

The Sense in Which I Don't Trust the Media

I ignore the news, in part, because I deem it unreliable. That's right, "I don't trust the media." But what exactly do I mean by this seemingly conspiratorial statement?

All things considered, when I hear the media report on *direct observations*, I believe them. If they say rioting is happening in DC, I am highly confident that rioting is happening in DC. If they quote a politician, I am highly confident that the politician said the quote. If they say that a person was convicted of a specific crime, I believe that the person was indeed convicted.

But my trust largely ends there. When the media makes claims about any of the following, I habitually roll my eyes.

1. *Causation*. I distrust media claims about causation – about claims like “X caused event Y” as well as “Event Y caused Z.” If the media says a politician won an election, I believe them. When they try to tell me *why* the politician won, however, I scoff. If they try to tell me what will happen as a result of the politicians’ victory, I scoff again. Why? Because causation is notoriously difficult to untangle, and few journalists have the slightest training in causal inference. (They are however masters of hyperbole).
2. *Meaning*. I distrust media claims about what events *mean* – about claims like “X shows Y” or “X is part of broader trend Z.” Why? Because putting any particular event in context requires long-term statistical reasoning, and few journalists have more than mediocre training in statistics. So if journalists claim that a notorious crime illustrates a general pattern about crime, I skeptically shrug.
3. *Importance*. Whenever the media cover a story, there's a subtext. And the subtext is: *This is important!* The goes goes when the media ignores a story. The subtext is: *This is **not** important!* Even if I knew nothing about the world, I would wonder, “What qualifies these people to adjudicate events’ importance?” And since I do know a great deal about the world, I am convinced that the media’s sense of importance is *radically* defective. These are the kind of people who would rather cover an insensitive tweet than Uighur concentration camps. They would rather report a fatality-free nuclear accident than the vastly greater health damage of coal. They would rather investigate the latest terrorist attack than discuss the global murder rate. These are not isolated shortcomings. The media’s main function is to distort viewers’ priorities.
4. *Politics*. Even on utterly apolitical issues, I consider the media deeply unreliable on causation, meaning, and importance. Once causation, meaning, and importance become political, however, I deem it absurdly, insultingly unreliable. Why? Most obviously,

because of the media's overwhelming left-wing bias. You can tell simply by reading the headlines; diction alone is a dead giveaway. Less obviously, because of the media's unthinking nationalism. Despite their cosmopolitan pretensions, even very left-wing journalists are nationalists at heart. That's why a minor terrorist attack against fellow citizens gets a hundred times as much attention as mass murder of foreigners. That's why token cuts in domestic welfare programs outrage the media a hundred times as much as massive cuts in the admission of refugees. When critics attack the media as "globalist," it's a case of 99% nationalists lashing out at 90% nationalists.

Personally, I should add, journalists almost always treat me very well. When they interview me, they're not just consistently fair and respectful; they also accurately report my positions. What gives? Much of the reason must be self-selection: Journalists who interview me tend to be favorably disposed. A secondary reason, though, is that journalistic vices are often a response to consumer demand. On some level, most journalists know that plane crashes are grossly over-covered; but alas, "If it bleeds, it leads." In a one-on-one conversation, though, the media is more thoughtful and open-minded than their output suggests. Another possibility, admittedly, is that when you interview someone as averse to Social Desirability Bias as myself, you can get a good story without bending the truth...