

## Chapter 2

# THE MAINSTREAM BIAS

During the final weeks of the 1996 Presidential election race, Republican candidate Bob Dole accused the national news media of having a “liberal bias” that favored Democrat Bill Clinton. If the media could shed this liberal bias, Dole implied, he could beat Clinton.

Many conservatives agreed.

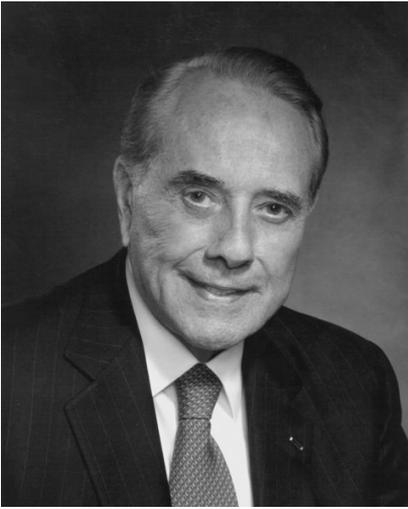
They believed American mass media have a strong liberal bias. In their book, *And That's The Way It Is(n't): A Reference Guide to Media Bias*, L. Brent Bozell III and Brent H. Baker argue that

America's most influential media outlets report the news through a liberal prism. With reprints, excerpts and summaries of more than 40 studies conducted over the past decade, (this book) provides the most thorough analysis ever compiled proving the liberal political slant in the national press.<sup>19</sup>

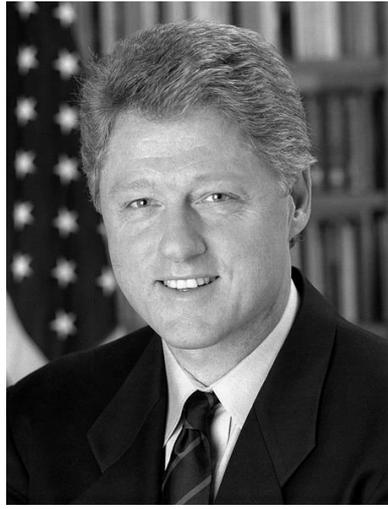
Not so, say the liberals.

They accuse the media of having a conservative bias. As media critics Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon put it:

One of the most enduring myths about the mainstream news media is that they are “liberal.” The myth flourishes to the extent that people don't ask pointed questions: If the new media are liberal, why have national dailies and news weeklies regularly lauded those aspects of President Clinton's program that they view as “centrist” or “moderate,” while questioning those viewed as liberal?<sup>20</sup>



Bob Dole



Bill Clinton

And a third perspective comes from the journalists themselves. They maintain that the news is neither liberal nor conservative. It's objective, or neutral.<sup>21</sup> As former ABC News President James Hagerly put it:

We're trying to be objective ... we are reporters! We get interpretations from other people and present them. If anyone on this network is expressing his own opinion — well, if I catch him [sic] I won't permit it.<sup>22</sup>

So who's right?

The conservatives, the liberals or the journalists?

None of them, we will point out in this chapter.

The news does contain a bias.

But when viewed from a detached perspective, it is neither extremely liberal nor conservative, nor objective in absolute terms.

It is *mainstream*, centrist, or middle of the road.

In fact, that's why mass media in America are often called "mainstream media."

# THE ETHIC OF OBJECTIVITY

To undo the mainstream bias, it is first necessary to examine the ethic of objectivity in journalism.

## ORIGINS OF OBJECTIVITY

The origins of objectivity are often traced to the 1830s and the so-called penny press in the United States, which sold newspapers for a penny apiece and became the first “mass” medium.

Prior to that time, most newspapers in Europe and the Americas were highly partisan, usually siding with and sometimes being financially supported by political parties. Many contemporary critics of journalism wish for that kind of press again — one that allegedly contained a robust debate.

But, as might be expected from a partisan press, the stories and columns in those publications were often vitriolic, inaccurate and self-serving. Not only that, they also excluded the other point of view. You only got one side of the story.

Moreover, most people didn't get more than one side to a story because they just read their own political party's paper. They didn't read the other party's paper, and this, of course, had the effect of limiting the debate.

But the ethic of objectivity changed that.

Increasingly, newspapers became less partisan and restricted opinion and commentary to special pages. News stories now contained not just one point of view, but two or more views.

Of course, to a certain extent, this took some of the bite out of the partisanship. But, at the same time, it improved the accuracy of the news accounts and, more importantly, brought the story to a broader range of people. Now people who were members of different parties could read the same publication and get the views of not only the leaders of their parties but also the opposition.

A formal conception of objectivity in journalism didn't really take root until late 1800s and early 1900s, when the social sciences (political science

and sociology) were developing. Like scholars, journalists were encouraged to remain detached when reporting on a story.

## OBJECTIVITY UNDER ATTACK

By 1950, the so-called ethic of objectivity had become a firmly established practice in journalism.

The assumption was truth would emerge if journalists (1) kept their personal opinions out of stories, (2) quoted all sides to a story, and (3) gave roughly equal coverage to those sides. Opinions, journalists say, are properly expressed only on the editorial and op-ed pages, or in news analyses.<sup>23</sup>

However, the ethic of objectivity itself became a target of attack during the so-called “McCarthy era,” which began in February 1950 when Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, charged that 205 communists had infiltrated the U.S. State Department. Although he was never able to substantiate these and many other charges, he held many press conferences and the news media quoted him extensively and covered his senatorial hearings because he was a powerful person.

The ethic of objectivity assumes that readers and viewers can sift through the information presented and find the truth.

