewing. In 2005, Tsfati and Cappella clarified the relationship by documenting that individuals who have a higher *need for cognition* (an enjoyment of thinking) are more likely to use media that they do not trust.

In exploring these individual predictors, it is important to note that **audiences generalize their judgments of media bias, inferring the existence of bias beyond a single article or broadcast.**

In generalizing their judgments, audiences rate entire news organizations as more biased after reading a single

similar to news coverage more generally” (p. 299). In the Gunther et al. study, people rated the credibility of several articles and the credibility of the media in general similarly. People extrapolated from their limited exposure to two articles to form impressions of the media in general. Further, audiences are more likely to evaluate a subsequent article as biased after encountering an article that they perceive to be biased (Cozzens & Contractor, 1987).

Media factors influencing public perceptions of news media performance

Assessments of news media performance are based not only on individual attributes and social factors; **audiences do indeed base their judgments on actual features of news stories.**

Though journalists have conceptions of how unbiased news *should* be written, it is important to note that **the public does not always share these journalistic assumptions.** Members of the public who reach different conclusions than journalists about the bias of sources included in the media are more likely to believe that the media are biased (Rouner, Slater, & Buddenbaum, 1999).
Summary: Media Characteristics Related to *Lower* Assessments of News Media Performance

1.

Features of news stories

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Coverage of celebrities

•

Journalist *interpretations* of news

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Coverage of political scandals

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Coverage of politicians' *strategies* (as opposed to *issue stances*, for example)

•

Uncivil debates

•

Stories that are hard to believe

•

Stories not presenting both sides of an issue (imbalanced stories)

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² Content analysis is a method for systematically and quantitatively evaluating communication messages. The method requires that the strategy for evaluating the messages be reliable such that if other researchers wanted to replicate the analysis, they could do so. One common strategy for assessing reliability is to have human coders independently code the same content and then evaluate whether they reached the same conclusions. See Krippendorff (2004) for more details.

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Claims about media bias in the media

2.

Production techniques

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Tabloid journalism techniques

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Non-high definition broadcasts

3.

Perceptions of the institutional / organizational source of a message also influence impressions of the message.

1.

The **content of news stories** influences audience credibility perceptions.

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Certain topics inspire audiences to disapprove of news media performance. The more the media focus on political strategy, scandals, and **celebrities**, the less people trust the media (Jones, 2004).

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News reporting increasingly has included **journalists' interpretations of the news** (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). An increasing focus on interpretation and analysis in news reporting may lead the public to trust the media less overall (Jones, 2004) but to trust those interpretations with which they agree—contributing to the

polarization in views about the media. In *Out of Order* (1994), Patterson observes that over several decades, journalists have inserted themselves more in shaping the tone of news stories, and that this interpretation has come mainly in the form of comments on the “game” of politics (ostensibly to avoid charges of bias that issue commentary could entail).

Current research suggests that this form of “interpretation” is not the same as “neutrality,” to the extent that trust and credibility has declined during the same period.

Stories featuring analysis contain more material with which audiences can disagree. This is in contrast to fact-based reporting without analysis which may give audiences less ground for disagreement.

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Media coverage of political scandals also appears to enhance media distrust. Disapproval of media coverage of the Lewinsky scandal, for example, was related to disapproving of news media performance (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001). In addition, the more cynical the coverage of the president, the lower the public’s opinion of the press’s performance (Kiousis, 2002). In the Kiousis study, cynical coverage was measured using a content analysis that asked trained coders to evaluate newspaper articles.² The coders examined the extent to which the articles described manipulative behavior on the part of the central actor of the article, for example. Results showed that as cynical coverage increased, perceptions of news media performance declined.

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As trust in government is related to trust in media (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Lee, 2005), uncivil debates on public affairs programs also may erode public trust in the media. In their series of experiments, Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that while audiences rated civil and uncivil programs as equally *informative*, they

Media coverage of political strategy may lead people to develop more cynical attitudes toward the media (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999). This type of coverage, known as strategy or horserace framing, has several attributes: “(1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games, and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); (4) centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (5) heavy weighing of polls and the candidates standing in them” (Cappella & Jamieson, p. 33). Essentially, strategy and horserace political coverage conveys that political actors act in their own self-interest, rather than the public interest. This type of coverage is in contrast to other styles of reporting about politics, such as discussing politicians’ issue stances.

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Uncivil debates on public affairs programs, where heated debate and disrespectful statements are the norm, corrode trust in the government and politics in comparison to civil debates (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). An informal survey of cable news discussion programs suggests that incivility has increased.

found the uncivil program to be more *entertaining*. **This suggests a tradeoff: although uncivil programming may be more entertaining, it also depresses trust.**

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Stories that are “hard to believe” are rated as less credible regardless of whether the source of the story is highly reputable (e.g. *New York Times*) or not

reputable (e.g. the *Star*, Austin & Dong, 1994). Skepticism of media also increases when news reports conflict with the reports of another person (Cozzens & Contractor, 1987).

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Imbalanced stories, stories that emphasize only one side of a controversial issue, lead audiences to see bias. Balanced stories that present both sides of controversial issues in equal proportion are perceived as less biased than imbalanced stories that emphasize one side of a controversial issue (Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004). Certain features of articles seem to trigger audiences to label articles biased. When asked to identify biased portions of news articles, audiences are more likely to label quotations within the article as introducing bias rather than facts or summary statements (D'Alessio, 2003).

