

The Thinker's Guide

For Conscientious Citizens on

How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda

In National and World News

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

By Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

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Dear Reader,

The logic behind bias and propaganda in the news media is simple and it is the same the world over. Each society and culture has a unique world view. This colors what they see and how they see it. News media in the cultures of the world reflect the world view of the culture for which they write. But the truth of what is happening in the world is much more complicated than what appears to be true in any culture. To be a critical reader of the news media in any society, one must come to terms with this truth and read accordingly. Critical thinking is a complex set of skills that reverses what is natural and instinctive in human thought.

The uncritical mind is unconsciously driven to identify truth in accordance with the following tacit maxims:

- “It’s true if I believe it.”
- “It’s true if we believe it.”
- “It’s true if we want to believe it.”
- “It’s true if it serves our vested interest to believe it.”

The critical mind consciously seeks the truth in accordance with the following instinct-correcting maxims:

- “I believe it, but it may not be true.”
- “We believe it, but we may be wrong.”
- “We want to believe it, but we may be prejudiced by our desire.”
- “It serves our vested interest to believe it, but our vested interest has nothing to do with the truth.”

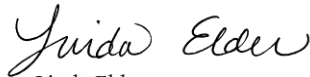
Mainstream news coverage in a society operates with the following maxims:

- “This is how it appears to us from our point of view; therefore, this is the way it is.”
- “These are the facts that support our way of looking at this; therefore, these are the most important facts.”
- “These countries are friendly to us; therefore, these countries deserve praise.”
- “These countries are unfriendly to us; therefore, these countries deserve criticism.”
- “These are the stories most interesting or sensational to our readers; therefore, these are the most important stories in the news.”

Critical readers of the news reverse each of these maxims. This guide explains how to do this and thus reduce the influence of bias and propaganda on human thinking.



Richard Paul
Center for Critical Thinking



Linda Elder
Foundation for Critical Thinking

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Democracy and the News Media

“Nothing could be more irrational than to give the people power and to withhold from them information, without which power is abused. A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.”

—James Madison

Democracy can be an effective form of government only to the extent that the public (that rules it in theory) is well-informed about national and international events and can think independently and critically about those events. If the vast majority of citizens do not recognize bias in their nation's news; if they cannot detect ideology, slant, and spin; if they cannot recognize propaganda when exposed to it, they cannot reasonably determine what media messages have to be supplemented, counter-balanced, or thrown out entirely.

On the one hand, world-wide news sources are increasingly sophisticated in media logic (the art of “persuading” and manipulating large masses of people). This enables them to create an aura of objectivity and “truthfulness” in the news stories they construct. On the other hand, only a small minority of citizens are skilled in recognizing bias and propaganda in the news disseminated in their country. Only a relatively few are able to detect one-sided portrayals of events or seek out alternative sources of information and opinion to compare to those of their mainstream news media. At present, the overwhelming majority of people in the world, untrained in critical thinking, are at the mercy of the news media in their own country. Their view of the world, which countries they identify as friends and which as enemies, is determined largely by those media (and the traditional beliefs and conventions of their society).

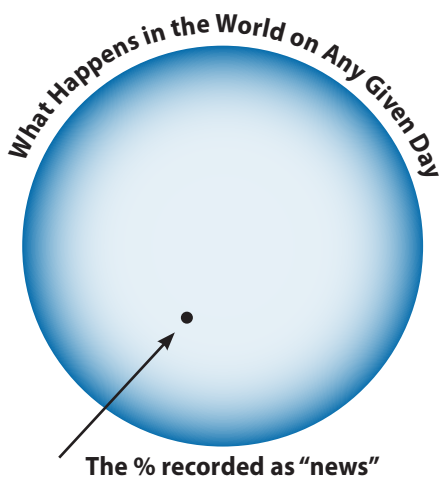
This slanted information is not a “plot” or a “conspiracy.” It is simply a matter of educational background and economic reality. Journalists and news editors are themselves members of a culture (German, French, Mexican, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indonesian, Russian, Algerian, Nigerian, North American, etc.). They share a view of the world with their target audience. They share a nationalized sense of history and allegiance, often a religion, and a general belief system. An Arab editor sees the world differently than an Israeli editor. A Pakistani editor sees the world different from an Indian one. A Chinese editor sees the world differently or as different from an American one. The same is true of news reporters and other journalists.

