

Challenging the “Liberal Media” Claim

On economics, journalists' private views are to right of public

By David Croteau

The idea that the mainstream media have a “liberal bias” has long been conventional wisdom. At various times, conservative public figures from Richard Nixon to Newt Gingrich have all taken refuge in the claim that the “liberal” media were out to get them. A legion of conservative talk show hosts, pundits and media-watch groups pound away at the idea that the media exhibit an inherently “liberal” tilt. But the assertion is based on little evidence and is repeatedly made in the face of contradictory facts.

In particular, the conservative critique of the news media rests on two general propositions: (1) journalists' views are to the left of the public, and (2) journalists frame news content in a way that accentuates these left perspectives. Researchers and analysts have discovered persuasive evidence against the latter claim. Content analyses of the news media have, at a minimum, shown the absence of any such systematic liberal/left tilt; some studies have found a remarkably consistent press usually reflecting the narrow range of views of those in positions of power, as well as a spectrum of expert opinion that tilts toward the right. (See Croteau and Hoynes, *By Invitation Only*; Soley, *The News Shapers*.)

But even some progressives have been willing to cede to conservatives the first point: that journalists hold views that are to the left of the public. Professionals in general, they observe, often have “liberal” leanings on social issues, and there is no reason to expect journalists to be any different. However, they have also argued convincingly that the norms of “objective journalism” and the powerful corporate interests that own and sponsor the news media ensure that news content never strays too far, for too long, from

protecting the status quo.

You don't understand the corporate ideology of General Motors by studying the personal beliefs of the assembly-line workers, the argument goes. Ideological orientation is introduced and enforced by those high in the organizational hierarchy who have the power to hire and fire, to reward and punish. Working journalists, despite their sometimes high visibility, usually do not call the shots in the nation's media corporations. (The documentary *Fear and Favor in the Newsroom* provides vivid illustrations of this situation.) Consequently, the private views of individual journalists often matter little.

Such an analysis of organizational dynamics is fundamental to understanding the news process. It, indeed, is a crucial argument that kicks the legs out from the conservative critique and gets at the more fundamental structural elements that set the news agenda. Still, this approach begs the question: Are journalists *really* to the left of the public? This element of the conservative critique has not been adequately addressed; it's one reason why the “liberal media” charge gets repeated without serious scrutiny.

To examine this essential underpinning of the “liberal media” claim, as well as other matters, FAIR commissioned a survey of journalists of the Washington press corps.

Journalists' Economic Policy Views: A Comparison With the Public

The survey included a series of questions regarding recent policy debates. Most questions were taken from, or very closely modeled after, questions that had been asked in national random surveys of the general public. That way rough comparisons could be made

between how journalists and the general public saw these issues.

Political Orientation

One of the basic findings of this survey is that most journalists identify themselves as centrists on both social and economic issues.

On social issues, how would you characterize your political orientation?

Center	57%
Left	30%
Right	9%
Other	5%

On economic issues, how would you characterize your political orientation?

Center	64%
Right	19%
Left	11%
Other	5%

When asked to characterize their political orientation on social and economic issues, most journalists self-identify as centrists. Of the minority who do not identify with the center, most have left leanings concerning social issues and right leanings concerning economic ones. This is consistent with a long history of research on profit-sector professionals in general (Brint, *The Political Attitudes of Professionals*; Derber et al., *Power in the Highest Degree*). High levels of education tend to be associated with liberal views on social issues such as racial equality, gay rights, gun control and abortion rights. High levels of income tend to be associated with conservative views on economic issues such as tax policy and federal spending. Most journalists, therefore, would certainly not recognize themselves in the

“liberal media” picture painted by conservative critics.

These identifications may explain why an earlier survey of journalists (Roper Center/Freedom Forum, 1996) found that respondents had voted for Bill Clinton in large numbers. Clinton’s centrist “new Democrat” orientation combines moderately liberal social policies (which bring criticism from conservative anti-gay, anti-abortion and other activists) with moderately conservative economic policies (which bring criticism from labor unions, welfare rights advocates and others). This orientation fits well with the views expressed by journalists.

