

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION 
STUDY GUIDE **Challenging media**

CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC OPINION

HOW POLITICIANS & THE MEDIA MISREPRESENT THE PUBLIC
FEATURING JUSTIN LEWIS

CONTENTS

CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC OPINION

HOW POLITICIANS & THE MEDIA MISREPRESENT THE PUBLIC

USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM	pg. 02
THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT	03
OVERVIEW	05
PRE-VIEWING EXERCISES	07
INTRODUCTION	
Key Points.....	10
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	10
POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS	
Key Points.....	11
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	11
ECONOMIC FORCES	
Key Points.....	13
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	13
MEDIA COVERAGE	
Key Points.....	14
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	14
THE PHANTOM LIBERAL	
Key Points.....	16
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	16
MILITARY OMISSIONS	
Key Points.....	17
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	17
DEMOCRATIC IDEALS	
Key Points.....	18
Questions for Discussion & Writing.....	18
EXERCISES FOR RESEARCH & WRITING	19
ADDENDUM	21

USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

- » View the video prior to showing it to your students.
- » Review the study guide and choose which exercises you will use with your students.
- » Use the previewing activities to help your students prepare for the ideas presented by the video.
- » Encourage *active listening*. Because the content of this video is likely to elicit emotional responses from the students, it is important that the students engage with each other in ways that ensure everybody has the opportunity both to speak and to be listened to. It is advised that you set guidelines or norms to ways to “actively listen” in advance of classroom discussions. Check out MEF’s handout, *Techniques for Active Listening*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/ActiveListening.pdf>)
- » Have the students keep a journal. It will be an effective place for them to explore their own attitudes and opinions and to record their observations about the media.
- » Review and discuss the handout *How to be a Critical Media Viewer*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/CriticalViewing.pdf>)
- » Incorporate activism and advocacy into your media literacy study. They are an important part of empowering students.

NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students manage and engage the substance and detail of this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach video content – and difficult for students to break down a large amount of streaming visual and audio material – the intention here is to help students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues the video addresses. The guide therefore gives you the option of focusing on one section of the video at a time. After a set of pre-viewing exercises, the structure of the guide mirrors the structure of the video, with each of the video’s sections accompanied by a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are included to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (*i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind*).

Exercises for Research & Writing are designed to encourage students to engage the video more critically and formally – through research and more structured forms of writing and reflection.

Please note: If students have access to computers, the guide gives you the option of requiring Internet research. If they do not have easy computer access, or you prefer not to work with them, these assignments are also designed for you to go to these sites yourself and print out the required text.

USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

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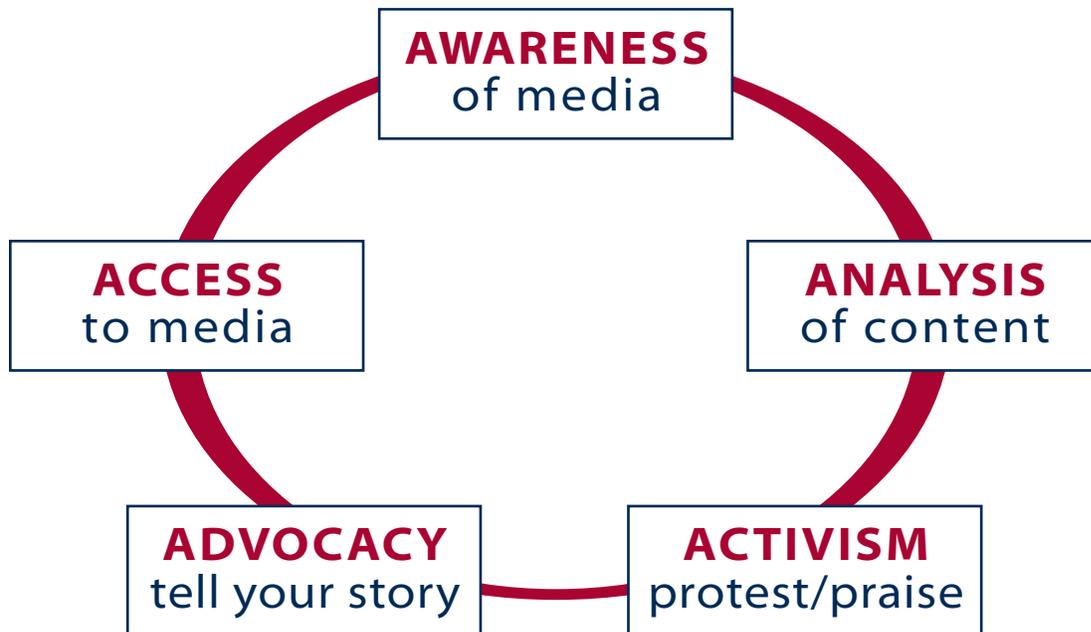
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THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT¹



THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT EXPLAINED

AWARENESS

Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.