What is more, news people work under severe time restrictions (in constructing their stories) and limitations of space (in laying out or presenting their stories). It is hardly surprising that profound differences are reflected in news coverage from nation to nation and culture to culture.

In any case, only those who understand the conditions under which world media operate have a chance of controlling the influence of their national media upon them.

Bias and Objectivity in the News Media

The logic of constructing news stories is parallel to the logic of writing history. In both cases, for events covered, there is both a massive background of facts and a highly restricted amount of space to devote to those facts. The result in both cases is the same: 99.99999% of the “facts” are never mentioned at all (see diagram below).



If objectivity or fairness in the construction of news stories is thought of as equivalent to presenting all the facts and only the facts (“All the news that’s fit to print”), objectivity and fairness is an illusion. No human knows more than a small percentage of the facts and it is not possible to present all the facts (even if one did know them). It isn’t even possible to present all the important facts, for many criteria compete for determining what is “important.” We must therefore always ask, “What has been left out of this article?” “What would I think if different facts had been highlighted here?” “What if this article had been written by those who hold a point of view opposite to the one embedded in the story as told?”

For example, people commonly consider facts to be important to the extent that they have significant implications for them personally: Is any given event going to affect what they want, how much is it going to cost them, how is it going to influence their income, their living conditions, their leisure, their convenience? How some given event is going to affect others, especially others far away and out of sight, is quite another matter. There is therefore a large divergence among the news media of the world as to what is presented as “significant” in the world.

The media focus on what their readers personally care about. Thus, even if their readers are irrational in some belief (e.g., harbor some irrational hate). The media nevertheless will treat that hatred as rational. Hence, when slavery was commonly accepted in the United States, the media presented slavery as “natural.” When the country became divided on the issue, the media followed suit (each paper presenting as right what its readers believed to be right).

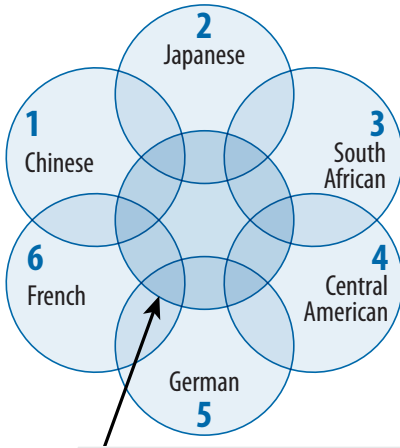
Consider how news media treat what is “shocking” or “exciting” or “disgusting” or “delightful” to a social group. For example, a woman sun-bathing on a beach with barebreasts is commonplace on the French Riviera (therefore is not condemned and her behavior is not treated as “news”) but the same woman would be arrested and punished for sun-bathing in a similar way at a beach in Lebanon (therefore would be condemned and her behavior treated as “news”). Or again, during the Olympics each country’s news media focus their attention on those events in which their nation’s athletes are expected to do well. And when one of their athletes wins a gold medal in an event, this event is presented to the home audience as if it were much more important than the events in which they won no metals. National audiences often are “thrilled” by “their victories” and uninterested in victories of others.

Human “objectivity” is an ideal that no one perfectly achieves. It requires a great deal of intellectual humility (knowledge of our extensive ignorance) and begins by freely admitting one’s own point of view, as well as the need to consider competing sources of information and opinion when making important judgments.

The key point is this: There are (typically) multiple points of view from which any set of events can be viewed and interpreted. Openness to a range of insights from multiple points of view and a willingness to question one’s own point of view are crucial to “objectivity.” This can be suggested in a diagram that illustrates how multiple viewpoints often stand in relation to the same set of events (see diagram, page 6). Objectivity is achieved to the extent that one has studied a wide range of perspectives relevant to an issue, obtained insights from all of them, seen weaknesses and partiality in each, and integrated what one has learned into a more comprehensive, many-sided whole. Each should serve to “correct” exaggerations or distortions in the others and to add facts not highlighted in the others.