State of the Economy

The Washington press corps has often been accused of being an “elite” that is out of touch with mainstream Americans. Journalists responding to this survey certainly did have very high household incomes, with over half living in households with \$100,000 or more in income, and one-third in households with income of \$150,000 or more. By comparison, the Census Bureau reports that the 1996 median household income was \$35,492. Eighty percent of U.S. households had incomes below \$68,015; 95 percent

made less than \$119,540.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, that journalists have a much more positive assessment of the state of the economy than the general public. Choosing from a list of options, 34 percent of journalists said they thought economic conditions were “excellent” and another 58 percent said “good.” Only 4 percent saw them as fair, and 1 percent rated them “poor.”

When pollsters ask the same question of the general public—where the benefits of economic growth have fallen unevenly—far different views are found. A March 1998 Gallup CNN/USA Today poll discovered that only 20 percent of the general public see economic conditions as “excellent,” while 46 percent say “good.” A full 27 percent describe them as “only fair” and 7 percent believe they are “poor.”

Economic Priorities

Asked to prioritize various issues for the President and Congress, the surveyed journalists gave answers often starkly at odds with the public, as measured by a nationwide November 1996 poll conducted by Greenberg Research.

Entitlements: Journalists overwhelmingly chose as one of the top few priorities: “reform entitlement programs” by

slowing growth in Medicare and Social Security. Only 12 percent of journalists ranked entitlement reform as a middle or low priority (compared to 38 percent of the public). By contrast, most of the public chose “protect Medicare and Social Security against major cuts” as one of its top few priorities—with 24 percent calling it the “single highest priority.” In short, while journalists’ gave heavy priority to slowing entitlements, the general public emphasized protecting them.

Health care: 32 percent of journalists felt that requiring employers to “provide health insurance to their employees” should be one of the top few priorities, while a larger 47 percent of the public did.

NAFTA expansion: This issue revealed the biggest gap between journalists and the public. While 24 percent of journalists chose expansion of NAFTA to other Latin American countries as one of the top few priorities, only 7 percent of the public did. A whopping 44 percent of the general public ranked NAFTA expansion as a low priority.

In these issue areas, the claimed economic centrism of journalists is often belied by a series of economic priorities that are actually to the right of the pub-

Economic Priorities

Regarding “a few issues facing the country,” journalists—and the public in a 1996 Greenberg poll—were asked: “How high a priority do you think each one should receive from Congress and the President?”

NOTE: **Journalists’ responses** are listed on the first line in **bold**; the public’s responses are on the second line.

	Single Highest Priority	One of Top Few Priorities	Near Top of List	Middle of List	Toward Bottom of List	Don’t Know/ Not Sure
a. Protect Medicare and Social Security against major cuts	13% 24%	26% 35%	16% 24%	13% 12%	15% 5%	16% 1%
b. Reform entitlement programs by slowing the rate of increase in spending for programs like Medicare and Social Security	19% 10%	37% 25%	15% 20%	8% 26%	4% 12%	17% 6%
c. Expand the NAFTA trade agreement to include other countries in Latin America	4% 2%	20% 5%	24% 7%	29% 33%	8% 44%	16% 9%
d. Require that employers provide health insurance to their employees	15% 16%	17% 31%	19% 18%	16% 20%	16% 13%	17% 2%

lic, and which would bring opposition from groups on the left: labor unions, health care advocates, senior citizens' advocates.

Environmental Laws

The one area in the survey where journalists could be considered somewhat to the left of the general public was regarding environmental regulation. When asked to choose between whether stricter environmental laws and regulations "cost too many jobs and hurt the economy" or "are worth the cost," 79 percent of journalists said such laws were worth the cost, while 21 percent disagreed. In comparison, in an October 1996 poll by the Pew Research Center, only 63 percent of the public said such laws were worth the cost, while 30 percent disagreed.

This result may not be very surprising since the economic cost of environmental regulation is often perceived to be carried by workers in the form of lost jobs—a problem that may not be of immediate salience for professional journalists. There may be more envi-

ronmental commitment—pro and con—among the general public than among journalists: 51 percent of the public, vs. 32 percent of journalists, agreed "strongly" that stricter environmental laws are "worth the cost"; 22 percent of the public, vs. 8 percent of journalists, strongly took the opposite view.

Corporate Power

The general public is more critical of the concentration of corporate power in the United States than are journalists. When asked whether they felt "too much power is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies," 57 percent of the journalists agreed, while 43 percent felt they did not have too much

Methodology

In consultation with the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University, a 24-question self-administered survey was sent by mail to 444 Washington-based journalists. Data was gathered from late February through April 1998.