*The New York Times* at the time reinforced this idea, declaring that even if McCarthy’s charges “are usually proved false,” he was still news, because separating innuendo from truth and accusation from guilt “lies with the readers,” not the newspaper.<sup>24</sup>

But, critics asked, how can the public discern the truth if sources are lying and journalists are unable to get all of the facts?

This is the fundamental flaw in the ethic of objectivity.



Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy

A massive amount of research in mass communication over the next five decades eventually would clarify the paradox. The ethic of objectivity produces its own bias, but it is neither radical nor aligned with a particular ideology.

The bias is mainstream.

It reinforces the status quo, which usually mean powerful people and their ideas.<sup>25</sup>

McCarthy was eventually censured by the Senate, but not before he had ruined many careers and lives.

The ethic of objectivity came under further assault during the 1960s, when the U.S. military disseminated false information to journalists in order to promote U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Some journalists were not easily misled, but editors at home were reluctant to publish content critical of U.S. policy, even if it was true.

The news media also were criticized after race riots erupted in many U.S. cities in the late 1960s. The Kerner Commission issued a report indicting the U.S. media for failing to cover black communities and issues. Heavy reliance on bureaucratic officials (most of whom were white) as sources of news was partly to blame.

## THE NEW JOURNALISM MOVEMENT

The ethic of objectivity survived these assaults, but new forms of journalism emerged in the 1960s to challenge it. The “new journalism” movement was highly critical of objectivity and traditional reportorial methods, because they tended to generate a mainstream bias that excluded alternative or unorthodox points of view.<sup>26</sup>

Instead of objectivity, the “new journalists” advocated various forms of subjectivity, which they said was more effective at revealing the truth.

Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Nicholas von Hoffman and others wrote articles and books that reported on real-life events but combined elements of a novel, such as people’s motivations and feelings and extensive analysis of events and surroundings. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, which told the story of two men who killed a family, epitomizes this genre.<sup>27</sup>

The new journalism movement — or some people called it “advocacy journalism” — also got a boost from social movements opposed to the Vietnam War and in favor of more rights for women and minorities. They pointed out that traditional methods of reporting historically had marginalized these groups, or failed to give them a voice. Journalism was too dependent on powerful government and corporate elite sources.

The Watergate scandal in the early 1970s also gave alternative journalism a shot in the arm. Investigative reporting, in particular, was seen as a method that could overcome some of the problems associated with the ethic of objectivity and routine news reporting.

What distinguished investigative reporting from routine news reporting was that the burden of proof lay on the journalist, not the sources, per se. The news media (especially the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*) were highly praised for helping to uncover corruption in the Nixon administration.

The new journalism movement began to wane in the late 1970s.

The end of the Vietnam War and new laws and court decisions providing more rights and protections to women and minorities took much of the steam out of the movement.

The ethic of objectivity survived and remains the primary guiding principle in U.S. journalism. Defenders of objectivity pointed out quite correctly that, despite its limitations, the “objective approach” was effective in providing readers with a greater number and variety of alternative points of view.

However, the ethic of objectivity did not then, nor does it today, mean that every person or institution in society gets the same amount of coverage on all issues. Journalism depends more on powerful sources of information and knowledge and, this, in turn, produces what is known as the mainstream bias.

## WHAT IS THE MAINSTREAM BIAS?

The mainstream bias means that news media in the United States (and most western countries, too) rarely give positive news coverage to extremist views on either the left or right side of the political continuum. Communists and



News stories about extremists like these fascist protesters, who rallied on the West lawn of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., in 2008, almost always portray them in a negative light. Such coverage helps define the boundaries of acceptable behavior in American society. (Photo by Utilisateur bootbeardbc de flickr, <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/bootbeardbc>>, used with permission)

others on the “far left” rarely get sympathetic press coverage in daily newspapers or on national television. But the same holds for neo-Fascists and others on the “far right.”

For example, some years ago the (Spokane, Washington) *Spokesman-Review* published a story titled, “White Separatists to be Featured at Survivalist Expo.”<sup>28</sup> The story outlined how leaders of neo-Nazi, right-wing Christian separatist, anti-black and anti-Semitic groups would be speaking at the Spokane Convention Center.

But the focus of the story was not on what the speakers would say — as it might have been for mainstream Republican and Democratic speakers. Rather, the focus on the straight news story was on how the views of these groups were contrary to the dominant values of the community. None of the extremist leaders was interviewed in the story, but there was a generous sampling of critics’ views.

“From a legal standpoint, there’s nothing we can do to block this kind of event,” one city official is quoted as saying. “Do we condone it? Do we

want it to be there? The answer is, ‘Hell no!’” Said another city official: “Like civil libertarians, I am concerned with ... (respecting) ... First Amendment freedoms. But as the human rights specialist, I will continue to speak against supremacy and hatred, and I encourage citizens who want to live in a respectful community to do the same.”

With this example, we are not trying to defend the position of right-wing groups — in our opinion, their views are repugnant and based on ignorance. However, in terms of analyzing the media coverage, this example illustrates how news media marginalize extremist groups and, by default, provide support for dominant groups and community values. Stories about terrorism do the same thing.

Another front-page story in the same issue of the *Spokesman-Review* — this one written by a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* — extolled the virtues of a Russian human rights champion who was tormented in prison during the Soviet days of “totalitarian repression.”<sup>29</sup> The implicit moral lesson: Communism is bad.

