

Impartiality in Televised News and its
Influence on Youth Audiences

William Sokoloff
PS115 – Public Opinion and Survey Research

Impartiality in Televised News and its Influence on Youth Audiences

Towards the end of the 20th century, one of the most trusted men in the United States was the iconic anchor of the CBS Evening News, Walter Cronkite. So important was the idea of keeping the news detailed, factual, and unbiased that he would drop his customary closing remark of, "...and that's the way it is." had he ended the report in a personal opinion or remark, rather than a factual statement. Today, however, it seems that's the standards of objective journalism have faltered slightly. In this world inundated with news from television, radio, newspapers, the internet and independent means, it seems there is so much less news actually being listened to. A lot has changed since Walter Cronkite's calming and authoritative voice informed Americans of the world they lived in. Now the news programs compete by staying edgy and catering to the opinions of the public. Television and news stations are owned by giant media conglomerates that have their own spin to put on the news so they can target individual audiences. The big question is, though, do Americans even care? Do people change their viewing habits at all if they find the news to be partial and incomplete?

The purpose of this study was to find out first, if people even believe in the existence of media biases, and secondly, if Americans even mind it. Does the partiality of the news really influence, or at the very least parallel, how often a person watched the news. To find that out, it is also necessary to show that people's viewerships do reflect their approval of a programs reporting. So far there have been many studies done by the survey research community as well as the media conglomerates on the subject of perceived biases in the media. However, there hasn't been a lot of research into any solid

correlation between how people perceive the objectivity of the news and whether or not it affects their choice in news programs.

Whether or not there actually is partiality in the media, there is a lot of strong evidence that Americans perceive the media, and the network news in particular, to be skewed. One study by the Pew Research Center in 2005 showed that 60% of Americans adults felt that “news organizations in general are political biased” while only 28% said they were unbiased¹. Even a study done by NBC News and the Wall Street Journal said that only 41% of Americans find national news coverage of government and politics to be objective and fair². When people are asked about more specific biases, such as towards political parties, individuals, and countries, the numbers are similar. In a 2002 Pew study, less than half of those surveyed said that news organizations are unbiased in their coverage of the Middle East³. Another study by Pew in 2004 found that only 43% of people felt the media showed no bias towards either Senator Kerry or President Bush during the presidential campaigns⁴. There is even a study showing that only 29% of people feel that fundamentalist Christians are presented fairly by the media⁵. There’s little doubt that a large percentage of Americans find the media to be more subjective than objective.

The next important question is whether or not a survey researcher can make the judgment that biased media is actually a reason why people don’t care for the news any longer. A 2007 survey done by Harris Poll showed that “biased/too narrow of a viewpoint” was one of the most popular reasons for why someone doesn’t read the news, second only to “lack of time” and “easier to go online”⁶. The Harris Poll results were an important finding because it established that people at least say that they don’t follow

news because the reports lean to one side rather than stay balanced. While the survey being studied here was actually focused on the specific affect of political biases in television news, it seems the public finds much more partiality in the news than just conservative and liberal stances and it is a very powerful indicator for why people don't watch the news.

Based on the large percentage of people who find media news outlets to be skewed and the seemingly negative view of the biases that people show towards that media trend, it was hypothesized in this study that the more biased a news program is perceived to be, the less a person would watch that particular program. Obviously the results of this hypothesis could mean a lot to the editorial and marketing department of a news agency, but there is also more to it than just finding the best way to attract viewers. The perceived bias of several different news programs acted as the independent variable in this study while, according to the hypothesis, the measured dependant variable was the viewership of particular news programs. This would mean that a large percentage of those who thought a news program was biased would watch a show very infrequently or never at all, whereas a large percentage of those who thought a news program was fair and unbiased would watch the program more frequently. If this hypothesis holds to be true, this relationship should be the same for all different news programs. To test this, each variable was measured for six news programs: CNN, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News ABC World News, MSNBC and Fox News.

While an analyst could not look at the results and definitively say that people watch a program less or more solely because of their opinion of the biased or unbiased nature of the show, a simple correlation can be shown. If causation could be proven

between biases and viewership, and there were no other reasonable rationalizations it would be a fundamental finding in media studies. A simple relationship between the two variables, however, can be quite interesting and useful as well. This correlation, or absence of a correlation, can be extremely useful in the field of media research because it is one more piece of information that helps explain what makes a person watch one program over another. In addition to the survey's merit as a guide to television marketing, it has scholarly merit in that the results can help researchers better understand how a person responds to both neutral and one-sided stimuli. Do people simply turn off and tune out information that they find to be misleading or prejudiced, or do they simply not care and see it as harmless? These results would not rule out or support any other plausible explanations, but if nothing else, these findings can be used by future researchers simply as a starting point to research more specific and more detailed hypotheses which together can help answer the larger question of how people choose what they listen to, why they listen to it, and what they take away from it.

