

Investigate this Document Further #2

Newspapers and the Issue of Bias versus Objectivity

Background

Many people today believe that newspaper reporting has always had as its main goal, ‘to tell the story objectively.’ However, in antebellum America, most newspapers across the country were often established, and usually regarded as another venue for political parties to promote their values, beliefs and their candidates for office. This could not be considered as unexpected since the men who established the American government so firmly believed in the free flow of information and open discussion that they actually wrote this freedom of expression into the Constitution. The 500 hundred or so newspapers that existed in the United States by 1830 were openly opinionated, partisan and, oftentimes very unkind in their treatment of the opposition. Local news was rarely reported in these early papers since their main purpose was to elect certain candidates for state or federal offices.

During the 1830s, technology and immigration helped make newspapers a more lucrative industry for mass consumption. Technological advances yielded the “penny press” that allowed more papers to be printed more cheaply, and the burgeoning immigrant population joining the ranks of the American labor force provided the volume of readership needed to buy up these papers. At the time of the Civil War in America, the usual focus on state and national political officeholders and their parties were now sharing pages with stories about local crimes, advertising products of interest to women, and eyewitness accounts from the war as a way to compete for readership in communities where several papers coexisted.

However, until the end of the nineteenth century, most papers openly remained primarily vehicles for partisan politics. It wasn’t until the advent of “investigative journalism” or “the muckrakers” at the turn of the century that American newspapers began to distance themselves from the influences of political parties. Yet, despite the fact that investigative reporting had positive influences on American reform, the sensational nature of this kind of reporting (including but not exclusively “yellow journalism”) as well as the subjective tone of many news stories, indicate that newspapers still sought to first, sell more papers and second, influence government and attract the electorate through their headlines and emotional appeal.

Adolph Ochs, owner of the *New York Times* in the late 1890s is considered to be the first acknowledged publisher of a newspaper that provided “objective” news reporting. Publishers like Ochs sought to provide an “objective” or balanced account of events (the beginnings of the “he said, she said” format) that would allow the informed reader to make up his or her own mind. Socially responsible journalism encouraged looking at news reporting and writing as a profession and in 1908, the first school of journalism was established at the University of Missouri by Walter Williams.

The peak of “objective” news reporting began to crumble under the succession of government scandals, beginning with the excesses of the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s, to the misinformation provided by the Executive Office about the Vietnam War, to the government treatment of citizens in the Civil Rights confrontations, to the Watergate scandal of 1972. Public mistrust of government leaders encouraged news reporting to go on the offensive with government and political parties, in their role as “public watchdog.” No longer were newspapers seen as entirely controlled by politics, though in many cases, newspapers would favor one or the other ends of the political spectrum.

No longer did reporters feel as compelled to create a “balance” in coverage when there were obvious signs that in many cases, one side had the facts and evidence on their side. This form of “news analysis” coverage became part of not only print but also of the emerging radio and television media. Today, many authorities will insist that the days of political control over newspapers such as were seen in the 19th century are long gone. But this is not necessarily true, since in today’s political arena, it is the individual candidate and office holder exerting more influence and attracting more public attention than do the party machines. During the latter part of the 19th century, following the Civil War, political parties were at their peak, riding on a tide of popular support fueled by media exposure. Today, with the weakening power of political parties, politicians are more dependent than ever on the press to reach a less politically active public.

With the competition from first radio, then television, and now electronic media, print newspapers are being challenged to keep their foothold in the American consciousness. American newspaper reporting has gone through many changes and with the electronic media explosion “change” will remain the adjective describing the newspaper industry. Many people today are entering the media mainstream as news bloggers and tweeters and even formally organized online news organizations: <http://tainews.org/>, greatly enhancing the diversity of news sources available for public consumption.

During Tourgee’s lifetime, newspapers in America were mainly regarded as mouthpieces for the major political parties. However, even within the Republican and Democrat camps, there existed divisions that were reflected not only in the political arena, but in the pressrooms as well. Groups with specific agendas or with extreme political philosophies on certain topics that differed from the mainstream would often start up a newspaper in order to get their specific messages out there, or even to change national focus on issues. Like today, in the electronic and even in the print forums, there are more than just two main points of view in news reporting.