“Most people, having given up on getting a set of unadorned facts, align themselves with whichever spin outlet seems comfortable.”

The Wall Street Journal
May 7, 2004

**Note:**

- Only some of the facts are highlighted in any point of view
- All points of view ignore or play down some facts
- No single point of view provides total understanding
- Understanding multiple viewpoints increases insight

The total set of facts relevant to understanding a given set of events

Six Points of View Focused on the Same Set of Events

We gain in “objectivity” (in conceptualizing both history and the news) to the extent that we can put stories and narratives into a rich historical context, and comment on them from multiple points of view. For example, to understand the war between Britain and its colonies in North America (1776–1783), one must look at the events from at least three points of view: that of the British government, that of the Colonial leaders, and that of the indigenous peoples.

To achieve objectivity, we need to:

1. identify the point of view from which a given news story or historical account is constructed,
2. identify the audience it is written for,
3. recognize what points of view it is negating or ignoring, and
4. distinguish the raw facts behind the story from the interpretation and spin being put on those facts. *When we do this, we are not as easily manipulated.*

We are able to exercise greater independence of judgment. We get a greater sense of what elements of the story or account are most or least credible. Of course, it is hard to do any of these if we have not also discovered multiple sources for information and a way to determine when those sources are most credible.

Additional Alternative News Sources

Below are some non-mainstream scholarly sources of news, and background for the news. We assume that you will read these sources with the same criticality we are recommending for mainstream views. Once again, we do not offer these sources as THE TRUTH but, instead, as helpful non-mainstream viewpoints providing alternatives to the content of mainstream media news.

Harpers

www.harpers.org

The Progressive

www.progressive.org

Counter Punch

www.counterpunch.org

Common Dreams

www.commondreams.org

Indy Media Center

www.indymedia.org

The Nation

www.thenation.com/

Mother Jones

www.motherjones.com/

Free Speech T. V.

www.freespeech.org/

In These Times

www.inthesetimes.com/

Z Magazine

www.zmag.org/

AlterNet

www.alternet.org/

The Multinational Monitor

www.essential.org/monitor/

Dollars and Sense

www.dollarsandsense.org/

The Guardian

www.guardian.co.uk/

The Village Voice

www.villagevoice.com/

Project Censored

www.projectcensored.org/

Conclusion

Learning to detect media bias and propaganda in the national and world news is an art that takes extended time to develop. Yet it is also an art essential to intellectual responsibility, integrity, and freedom. This mini-guide presents a starting place for the development of intellectual analysis and assessment applied to news stories. As one develops in this art, one experiences a progressive shedding of layers of social indoctrination and ethnocentricity.

In the end, of course, each of us must decide for ourselves what to believe and how to act. We can do this critically or uncritically, rationally or irrationally, egocentrically or fair-mindedly. We can either tacitly accept our social conditioning and its accompanying ideology, or we can make a deliberative conscious choice to grow beyond that conditioning. The choice is ours. No one can legitimately make that choice for us. If we choose to go beyond our social conditioning and think for ourselves, we can become free persons and conscientious citizens.



The Foundation for Critical Thinking
PO Box 220
Dillon Beach, CA 94929

About the Authors

Dr. Linda Elder is an educational psychologist who has taught both psychology and critical thinking at the college level. She is the President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking and the Executive Director of the Center for Critical Thinking. Dr. Elder has a special interest in the relation of thought and emotion, the cognitive and the affective, and has developed an original theory of the stages of critical thinking development. She has coauthored four books on critical thinking, as well as twenty thinkers' guides. She is a dynamic presenter with extensive experience in leading seminars on critical thinking.



Dr. Richard Paul is a major leader in the international critical thinking movement. He is Director of Research at the Center for Critical Thinking, and the Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, author of over 200 articles and seven books on critical thinking. Dr. Paul has given hundreds of workshops on critical thinking and made a series of eight critical thinking video programs for PBS. His views on critical thinking have been canvassed in *New York Times*, *Education Week*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *American Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Reader's Digest*.