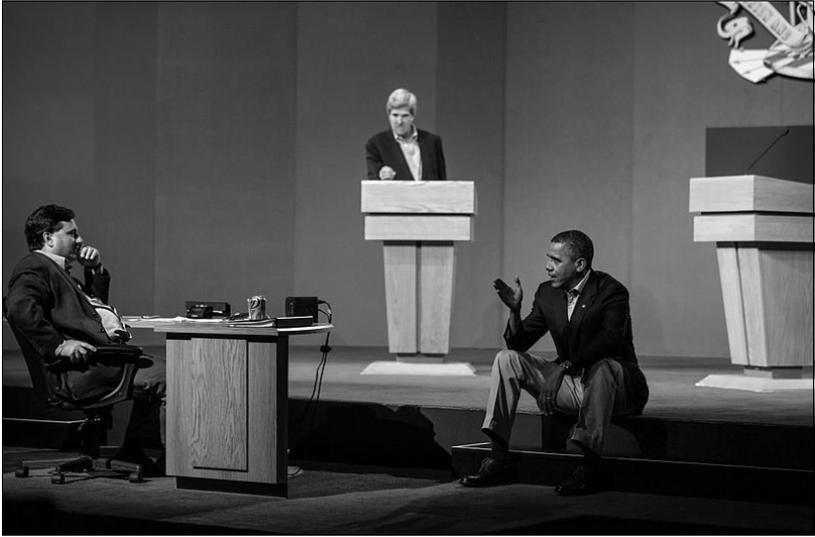
The only notable exception in terms of giving extremist groups positive media coverage is when they are denied freedom of speech. But in these cases the news coverage focuses on the free-speech issue rather than on the ideological goals or ideals of the groups. This happened in Skokie, Illinois, many years ago, a heavily Jewish community where neo-Nazi groups staged a march through the streets. The American Civil Liberties Union defended the free-speech rights of the neo-Nazis. However, mainstream media news stories strongly condemned and criticized the goals of neo-Nazis.

So what is the mainstream ideology?

In the United States, it is embodied in the Democratic and Republican parties. In England, it is the Conservative and Labor parties. And throughout much of Europe, it is the Social Democrats. These are the groups that get preferential coverage in the news and generally the most positive coverage.

To be sure, there is a lot of critical news directed at mainstream political parties. Most of this criticism stems from the parties criticizing each other. Outside groups, if they are not mainstream, are rarely quoted in such stories.

In fact, *the more extreme the group, the less the news media will cover it and the less favorable that coverage will be.* Conversely, as a rule, the more a group’s goals fall



President Barack Obama talks with Ron Klain during a mock presidential debate in 2012. Sen. John Kerry, background, played the role of Mitt Romney.

within mainstream values and norms, the more coverage it tends to get and the more favorable that coverage.

### THE MAINSTREAM BIAS IN ELECTIONS

The mainstream bias is easiest to see during a presidential election.

All presidential races include more candidates than just those in the Democratic and Republican parties. In 2012, for example, eight people ran for president in Washington state (not all candidate names are on all state ballots).

Now, if journalists sought to be purely objective, they should give each candidate in a presidential election equal coverage — that is, each should receive the same amount of space, same placement and the same balance of views.

This ideal is sometimes possible when there is only one Democratic and one Republican candidate, because both are from the political mainstream. However, because presidential elections also include candidates from nonmainstream parties, the coverage has never, ever come close to the ideal



Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein was arrested in 2012 when she tried to enter the site of the presidential debate at Hofstra University to protest the exclusion of her and other nonmainstream candidates from the debates. This practice helps ensure the election of mainstream candidates. In this 2011 photo, Stein is talking to Occupy Wall Street protestors. *(Photo by Paul Stein, <[www.flickr.com/photos/kapkap/7999998562/sizes/m/in/photostream](http://www.flickr.com/photos/kapkap/7999998562/sizes/m/in/photostream)>, used with permission.*

of objectivity. The mainstream media always give more coverage to the Republican and Democratic candidates.

In 2012, for example, the lion's share of coverage went to Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Very little coverage went to Green Party candidate Jill Stein, Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, and Socialist Workers Party candidate James Harris.

Why do "alternative" candidates get so little coverage?

When journalists are asked this question, they say it's (1) because the alternative candidates have no chance of winning, (2) because the public isn't as interested in their views, and (3) because the newspaper has limited space and resources.

The journalists are right.

Most of the alternative candidates have no chance of winning, and the public generally is less interested in the views of non-mainstream candidates. But this doesn't alter the fact that the election coverage is less than objective. The alternative candidates are "marginalized," meaning they are not assumed to be viable candidates.

So, is this mainstream bias a good or bad thing?

That depends on whether you like the mainstream parties.

During the 1992 presidential election, Dr. Lenora B. Fulani, the only black female candidate in the race, asked reporters why they were not covering her campaign. As expected, they said it was because she didn't raise much money and didn't have much of a chance of winning.

Her response: *How can I raise money and win if you don't give coverage to my campaign?*

Catch-22.

## MAINSTREAM BIAS IN OTHER NEWS STORIES

The mainstream bias is sometimes more difficult to see in other news stories, especially in those that are not controversial.

But it is there.

For example, in the same *Spokesman-Review* issue that carried the article about the fascist meeting was a story that examined the motives why a deputy sheriff charged with murder may have shot his wife. She allegedly committed adultery. Fidelity (or monogamy) is a value that most mainstream religious groups' cherish. And the story subtly reminded people of the importance of that value.

Still another story in that issue of the newspaper noted that a new diabetic drug could reduce the need for insulin. This story reinforced social norms and values about the importance of scientific research, and it helped the U.S. Food and Drug Administration get the word out to the public (and achieve its goals).