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Claims about media bias made in the media can affect public perceptions of news media performance. In particular, statements about media bias made by journalists, party officials, and candidates influence public perceptions of media bias. The more frequently the

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cable news programs. The creation of Fox News Network itself was based on a political thrust (arguably across both opinion programs and hard news), which has led to ratings success and imitation. Accusations that various media outlets are biased – regardless of whether they are – could lead members of the public to conclude that these outlets are biased on the basis of what they've heard. Supporting this idea, audiences for programming that is critical of the

media reported on accusations of liberal media bias in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns, the more the public perceived that the media were liberally biased (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Domke, Watts, Shah, and Fan (1999) argue that the liberal media critique is part of a Republican/conservative strategy that, at least in the late 1990s, was unanswered by Democrats and liberals. The finding that public perceptions of bias are related to publicity for bias claims is consistent with the conclusions of Zaller (1992), who argued that public opinion often follows elite cues about where to stand on issues. When elites claim the media are biased, the public will follow suit.

While Watts et al. found that elite statements about whether the *media in general* leaned to the left or to the right were related to public opinion about media bias, critiques that *specific media outlets* are biased in one direction or the other are more prevalent today. Of course, this reflects in part the reality of the rise of more opinionated television news programs dedicated to a particular partisan stance – an approach followed successfully by several mainstream media find mainstream media less credible. Jones (2004), for example, found that those who listen to more talk radio or who use the Internet to obtain political information are more likely to distrust the media. Consumption of “fake news” programming such as *The Daily Show* also is related to lower levels of media trust among younger citizens (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). These programs likely depress media trust by frequently mocking the mainstream media.

In sum, **public perceptions of news media performance follow how elites (both journalists and public figures) publicly assess the news media's performance.**

2.

Production techniques also influence audience credibility judgments.

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Tabloid journalism production techniques (e.g. music, sound effects, slow motion, flash frame transitions, and an obtrusive reporter tone) lead viewers to see news as less believable and as less informative (Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000). Tabloid journalism production techniques also lead viewers to believe that reporters are more subjective – this is particularly true for public affairs news topics (Grabe, Lang, & Zhou, 2003).

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Not all production attributes yield lower trust, however; **high definition news broadcasts** lead viewers to perceive the news as more credible than news not broadcast in high definition (Bracken, 2006).

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Public perceptions of public broadcasting

In comparison to research on audience perceptions of specifically *commercial* broadcasting, there has been less research on *public* broadcasting. There are some indications that audiences have a positive perception of public broadcasting. A 1999 survey of northern Floridians found that PBS was rated as more trustworthy, informative, and educational compared to Discovery, TLC, A&E, Nickelodeon, and Disney (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2002). More recently, publicly-available research

3.

The **institutional or organizational source** of the message is another important influence on people's assessments of news media performance.

Preconceived notions about whether a media source is biased can shape how a person interprets information attributed to this source. When presented with an identical news report attributed to different sources, audience perceptions of objectivity, balance, credibility, and trustworthiness vary (Baum & Gussin, 2008; Iyengar & Morin, 2006, Turner, 2007). Baum and Gussin (2008), for example, found that labeling an identical transcript as from FOX or from CNN significantly influenced people's perceptions. Even though the article was *identical*, people perceived the FOX-labeled article as more favorable toward President George W. Bush than the CNN-labeled article. Thus, **source impressions color people's ability to evaluate the content of media messages.**

prepared for PBS by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Media found that 41 percent reported that they trust PBS news and public affairs programs a great deal (PBS News, 2008).

Despite these positive indications, there also is evidence of a partisan divide in credibility assessments of public broadcasting. The Pew Research Center (2006) found that that 15 percent of Republicans and 30 percent of Democrats believed all or most of what NPR said. Further, 13 percent of Republicans and 32 percent of Democrats believed all or most of what was reported on *The NewsHour*. This

gap has fluctuated somewhat over time, and is displayed in the following charts. Figure 1: Believability of *NewsHour*, NPR over time

**Believe All or Most from
NewsHour 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 2000 2002 2004
2006 Democrats Republicans
Believe All or Most from National Public
Radio
(NPR) 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 2000 2002 2004
2006 Democrats Republicans**

Data from the Pew Research Center, 2006.
Percentages are of those able to rate the programming.

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Beyond the Mass Public: Other Approaches to Assessing News Media Performance

Although it is important to understand how the mass public reaches conclusions about news media performance, it also is important to investigate how a variety of organized publics approach these issues. These perspectives can be usefully compared to the ways academics have approached the systematic evaluation of news media performance. Such a comparison reveals some similarities in method, because the tools for analysis are no longer the sole province of the scholarly world. But important differences arise between a usually more dispassionate academic approach and ones based on a political agenda.

Academics

Academics have employed many measures for assessing actual news media performance. As the “Best Practices in Assessing Objectivity and Balance” is the topic of another White Paper for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, we devote only short attention to this issue here.

Though academics have researched what the public believes about the media (see research reviewed above), they also have proposed other indicators of news media

As the charts document, Democrats consistently have found *The NewsHour* and NPR to be more believable than Republicans. For both *The NewsHour* and NPR, Republicans have found the programming to be less believable over time, while the pattern for Democrats is less clear. There also is some indication that the gap may increase during presidential election years in comparison to mid-term election years, though more data would be necessary to sufficiently test this idea.

performance. Academics have assessed news media performance either by analyzing the media’s content or by analyzing other aspects of the news making process; we discuss both of these in turn.

Content measures. Attributes of media coverage are frequently assessed using the technique of content analysis, which is a method where media content is systematically and quantitatively analyzed. The method requires researchers to obtain measures of reliability to ensure that the results are replicable by others. (Krippendorff, 2004).