ANALYSIS

Students discuss the forms and contents of the media's various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

ACTIVISM

Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it – this can be in the form of praise for healthy media, protest of unhealthy media, or development of campaigns to educate others with regard to the media, to change media messages, etc.

ADVOCACY

Students learn how to work with media and use their own media to develop and publicize messages that are healthy, constructive, and all too often ignored by our society.

ACCESS

Students gain access to the media – radio, newspaper, internet, television, etc. – to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and how it works, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

1. Diagram and explanation adopted from E.D.A.P.'s GO GIRLS! Curriculum, (c) 1999 (<http://www.edap.org/gogirls.html>)

OVERVIEW

Constructing Public Opinion explodes the myth that politicians too often cave into polling numbers, that too little leadership and too much knee-jerk democracy is at the root of Americans' disillusionment with politics. Professor Justin Lewis argues instead that public opinion is in effect manufactured and distorted in ways that undermine true democratic participation. He also maintains that the reasons for this are less conspiratorial than institutional: a reflection of the mandate of political, corporate and media elites to maintain the status quo in order to satisfy their interdependent interests.

The film takes a sustained and critical look at the rise and influence of public opinion polls in American politics, and examines the relationship between politics, media and the public. It demonstrates that public opinion data used by politicians and reported by media do not so much reflect what Americans think as construct public opinion itself. Lewis investigates, against conventional wisdom, a central paradox: that the very opinion polling that appears to wield such influence over politicians, and media coverage of politics, has in actuality distorted and limited the voice of the public.

The film explores this paradox by showing how the potential power of polling to give people a voice in the political process is undermined by the nature of the political system itself. While the public is now surveyed with greater frequency and sophistication than ever before, Lewis demonstrates how people's desires often carry less urgency with political elites than the need of elites to manage people's desires. His argument is not an indictment of a few powerful individuals conspiring against the public, but of a political culture so infused with money, so confined by mainstream corporate media coverage, and therefore so beholden to elite moneyed interests, that it fails to respond to the real opinions of ordinary people. The chief casualty in all of this is the truth, the real things that real people say they want from their government and representatives – and the effect is cyclical: true public opinion continues to be misrepresented, and these misrepresentations in turn continue to shape and severely limit the public's sense of political reality and their place in it.

The film shows how this ongoing misrepresentation of public opinion:

- » Constructs, rather than reflects, true public opinion by failing to reflect the specific and accurate opinion of the public on specific issues.
- » Constructs by misrepresentation the public itself.
- » Excludes real and mainstream public sentiment that has been shown repeatedly in surveys to lie outside, and to the left, of what mainstream reporting of opinion allows.
- » Reflects the interests of politicians who must first satisfy the interests of those who fund them, interests that are by definition conservative because wedded to the status quo.
- » Reflects the interests of the mass media whose job it is to report what the public says it wants: the media's institutional interests as corporations themselves, and the related pressure on them to trade in labels, image and oversimplification – rather than specifics, nuance and substance – in order to maintain ratings and market share.
- » Reflects media bias toward the elite interests who have the greatest access to media; does not so much measure public feeling about the direction or shape of policy as it does direct and shape public feeling about predetermined policies that often work against what the public says it wants.
- » Creates a climate of misinformation which in turn affects public opinion by affecting people's understanding of major issues.

PRE-VIEWING EXERCISES

1. CLASS DISCUSSION

a) Write down the term liberal on one side of the board, conservative on the other. Ask students to come up with adjectives that come to mind quickly when they hear each of these terms, one at a time. Fill the board with as many of these adjectives as possible. When you are finished watching the film, look back at these responses and discuss them in light of the film's arguments.

b) Ask students whether they believe Bill Clinton was a "liberal" on economic issues or more "conservative." Ask them to share what they base their opinions on.

c) Ask students whether they think the media are liberal or conservative. Talk about whether they agree with the frequently repeated notion that network news media in particular have a liberal bias.

d) Draw an empty circle on the board, then ask students to turn it into a pie-chart showing how much they think the United States spends on specific programs like health care, education, foreign aid, welfare, the environment and the military. Including the military is the key to the assignment. Take another look back at this chart after watching the film and discuss it in light of Lewis' points about military spending and how it is covered – or not covered – by mainstream media.