Journalists were asked a range of questions about how they did their work and about how they viewed the quality of media coverage in the broad area of politics and economic policy. They were asked for their opinions and views about a range of recent policy issues and debates. Finally, they were asked for demographic and identifying information, including their political orientation.

The survey targeted Washington bureau chiefs and Washington-based journalists who cover national politics and/or economic policy at U.S. national and major metropolitan outlets. The intent was to represent the breadth of available media outlets, while realistically focusing on the largest and most influential of these national and major metropolitan outlets.

A survey was sent to every journalist who met the following criteria:

- They were listed in the Spring 1998 *News Media Yellow Book*, a directory of media professionals, under one or more of the following assignment categories: "Congress," "federal government," "national affairs," "politics," "White House," "business," "consumer issues," "economics" or "labor."
- They were based in the Washington, D.C. area.
- They worked for a national or major metropolitan U.S. news organization that potentially reaches the general public.

In addition, Washington-based journalists listed as "bureau chiefs" in the *Yellow Book* were surveyed if they were at a U.S. news organization that potentially reaches the general public and has at least 10 staffers listed in the *Yellow Book*.

These criteria yielded a targeted population total of 33 bureau chiefs and 411 other journalists, all of whom were sent questionnaires.

The targeted population represents a broad range of news outlets, while at the same time focusing on the largest and most influential of these outlets. The criteria used for targeting journalists meant that smaller and less influential news outlets were not over-represented, a problem found in earlier research on Washington-based journalists. The criteria were successful in both generating significant breadth (journalists at 78 different news organizations were surveyed) and keeping the emphasis on the largest and most influential media (half of the surveys were sent to journalists at 14 news organizations).

The 14 news organizations that received more than 10 surveys were (in alphabetical order): **ABC News/ABC Radio, Associated Press/AP Broadcast News, Bloomberg News, CNN, Knight-Ridder Newspapers/Tribune Information Services, Los Angeles Times, NBC News, New York Times, Reuters America, Time, USA Today/USA Weekend, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post and Washington Times.**

Of the 444 questionnaires mailed, 141 were returned, for a response rate of 32 percent. In terms of type of position held by the journalist, type of media outlet, and general size of media outlet, there was no statistically significant difference between respondents and non-respondents. (See table opposite.)

Corporate Power

Which of the following statements comes closer to your views?

Too much power is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies.

Journalists		The Public
57%		77%
24%	Strongly agree	62%
32%	Not strongly	15%
1%	Not sure	—

The largest companies do NOT have too much power.

Journalists		The Public
43%		18%
12%	Strongly agree	9%
30%	Not strongly	9%
1%	Not sure	—

— Neither/don't know 5%

Times Mirror, Oct. 1995

power. The numbers were quite different, though, when the Times Mirror Center asked the same question of the general public in October 1995. A full 77 percent of the public felt that corporations had too much power, with only 18 percent feeling that they did not. The public also tended to take a more emphatic position: 62 percent agreed "strongly" that a few corporations have too much power, vs. only 24 percent of journalists who were that definitive.

Taxes

The centrist orientation of journalists comes through clearly when assessing Clinton's 1993 economic plan, which modestly raised tax rates on the wealthy, countering the trend of reduced tax rates that they had enjoyed in previous years. Nearly half (49 per-

cent) of journalists thought this policy was about right, while 14 percent thought it went too far, and 18 percent thought it didn't go far enough. In contrast, when the public was asked a similar question in an **ABC News/Washington Post** poll in April 1993, 15 percent of the general public felt Clinton's policy went too far and an overwhelming 72 percent felt it didn't go far enough. (Ten percent volunteered that they thought it was about right.) Here again, the relative economic privilege of the Washington press corps may partly explain this contrast with the public.