D’Alessio and Allen (2000) review a number of ways in which news media bias has been assessed in scholarly research.

- Column inches devoted to different sides
- Number of headlines or photographs devoted to different sides
- Amount of time spent covering different sides
- Number of overtly opinionated statements about different sides

As previously discussed, our two-party system lends itself to an analysis of whether each side is being treated equally in the media. Accordingly, the assessment techniques described by D'Alessio and Allen are seen as indicating biased coverage when one side (e.g. Democrats or Republicans) receives a disproportionate amount of space, time, or attention in the press. In their meta-analysis of media bias

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Conducting **content analyses** where trained coders evaluate the *tone* of media coverage and whether media coverage is more favorable toward one political candidate compared to another (e.g. Aday, Livingston, & Hebert, 2005; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Project for Excellence in Journalism).

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Using **computer content analysis** to assess media bias. For example, Domke, Watts, Shah, and Fan (1999) analyzed the proximity of candidate names to positive or negative terms (e.g. success or attack) using a computer program. This allowed them to create measures of the valence of news coverage. Domke et al. checked the validity of their computerized content analysis strategy by comparing the computer coding results with human coding results, finding considerable agreement.

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Relating Congressional voting records to media bias. Groseclose and Milyo (2005) noted the frequency with which (a) members of Congress and (b) media outlets cited various liberal and conservative think tanks and policy groups. Groseclose and Milyo used this information to compute ADA scores (an

research, D'Alessio and Allen find little evidence of a systematic media bias, defined as an imbalance in coverage received by competing political campaigns. It is important to note that this meta-analysis looked at the media as a whole instead of focusing on specific outlets.

In addition to the techniques mentioned by D'Alessio and Allen (2000), scholars have investigated media bias by: indication of Congressional members' partisanship) for various media outlets. They concluded that many news programs have a liberal bias, including NPR's *Morning Edition*. This study also found that *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* was only slightly left of center. The authors defined the center by estimating the average U.S. voter's ADA score.

Non-content measures. Though analyzing messages in the media represents one strategy for assessing news media performance, other strategies have been employed.

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Assessing the partisanship and political ideology of journalists (e.g. Pew Research Center & Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004; Weaver et al., 2007)

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Examining the media industry to see if journalists are beholden to advertising corporations and official sources (see, for example, the film *The Myth of the Liberal Media: The Propaganda Model of News*)

Summary. Academics have employed a wide variety of methods to assess news media performance. Content analyses frequently include only a few aspects of

coverage. Zelizer, Park, and Gudelunas (2002), however, argue that that looking at only one feature of news presentation is problematic because bias can manifest itself differently in different features of the news. In their examination of bias in newspaper coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in September of 2000, for example, these authors examined visuals, graphics, frames, language, and placement. In general, the

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corresponding rise in the number of groups monitoring media performance. *Time* magazine characterized these groups dismissively in 1991 as “The Media’s Wacky Watchdogs,” suggesting that “media bashers” were only out to make a buck (Aug. 5, 1991, p. 54). Since that time, these watchdogs have grown dramatically and are taken more seriously by the mainstream media. Interest groups of all kinds have incorporated a media critique in their political projects, including identity movements centered around gender, race, and ethnicity which want more favorable treatment. Other organizations have made news media criticism a more central part of their work, but differ significantly in the way they approach this analysis.

Media monitoring outside the academic world, and including the blogosphere, is still largely an American phenomenon, given the greater acceptance in Europe and elsewhere that journalism and politics are naturally tied together. Citizens in these regions would find charges of media bias unremarkable. Many interest groups include a media monitoring component, but a number have made media criticism their primary role. Based on funding, the right-leaning critics (roughly categorized examples of right- and left-leaning critics can be

best methods are those that: (a) assess multiple aspects of coverage, (b) provide clear criteria that permits others to replicate the analysis, and (c) capture content differences that are meaningfully connected to news media performance.

Media watchdogs

As the media have become more powerful, along with public awareness of their importance, there has been a

found below) have had an advantage in prominence and longevity (although the left seems to have closed the gaps in the blogosphere).

Schudson (1995) notes, “Another story is that the main development in the news media has been a sharp move of news content to the right (a favorite theory on the left) or, alternatively, that the national news media have been captured by a corps of too well paid, too comfortable, too Eastern, too Ivy League, and too liberal journalists (a favorite, naturally, on the right)” (p. 182). In observing this discourse of contending critiques (often not engaging directly with each other), Schudson continues by categorizing media watchdogs as left- and right-leaning, noting many of the same details as we do below.

Media watchdog organizations employ many different methods for assessing news media performance. Their claims must be carefully evaluated in light of their method. These organizations are valuable, however, in making the public more aware of how the news is created and the characteristics of the news. The findings provide valuable insights as long as the methods are reported clearly and can be replicated. The cases below exemplify the range of approaches and political positions.

1.

Conservative

- Accuracy in Media (AIM)

Accuracy in Media, founded by the late Reed Irvine, is the granddaddy of media monitors with a conservative, anti-communist agenda and support from conservative foundations. Recently, for example, AIM attacked Al-Jazeera for being anti-American and a terrorist

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division. AIM has been critical of public broadcasting as left-leaning in the past (AIM Report, 2005).