The best way to study the relationship between biases and viewership was to create one question for each variable and these questions were repeated for several popular television news programs. While many previous studies had asked only if respondents felt that news coverage was biased or unbiased, and others asked respondents if they did not watch the news because of media biases, there has been very little research done that specifically asks respondents both questions. By measuring both variables together, any relationship discovered in the results has more reliability because the responses come from the same respondents at the same time, rather than comparing the results of two different surveys done to different groups of people.

The independent variable is the variable that will be held constant rather than measured in order to see how it affects or relates to the independent variable. For this survey the independent variable was if the respondents believe that a television program was biased liberally, conservatively, or generally unbiased. To find this, the respondent was asked “Overall, would you consider [news show] to be liberally biased, conservatively biased, or unbiased?” A fourth option “Don’t Know” was also given as a possible response. This question was asked in regards to CNN, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, ABC World News, MSNBC, and Fox News. Subsequently, “[news show]” was replaced with the appropriate program name for each question.

The question was established in that way for particular reasons. It was decided that having the options of liberally and conservatively biased would aid in keeping the results as close to the truth as possible. Had “biased” and “unbiased” been the only possible responses there was a risk that “unbiased” responses would be overvalued. If a respondent watches a new program that is skewed to his or her point of view, he may be inclined to mark it is as unbiased. If both “conservatively biased” and “liberally biased” are possible responses, a person who knows that their favorite program is geared towards his own opinions may feel form comfortable marking it as such. Over all, having both options makes the bias sound less negative to someone who is being catered to by that program. For many of the same reasons, the “Don’t Know” response was included to stop a respondent from having to force a decision. This is even more important for respondents who have never seen the news program, and so without the “Don’t Know” response, they’d be forced to make a decision based on what they have heard from outside influences rather than personal experience.

The independent variable in this study was the viewership of a news program. Basically it measured if the biases and partiality in the news affects or parallels how dedicated a viewer is to a program. In survey research, a problem arises in these situations where the respondent is being directly asked what his or her reasoning is for acting a certain way. Even in the case of the Harris Poll survey, where respondents were allowed to select multiple answers, there was a lot of room for error because respondents may just not know why they do something or they may think that something bothers them, but when they actually go to buy a newspaper, those things may not influence them at all. When measuring something as psychologically complicated as a person's attitude and reaction process, it is sometimes easier to make inferences and deductions rather than receive direct responses that only seem correct to the respondent.

For those reasons, in testing this particular hypothesis, the dependent variable was measured simply by asking how often a particular news program was watched. Each respondent was asked "How many days a week do you watch any of the news shows listed below?" The possible responses were "Zero", "Less than once/week", "One day/week", "Two days/week", "Three days/week", "Four days/week", "Five days/week", "Six days/week" and "Seven days/week". Unlike simply asking a respondent if the biases or impartiality of the show affects their viewership, the survey used a technique which was more subtle and indirect and whose results could show a pattern or lack thereof. The question was asked for the same news programs as was the independent variable: CNN, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, ABC World News, MSNBC and Fox News. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart was also part of this series of questions, however, it was left out of the question for the dependent variable by error and so there was no

information to compare it to. In addition, the order in which the programs were presented was originally randomly selected but kept the same for each respondent to keep participants from comparing the bias of one program to another. These implementations helped in minimizing systemic biases.

A major factor that needed to be considered in the construction for this survey was how to minimize influences created by the survey. It was determined that the best order to ask the question would be to test the independent variable, viewership, before the dependant variable, bias. The reason behind this was to make sure that respondents didn't answer questions specifically based on how they responded to previous questions. There was a possibility that if a respondent answered questions on what programs are biased, they might answer the viewership questions based on how they think their answers should correspond. By asking what's being measured first, the respondents don't know what their responses were being compared to.

The survey used to test the hypothesis was The Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People Study, Part 2. It was determined that the target sample population of the survey would be 1,000 non-military individuals in the United States aged 18-24. This sample would be stratified so that 500 of those responding would be full-time students, and 500 would not be. While probability sampling is usually the ideal way to select a survey sample, it was not only not an option for this survey, but it would have also been detrimental to the results of the survey. In fact, a much smaller percent than 50% of American aged 18-24 are full-time students. Had this been a probability sample, the population would much closer reflect the actual population, but the sample size of full-

time students would be too small and the results for that stratum would have had a large margin of error.