NAFTA and "Fast Track"

Compared to the general public, journalists have a far more positive assessment of NAFTA's impact and are more

Targeted Journalists Vs. Respondents

Type of position:	Percent of Targeted Journalists (number)	Percent of Respondents (number)
Washington bureau chiefs	7% (33)	6% (9)
Editors or producers	23% (100)	19% (27)
Reporters, correspondents and other	70% (311)	75% (105)
Type of media outlet:		
Wires/news services	19% (86)	14% (20)
TV	19% (84)	17% (24)
Radio	5% (20)	6% (8)
Newspaper	41% (180)	46% (65)
Magazines, periodicals and other	17% (74)	17% (24)
Size of outlet (as indicated by number of surveys sent)		
Sent more than 10 surveys	50% (223)	50% (71)
5-10 surveys	34% (152)	36% (51)
3-4 surveys	5% (23)	6% (9)
1-2 surveys	10% (46)	7% (10)

likely to support granting the president “fast track” authority to negotiate new trade agreements. Sixty-five percent of journalists feel that NAFTA has had more of a positive impact on the United States, while only 8 percent feel it has had more of a negative impact. But most recent polls find the American public more negative than positive on NAFTA’s effect. In a Hart-Teeter **NBC News/Wall Street Journal** poll in July 1997, only 32 percent of the public thought NAFTA’s impact on the U.S. was more positive, while 42 percent felt NAFTA had a mostly negative impact.

Perhaps as a result of these differing assessments of NAFTA, journalists are much more likely to favor granting “fast track” authority to the president to negotiate new trade agreements—authority opposed most forcefully by unions. A full 71 percent of journalists favor such a policy, while only 10 percent oppose it. According to an October 1997 Hart-Teeter **NBC News/Wall Street Journal** poll, the rate of opposition to “fast-track” among the general public is over five times that of the rate among journalists: Fifty-six percent of the public say they oppose “fast track,” while only 35 percent support it. In the debate over trade, most journalists tend to agree with the position that corporations take on the issue, while most members of the public side with the critical views of labor and many consumer and environmental groups.

Medical Care

As indicated above under “Economic

Who the Journalists Are

Demographic characteristics of the respondents to FAIR’s survey include:

- Male journalists (66 percent) outnumbered female journalists (34 percent) by about two to one.
- Eighty-nine percent of respondents were white, 5 percent black, 3 percent Latino, 2 percent Asian and 2 percent chose the category “other” when describing their race.
- Only 5 percent of the respondents were not college graduates. Fifty percent had bachelor’s degrees, 14 percent had some postgraduate training, and a full 31 percent had postgraduate degrees.
- Only 5 percent of respondents reported annual household incomes under \$50,000. Forty-three percent had household incomes between \$50,000 and \$99,999; 21 percent were between \$100,000 and \$149,999; 17 percent were between \$150,000 and \$199,999; and 14 percent had household incomes of \$200,000 or more.

Priorities,” journalists are less interested than the general public in requiring that employers provide health insurance to their employees. Journalists are also less likely than the public to believe that the federal government should guarantee medical care for those who don’t have health insurance. While 43

percent of journalists felt that the government should guarantee medical care, a similar 35 percent felt that this was not the responsibility of the government. In contrast, a February 1996 **New York Times/CBS News** poll found that the general public supports government guaranteed medical care by more than a two-to-one margin (64 percent to 29 percent).

Conclusion: Beyond the “Liberal Media” Myth

This survey calls into question the conservative claim that journalists’ personal views are to the left of the public. On economic issues, the minority of journalists not in the “center” are more likely to identify as having a “right” orientation. When polled on specific economic policies, journalists were often to the right of public opinion. There appear to be relatively few national journalists with left views on questions like corporate power and trade—issues that probably matter more to most media owners and advertisers than social issues like gay rights and affirmative action.

While this survey exposes the right-wing stereotype of the “liberal journalist,” one should not replace it with an equally false mirror image of a “conservative journalist.” Like profit-sector professionals in general, many journalists hold somewhat liberal social views and conservative economic views. And it’s important to remember that a majority of journalists identify as “centrists.”

The right’s “liberal media” myth has been maintained, in part, by the well-funded flow of conservative rhetoric that focuses attention on journalists’ social views and away from their economic views. But the conservative critique is based not only on the proposition that journalists’ views are to the left of the general public, but also that these views influence the news content they produce.