- Media Research Center (MRC)

The Media Research Center calls itself the “leader in documenting, exposing and neutralizing liberal media bias.” Clearly one of the leaders among the watchdogs and well funded by conservative foundations, the MRC addresses bias in the culture at large, encompassing entertainment as well as news media. Although its mission statement calls for *balance* in the media, the more pointed expressed goal is to provide information useful for conservative activists. Starting with the liberal media premise allows the evidence to consist of anecdotal statements selectively culled from the mainstream media that would indicate criticism of America, the government, or Republicans. MRC leader Brent Bozell has distributed a guide for detecting media bias, which include conventional indicators of emphasis, omission, and sourcing. A recent “Media Reality Check” report on media coverage of Iraq criticized coverage for underplaying American “success” and “heroism.”

2. Liberal

- Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (Fair)

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting presents itself as a progressive media

organization. No systematic evidence from specific programming was introduced, relying instead on a poll of what respondents thought about the network, with claims that it is a propaganda outlet (an example of “perceived” vs. “actual” bias) and noting the borrowing of personnel by Al-Jazeera English from the Arabic

monitor, advocating greater diversity in media especially for under-represented groups and dissent. It identifies media bias rooted in corporate control, advertiser and public relations pressure, and advocates structural reform, including independent public broadcasting. PBS also has been criticized from this perspective. In studies of *The NewsHour* program in 2006 and 1990, FAIR examined the sources appearing and determined that they were overwhelmingly male, white, with Republicans outnumbering Democrats in the more recent study 2 to 1. As in commercial news, officials dominated the lineup with the rare representative of public interest groups.

- PR Watch

Supported by the Center for Media and Democracy, PR Watch and its related “Sourcewatch,” focus on efforts to manipulate or spin the news, usually on behalf of corporate and government interests.

- Project Censored

Project Censored examines “news that didn’t make the news,” primarily from the perspective of structural constraints on media based on their interconnections with corporate interests.

- Media Matters

Media Matters for America is a relatively recent and well-supported watchdog, dedicated to “comprehensively monitoring,

analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media.” Employing similar techniques to FAIR, Media Matters’ reports document what it regards as imbalances and double-

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an advocate for public broadcasting independence (from political and corporate interference).

3. Other monitoring organizations

- The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA)

The Center for Media and Public Affairs claims it’s nonpartisan, nonprofit, and scientific. The founders Robert and Linda Lichter are known as the authors of *The Media Elite*, the previously mentioned book which launched a strong critical attack against the mainstream press based on the claimed political leanings of journalists at the elite (New York and Washington) media. Funding for the center is primarily from conservative foundations, and Lichter was an AEI fellow and consultant to Fox News. Their studies use traditional content analysis methods, but have been criticized for generalizing from the limited data that supports the claim that media tilt left. For example, a 1992 study of 225 PBS documentaries found a liberal slant, but that was based on a small fraction of the total segments from those programs – those clearly stating a thematic opinion – and ignoring the non-documentary programs that often contained conservative commentary (e.g., Wall Street Week).

- Media Tenor

Outside the U.S., Media Tenor is the most well known media monitor, conducting systematic content analysis for a variety of clients, particularly business, and partners with academic experts in communication. Using human coders, they have conducted a number of

standards in finding a disparity favoring conservative voices in areas such as op-columns, talk-show guests, coverage of religion, and under-representation of women and minorities. It also has been publicly distributed reports about issues and people in the global media. Sources of news are well documented, but a positive or negative evaluation of the content is more subjective. In a political campaign, the positive/negative valence may be clear because it is always with reference to how the campaign is going compared to the opponent’s. In more complex issues, however, a positive evaluation is always with reference to some normative benchmark, which is not always easy to identify. A declining stock market, for example, still means profits for someone. In spite of its ostensible scientific method, its affiliation with Robert Lichter of CMPA and the interpretations it sometimes makes of the data have left Media Tenor open to charges of subjectivity.

- The Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ)

The Project for Excellence in Journalism conducts systematic analyses of news media content. Though PEJ used to be affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, it is now part of the Pew Research Center. PEJ conducts large scale content analyses of major newspapers, websites, morning shows on network television, evening news programs (ABC, CBS, NBC, & PBS), cable television programs, and radio programming. Human coders assess the story topic and newsmakers. PEJ also offers commentary on the state of the news media.

Both *The NewsHour* and NPR’s *Morning Edition* are included in PEJ’s

regular media coding, and PEJ provides commentary on the results of their 20 coverage of the presidential hopefuls in the Fall of 2007, PEJ drew three conclusions about *The NewsHour*'s coverage: (1) *The NewsHour* gave less attention to the primaries in comparison to the nightly network news (2) *The NewsHour* gave more attention to lesser-known candidates, and (3) "When it came to tone, however, *The NewsHour* upheld its pattern found in other research for more neutral coverage than other media" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007).

Objective 3: Comparison of how news consumers view the difference between news, analysis, commentary, and opinion, and whether the standards are different for commercial news outlets versus public media

Increasingly, the public responds to news and information with little regard for the traditional distinctions made by media professionals between reality and entertainment, news and opinion, commercial and public, and indeed between "professional" and "amateur," or citizen. The news and information environment now is more fluid, with signposts for bias provided less by the content itself than by non-media actors who integrate media criticism into a broader rhetorical strategy.

Within this context, it is challenging, even from the perspective of academic researchers, to develop *a priori* distinctions between news, analysis, commentary, and opinion. Yet it is part of American press ideology that they can be clearly distinguished. The editorial page of a newspaper is set apart from its news coverage and analysis is distinct from breaking news. All news decisions, of course, have an element of subjectivity. Consider, for example, a sentence that says "Women were

analysis. For example, in assessing

significantly more likely to support Clinton over Obama compared to men." In one sense, this is news – this may be based on the results of a poll, for example, where there was a statistically significant difference between men and women in their support for the Democratic presidential hopefuls. In another sense, however, this is opinion or analysis – the researcher chose to analyze gender, chose to report about gender, chose to discuss the Democratic presidential hopefuls, and chose to use the word "significantly."