2. POLLING YOUR STUDENTS

This exercise takes the form of a public opinion poll. We've constructed two polls, found below. Each one asks questions about the same issues, but in each the questions are phrased differently in an attempt to elicit different responses. The point of this exercise is to provide students the actual experience of being polled, while at the same time showing them first-hand how volatile public opinion is – how informed responses depend on good information, and how pollsters, media and politicians alike can manipulate opinion to achieve the results they desire.

The point of this exercise is to encourage students to begin thinking about polling before seeing this film, and the questions that follow it are designed to spark discussion about a number of specific themes treated by Professor Lewis.

TIPS FOR USING THIS EXERCISE

These polls can be used in the classroom in a number of ways. Here are three suggestions:

1) If your class is large enough, have one half of the class complete **Poll 1**, the other half **Poll 2**. (*Note: It might be best not to tell students they are getting different polls; that way they'll be more likely to complete the exercise in a manner that's closer to actual conditions, rather than interpreting it as a trick of some kind.*)

2) If you teach more than one class, you may try giving **Poll 1** to one class, **Poll 2** to the other. Then during discussion, talk about the overall results and any differences with each class.

3) Have all of your students complete one poll first, then have them complete the second one after. (*Note: This approach has the advantage of students seeing how their own responses might change based on the way questions are framed. But it has the potential disadvantage of their responses in the first poll affecting the way they answer in the second.*)

PRE-VIEWING EXERCISES

POST-POLL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After comparing and discussing the results of these two polls, these discussion questions might help make for a smooth transition to some of the key issues presented in the film:

- 1) Can polls shape public opinion? How? Why does this happen?
- 2) Does what's excluded from polls alter the nature of the results? How? Why?
- 3) Can the public, because of lack of information from media – or the poll itself – give contradictory answers – or answers that might change with access to better information?
- 4) Do we sometimes respond to labels – like “feminist” or “liberal” – rather than thinking through an issue? Why?

POLL ONE:

1. Which of the following best describes your overall political views:

- a. I favor big government and higher taxes.
- b. I favor smaller government, more individual freedom and choice, and lower taxes.
- c. I favor something in between these two.

2. Would you describe your political views as:

- a. liberal/left-wing
- b. conservative/right-wing
- c. moderate

3. Would you consider yourself a so-called “feminist”?

4. Do you believe politicians listen too much to polls, and not enough to their own conscience?

5. Do you agree or disagree with this statement:

Democrats represent the interests of ordinary people more than Republicans do.

6. Do you agree or disagree with this statement:

Republicans represent the interests of big business and the rich more than Democrats do.

7. Do you think that throwing more money into the education budget is the solution to solving problems in inner city schools?

8. Which of the following statements do you agree with more:

- a. The Federal government should spend more of the tax dollars of working Americans on a new nationalized system that gives health care to every person in the country, whether they work or not.
- b. Health Care will be most efficient and will cost less for everyone – including the poor – if it's handled by private companies that can drive down costs by competing freely against one another for our business.

9. Democrats and Republicans alike agree that there are newer and more sophisticated threats than ever to American security. The State Department has identified weapons of mass destruction, the rise of terrorism, and the potential for economically-failing Russia to accidentally launch a nuclear weapon at the U.S. as serious threats.

In your own opinion, which of the following do you most agree with:

- a. After eight years of Clinton's presidency, the U.S. military budget is too big.
- b. After eight years of Clinton's presidency, the U.S. military budget is too small.
- c. After eight years of Clinton's presidency, the U.S. military budget is about right.

PRE-VIEWING EXERCISES

10. *Do you feel that Bill Clinton was:*

- a. More liberal than conservative on economic issues.
- b. More conservative than liberal on economic issues.

POLL TWO:

1. *Which of the following best describes your overall political views:*

- a. I believe the federal government is a necessary power and should be strong enough to check and balance the power of big business and corporate America.
- b. I think the federal government is too big and should give large corporations more power to do what they'd like.
- c. I favor something in between these two.

2. *Would you describe your political views as:*

- a. Most concerned with equal opportunity, respect for diversity and the environment, and community issues like helping those who cannot help themselves.
- b. Most concerned with your own individual and financial freedom.
- c. Something in between.

