

Media Bias: It's Real, but Surprising

A UCLA study found political bias in most news coverage, but the findings defy some conventional wisdom about who is Right and who is Left.

While the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal is conservative, the newspaper's news pages are liberal—even more liberal than The New York Times.

Coverage by public television and radio is conservative compared to the rest of the mainstream media.

These are just a few of the compelling findings from a UCLA-led study, which is believed to be the first successful attempt to measure bias objectively in a range of media outlets and rank them accordingly.

“I suspected that many media outlets would tilt to the left because surveys have shown that reporters tend to vote more Democrat than Republican,” said Tim Groseclose, a UCLA political scientist and the study's lead author. “But I was surprised at just how pronounced the distinctions are.”

Groseclose and University of Missouri economist Jeffrey Milyo based their research on a standard gauge of a lawmaker's support for liberal causes. Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) scores lawmakers based on the percentage of times they vote on the liberal side of an issue—with 100 as most liberal and 0 as most conservative.

Groseclose, Milyo and a team of 21 research assistants scoured U.S. media coverage as well as speeches of U.S. lawmakers of the past 10 years. They tallied the number of times each media outlet referred to think tanks and policy groups, such as the left-leaning NAACP or the right-leaning Heritage Foundation. If a media outlet displayed a citation pattern similar to that of a lawmaker, then the study assigned both a similar ADA score.

Of the 20 major media outlets studied, 18 scored left of center, with CBS' Evening News, The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times ranking second, third and fourth most liberal behind the news pages of The Wall Street Journal.

Only Fox News' Special Report and The Washington Times scored to the right of the average U.S. voter.

The most centrist outlet proved to be the NewsHour With Jim Lehrer. A close second and third were CNN's NewsNight With Aaron Brown and ABC's Good Morning America.

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Perhaps surprisingly, the fourth most centrist outlet was Fox Special Report, which often is cited by liberals as an egregious example of a right-wing outlet. While Special Report proved to be right of center, the study found ABC's World News Tonight and NBC's Nightly News to be left of center. All three outlets were approximately equidistant from the center, the report found.

“If viewers spent an equal amount of time watching Fox's Special Report as ABC's World News and NBC's Nightly News, then they would receive a nearly perfectly balanced version of the news,” said Milyo.

Another finding that contradicted conventional wisdom was that the Drudge Report was slightly left of center.

“One thing people should keep in mind is that our data for the Drudge Report was based almost entirely on the articles that the Drudge Report lists on other Web sites,” said Groseclose. “Very little was based on the stories that Matt Drudge himself wrote. The fact that the Drudge Report appears left of center is merely a reflection of the overall bias of the media.”

Yet another finding that contradicted convention relates to National Public Radio, often cited by conservatives as a liberal news outlet. But according to the study, it ranked eighth most liberal of the 20 that the study examined.

The results break new ground in the exploration of political bias in the media.

“Past researchers have been able to say whether an outlet is conservative or liberal, but no one has compared media outlets to lawmakers,” Groseclose said. “Our work gives a precise characterization of the bias and relates it to a known commodity—politicians.” [QR](#)