Though the lines quickly become blurry, academic research still provides some insight into how news consumers – who themselves have been socialized with these distinctions – distinguish between news, analysis, commentary, and opinion. The results of research indicate that, in general, **news consumers are neither rigorous nor consistent about dividing information into fact and opinion categories.**

1.

When the task of dividing information into categories of fact versus opinion is easy, news consumers have little trouble making these distinctions.

Graney (1990), for example, provided subjects with paragraphs from editorials or from news without telling them the source of the content. After receiving a brief training on distinguishing between fact and opinion, subjects were asked to evaluate the paragraphs as either fact or opinion. Subjects were correct over 90 percent of the time. In the study, subjects were *asked* to make distinctions between fact and opinion; whether they do so in their day-to-day lives is unclear.

The public's ability to distinguish between factual reporting and editorializing has been offered as one explanation as to why the public has historically found television to be more credible than newspapers. Until 2000, television broadcasters were not permitted to make political endorsements while newspapers were (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). According to this explanation, the public perception that newspapers were less credible than television was because the public knew that newspapers were able to endorse while television news was prohibited from endorsing. This explanation could represent the public's knowledge about endorsement practices, however, not their ability to distinguish between fact and opinion.

2.

Though the public sometimes does distinguish between news, analysis, commentary, and opinion, there is evidence that they do so inconsistently.

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The public is not always vigilant about categorizing incoming information. If the public were vigilant about making distinctions, then they should avoid using fictional information when making assessments about reality. Yet research suggests that the public is prone to do just this. Studies on *cultivation effects* show that people incorrectly estimate the prevalence of many different occurrences (e.g. crime, single-parent families, etc.) based on their exposure to television images (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002).

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newspapers' political leanings when the newspapers' candidate

Even fictional television images can influence people's perceptions of reality.

Cultivation effects can be dampened, however, by motivating and/or enabling the public to more carefully think about their assessments (Shrum, 2002). This research suggests that encouraging effortful and careful mental processing can help the public to make distinctions between news and opinion.

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If people are good at distinguishing between news and opinion, they should be able to detect media leanings. Research, however, shows that **the public is not very good at detecting the political leanings of the media that they consume**. Robinson (1972) reported that just over half of his sample was able to detect the partisanship of the newspaper they read (newspaper partisanship was assessed using reports in *Editor & Publisher*). This seems to have changed little over time. Using data that paired a content analysis of media leanings with public perceptions of media leanings, Mutz and Martin (2001) reported that only 48 percent of respondents correctly reported the presidential candidate favored by their newspaper. Using the same data, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) found that "most newspapers did not take strong partisan stands, and a large proportion of the respondents did not perceive their daily newspaper (or television news program) as preferring one candidate" (p. 119).

Dalton et al. did find, however, that citizens were able to detect their preference was clearer and more extreme in the coverage. This again suggests that when distinctions are

easily made, the public is able to delineate between news, opinion, analysis, and commentary.

Dalton and colleagues also showed that people who were more attentive to a political campaign had only a slight advantage in accurately perceiving the political leanings of the newspaper they read.

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Audiences are more likely to identify certain types of content as biased.

In one study, D'Alessio (2003) asked people to indicate where they found bias in news articles. He found that people were far less likely to label factual content as biased compared to summary content and quotations in news articles. Similarly, Baum and Gussin (2008) found that media content that did not contain any substantive political content was not perceived as biased, while media content including substantive political content was perceived as biased by study participants asked to code paragraphs of media content about the 2004 presidential campaign as favoring Bush or favoring Kerry.

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If people meaningfully distinguish between fact, opinion, analysis, and commentary, we might expect to find differences between the effects of exposure to these different types of information on people's attitudes and beliefs. Research on political debates has examined how audience reactions differ depending on whether audiences (a) watched a debate (more fact-based exposure) and/or (b) watched post-23 distinctions are easy and (b) they are asked to do so. In general, however, people are not great at making these distinctions. Further, even when people

debate analysis such as the statements made in the "spin room" (more analysis-based exposure).

Post-debate analysis *does* influence political perceptions (Fridkin, Kenney, Gershon, & Woodall, 2008; Tsfati, 2003). Post-debate analysis, however, has less of an effect on those watching the actual debate in its entirety. These studies suggest two things. First, in the absence of viewing the actual news event, news analysis is influential. Second, after viewing the actual event, people may not be influenced by news analysis. This gives some indication that people can recognize news analysis and will discount this information if they are able.

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Even if people are able to accurately assess differences between news and opinion at the time of exposure, it is unclear that they are able to retain these distinctions over time. Yegiyan and Grabe (2007) found that over time, the public's ability to distinguish between information presented in news-like ads (an opinionated source) and information presented in news (a factual source) was severely hampered. Only a week after exposure to the news-like ads, "information presented in news-like ads was incorrectly attributed to news about 70% of the time" (p. 391).

Summary. People can distinguish between news and analysis, commentary, and opinion when (a)

are able to accurately assess differences between news and opinion at the time of exposure, it is unclear that they are able to retain these distinctions over time.

Implications for Public News Media Outlets

The research reviewed above has several implications for public broadcasting which we review below. To the extent that public broadcasting indexes the same elite opinions and sources, amplifying the same voices already heard in the commercial arena, public media will be regarded as just another part of the mainstream media (and, no doubt, already is in many respects).