3. *Do you believe that women should have the same rights as men, that they should be paid equally if they do the same amount of work as men, and should be free of being discriminated against simply because they are women?*

4. *Would you agree that politicians probably use polls:*

- a. Mostly to know how to market their own ideas better to people, or
- b. To actually give ordinary people what they say they want?

5. *Do you agree or disagree with this statement:*

Democrats represent the interests of ordinary people more than Republicans do.

6. *Do you agree or disagree with this statement:*

Republicans represent the interests of big business and the rich more than Democrats do.

7. *The Cold War is over, yet the United States continues to spend 13 times as much as the seven countries – combined – that the State Department have identified as our potential enemies. Do you feel it makes sense to take a small fraction of the money out of the military budget and use it to help schools that are failing children?*

8. *Which of the following statements do you agree with more, given that the United States is one of the only industrialized nations in the world that does not provide its citizens with affordable health care coverage.*

- a. The Federal government has a responsibility to make sure that poor people, the disabled, those who cannot work and children have access to good, affordable health care.
- b. Health Care should be handled by big businesses and corporations and based primarily on their profits.

9. *The United States military budget is \$300 billion a year. It is five times as much as the next biggest spender, Russia. And it is 13 times bigger than what all of our enemies spend combined. Given that there seems not to be enough money for education, health care, the environment, do you think:*

- a. The U.S. military budget is too big.
- b. The U.S. military budget is too small.
- c. The U.S. military budget is about right.

PRE-VIEWING EXERCISES

10. *Bill Clinton was:*

- a. More liberal than conservative on economic issues.
- b. More conservative than liberal on economic issues.

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction, Lewis challenges the myth of the “poll-pandering” politician. He cites data that show the American people to be far more “liberal” than their representatives on a broad range of issues. The section ends with these questions: If, as we so often hear, politicians do only what the polls tell them to do, then how is this mismatch between popular sentiment and mainstream policy possible? And what does this mismatch say about the democratic process?

KEY POINTS

- » It is a myth that politicians, in quest of popularity, do what polls tell them to do.
- » This myth creates the impression that the political system may have problems, and that politicians may not be strong leaders, but that on the whole both are responsive to the public.
- » A detailed look at public opinion reveals broad support for a range of liberal or left-wing policies, including increased government spending on inner cities, the environment, education, health care, a minimum wage increase, more gun control, and campaign finance reform.
- » Despite the popular support of ordinary people for liberal policy on a range of economic issues, their representatives – whether Republican or Democrat – are generally far more conservative.
- » This discrepancy raises questions about the true influence and use of public opinion, and in a democracy forces us to ask how it’s possible that there could be such a mismatch between what the people want and the actual policies pursued by their representatives.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What “mismatch” does Lewis describe between the politics of large numbers of the people and the politics of their representatives?
2. Why does Lewis say that the use of polls in the United States is undemocratic? Isn’t this a contradiction?
3. If politicians listen to polls all the time, and polls reveal what the people think, then how can it be possible to say also that politicians don’t listen to the American people?
4. A lot of people say that politicians are weak leaders because they listen to polls too much. Do you think this is true? If politicians are elected to represent the interests of their constituents, shouldn’t they stay informed about what their constituents care about?
5. In your opinion, how can a leader be strong and still use polls? Is this possible?

POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

This section begins to explore reasons for the discrepancy between popular support for liberal policies and the more conservative policies pursued by representatives. After defining what is meant, broadly speaking, by the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” Lewis shows how people often support vague conservative themes – like individual liberty and wariness of big government – while at the same time supporting specific policies that favor government spending and intervention. The section ends by considering one possible reason why people support conservative ideas and liberal policy: the negative connotations in the public mind of extreme labels like left-wing or right-wing, liberal or conservative.