More recently, *The Arizona Republic* published a story on one of its Monday morning front pages about the Arizona Cardinals professional football beating the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.<sup>30</sup> The story implicitly accepts the notion that sports is good for a community. Many people believe local



Stories about the Yarnell Hill Fire near Prescott, AZ, which killed 19 firefighters, reinforce values about the sanctity of human life and provide information that individuals and groups use to avert such disasters in the future.

sports leagues and events reinforce values about the importance of teamwork and, at the same time, help keep young people out of trouble.

Some scholars also see spectator sports as a mechanism for diverting people's attention away from political and economic injustice in society.

Sports “narcotizes” viewers, one sociologist has suggested. That characterization might be strong, but it is clear that sports is a social institution that helps maintain social order in a community.

The front page of the *Republic* also contained a story about a government investigation into a forest fire that killed 19 firefighters.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from reinforcing values about the sanctity of human life, the story provided information that various groups and individuals will use to understand the tragedy and perhaps avert future disasters. The story also points out that some of the families of the victims will also use the information to file lawsuits.

Although many people dislike lawsuits, they are the civil way in modern societies to solve disputes between people and organizations. Sociologists point out that lawsuits reduce the potential that individuals will use violence to solve a dispute.

We authors must emphasize again that we are not passing personal judgment on these stories or the values promoted in them. In fact, we believe many of them are noble and worthy of coverage.

Our point is that the news is not objective in any absolute sense, despite what journalists may claim. At the same time, the news is not nearly so conservative as the liberals would have us believe, nor as liberal as the conservatives would have us believe. Rather, in all cultures, news in the mass media generally promotes the dominant values of that culture and the powerful social institutions. And, at election time, the mainstream bias helps to guarantee that changes in local or national leadership do not come too quickly or too radically.

By the way, if you want to understand why some people believe the news media are too liberal or too conservative, simply ask them for their political orientation. As a rule, the more conservative the orientation, the more likely they are to see the media as liberal; and the more liberal the orientation, the more likely they are to see the media as conservative.

So much for objectivity.<sup>32</sup>

## MAINSTREAM BIAS IN ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING

We have spent most of this chapter talking about the mainstream bias in news media reports. And for good reason. News media play a major role in

shaping or influencing public policy. Politicians, bureaucrats, corporate executives, special interest groups and many voters depend heavily on news to achieve their professional and personal goals.

But the mainstream bias also exists in entertainment programming, and the impact of entertainment programming should not be underestimated, especially because most people spend much more time with it than with the news.

Finding examples of entertainment programming that support mainstream values and institutions is not difficult. Take, for instance, shows about law and order. Almost all of them reinforce the value that “crime doesn’t pay.” Sure, those shows have a fair amount of gratuitous violence. But they rarely encourage people to engage in criminal activity. Lawbreakers are almost always caught, killed or punished. And those that get away usually have noble motives or are up against a corrupt system.

Through the latter half of the 20th century, mass communication scholar George Gerbner argued that crime shows and their accompanying tales of morality help define the boundaries of acceptable behavior and, thus, provide implicit support for authoritarian police practices and laws.

Although Gerbner’s social control model makes a lot of sense, some critics believe television violence produces anti-social behavior, including criminal behavior. Social science research over the past four decades has shown that violent programming increases the probability of temporary aggressive behavior in small children. But the question of whether violent programming can contribute to adult criminal behavior is still unanswered.<sup>33</sup>

Entertainment programming also reinforces many other values that contribute to social order and mainstream views. For example, television programming and movies frequently extol the virtues of a good education and a successful career, but the self-absorbed “filthy” rich and those who turn their backs on materialism (the ascetics) both tend to be marginalized or are portrayed as kooks. Education is also highly revered, because it is seen as the ticket to success in the capitalist job market.

Most Western mass media do not support a particular religious institution, because their societies and communities have a variety of religious groups. But they all place a great deal of importance on the idea that religion is important for social cohesion and stability. Generally, it’s also



Love is a powerful aphrodisiac for social control. (19<sup>th</sup> century painting of the famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* by Frank Dicksee)

good to be religious, but both fanatics (members of cult groups) and religion-hating atheists are usually portrayed in a negative light.

Although many television comedies, particularly in the United States, portray characters in nontraditional family situations, the emphasis is almost always on love, friendship, honesty, sincerity and treating others well.

And then there is love, perhaps the most commonly found theme in media next to violence. Western media idealize the notion of romance and love, and who could conceive of a more powerful aphrodisiac for social control?

## ORIGINS OF THE MAINSTREAM BIAS

The mainstream bias is not the product of a conspiracy on the part of journalists, film producers or elites in Western countries. Media in all social systems reflect the general concerns and interests of those in positions of power. If they didn't, they would have a difficult time surviving.

Imagine, for instance, what would happen if a news organization published a story that was sympathetic to extremist views, such as those of the neo-Nazis. Community and mainstream political groups would be outraged. Many advertisers would pull their ads, and many readers would drop their subscriptions. In other words, the dependence that media have on profits to survive is one of the mechanisms for keeping media “in line” — and it helps uphold and protect the status quo.

The mainstream bias is the product of a number of complex legal, cultural, social and economic constraints that media face to survive in the marketplace. These forces did not just emerge yesterday. They go back to the origins of mass media themselves.

The first newspapers in England and the United States faced major legal constraints. If they published content that was critical of the authorities, the newspaper could be shut down and the publisher prosecuted. In fact, the first newspaper in the United States was shut down after the publication of its first issue in 1690, because it published stories that angered the colonial governor.<sup>34</sup>

Legal constraints, which include libel law (content that harms a person’s reputation) and privacy law, continue to play an important role in regulating what journalists and people can say. However, formal laws are only a small part of the picture. Cultural and social factors also play a key role.