There are two key problems with this latter claim. First, it is *sources*, not journalists, who are allowed to express their views in the conventional model of “objective” journalism. Therefore, we learn much more about the political orientation of news content by looking at sourcing patterns rather than jour-

Policy Scorecard

On these issues journalists appear to be . . .	to the left of the public	to the right of the public
Protecting Medicare and Social Security		✓
The expansion of NAFTA		✓
Requiring employers to provide health insurance to their employees		✓
Stricter environmental laws	✓	
Concern over concentrated corporate power		✓
Taxing the wealthy		✓
Impact of NAFTA		✓
“Fast track” trade authority		✓
Government guaranteed medical care		✓

nalists' personal views. As this survey shows (see sidebar), it is government officials and business representatives to whom journalists "nearly always" turn when covering economic policy. Labor representatives and consumer advocates were at the bottom of the list.

This is consistent with earlier research on sources. For example, analysts from the centrist Brookings Institution and right-wing think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute are those most quoted in mainstream news accounts; left-wing think tanks are often invisible (*Extra!*, 5-6/98). When it comes to sources, "liberal bias" is nowhere to be found.

Second, journalists do not work in a vacuum. It is crucial to remember the important role of institutional context in setting the broad parameters for the news process. Businesses are not in the habit of producing products that contradict their fundamental *economic* interests. The large corporations that are the major commercial media in this country—not surprisingly—tend to favor style and substance that is consonant with their corporate interests, as do their corporate advertisers.

It is here, at the structural level, that the fundamental ground rules of news production are set. Of course, working journalists sometimes succeed in temporarily challenging some of those rules and boundaries. But in the long run, if they are to succeed and advance in their profession, they must adapt to the ground rules set by others—regardless of their own personal views.

Perhaps it is in this light that journalists' basic centrist orientation should be understood. Their adherence to the middle of the road and conventional wisdom is consistent with media outlets owned and funded by corporations that benefit from the status quo and are threatened by alternative analyses. Unfortunately, this too often leaves citizens with policy "debates" grounded in the shared assumptions of those in positions of power. ■

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Journalists' Views on Media Coverage

Journalists responding to the survey report high levels of satisfaction with the amount and quality of economic policy coverage provided by their own news organization. A full 76 percent of the journalists thought that their news organization provided "excellent" or "good" quality coverage in terms of giving the public information they need to make informed political decisions. Another 14 percent thought it was "fair" and 9 percent said it was "poor."

Their assessment of other news media, though, was more varied. "Business-oriented news outlets" received the highest grade for the quality of the economic information they give to the public; 80 percent thought it was "excellent" or "good." "Major daily newspapers," too, received a positive assessment, with 65 percent saying their coverage was "excellent" or "good." However, for every other type of media, less than half of the respondents rated its coverage as "excellent" or "good."

A full 92 percent of responding journalists said the quality of economic policy coverage on broadcast TV networks was only "fair" or "poor," with just 6 percent saying it was "good" and not a single respondent saying it was "excellent." (Even of those journalists working in television, 83 percent rated broadcast TV networks as "fair" or "poor.") Cable news services were judged by 63 percent of journalists to provide only "fair" or "poor" coverage of economic policy issues.

Choosing from a list of possibilities, more journalists (58 percent) thought that business misconduct was a topic that received "too little" media attention. This was followed closely by international trade agreements (53 percent), labor misconduct (50 percent) and the federal budget process (49 percent). The stock market (22 percent) was the item that journalists most often cited as being covered "too much," followed by government misconduct (16 percent) and "downsizing" (14 percent).

Work Routines and Information Sources

Technological changes seem to have had an impact on the work routines and information sources of journalists. With contemporary technology, the news cycle is quite short for a large number of journalists. More than a quarter of those who responded to the survey (26 percent) reported having a deadline more than once a day. Another 55 percent usually had daily deadlines.

Electronic data services have become a staple source of information for journalists. Seventy-two percent reported that they consulted Internet or other online services during a typical workday. This was surpassed only by wire services (94 percent) and cable TV news (79 percent).

Journalists rely most often on government officials and business representatives as sources for their stories on economic policy issues. Labor representatives are consulted far less frequently than business representatives, and consumer advocates are even less likely to be consulted.

How often do you talk to the following sources in your work on economic policy issues?

	% saying "nearly always"	% saying "often"
Government officials	51%	34%
Business representatives	31%	35%
Think-tank analysts	17%	47%
University-based academics	10%	38%
Wall Street analysts	9%	22%
Labor representatives	5%	30%
Consumer advocates	5%	20%