KEY POINTS

- » In terms of the role of government in the economy, the term “liberal” or “left-wing” refers to a belief in high government intervention, high spending on social programs.
- » “Conservative” or “right-wing” refers to a belief in low government intervention, low spending on social programs.
- » Public opinion enters here: people often support vague conservative “themes” – abstract notions like “individual freedom.” But when given specific options, they tend to support policies that favor government spending and intervention.
- » This apparent inconsistency is due, in part, to people’s reactions to political labels – specifically their ambivalence about extreme labels.
- » People prefer the label “moderate” to either conservative or liberal.
- » The way media construct narratives in political coverage plays a role in this: In political stories, “moderate” is constructed again and again in positive ways, extremists in negative ways.
- » This reaction to labels is supported by surveys that show that many people favor liberal approaches on a range of policy issues, but reject the term liberal.
- » In addition to media narratives that create negative associations with the term “liberal,” the composition of government itself tilts mainstream political discourse to the right.
- » Conservative views and opinions on issues such as the death penalty and abortion are represented in government, whereas liberal responses to public opinion surveys reveal that people are very much to the left of most Democrats in Congress and the White House.
- » On economic issues in particular, the public are actually further to the left than those elected to represent them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What does Lewis mean when he says people often support “vague conservative themes” while at the same time supporting liberal policies?
2. What are some examples of “vague conservative themes”?
3. Do you notice an overarching theme to these individual conservative themes?
4. Lewis mentions that people are reluctant to describe their politics in extreme terms. That they are more likely to say they are “moderate” than conservative or liberal. What are some negative connotations of the word “liberal”? What stereotypes are attached to the term?
5. What are some negative connotations of the word “conservative”? What stereotypes are attached to the term?
6. Can you see any thematic differences between the image of the liberal and conservative? For example, is

POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

there a perception that one is stronger than the other? That one is more “masculine” or “feminine” than the other? Does the image associated with one term seem to fit more closely with the mythology of America than the other?

7. Given your responses to the questions above, can you explain more clearly why people might not want to call themselves liberal, in particular? Can you develop this line of thought to account for why there is a so-called “gender gap” in American politics – why it’s true that men tend to vote for candidates they believe to be “conservative” more than “liberal,” and why women tend to do the opposite?

ECONOMIC FORCES

This section focuses on why the actual liberal or left opinions of many Americans are excluded from mainstream political discourse. Lewis shows that while there are real differences between Democrats and Republicans on so-called civil liberty or social issues, there is little difference between the two dominant parties on economic issues. He argues that Democrats can *afford* – literally – to adopt liberal stances on social issues, but cannot afford to adopt the public’s often liberal stance on economic issues. This leads to a discussion of the role money plays in politics. While money is not central to how we think of such issues as the death penalty and abortion – where we see real differences between the two parties – it is central to issues such as health care, wages and corporate taxes – issues on which the two major parties tend to agree. Lewis argues at the close of this section that Democrats and Republicans are so close on economic issues because both parties rely primarily on money from corporate and business interests that are, by definition, economically conservative because they are concerned primarily with maximizing profit.

KEY POINTS

- » The real difference between mainstream politicians can be found mainly on so-called civil liberty or social issues.
- » What defines these issues – for example the death penalty, gay rights, women’s equality, abortion – is that money isn’t central to how we think about them.
- » In contrast, Democrats and Republicans tend to share a similar stance on those issues that do involve money, issues such as health care, wages, trade agreements, and the environment.
- » Money in politics enters here: the massive amount of money raised by politicians undermines liberal policy solutions. The reason for this is that both parties get most of their money from corporate and business interests, and must therefore heed these economically conservative interests or risk losing the money that sustains them as politicians.
- » In this political environment, it is logical that community concerns that threaten business interests are not given priority.
- » Surveys show clearly that the public is interested in community concerns such as health care, homelessness and the environment, but politicians tend to ignore radical solutions to these concerns because they need money to run effectively.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How does money influence the way the two dominant parties approach economic issues?
2. Why do Democrats and Republicans disagree on social and so-called civil liberty issues but not on the major economic issues?
3. Name a few reasons why a corporation would be interested in lobbying and pressuring politicians to make laws that would reduce their own profits.
4. You’re a politician: you cannot function and stay in power without raising massive amounts of money from corporations, but the people you represent favor a law that would cost these corporations millions of dollars. If you side with the people, you lose the money you need to stay in office. If you side with the corporations, you lose the votes you need to stay in office. Leaving office is not an option for you. What are some solutions to this dilemma? How can you use polls to help you survive?

MEDIA COVERAGE

This section, and the two that follow, examine more closely the role media play in shaping what counts for “public opinion.” Having established that the more liberal views of Americans fail to be represented within the political spectrum, Lewis shows in this section how media feed, and feed off of, the artificial perception that public opinion is more moderate or conservative than it actually is. Key to his argument is that media do not simply report survey data, do not simply reflect what the public says it wants, but actually play a central role in constructing public opinion.