Instead of randomly sampling and surveying the two strata of young Americans being tested, which would have been extremely expensive and nearly impossible, a “target sample” was created by randomly selecting the two strata from the American Community Study conducted by the Bureau of the Census. By stratifying the two groups error caused by non-probability sampling was minimized while keeping the desired number of respondents. This target sample could then be used to weigh the results of the actually sampled and surveyed population. From an online panel provided by Polimetrix Inc. 1,629 surveys were completed. From those, a group of 1,000 that most closely resembled the target sample was selected to form the final sample of the study. The weighed results of these respondents are presented in this report. They have been weighted first by the full-time and non-full-time student characteristic and secondly by age, race, education, and gender. Using the weights and the target sample as an “ideal sample” further minimized the error caused by using Polimetrix’s pre-selected panel rather than random-sampling.

Compared to other studies the response rate for this survey was rather high. Of the 993 panelists originally invited to participate in the survey, 95.2% were qualified and 31.2% participated. The remaining participants were eligible respondents redirected to this study after being considered ineligible for others surveys being performed by Polimetrix Inc. These redirected panelists showed a 66.7% response rate. Overall the survey showed an 85.8% response rate which is well within the range of an acceptable survey. The survey itself was conducted online through a website controlled by

Polimetrix for the duration of 1 week. The internet based survey was chosen because of its ideal costs and ideal time commitment by researchers. Statistically, internet based surveys over-represent liberals and youths, but because this study was of youths to begin with, it was still a better method than a telephone-based survey which would have resulted in a much lower response rate and much more inconsistent results. For the hypothesis in this particular study, a random sampling, or a target sample that was randomly selected from all Americans 18 and older would have been best because it is a general hypothesis and not specifically targeted to young Americans. The stratified sample, on the other hand, was a necessary evil as previously explained because of the small population size of full-time students.

The hypothesis being tested in this study compares a perceived bias in news programs to how often a respondent watches the programs and purports that subjectivity reflects smaller viewership while objectivity reflects larger viewership. If that holds true, then the following data sets should show that a large percentage of respondents find programs to be biased and rarely watch them, and a small percentage find the programs biased, but watch them frequently anyway. Likewise, in comparing respondents who believe the news programs are unbiased to those who believe they are either liberally or conservatively biased, a much smaller percentage of people would rarely watch the program, while a much larger percentage of respondents would watch the show frequently, presumably because it is believed to be an unbiased program.

Weekly Viewership of CNN as Related to Perceived Program Biases

			newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN		
			Biased	Unbiased	Total
watchcnn	Never	Count	191	54	245
		%within newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN	43.2%	30.5%	39.6%
Watch CNN (recoded)	1 day or less but not never	Count	112	36	148
		%within newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN	25.3%	20.3%	23.9%
	2-3 days	Count	68	33	101
		%within newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN	15.4%	18.6%	16.3%
	4-5 days	Count	38	21	59
%within newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN		8.6%	11.9%	9.5%	
6-7 days	Count	33	33	66	
	%within newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN	7.5%	18.6%	10.7%	
Total		Count	442	177	619
		%within newsbias_cnn Bias-CNN	100%	100%	100%

Table 1. Crosstabulation is of perceived biases of CNN news program (independent variable) and how often respondents watch the program (dependant variable). Data ignores “Don’t Know” response and combines “Liberally biased” and “Conservatively biased” into “Biased”. Questions were asked over 1 week period via the internet. (Statistical significance p = 0.001).

Weekly Viewership of CBS Evening News as Related to Perceived Program Biases

			newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News		Total
			Biased	Unbiased	
Watch CBS News (recoded)	Never	Count %within newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News	184 57.9%	53 40.8%	237 52.9%
	1 day or less but not never	Count %within newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News	92 28.9%	48 36.9%	140 31.3%
	2-3 days	Count %within newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News	22 6.9%	21 16.2%	43 9.6%
	4-5 days	Count %within newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News	13 4.1%	2 1.5%	15 3.3%
	6-7 days	Count %within newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News	7 2.2%	6 4.6%	13 2.9%
	Total	Count %within newsbias_cbsnews Bias-CBS Evening News	318 100%	130 100%	448 100%

Table 2. Crosstabulation is of perceived biases of CBS Evening News (independent variable) and how often respondents watch the program (dependant variable). Data ignores “Don’t Know” response and combines “Liberally biased” and “Conservatively biased” into “Biased”. Questions were asked over 1 week period via the internet. (Statistical significance p = 0.000).