Though there has been less research about audience perceptions of public broadcasting in comparison to research on audience perceptions of commercial news broadcasts, there are parallels. Similar to perceptions of commercial news broadcasts, perceptions of public news broadcasting vary based on partisanship. Democrats rate *The NewsHour* and NPR as more believable compared to Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2006).

Further, in 2003, publicly-released data gathered for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting documented that just over 20 percent perceived PBS and NPR as liberally biased while around 10 percent perceived a conservative bias (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2003). The percentage seeing a liberal bias in public broadcasting may have changed as the partisan gap in credibility assessments of *The NewsHour* and NPR have changed (Pew Research Center, 2006).

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“Tomlinson had sought to add more conservative-minded shows to the line-up to counter what many conservatives

This gap in credibility perceptions could be the result of an actual bias. When presented with biased material, people can detect that the news is slanted (see, for example, Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004).

Analyses aiming to understand whether public news media actually are biased yield decidedly mixed results. This likely is due to the variation in employed methods for assessing bias, in the programs and time periods studied, and in the different organizations conducting the analysis. For example, while CMPA’s limited sample 1992 study of PBS documentaries found a liberal slant (see above), FAIR found that *The NewsHour* sources were more likely to be Republicans, and the Project for Excellence in Journalism commended *The NewsHour* for its neutral coverage relative to other outlets.

This gap in credibility perceptions also may be the result of media coverage and elite discussion about the alleged partisanship of public news media broadcasts. Though media discussion of a liberal tilt may have subsided recently, there certainly is evidence for this type of coverage:

“The Corporation for Public Broadcasting is at the center of debates about perceived liberal bias” – June 15, 2006, *New York Times*

considered a liberal bias in public broadcasting.” – December 20, 2006, *Washington Post*

Media critics charging a pro-conservative tilt received far less coverage. As Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) document, media coverage of bias can translate into perceptions of bias irrespective of the actual bias of media content.

To the extent that public media are known for their “civility,” this is an asset. Research shows that the public associates this trait with greater trust and credibility.

Summary: Key Research Conclusions

1.

The public does not always think about bias in the news in the same way that journalists do.

2.

The media may be objective and fair, while still being regarded as not credible by the audience.

3.

Judgments of news media performance are influenced by the actual features of

Recommendations for the Future

Based on our review and synthesis of the literature about news media performance, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting requested that we make recommendations for improving news delivery, evaluating news objectivity, and capitalizing on objective and balanced content. The following pages review these recommendations.

Objective 4: Recommendations on how the process of collecting and delivering news content on public media could be improved within the context of objectivity and balance.

1.

Describe efforts to ensure quality news media performance.

news stories. For example, when stories present only one side of an issue or use tabloid production techniques, audiences judge the story to be less credible.

4.

Audiences generalize their judgments of media bias beyond a single article or broadcast to entire news organizations.

5.

The elite-generated rhetorical context matters. Public perceptions of the news media are linked to how elites publicly assess the news media. Charges that the media have a liberal bias have been more prevalent and publicized than charges that the media have a conservative bias.

6.

Impressions of news sources strongly color people’s ability to evaluate the content of media messages from that source.

The process of delivering news content on public media could be improved within the context of news media performance by giving the public more information about efforts taken to ensure quality. For example, how do reporters go about selecting sources for a story? Why did the news outlet broadcast one candidate’s speech and not another candidate’s speech? What standards are in place? Making these available to the public will help audiences understand the process of news content collection and delivery.

Public media professionals must engage the public with dialogue about news and journalistic decisions. These discussions – spurred in part by media watchdogs – are a major feature in the on-line world,

and media voices must engage with it. In the past, responses to charges of bias and other journalistic weaknesses have been met with limited or defensive comments from broadcasting spokespersons. Instead, public media should embrace this discourse, featuring any claims of bias on associated web sites with supporting evidence, adding a clear background on how decisions were reached, posing related issues, acknowledging weaknesses where appropriate, and encouraging public comment.

The popularity of programs like the Daily Show and Fox News suggest that citizens are drawn to news with a sharp point of view – even if comedic. They know intuitively that news is a constructed product and, to the extent that news organizations are able to acknowledge and build on this awareness, they will increase credibility. Otherwise, no amount of care in the journalistic process will lead viewers to

26 trust. There is some related evidence regarding codes of conduct, however. Codes of conduct represent efforts to publicize standards. When political campaigns have used codes of conduct, citizens believe that these types of codes are important and find that issues are discussed more frequently during campaigns (Maisel, West, & Clifton, 2007). Just as codes of conduct in political campaigns are seen as beneficial, we believe that publicizing efforts to ensure quality news media performance would be positively reviewed by the public. Original research could be solicited to investigate how to most effectively increase transparency.

As the public and journalists differ in their assessments of bias (e.g. Rouner,

completely trust the product without an accompanying honesty about how it was done.

This recommendation is related, but not identical, to the “media beat,” which has become more popular in newsrooms over the past decade. Journalists assigned to the “media beat,” however, tend to cover other media outlets and their articles and segments tend to be targeted toward other media professionals as opposed to the public (Fengler, 2003) and becomes an “insider” discourse. Our recommendation is to make newsroom decisions more transparent. In the face of rhetorical attacks (and their effects on public perceptions), journalists cede the battle unless they redouble their efforts at openness and transparency. Admittedly, there is limited empirical evidence suggesting that publicizing efforts to ensure quality news media performance translate into higher media

Slater, & Buddenbaum, 1999), these efforts at greater transparency could help to educate the public about how to assess news media performance and the standards in place for ensuring quality.

2.