When John Campbell began publishing a newspaper in the American colonies in 1704, he was well aware that he had to stay within certain moral and ethical boundaries — not just to please the British authorities but to please community leaders, too.

At that time, a story about women’s rights or sexual relations, for example, would have offended many clergymen and sparked harsh criticism of the newspaper. Most mainstream media, in fact, did not support women’s right to vote until after 1916, when President Woodrow Wilson declared his support for the 19th Amendment. And Wilson’s change of heart, no doubt, was influenced at least in part by the fact that Australia and New Zealand had already given women the right to vote.

Although times have changed and stories about women’s rights and sex are much more common today, media are still bound by cultural values and the interests of those in power. Women and minorities in most Western countries still struggle to achieve equality in the workplace. And the media



President Woodrow Wilson, shown here with his cabinet in 1918, eventually supported passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which gave women the right to vote.

rely heavily on political and economic elites — not the general public — for news, which means the news tends to legitimize the institutions these elites run.

The dependence that media have on elites for news can be traced in large part to the development of news beats.

Prior to the 1830s, the content of most newspapers was composed of national or international affairs. The accounts were usually lifted from newspapers in other countries or from official government documents. Local news stories, when they appeared, were often gleaned from other local newspapers, private letters, correspondence and, occasionally, personal contacts with governmental officials. Newspapers were directed largely to elite audiences, which included government officials, politicians and business people.

Most newspapers were highly partisan in character, and many were supported by political parties. Although colorful, such papers had limited appeal — generally to members of their political party.

This changed dramatically with the emergence of the penny press in the 1830s. The penny papers focused not just on economic and governmental news but on social news, which included reporting the affairs of the local police, courts and community groups. These papers were very popular

because they were cheap (1 cent). Circulation and advertising revenues grew rapidly.

To maintain a continuous flow of news copy, newspapers created “beats.” These beats were anchored in the centers of power in a community, which included governmental sources (police, courts, city hall), businesses (Wall Street), community groups (religious, social) and, eventually, lifestyle beats (sports, food, women’s pages).

The penny press also helped shape the ethic of objectivity. Gradually, throughout the 19th century, newspapers began to shed their partisanship in favor of a more neutral stance. This appealed to more readers, which in turn boosted advertising sales and revenues.

Whereas the ethic of objectivity did mean that newspapers were now printing more than one opinion when covering a controversial issue, it did not mean that newspapers were objective in some absolute sense. They still obtained news and information from the powerful elites, and those outside the mainstream power groups were still marginalized, meaning they were perceived to be less credible and newsworthy.

In sum, the mainstreaming effects of the news media are not a product of a conspiracy; rather, they stem from organizational routines and constraints on the news operation. Through a unique set of historical circumstances, media linked themselves to the centers of power, which created a symbiotic, or mutually beneficial, relationship. By cooperating with the media, elites helped to legitimate the role of the media in covering news. And the news coverage generally helps elites achieve their goals.

## MAINSTREAM VALUES IN THE MEDIA

News coverage of presidential elections highlights one of the major mainstream values promoted in the news — moderatism. In other words, excess or extremism in politics should be avoided.

Sociologist Herbert J. Gans has identified seven other enduring values in the news: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, (social) order and national leadership.<sup>35</sup> Although he was writing about U.S. media, these values actually can be applied to news media in most Western and many other nations

around the world, and to most forms of entertainment programming on television, at the movies and on radio.

By ethnocentrism, Gans means that the news media value their own nation above all others. This ethnocentrism is most explicit, he says, in foreign news, “which judges other countries by the extent to which they live up to or imitate American practices and values.” War news and humanitarian efforts provide the clearest expression of this principle. Recent examples include coverage of the ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In all of these conflicts, Western news media coverage helped legitimate intervention by NATO, the United States and other Western countries.

The value of altruistic democracy is highlighted in stories about corruption, conflict, protest and bureaucratic malfunctioning. The news implies that politics should be based on the public interest.

The value of responsible capitalism means that the news has an optimistic faith in capitalism, the good life and competition, and that unreasonable profits and gross exploitation of workers is wrong. Stories about corporate investors who violate federal laws reinforce this value.

Small-town pastoralism refers to the love affair that most Americans and Westerners have with the idea of small-town life, and to the problems posed by industrialization: urban crime, increasing social conflict and urban decay. British author Peter Mayle’s books about rural French life, such as *A Year in Provence*, strongly support this value.

Individualism promotes the idea of freedom of the individual both within and against the system. People are expected to participate in society and act in the public interest but on their own terms. Ayn Rand’s book *The Fountainhead* exalts individualism and warns of the dangers of collectivism.

Gans also argues that strong leadership is highly valued, because it is the way through which order and moral values are maintained. In all countries around the world, news media provide substantial coverage of their leaders.

As noted earlier in this book, the news also reinforces the value of order and social cohesion. Whenever a major disorder occurs, such as a riot or protest, the first thing the authorities do is call for calm. Of course, the media are the messengers of this social control message. The message is almost always the same: violence is never the way to solve problems and one must work peaceably for change.

Well, almost always.

There are some interesting historical exceptions to this rule.

## REUTERS, TERRORISM AND OBJECTIVITY

The Sons of Liberty.<sup>36</sup>

U.S. historians could have called them America's first terrorists. After all, they used violence to achieve political goals before and during the War of Independence. They tarred and feathered British civilians and destroyed their property. They forced some British tax collectors to resign from their positions. They also were behind the famous Boston Tea Party.

Historian Todd Alan Kreamer points out that the British clearly viewed the Sons of Liberty as a terrorist organization. But American history books today do not characterize that group as a terrorist organization for one simple reason: America won the war.