Weekly Viewership of NBC Nightly News as Related to Perceived Program Biases

			newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News		
			Biased	Unbiased	Total
Watchnbc	Never	Count	154	65	219
		%within newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News	50.7%	39.6%	46.8%
Watch NBC News (recoded)	1 day or less but not never	Count	96	52	148
		%within newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News	31.6%	31.7%	31.6%
	2-3 days	Count	30	28	58
		%within newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News	9.9%	17.1%	12.4%
	4-5 days	Count	17	13	30
%within newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News		5.6%	7.9%	6.4%	
6-7 days	Count	7	6	13	
	%within newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News	2.3%	3.7%	2.8%	
Total		Count	304	164	468
		%within newsbias_nbcnews Bias-NBC Nightly News	100.1%	100%	100%

Table 3. Crosstabulation is of perceived biases of NBC Nightly News (independent variable) and how often respondents watch the program (dependant variable). Data ignores “Don’t Know” response and combines “Liberally biased” and “Conservatively biased” into “Biased”. Questions were asked over 1 week period via the internet. (Statistical significance p = 0.000).

Weekly Viewership of ABC World News as Related to Perceived Program Biases

			newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News		Total
			Biased	Unbiased	
Watchabc	Never	Count	152	63	215
		%within newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News	50.8%	43.2%	48.3%
Watch NBC News (recoded)	1 day or less but not never	Count	99	40	139
		%within newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News	33.1%	27.4%	31.2%
	2-3 days	Count	36	25	61
		%within newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News	12.0%	17.1%	13.7%
	4-5 days	Count	7	12	19
		%within newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News	2.3%	8.2%	4.3%
	6-7 days	Count	5	6	11
		%within newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News	1.7%	4.1%	2.5%
Total		Count	299	146	445
		%within newsbias_abcnews Bias-ABC World News	99.9%	100%	100%

Table 4. Crosstabulation is of perceived biases of ABC World News (independent variable) and how often respondents watch the program (dependant variable). Data ignores “Don’t Know” response and combines “Liberally biased” and “Conservatively biased” into “Biased”. Questions were asked over 1 week period via the internet. (Statistical significance p = 0.001).

Weekly Viewership of MSNBC as Related to Perceived Program Biases

			newsbias_msnbc Bias-MSNBC		
			Biased	Unbiased	Total
Watch MSNBC (recoded)	Never	Count %within newsbias_ msnbc Bias-MSNBC	165 51.2%	52 33.1%	217 45.3%
	1 day or less but not never	Count %within newsbias_ msnbc Bias-MSNBC	76 23.6%	32 20.4%	108 22.5%
	2-3 days	Count %within newsbias_ msnbc Bias-MSNBC	44 13.7%	25 15.9	69 14.4%
	4-5 days	Count %within newsbias_ msnbc Bias-MSNBC	22 6.8%	30 19.1%	52 10.9%
	6-7 days	Count %within newsbias_ msnbc Bias-MSNBC	15 4.7%	18 11.5%	33 6.9%
Total			322 100%	157 100%	479 100%

Table 5. Crosstabulation is of perceived biases of MSNBC news program (independent variable) and how often respondents watch the program (dependant variable). Data ignores “Don’t Know” response and combines “Liberally biased” and “Conservatively biased” into “Biased”. Questions were asked over 1 week period via the internet. (Statistical significance p = 0.000).

Weekly Viewership of Fox News as Related to Perceived Program Biases

			newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News		Total
			Biased	Unbiased	
watchfox	Never	Count	299	12	311
		%within newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News	54.9%	8.1%	44.8%
Watch Fox News (recoded)	1 day or less but not never	Count	100	28	128
		%within newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News	18.3%	18.8%	18.4%
	2-3 days	Count	61	30	91
		%within newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News	11.2%	20.1%	13.1%
4-5 days	Count	38	34	72	
	%within newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News	7.0%	22.8%	10.4%	
6-7 days	Count	47	45	92	
	%within newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News	8.6%	30.2%	13.3%	
Total		Count	545	149	694
		%within newsbias_foxnews Bias-Fox News	100%	100%	100%

Table 6. Crosstabulation is of perceived biases of Fox News (independent variable) and how often respondents watch the program (dependant variable). Data ignores “Don’t Know” response and combines “Liberally biased” and “Conservatively biased” into “Biased”. Questions were asked over 1 week period via the internet. (Statistical significance p = 0.000).