In document #717 (Letter from Dunn to Tourgee), Dunn identifies men who are both Democrat and Republican. He mentions two newspapers that were considered “Republican” at the time, the North Carolina *Union Register* (which Tourgee worked for) and *The Standard* of North Carolina that was owned by William Holden. Tourgee had been attacking Holden and the more moderate Radicals for being too lenient with the former Confederate leaders who were attempting to regain their positions in government

after the Civil War. In Dunn’s opinion, the bickering among the Republicans would only strengthen the power of the Democrats – in his words, he states:

“Let the Register and the Standard unite thoroughly and heartily – let Caldwell and Settle unite – thoroughly determined, and put down all the schisms, by which means alone you may put down Secession and Copperheadism.”

Today, as in the past, citizens need to be aware of the multiple media messages they receive on a daily basis. They need to be able to detect and discern biases and then determine if they are based on fact or opinion (or both). They need to be able to assess the validity of evidence presented in the news sources they encounter and to seek other evidence that can confirm or challenge another point of view. These are skills that students learn in the classroom and these are skills that they can rely on as adults to be informed and engaged citizens.

Resources:

The Fading Mystique of the Objective Press (Doug McGill, 2004):

<http://www.mcgillreport.org/objectivity.htm>

Antebellum America: Journalism (Mark Canada)

<http://www.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/17841865/history/journal.htm>

The Media and Democracy: Theory and History:

<http://online.missouri.edu/exec/data/courses/2339/public/lesson01/lesson01.aspx>

“The Reconstruction of American Journalism” (from *Columbia Journalism Review*,

2009) http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php?page=all

Lesson ideas:

Adapted from: Teaching About Author’s Point of View in Nonfiction

(<http://www.brighthubeducation.com/high-school-english-lessons/52601-teaching-point-of-view/>)

And: Bias in the Newspaper (<http://www.naafoundation.org/docs/Foundation/highfiveunitB.pdf>)

***Satisfies the Common Core Standards for Education in Writing and Reading**

Reading:

- 1.** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- 2.** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- 3.** Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take

Writing:

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Vocabulary:

Objectivity	Not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts
Bias	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. A preference or an inclination, especially one that inhibits impartial judgment. b. An unfair act or policy stemming from prejudice.
Point of View	A manner of viewing things; an attitude.
Prejudice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. An adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts. b. A preconceived preference or idea.

Begin by asking students what they understand by the phrase “Point of view.” Write down various suggestions given. Then ask them if these things could all be included as:

1. Through whose eyes are you viewing this situation/scene/story?
2. What can you tell me about that person's opinions, values, and beliefs?
3. How do you know that this speaker feels that way?

Tell students that they are going to read newspaper articles about a topic during the time of American History just after the Civil War and that they will be looking for evidence of point of view. Remind them that they will need to back up their answers with textual evidence.

Use the **Library of Congress** site to pre-select the topic and newspapers you will have students read from. The section, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, 1836-1920* includes almost 5 million pages from newspapers in 26 states. In addition, you can access North Carolina newspapers through their Newspaper Digitization Project at: <http://www.archives.ncdcr.gov/newspaper/index.html>

Depending on time and skill levels, you can choose a single paper or several from across the country; you can include one or multiple topics for investigation (in our example, we

use search terms “Freedmen’s Bureau” and “the negro question” for the time period 1866-1876. You can change the time period to search as well. Pre-selecting and printing off copies is recommended, unless students will work with computers and read the newspapers online.

Library of Congress Sources:

Freedmen’s Bureau:

Keowee courier., March 06, 1868

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026912/1868-03-06/ed-1/seq-1/>

(“Congressional Reconstruction”)

Fayetteville observer., March 29, 1866

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033395/1866-03-29/ed-1/seq-1/>

(“Joke of the season” – *contains racially offensive language)

The evening telegraph., January 02, 1866, FOURTH EDITION

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025925/1866-01-02/ed-1/seq-1/>

(“General Pillow’s experience with the Tennessee and Arkansas Freedmen”)

Edgefield advertiser., February 19, 1868

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1868-02-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

(“An interesting letter to General Scott of the Freedmen’s Bureau” lengthy, but well worth the read!)