To the victors go the spoils, including the power to define reality. So, today, the Sons of Liberty are known as patriots or freedom fighters, not terrorists.

The line between terrorist and patriot (or freedom fighter) is thin but not invisible to mass media scholars who study propaganda, culture and language. They know that U.S. government politicians and spokespersons often use highly emotive words to demonize their enemies and glorify their friends. "Terrorist" and "freedom fighter" are two of the most popular. Media research shows that journalists routinely and unquestioningly cite these terms in news stories, even outside of directly quoted material.

But once in a while a news organization steps out of the mainstream. That happened on September 25, 2001, when Reuters news service announced that it would no longer use the word "terrorist" or "freedom fighter" in news stories unless those terms were attributed to a source. In essence, the news agency called into question the power of political elites such as George Bush to define reality. Media rarely do that, especially after an event as horrific as the September 11 attack.

Nancy Bobrowitz, who was senior vice president for Reuters' corporate communications, said Reuters had, for several decades, a policy against using what it calls "emotive" terms without attribution. However, the policy



Five “Patriots” tar and feather of British Commissioner of Customs John Malcolm on Jan. 5, 1744, under the Liberty Tree in Boston. The painting shows the Boston Tea Party in the background, an event that occurred a month earlier. Some historians say the Sons of Liberty was the first terrorist groups in America.

apparently was not formalized until Reuters head Stephen Jukes sent out a memo to his staff in September saying “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”

Reuters’ website added: “As part of a long-standing policy to avoid the use of emotive words, we do not use ‘terrorist’ and ‘freedom fighter’ unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributed to a third party. We do not characterize the subjects of news stories but instead report actions, identity and background so that readers can make their own decisions based on facts.”

Bobrowitz said Reuters must adhere to such a policy in part because Reuters has a “global audience.” She said objectivity is important to gain the confidence and respect of readers around the world. A month later, the BBC World News Service agreed and instituted a similar policy.

However, none of the major U.S. news organizations has followed Reuters’ lead. In fact, so far Reuters’ decision has generated more criticism than support from U.S. journalists and their organizations.

“Journalism should be about telling the truth, and when you don’t call this (September 11) a terrorist attack, you’re not telling the truth,” Rich Noyes, director of media analysis at the conservative Media Research Center, told the *Christian Science Monitor*.

To support their case, some critics of Reuters cite former *New York Times* columnist William Safire’s definition of terrorism. Safire wrote that the term “terrorist” has its roots in the Latin “terrere,” which means “to frighten.” Safire added: “The most precise word to describe a person who murders even one innocent civilian to send a political message is terrorist.”

This is a reasonable definition.

But if one accepts it, critics point out, then U.S. history must be re-written.

The Sons of Liberty would be just the beginning. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the list of other “terrorist actions” would include the forced annexation of Hawaii, police violence against labor union workers, state tolerance of lynchings of African Americans, the CIA-backed coup in Chile in 1973, the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, and military invasions in Caribbean countries.

Of course, critics also would point out that the quintessential terrorist act was the dropping of atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, because

they directly or indirectly contributed to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. Proponents of dropping the bomb justify these deaths as unfortunate casualties of war. They blame the Japanese.

But, as media scholars point out, historically, the ultimate arbiter of what is defined as an act of terror is who wins the war or the conflict. The inability of U.S. media to see this principle stems largely from the structural constraints they face. They serve American elites and institutions, and they ultimately must respond to their concerns. If they don't, then those institutions could stop giving the news media information and news.

## THE MAINSTREAM BIAS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

One of the hallmarks of modern society — if not its identifying feature — is social change. But if the mass media contain a mainstream bias, how can change take place?

The short answer is that the media rarely serve as agents of radical change. They are better characterized as agents of reform.

One would be hard-pressed to argue that mainstream media are radical. The only possible exception to that rule is the American Revolution, when the “patriot” press played a key role in mobilizing and informing the colonists.

But historical and social scientific research on mass media clearly supports the idea that mass media can play a reformist role, and one that benefits not just elites but the poor and other disadvantaged groups. In fact, the reformist role helps explain, in turn, the stability and durability of capitalism as an economic institution.<sup>37</sup>

Mainstream mass media and corporate media in particular have played an important role in legitimating and sometimes facilitating (though rarely initiating) the goals of many social movements, which in turn have led to a number of social changes. The most notable example of this occurred at the turn of the century, with the rise of the so-called “muckrakers,” who were responding to the Progressive Movement.

Media in Western nations also have played a role in legitimating decisions from the courts and government that expanded rights and opportunities for women, minorities, the working class, environmentalists,

homosexuals and the poor. Such changes certainly have not eliminated inequalities, discrimination or injustices, but they have significantly altered the power structure in most Western countries during the 20th century.<sup>38</sup>

Although journalists tend to support the dominant system of values, research shows that they generally are more liberal than elites, as well as the general public, on a wide variety of social and political issues.<sup>39</sup> These findings suggest that media have the capacity at times to produce content that is critical of dominant groups and beneficial to disadvantaged groups.

Polls and historical research show that conservatives are more critical than liberals of investigative reporting and that journalists often are sensitive to the concerns of minorities and consumers groups, are critical of business, and believe that private business is profiting at the expense of Third World countries.<sup>40</sup> One analysis of U.S. network television news coverage of Latin America also failed to produce evidence of a conservative, status-quo bias.<sup>41</sup>

Media reports also helped legitimize rural protest groups in Minnesota, whose goal was to block construction of a power line that would serve a large, Midwestern metropolitan area.<sup>42</sup> Studies often find that media coverage influences governmental policy at the national level<sup>43</sup> as well as the local.<sup>44</sup> And a recent study found that, contrary to the expectations of the researcher, media coverage of separate protest marches in Washington sponsored by gay and lesbian organizations and pro-choice groups were much more favorable than unfavorable to each of those challenging groups.<sup>45</sup>

Although media need a consistent, inexpensive supply of news and depend heavily on political and economic elites for the news,<sup>46</sup> it is also important to point out that elites depend heavily on the media to achieve their goals. It is widely agreed, for example, that a state or national politician cannot be elected today without effective media coverage. Candidates rely less and less on the political party machine and more and more on direct coverage in media to get elected. This dependence, in turn, has lessened to some extent the power of the traditional political parties.