Provide credible information that allows the public to accurately assess news media performance.

In attempting to assess news media performance, people may require additional information to validate claims made in the media. A number of scholars and activists have developed media literacy campaigns to encourage people to more carefully and thoughtfully process media content (see, for example, Potter, 2005). By documenting individual sources of news information and efforts to obtain additional

information, news organizations could empower people to make assessments about news media quality on their own. Jackson and Jamieson (2007), for example, provide a number of rules for evaluating the quality of news content. Examples of their rules for assessing news information include: check primary sources, know how numbers are calculated, and know background information about sources. By making this information easily accessible to the news consumer, news media perceptions could be improved.

Research on how people assess credibility provides key insights into the types of information that increase credibility. Metzger (2007), for example, reviews factors such as source citations, citations to scientific data or references, author qualifications and credentials, and the notification/ presence of an editorial review process or board, which can all

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what to cover; 2) examine alternative ways to frame stories on important community issues; 3) choose frames that stand the best chance to stimulate citizen deliberation and build public understanding of issues; 4) take the initiative to report on major public problems in a way that advances public knowledge of possible solutions and the values served by alternative courses of action; 5) pay continuing and systematic attention to how well and how credibly it is communicating with the public (p. 17).

Numerous public journalism initiatives have been conducted and evaluated, several with particular relevance to the objective of improving the collection and delivery of news content. Several are reviewed below:

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increase credibility perceptions of online information. The Internet makes providing this information to interested citizens far easier than in times past and is relevant as an additional tool for broadcasting.

3.

Facilitate opportunities for public input in the news making process.

Incorporating the public in the news process may be helpful in increasing perceptions of credibility. This suggestion stems from the public, or civic, journalism movement. Though many definitions have been offered for public journalism, Lambeth (1998) offers the following:

Public journalism can be viewed as a form of journalism that seeks to: 1) listen systematically to the stories and ideas of citizens even while protecting its freedom to choose

Several Wisconsin media outlets, including the public television and public radio stations, put together a public journalism project called *We the People*. The program included town hall meetings, debates, and a civics training program to educate citizens about political strategy. Citizens had many opportunities to participate. For example, there was a call-in public radio program following the debate. The investigators asked citizens whether the program made them feel more positively toward the organizations sponsoring *We the People*; “Before the election, 29 percent responded positively; after the experiment, the figure increased to 42 percent” (Denton & Thorson, 1998, p. 156). There is some precedent that positive feelings are related to trust; Tsfati (2002) found that ratings of the press in covering presidential elections were highly correlated with trust in an

outlet. This suggests that projects like *We the People* will increase trust in the media. (People will likely generalize a good example to the large enterprise as they do for bias judgments.)

Furthermore, this project was responsive to citizen interests; Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that when citizens were asked about what is right about how the media cover politics, the public indicated that they “preferred news events included those that involved the news media least – debates, lengthy interviews, and unedited speeches” (p. 227).

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Looking at newspapers in twenty media markets during the 1996 election, Meyer and Potter described their findings from the Poynter Election Project; “Media bashing declines as citizen-based

28 expressed concern that relying on the public’s thoughts may not be in society’s best interests (see a review of critiques of public journalism in Rosen, 1999). Further, civic journalism efforts do not uniformly increase citizen trust in the media (Grimes, 1999). Additional research on how to best increase trust could be conducted in order to isolate factors that are most important in public journalism projects.

In many ways, the public journalism movement has been superseded by the rise of *citizen journalism* and its partial embrace by the mainstream media – which has incorporated various components of the blogosphere – in an attempt to capture a wider array of public voices. By citizen journalism, we mean efforts to include citizens directly in the news making process. There are numerous examples of these efforts.

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journalism increases, even after the effects of party, age, race and education have been filtered out” (Rosen, 1999; Meyer & Potter, 1998).

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In a study surveying newspaper editors and journalism educators, Dickson and Topping (2001) conclude, “This study suggests that media credibility is a concern for newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators and that they think public journalism might be one means for improving credibility” (p. 82).

The implication of these studies is that involving the public in some aspects of news creation and production may be helpful. Certainly this recommendation is not without objection – some have MSNBC.com, NBC News, and MySpace sponsored a contest to send two citizen journalists to cover the Democratic and Republican National Conventions (Friedman, 2008).

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Fox News asks viewers to participate in uReport while CNN asks viewers to participate in iReport; both ask viewers to send in photos and videos.

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The BBC has incorporated citizen journalism. As director of BBC’s World Service and Global News Division Richard Sambrook (2005) notes, “We know now that when major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on, news coverage is a partnership” (p. 14).

To this point, however, we are lacking systematic research about the effects of citizen journalism on assessments of news media performance. There is some

indication that citizen journalism may positively affect news media perceptions. Research suggests that *hostile media perceptions* (whereby partisans judge putatively neutral messages as biased against their point of view) decline with student reporters in comparison to journalists (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). In the same way, citizen journalists may lead the public to rely less on their previously held beliefs when evaluating news media performance.

4.

Incorporate a more diverse array of perspectives in news reporting.