Nashville union and American., December 24, 1874

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699/1874-12-24/ed-1/seq-1/>

(“The Richmond Freedmen Howling for their money”)

Arizona citizen., June 28, 1873

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014896/1873-06-28/ed-1/seq-1/>

(“Not frontier thieving”)

The evening telegraph., February 22, 1866, FOURTH EDITION, Page 2

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025925/1866-02-22/ed-1/seq-2/>

(“The veto, a new departure or the dissolution of the Republican party?”)

The daily phoenix., March 16, 1866

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84027008/1866-03-16/ed-1/seq-2/>

(“In favor of the negro bureau”)

The New Orleans crescent., September 22, 1868, Morning, Page7

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015775/1868-09-22/ed-1/seq-7/>

(“The platform of the national democratic convention, adopted 1868”)

The national Republican., May 10, 1866

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86053571/1866-05-10/ed-1/seq-2/>

(“What does it mean?”)

The “Negro Question”:

The Athens post., May 28, 1869, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024443/1869-05-28/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“The negro convention”)

The Sumter watchman., June 08, 1870, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026917/1870-06-08/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“The bill to enforce the fifteenth amendment”)

The Cairo evening bulletin., August 16, 1869, DAILY EDITION, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88074143/1869-08-16/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“Miscellaneous paragraphs – from Syracuse, NY Courier)

Nashville union and American., January 27, 1870, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699/1870-01-27/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“The convention”)

Gallipolis journal., May 23, 1867, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038121/1867-05-23/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (from The Nashville gazette”)

The sun., February 10, 1869, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030272/1869-02-10/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“The state capital...the irrepressible negro question”)

The evening telegraph., May 01, 1867, FOURTH EDITION, Page 4

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025925/1867-05-01/ed-1/seq-4/>
 (“The Democratic party and new issues”)

The evening telegraph., November 07, 1867, FIFTH EDITION, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025925/1867-11-07/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“Speech of Wendell Phillips on the ‘Political Question”)

Nashville union and American., January 28, 1870, Image 1

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699/1870-01-28/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“The Convention”)

The Columbia daily phoenix., June 01, 1865

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84027007/1865-06-01/ed-1/seq-1/>
 (“Chief Justice Chase, the great negro worshipper”)

As students read the texts (or you may wish to read with them) they should be able to identify feelings and biases in each story.

Have students create a two-column chart to fill in as they read. Column one should have the heading "The writer of this story thinks/feels ..." and column two should read, "I know this because he says ...".

Have students identify opinions and feelings from the text, and give proper citations to back up their theories.

Students can be asked to compose a short writing piece, expanding on the newspaper's point of view by referencing information from their text as well as other primary and secondary sources used in the unit.

Next you want to work with students in helping them gain a better understanding of the differences between point of view and bias and, between bias and objectivity.

Introduce *bias* with a brief discussion about how it appears in everyday interactions— For example, in what students may think or feel about parents, teachers, administrators or law enforcement officers. Bias is a preference for or dislike of something, usually based upon opinions and prejudices, rather than upon factual evidence. Suggest an activity such as that which follows to illustrate:

- *Identify an event or incident that occurred at a school dance, assembly, sports event or in the cafeteria.*
- *Ask two volunteers who were there to describe it.*
- *Have one student leave the room while the other recounts the event.*
- *Have the first student leave the room and have the second student enter and recount the event.*
- *Bring the first student back into class.*
- *Discuss similarities and differences between the two accounts and cite examples of bias or lack of objectivity in the accounts.*

Discuss the meaning of *bias* and *objectivity* using a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the meaning of the two words.

Allow students several minutes to re-read their newspaper stories and then ask them to look for clues (words or phrases) that identify: a) topic and potential conflict; b) audience; and c) writer bias, if any. Have students underline words or phrases they believe show bias.

Ask students what might prompt bias in observers or reporters of an incident (gender, race, age, education, cultural experiences, religion or political affiliation).

Ask students whether they think it is possible to keep bias out of reporting. Is there a place for bias in journalism? If so, should the journalist make his or her bias clear? Distribute the activity page *It All Depends*. Review directions with students. As a class, complete *It All Depends*. Discuss.

Distribute the activity page *Bias in the Media*. Review directions with students. As homework or extra credit, have students complete *Bias in the Media* and be prepared to share answers with the class.