Another study showed that veteran reporters at mainstream newspapers can write stories that challenge components of the dominant ideology.<sup>47</sup> Studying Canadian press coverage of disarmament, peace and security issues, another reported that commentaries, columns and op-ed pieces often challenged the dominant view of bureaucrats.<sup>48</sup>



The news media often cover protests and demonstrations, such as the one outside of the 2008 Republican National Convention in Saint Paul, Minnesota. That coverage provides information and commentary that citizens and politicians often use when they vote or create policies.

And a study of the press in India suggests that the news media have the potential to challenge the status quo.<sup>49</sup> The researcher found that such challenges may not be direct or comprehensive, but some kinds of news stories may represent a challenge indirectly by contributing, for example, to public awareness of problems with the status quo, which in turn can promote discontent and support for social change.

Research also shows that alternative media often challenge dominant ideologies and contribute to mobilizing and promoting social movements or causes. Challenging the arguments of the “routines theorists,”<sup>50</sup> one participant observation study found that reporters at an alternative radio station could create oppositional news using conventional routines and reportorial techniques.<sup>51</sup>

A historical review reported that alternative media have helped to promote the American revolution, abolitionism, and equality for women, minorities, and gay rights groups.<sup>52</sup> And even though one study discussed earlier found that the mainstream mass media marginalize anarchist groups,

the study also found that the alternative (nonmainstream) press idolized them.<sup>53</sup>

Research on the ideological effects of the media indicates that the media may have dysfunctional consequences for some groups, but this is not always the case and, furthermore, media consumers are not easily manipulated. Researchers found that English children's use of mass media leads to distorted perceptions of immigrants.<sup>54</sup> But two other studies conducted in the United States have reached opposite conclusions.

One, which was conducted during the 1960s, reported that the greater the number of mass media messages white Southerners attended to, the less likely they were to have strict segregationist attitudes.<sup>55</sup> Although this relationship was not particularly strong, it did hold up when controlling for education. Mass media, the researchers argued, often subvert traditional, patrimonial ways and usher in modern attitudes that promote social change.

Researchers behind the *Great American Values Test* concluded that a specially designed 30-minute television program broadcast in 1979 also was able to increase anti-racist beliefs and the importance of equality itself as a basic social value.<sup>56</sup> The researchers also found that people who have a high dependency on television changed their values more and contributed more money to groups that promote anti-racism and equality than people with low dependence on television.

A large body of research also indicates that media often impact public policy. Researchers at Northwestern University, for instance, found that investigative stories on police brutality “produced swift and fundamental revisions of regulations regarding police misconduct.”<sup>57</sup> Another study found that media coverage of murder cases influences the way prosecutors handle cases.<sup>58</sup>

Another study suggests that television may actually promote beliefs that oppose economic inequalities.<sup>59</sup> The data, obtained from personal interviews with a probability sample of U.S. adults in 1986, show that people who benefit most from the system — men, whites, conservatives, and those who have high incomes, education and occupational prestige — are most likely to favor economic inequalities. The data suggest that television viewing reduces support for beliefs that promote economic inequality, even when controlling for all of the other factors.

Sociologist William Gamson's peer group study also suggests that people often use media to challenge and criticize established authorities. He challenges both the radical view that working people are incorporated by the dominant ideology and the mainstream social science view that working people are uninterested in politics and unable to engage in well-reasoned discussions. Using data collected in peer group sessions with 188 "working people," he concludes that "(a) people are not so passive, (b) people are not so dumb, and (c) people negotiate with media messages in complicated ways that vary from issue to issue."<sup>60</sup>

Mainstream corporate media may also help promote the causes of social movements.

## MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Although investigative journalism is often cited as a source of social change, it is not the most significant source in modern society. Social movements, many sociologists would argue, are much more important. Without social movements, today's world would be much different.<sup>61</sup>

Consider, for instance, what it was like to be a woman before the late 20th century. Nowhere in the world did women have the right to vote. They had limited access to a college education — many schools would not accept women. But even if a woman had a college education, she didn't have access to the best jobs in the public or private (corporate) world. Teaching school was her best bet.

Or consider what it was like to be an African American living in pre-Vietnam War America. African Americans could not eat in many restaurants. They had to sit at the back of the bus. They could not drink out of water fountains reserved for whites. Their children could not attend the best schools. They were denied access to good jobs. And, in some areas of the Deep South, they lived in fear for their lives.

Today, there is little question that opportunities and social conditions for women, African Americans and many other historically oppressed groups have improved in the United States and most Western countries. Women are guaranteed the right to vote. Minorities and women have better access to jobs and education. Factory laborers are no longer required to



Social movements are one of the most important sources of social change in society. In this 1967 photograph, Martin Luther King, Jr., is speaking against the Vietnam War at University of Minnesota's St. Paul Campus of the University of Minnesota. (*Photo by Minnesota Historical Society, used with permission*)

work 16 hours a day. Pollutants and emissions from factories and motor vehicles are much more highly regulated. People now have access to contraceptives. The elderly have social security and health care. The stigma associated with being homosexual has lessened considerably, and many corporations and governments have extended employment benefits to same-sex partners.