KEY POINTS

- » Mainstream media don’t cover public opinion so much as they *construct narratives* about public opinion.
- » When media cover polls, they tell a story about what public opinion is, shaping the very way we understand it in their choice of questions, what they exclude, their lack-of follow-up and specificity, and their reliance on mainstream political stereotypes and labels to tell a good story.
- » Media coverage of public opinion does not recognize the gap between a public that tends to be more liberal than mainstream politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike.
- » Media reports on public opinion exclude the possibility of left-wing approaches to economic issues, making the public appear more conservative than it actually is.
- » The reasons for these exclusions, distortions and misrepresentations are systemic, caught up with the elite-oriented nature of reporting.
- » Media have an “elite” orientation – a built-in bias toward the views of those in positions of power – because elites have the greatest access to media. In this way, politicians, who tend to have power, control and money, set the media stage for what we talk about and how.
- » Because politicians are more conservative than the public, their power and access alter and shape the media narrative in more conservative directions.
- » Polling and the interpretation of poll results therefore tend to steer away from nuance and specific measures of ordinary people’s views on issues, focusing instead on so-called “horse-race,” candidate-centered polls.
- » Candidate-centered polls and coverage reduce politics to image, steer people in one predetermined direction or the other, and in this way set up a narrow range of artificial choices while excluding alternative views about policy.
- » At the same time that media coverage narrows the ideological spectrum on economic issues, it also creates the impression that real debate is happening by focusing on the differences between parties and candidates on civil libertarian and social issues like gay rights and abortion.
- » The excessive coverage of differences on social issues and not the similarities on economic issues “masks the degree of elite consensus.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What does Lewis mean when he says that the media have an “elite orientation”? What is an “elite”?
2. How does the way media cover politics exclude a wide-ranging discussion of the specifics involved in real issues?
3. Who has the greatest influence on the way media cover politics? Why? And what’s the effect of this?
4. The first rule of journalism school is that reporters should remain objective. What forces get in the way of the objectivity of mainstream media?

MEDIA COVERAGE

- 5.** Do you feel that the media cover politicians superficially simply because politicians are superficial, or that politicians keep their ideas superficial because the media that cover them are superficial? Both? Neither?
- 6.** When you think of Republicans and Democrats debating and arguing about issues, which issues come to mind?
- 7.** How does “horse-race” coverage of politics, and image, play a role in shaping the way issues are discussed?
- 8.** Do you think people would be more interested in politics if politicians were more specific? Would you, yourself, have the patience to listen to politicians on TV being specific?

THE PHANTOM LIBERAL

Continuing his look at media's pivotal role in shaping public opinion by seeming simply to report it, Lewis looks more closely at how mainstream media skew political discourse to the right. This section demonstrates how media narratives create the illusion that a real battle of ideas between left and right exists in the mainstream, while in reality excluding left-wing ideas altogether. One of the effects of this narrowing of the spectrum is that what mainstream media characterize as moderate is in actuality conservative, and that what's characterized as liberal is actually closer to moderate. The section concludes by illustrating the influence on the public mind of this elimination of liberal opinion, showing that most people believe former President Clinton, a self-described conservative New Democrat "moderate," was a liberal.

KEY POINTS

- » Media create the sense that politics is generally responsive to the people: that they present a broad range of issues, and that politicians listen to the people through polls.
- » In reality, the range of opinion is skewed to the right in ways that marginalize liberal opinion.
- » Bill Clinton was covered by mainstream media as a liberal, when in fact his stand on most issues – NAFTA, the Telecommunications Act – was conservative, as indicated by his corporate support and left-wing opposition.
- » Polls show that people incorrectly believe that Bill Clinton voted on the liberal side of a number of key issues.
- » While there was significant media coverage of Clinton's positions on these issues, the general framework and tenor of media coverage overwhelmed the specifics.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How and why is liberal and left-wing opinion excluded from mainstream discussions of public opinion?
2. If free speech is one of the most cherished virtues in America, how do we explain the complete absence of any mainstream news personality or talk show host that holds truly left-wing ideas? What are some reasons why someone way to the left of the Democratic Party, for example a socialist or a communist, cannot be found anywhere on TV shows that offer political opinion and debate? What does this say about free speech?
3. If people don't like extremes, then why is it possible for someone with extreme right-wing views like Rush Limbaugh or Oliver North to have television and radio shows, but not people who hold extreme left-wing views?
4. What does it mean to be "left" of liberal?
5. What effect do you feel it has on the way people think about politics and issues when the media present Democrats continually as "left-wing" – without acknowledging that Democrats are actually far to the right of politicians truly on the left like Ralph Nader?
6. When you consider some of the stereotypes that are attached to the term "liberal," does it make sense that Bill Clinton is perceived by so many people to be a liberal despite his thoroughly conservative voting record? How so?
7. Lewis says that people tend to pay attention to images and the "general framework" of a political story more than specifics. Do you agree? If so, why do you think this is? Do you see this as a problem? And if you do, what solutions might you propose to assure that the American people are as informed as they need to be in a democracy?