In recent years, the idea of *issue framing* has taken hold in the academic literature as a way of understanding news and political communication. **Frames** are defined as “organizing principles that work symbolically to meaningfully

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and narrative story-lines. Certainly, the language of framing leads to more useful discussion of news media performance than the more pejorative and more limited concepts, such as bias, which can signify the critics own implicit standard. In one of the most widely cited works on the sociology of news, *Deciding What's News*, sociologist Herbert Gans (1979), calls for a more multi-perspectival news. By this, he intended for the news to incorporate a wider variety of voices, not just limited to official and economic elites – what he called “the knowns.” Current serious public affairs would be wise to consider this idea, moving toward greater pluralism and beyond the simplistic notion of balance as an evenly matched pitting of one side against another, a structure that often plays into the polarization of opinion and suggests

structure the social world” (Reese, 2001). Facts don't speak for themselves but are embedded in narratives that tell a compelling story, an idea with crossover appeal that is understood intuitively by the public, political leaders, and media professionals. Pejoratively regarded as “spin” when political managers do it, framing is a part of democratic life, and the idea has given greater importance to the way we look at public discourse. In the simple awareness that there is more than one way to frame a story, even journalists are more accepting that they can never perfectly mirror society, but that news reports are inevitably structured in a number of ways. Through a greater awareness of framing, the public is more likely to have a transparent understanding of the message construction that goes on behind the scenes, with important choices in language, sources, visuals, that the truth is found between two extreme positions.

Rodney Benson (2008) is among the emerging media sociologists finding ways to evaluate the multi-perspectival dimension cross-nationally. In spite of the political and economic differences between the U.S. and French media, he finds that the French news media provide a more diverse array of frames concerning key issues, and they feature more civil society news sources who are not within the traditional governmental and economic elites. Benson speaks favorably of how French journalism has institutionalized a “story ensemble” format, which – regardless of the news of the day – commits to a single event or trend on the front and first few pages. A variety of elements is grouped together, including breaking news, analysis, transcripts of interviews, and

background information. What is true for print media also can apply to television. Much of broadcast news formats encourage the idea that the truth is found between two competing, often official and political, sides. By moving away from this traditional format of competing talking heads, to present a variety of perspectives and styles both within and across programs, television news may serve to move the perceptions of viewers beyond a simple evaluation of “balance.” By incorporating a more multi-perspectival array of voices, going beyond the “inside-the-beltway” experts and ideologically-aligned sources, viewers may be obliged to put aside their traditional cues as to what constitutes bias. **If PBS tracks the same array of sources and formats found in commercial media (even though with a less hurried and more serious and**

30 attributed to the outlet (Baum & Gussin, 2008; Turner, 2007), the source of the message could be eliminated when asking the public to provide their perceptions. Blinded transcripts of news content could be evaluated by a random sample of the public. Based on the *hostile media phenomenon*, we would not predict that all members of the public would assess the content as objective and balanced. Based on this phenomenon, however, neutral news programming should be assessed as liberally biased by those with conservative leanings and as conservatively biased by those with liberal leanings. After taking into account the proportion of liberals and conservatives in the sample, neutral sources, on average, should be judged as objective and balanced by the public. Similar strategies have been employed in the past. Stroud (2006) asked subjects to

“civil” tone), it will be subject to the same public perceptions and criticisms that attach to the rest of the mainstream press.

Objective 5: Recommendations on how to better monitor and evaluate news and public affairs programming related to issues of objectivity and balance.

5.

Have the public evaluate media content to assess news media performance.

One way in which news media performance could be monitored and evaluated is to have the public assess news content. Based on the results of this analysis, news and public affairs programming could demonstrate their objectivity and balance or could use it to adjust and monitor news content. As perceptions of a media outlet can color public perceptions of a message

evaluate whether magazines leaned left or right to find magazines that on average, people perceived as centrist. As the magazines were not well known, it was possible to assess perceptions without removing information about the source. Specifically incorporating *The NewsHour* into a study, Feldman (2008) asked undergraduate students to examine three short news segments: one from MSNBC’s Countdown with Keith Olbermann, one from CNN Headline News’ Glenn Beck, and one from *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS. After removing information about the news program and host from the transcripts, she found that Olbermann and Beck were perceived as biased while Lehrer was perceived as neutral. This provides some precedent for evaluating the content of news media by making viewers unaware of the source.

Summary: Steps for Evaluating News Media Performance

1. Obtain articles, transcripts, and any accompanying visual material.
2. “Blind” the materials by removing any feature that could identify the public affairs program.
 - a. This includes removing names of reporters or anchors, mentions of the news broadcast, and any distinctive features of the programming such as the names of the segments.
 - b. For visual materials, this would include digital removal of any material that could lead someone to guess the program being evaluated.
3. Have a random sample of the public evaluate the blinded programs for signs of bias. Afterward, ask the sample to report their political ideology,

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Lepper, 1985). In order to help public media outlets capitalize on their distinct role, however, we make the following recommendation.
6. Contrast coverage with other news media outlets.

Given that the public has established perceptions of many media outlets, public media outlets can document their role as a distinct provider of objective and balanced news and public affairs programming by contrasting their coverage with that of competitor media outlets. Several strategies can be used in order to achieve this objective.

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partisanship, and beliefs about any issues discussed in the programs.

4. Analyze whether the sample perceives the content to be biased, taking into account the political beliefs of the sample.
5. Repeat this across a variety of issues and programs, as there will likely be variation.

Objective 6: Recommendations on how public media outlets can capitalize on their increasingly distinct role as providers of objective and balanced news in public affairs programming.

In today’s media environment, it is impossible for any media outlet to be seen as objective and balanced by all members of the public; even neutral media content is perceived as biased by strong partisans (Vallone, Ross, &

- **Assessment using audience perceptions.** Using the technique mentioned under Objective 5, differences between news programs can be assessed and publicized in order for public media outlets to convey their distinct role.

- **Assessment using content analysis.** Third party vendors could be hired to conduct a content analysis to assess and publicize differences between the frames employed by public media outlets and the frames used by the mainstream media.

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