To be sure, these changes and the passage of time have not eradicated discrimination, inequality, income disparities, disregard for the environment, unwanted births, lack of access to opportunity, poor health care and poverty. Sociocultural patterns are deeply embedded, and elites and the institutions they control nearly always resist change, because it usually means a loss of political, social and economic power. But elite resistance to challenges from less advantaged groups is not always effective in preventing social change that benefits those groups.

As the preceding examples show, social movements often have played a pivotal role in altering, however subtly, the balance of power between

traditional elite groups and the masses. That's one reason why U.S. civil rights leader Jesse Jackson says he remains upbeat and optimistic — despite past and current problems, the civil rights movement, in his view, has won significant battles since the 1960s.<sup>62</sup>

To be sure, social science research clearly demonstrates that all social systems have ideological and coercive means of social control, and that the content of mainstream mass media generally supports those ideologies and those in power. We know that all modern social movements need the mass media to achieve their goals in a representative democracy. Media play an important role in legitimating (or delegitimizing) the goals of social movements and accelerating (or decelerating) public attention to the social problems movements identify.

We also know, thanks to media researcher David L. Protess and his colleagues at Northwestern University, that investigative reporting is most likely to promote change when journalists and policy makers actively collaborate to set policymaking agendas prior to story publication.<sup>63</sup> However, we don't know a whole lot more about the conditions when mass media may help promote or hinder social change, partly because this topic generally has been ignored by critics of corporate and global media.

Nevertheless, despite the shortage of research, several statements can be made. One is that, historically, mass media have tended to ignore social movements until they gain power. Although the civil rights and women's movements were founded in the 19th century, they did not garner significant favorable media coverage until the 1950s and 1960s. This coincides with a substantial growth in the size and power of those movements. The same thing happened to the environmental movement. Not until 1962, with the publication of Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*, which drew attention to the problems of pollution, did mainstream media begin giving substantial coverage to environmental issues.

However, since then, mainstream media — especially media in large, pluralistic cities — have published or aired many stories that have lent support to the goals of these movements, and news coverage has been much more favorable.<sup>64</sup> Television entertainment programming in the United States also has become more favorable to women and those with alternative lifestyles.

Overall, then, it is clear that mainstream mass media are no agents of radical change. But throughout the 20th century, corporate media have published many stories that have helped promote or legitimize social reforms. As Herbert Gans sums it up:

News is not so much conservative or liberal as it is reformist; indeed, the enduring values are very much like the values of the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century. The resemblance is often uncanny, as in the common advocacy of honest, meritocratic, and anti-bureaucratic government, and in the shared antipathy to political machines and demagogues, particularly the populist bent.<sup>65</sup>

And comparing the media to legal systems, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander observes:

In distinguishing the news media from the law, the significant point is the media's flexibility. By daily exposing and reformulating itself vis-à-vis changing values, group formations, and objective economic and political conditions, the media allows "public opinion" to be organized responsively on a mass basis. By performing this function of information-conduit and normative-organizer, the news media provides the normative dimension of society with the greatest flexibility in dealing with social strains.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, relative to most other social institutions in society — including the church, government, the legal system and schools — the news media are more responsive to alternative, nonmainstream groups and ideas. This helps social systems adapt and change.

## THE FUTURE OF (RELATIVE) OBJECTIVITY

Studies show that mainstream journalists depend heavily upon powerful political and corporate elites for the news. In fact, about two-thirds percent of all news stories are estimated to originate with such sources.

As noted in this chapter, this dependence creates a bias in the news — one that favors those in positions of power in the system and excludes those

who lack power. Historically, the latter has included minorities, women, the poor, labor unions, environmentalists, homosexuals, anti-globalization groups, and anti-war groups.

Although the ethic of objectivity produces a bias that favors mainstream values and institutions and, thus, is anything but “objective” in an absolute sense, the ethic is likely to remain the most important value guiding news gathering well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That’s because, in relative terms, the ethic of objectivity does produce a journalism that incorporates more points of view or opinions than other approaches.

Recall, that, during the 19th century, most newspapers in Europe and the Americas were highly partisan, usually siding with and sometimes being financially supported by political parties. Many contemporary critics of journalism wish for that kind of press again — one that allegedly contained a robust debate.

But, as might be expected from a partisan press, the stories and columns in those publications were often vitriolic, inaccurate and self-serving. Not only that, they also excluded the other point of view. You only got one side of the story. Moreover, most people didn’t get more than one side to a story because they just read their own political party’s paper. They didn’t read the other party’s paper, and this, of course, had the effect of limiting the debate.

The ethic of objectivity changed that.

Increasingly, newspapers became less partisan and restricted opinion and commentary to special pages. News stories now contained not just one point of view, but two or more views. Of course, to a certain extent, this took some of the bite out of the partisanship. But, at the same time, it improved the accuracy of the news accounts and, more importantly, brought the story to a broader range of people. Now people who were members of different parties could read the same publication and get the views of not only the leaders of their parties but also the opposition.

Paradoxically, then, the ethic of objectivity actually broadened the debate on public issues and this is its great strength.

## UNIQUE MEDIA ROLES

Although all forms of mass media serve as institutions of control and change, each performs a unique function. Newspapers play the biggest role when it comes to public affairs; movies are powerful storytellers; and broadcast media are good at entertaining. The Internet and new technologies are blurring the lines between these media, but they nonetheless are likely to live on in the near future.

The various roles of print media are discussed in the next chapter, followed by a chapter on broadcast media. The last chapter discussed the role of the Internet and new technologies.