MILITARY OMISSIONS

This section develops the idea that media not only cover public opinion, but also influence it. Lewis argues that media play an “agenda-setting” role, that what they choose to cover is in turn considered by the public to be important – rather than the other way around. As an example, he examines media coverage of military spending in the United States, showing how the exclusion of specific detail inspires consensus from people who would otherwise question military spending.

KEY POINTS

- » Media play an agenda setting roll, with public concern about issues tending to follow media coverage of those issues – rather than any changes in the real world.
- » Shifts measured in so-called “public concern” about problems such as drugs and violence have nothing to do with the scale of these problems, and everything to do with the amount the media cover them.
- » The power of media to define what issues are important has to do with what they report, and what they don’t.
- » Polls measure public response to issues that are often incompletely reported.
- » People’s responses to polls about the specific details involved in such issues as military spending are often wrong, but at the same time represent a rational response to the information they’re given.
- » The overall effect of media omissions is “to suppress active public support for changing the current course.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How do media play an “agenda-setting role” in American politics?
2. If something is not covered on television, do you think that it can still be a major concern of people? Can you give examples?
3. If politicians use polls excessively, and if polls record people’s responses to issues based on a lack of information, then what can we say about the way politicians are likely to use polls?
4. Is it in the interest of politicians to truly present *all* sides of an issue? Why or why not?
5. Why do you feel media so often leave so much out of their coverage of issues and public opinion? Do you feel that those who work in media are aware that they’re doing this? If so, why do they do it? If they’re not aware, why do you think this is?
6. Why is it in the interest of politicians and media to resist talking about things in ways that might inspire people to want to “change the current course”?

DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

This concluding section points out that polling was viewed originally as a tool capable of enhancing democratic participation. In the beginning, innovations in the measuring of public opinion had the potential to make elites more responsive to the concerns of ordinary people. Instead, Lewis concludes, polls are now used primarily as market research – not to make government and media more responsive to the public interest, but to help make elite interests more palatable to the public.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

- 1.** What does Lewis mean when he says that polls are used as marketing tools, instead of being used to understand and react to what the people really want?
- 2.** If polls are marketing tools, then what's being marketed with them? How does this work? How can politicians use poll results that show people disagree with them to sell them the very policy they disagree with?
- 3.** If media exclude the complexity of public opinion, and if people have been shown to favor generalities over complexity when they watch television, then what are some possible solutions? What do you think can be done to make people more informed about issues, less influenced by mainstream coverage of issues, and more likely to vote for those politicians who truly reflect their interests?

EXERCISES FOR RESEARCH & WRITING

These exercises are designed to encourage critical thinking about mainstream notions of “public opinion” and how they affect the political process. A number of these exercises use links to online resources.

1. PollingReport.com provides a comprehensive archive of the latest poll results. It puts polls conducted by the industry’s major players side-by-side, allowing you to compare results based on how questions and issues are framed. There are a number of options for this assignment:

- » Go to **PollingReport.com** and draw on ideas from *Constructing Public Opinion* to do your own analysis of any differences you see from poll to poll on the same issue. How do you account for these differences? What kinds of assumptions are built into the wording of certain questions, and how do these assumptions seem to alter people’s responses? (*Note: This assignment will work best on so-called “issue questions.” Questions that measure the job approval rating of the president, Congress, etc. tend to be phrased identically from poll to poll.*)
- » Go to **PollingReport.com** and look at the kinds of questions that tend to be asked overall – “job approval” questions included. Based on Professor Lewis’ arguments in the film, do you feel that the way questions are framed limits or distorts the way public opinion on specific issues is measured?
- » After looking through a number of polls at **PollingReport.com**, do you detect any kind of ideological bias in the way public opinion is measured by the major research firms? Specifically, do these kinds of polls seem to shy away from measuring the left-wing sentiments of people? Do they steer opinion in a more politically “moderate” direction? If so, how? If not, explain.

2. Public Agenda (www.publicagenda.org) bills itself as a “non-partisan” public opinion research organization. Their stated mission is to conduct polls that are “objective.” Go to their website and decide whether you feel this is true. Keeping in mind the ideas presented in *Constructing Public Opinion*, examine some of their polling. If you feel they *are* more objective than the typical mainstream polling discussed by Professor Lewis, explain why. If you feel, instead, that their polls reproduce some of the very distortions of opinion Lewis talks about, explain why. The key to this assignment is remembering Lewis’ central point that “objectivity” would mean measuring the total range of public sentiment – with so-called left-wing solutions to problems measured as prominently as those from the middle and right of the political spectrum.