The results of the survey reflected very nicely the expected results of the hypothesis across all of the news programs. For each of the news programs in question, there was a significantly higher number of people who believed the news programs were biased. Only 28.3% of respondents felt that CNN was an unbiased news source, 28.6% for CBS Evening News, 34.8% for NBC Nightly News, 32.0% for ABC World News, 32.2% for MSNBC and 21.1% for Fox News. It would seem that Americans trust their news programs very little. People no longer look towards the news reports to give the entire story, with all the facts, presented from both sides. In fact, the results show that the

partiality of the media is a big reason why people don't look towards the news programs at all.

Looking at Tables 1 through 6, a clear pattern emerges in how people are affected by the biases they find in the media. For each news program there was a large percentage of respondents who found the program biased, either conservatively or liberally, and never or rarely watches the program. There was also a very small percentage of respondents who find the programs to be biased but watch the show very frequently anyway. This was exactly how the hypothesis predicted the pattern to emerge. Now, one could argue that there will always be fewer viewers who watch a show frequently, but in comparing the viewership of bias perceiving individuals and non-bias perceiving individuals, biased viewers decrease viewership at a much larger rate. For instance, 62.6% of respondents who found CBS Evening News to be biased never watched the program and 2.2% watched it very frequently. In comparison, 40.8% of respondents who thought CBS Evening News was unbiased never watched it and 4.6% watched it very frequently. While both show a decrease in the number of viewers who watch the show often, the respondents who answered that the program was unbiased had a much higher percentage of frequent viewers than the bias perceiving respondents, and a much smaller percentage of infrequent viewers. The same pattern was observed for all of the studied news programs in the survey.

The pattern is very important because it represents a significant correlation and hints at causality between the biases of a news program and how often people will watch it. The data suggests that not only a large portion of Americans find major news programs to be skewed and partial, but that these biases may in fact influence what news

Americans watch and how often they watch it. This data supports the hypothesis that impartial and unbiased media sources will have larger and more consistent audiences. This study acts as a possible indicator that an unbiased news program will attract more viewers while a biased news source would discourage viewers.

While the results of the study substantiated the hypothesis, this does not necessarily mean that there were no faults in the survey, and thus faults in the results. This study supports the idea that news programs would be better off with an unbiased agenda, however the argument can be made that the results were skewed because respondents who are personally conservative or liberal would find programs geared towards themselves as unbiased. In actuality, this study showed the opposite. The final sample population who took part in this survey was made up of 46.4% liberals or moderates leaning liberal, and 34.2% conservatives or moderates leaning conservative. If the argument held truth to it, one would expect the survey to show programs as either, largely unbiased or conservatively biased, rather than liberally biased. In fact, With the exception of Fox News, every news program studied has a significantly larger percentage of respondents who found it liberally biased than unbiased or conservatively biased. Still, it would be interesting to perform further research into the question of how people identify biases that are geared towards themselves.

Other problems inherent in survey resulted from discrepancies in the targeted sample and the population being studied by the hypothesis. This hypothesis was for a general population, but the nature of the survey as a whole identified the panel by age (18-24) and education (full time student or not), instead of the entire adult population. Still, the study was a stepping stone in reaching a more complete understanding of how

perceived biases by the public influences viewership and readership in news outlets.

Further research could include the testing of more news programs or even media outlets other than just televised news programs, in addition to a target population more representative of the entire adult population of the United States. From the statistical significance of the data it can be determined that the questions had minimal problems and were able to assess the hypothesis in an effective manner. The study successfully showed that there may have a reason why Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America, and also the most popular news anchor of his time. Without further studies on media biases and other explanations for low viewership, this study can't definitively say that biases create low audience numbers, but it definitely points in that direction. It's always good to know that Americans aren't complacent with information being fed to them. Americans would rather know everything and decide for themselves, or at least that's an even larger issue that this study only touches upon.

¹ Pew Research Center. Polling the Nations. 26 June 2005. <<http://poll.orpub.com/>>.

² NBC News/Wall Street Journal. Polling the Nations. September 1998. <<http://poll.orpub.com/>>.

³ Pew Research Center. Polling the Nations. 27 June 2002. <<http://poll.orpub.com/>>.

⁴ Pew Internet & American Life Project. Polling the Nations. 27 October 2004. <<http://poll.orpub.com/>>.

⁵ Pew Research Center. Polling the Nations. 25 June 1996. <<http://poll.orpub.com/>>.

⁶ Harris Poll. Polling the Nations. 11 June 2007. <<http://poll.orpub.com/>>.