3. In “Stem-Cell Opinions: It’s All in the Wording” reporter Karlyn Bowman talks about the way different questions in a poll on the issue of stem cell research yielded very different responses. Read the article and summarize its key points, with particular attention to her observation that polling firms are often hired by clients to find the results the client wants.

4. This exercise is based on **No. 3** above. After thinking about and summarizing Bowman’s article, this assignment calls for you to write your own polling question about a “hot issue” you’re interested in. Choose a controversial issue, one that generates debate. Your assignment has two parts: You’ve been hired to survey public opinion on this issue by an imaginary client who wants to see results that show public support for one side of the issue. Devise a single question that will satisfy your client’s interests. When you’re finished, do it again, this time for an imaginary client on the opposite side of the issue. Write a single question that you feel will please this client. Refer to Bowman’s article for some ideas on how polling questions are actually written.

5. Professor Lewis talks quite a bit about how the media are controlled by elites with conservative interests, and makes the case that this logically affects the range of opinion that media cover. Study the “Media Giants Chart” from the PBS documentary “Merchants of Cool,” available at: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants. Try to locate the major networks – ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and FOX – and figure out who their parent companies are. In addition, look at the other companies that are owned by the same mega-corporation. Record your findings and consider this question: Do you agree that this kind of corporate

EXERCISES FOR RESEARCH & WRITING

structure is bound to distort real public opinion? What are some “free speech” issues that this kind of corporate structure might raise?

6. We often hear that the media is left-wing. Polls repeatedly indicate that people feel the media has a liberal bias. Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh, for one, has made a living characterizing mainstream media news outlets (along with moderate Democrats) as “leftists.” Professor Lewis’ overall thesis flies in the face of this conventional wisdom. His view is that mainstream media, by nature, are conservative.

Pick a side on this issue and defend it. The question: Do mainstream media have a liberal, leftist bias? Be sure to deal with Lewis’ specific arguments ideas – whether you agree with them or not, and to explain, specifically, how the other side could get it so wrong. *(This exercise can also be framed as a debate – one group asked to defend the claim that media are left-wing, the other that media are conservative.)*

ADDENDUM

STEM-CELL OPINIONS: IT'S ALL IN THE WORDING

By Karlyn Bowman

From *Roll Call* July 12, 2001

Polls have become advocacy weapons in many policy debates, with organizations commissioning surveys designed to support their points of view. Gary Langer, ABC's chief polling analyst, notes that there has been "little independent public-opinion polling" on stem-cell research and suggests that interest groups have worded questions in ways that elicit responses favorable to their positions.

Langer cites a poll released by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops that framed the issue by saying that "live embryos would be destroyed" for "experiments." A pro-stem-cell research poll referred to "excess fertilized eggs" (and didn't mention embryos) and listed seven "deadly diseases" the research could help treat.

The ABC News-Beliefnet poll framed the issue this way: "Sometimes fertility clinics produce extra fertilized eggs, also called embryos, that are not implanted in a woman's womb. These extra embryos either are discarded or couples can donate them for use in medical research called stem-cell research. Some people support stem-cell research, saying it's an important way to find treatments for many diseases. Other people oppose stem-cell research, saying it is wrong to use any human embryos for research purposes."

When asked "What about you?" Fifty-eight percent said they supported the research, while 30 percent opposed it. White Catholics, a key swing group in the electorate, supported stem-cell research by a margin of 54-to-35 percent. Conservatives were split evenly at 44 percent each way. Fifty percent of those who believe abortion should be generally illegal opposed stem-cell research.

The June NBC News-Wall Street Journal survey explained the issue this way: "There is a type of medical research that involves using special cells, called stem cells, that are obtained from human embryos. These human embryo stem cells are then used to generate new cells and tissue that could help treat or cure many diseases."

When read two statements about the research, 69 percent agreed with this one: "Those in favor of this research say that it could lead to breakthrough cures for many diseases, such as cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and spinal cord injuries, and this research uses only embryos that otherwise would be discarded."

Twenty-three percent agreed with this statement on the debate: "Those opposed to this type of research say it crosses an ethical line by using cells from potentially viable human embryos when this research can be done on animals by using other types of cells."