

**Schiffer, Adam J.** *Evaluating Media Bias*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. 158 pp. (\$68 cloth, \$29 paper).

Discussions about the media's role in politics have never seemed more important or more necessary. In a moment when casual consumers of media do not hesitate to make harsh critiques of the media's role in politics, many could benefit from an effort to make the discussion more grounded in social scientific principles. Adam Schiffer's clear-eyed and informative review of bias in American political news sets out to do this by providing an accessible primer for anyone interested in thinking about the role of the press in politics in a more rigorous and even-handed way than might come naturally.

Schiffer's primary argument is that charges of partisan bias in the mainstream media not only fail to stand up to the available evidence but also are not even the most pernicious form of media bias. Rather, what he terms "real biases" – such as the propensity to select dramatic narratives over meaningful policy discussions, or to create the appearance of balance on issues rather than focus on the truth (see news coverage of global warming) – are perhaps more consequential and, stretching a bit further, may have even contributed to the unexpected results of the 2016 presidential election.

The first part of the book tackles the question of partisan bias and, specifically, the oft-repeated charge that the mainstream media has a liberal bias. A comprehensive review of the relevant academic literature reveals that, on balance, the claim of a left-leaning bias is unsupported. What, then, are bias cops and commentators getting wrong? Schiffer draws on a number of relevant cases to explain. Here's one example: news coverage leading up to the 2008 presidential election heavily favored Barack Obama to John McCain. A remarkable 57 percent of stories on McCain were negative, while only 29 percent of stories on Obama tilted negative. Such a sizable disparity in the balance of sentiment towards the two candidates unsurprisingly led to a cascade of charges of bias. The watchdog Accuracy in Media, for example, noted that the mainstream media "were overwhelmingly in the tank for Barack Obama" (Schiffer, p. 22). But, as Schiffer points out, failing to meet a balanced baseline, which would mean equal amounts of negative and positive coverage for both candidates, does not necessarily equate to bias. Rather, sometimes *reality itself is slanted* in favor of or against a particular candidate. Thus, in the midst of a Great Recession brought on in part by Bush economic policies that had been supported by McCain, simply observing an imbalance in coverage is not sufficient to conclude that the media had slanted their coverage against McCain.

Going a step further, Schiffer sets forth a helpful framework for evaluating claims of bias. He makes the case that any valid bias charge ought to propose a normative standard for quality news coverage, apply that standard to the case under consideration by laying out what unbiased coverage would look like, and then evaluate whether or not the observed coverage meets the standard. In some sense, this approach is reminiscent of how political scientists evaluate claims of gerrymandering in electoral systems by relying on a partisan fairness standard for how votes

are translated into seats. In both instances, bias is present only when one party would not be treated equivalently to the other party if the circumstances were switched. In my view, this approach is intuitive and will push readers to treat claims about partisan bias in media coverage with more skepticism.

The strongest and most informative parts of the book come in the later chapters when Schiffer moves beyond the discussion of partisan bias to examine other forms of bias and their role in understanding recent moments where the media has fallen short. Coverage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) provides one compelling example that illustrates the harm done by real media biases. These failures span from reporting false or misleading information (such as when CNN, in a rush to provide commentary before its competitors, misreported that the Supreme Court had struck down the individual mandate at the heart of the ACA) to over-emphasizing political maneuverings behind the legislation rather than substantive changes in health policy.

Real biases in reporting also played a role in the 2016 presidential election. Examining the early stages of the race for president (i.e., the pre-primary and Republican primary contest), Schiffer demonstrates convincingly that the media's blanket coverage of candidate Donald Trump likely contributed to the "Trump phenomenon". During a four-month stretch early in the campaign, Trump received more coverage than any other candidate in the Republican primary every single day. In July of 2015, Trump received an astounding 70 percent of all mentions of Republican candidates for president on CNN. Furthermore, news coverage drove additional interest (as opposed to interest driving news coverage), as Schiffer shows that Trump's social media follower count spiked after media mentions but not vice versa (Schiffer, p. 107). All told, the author makes a compelling case that the overwhelming attention paid to Trump arose not from any underlying or structural factors – Trump's early poll numbers hovered under 20 percent – but rather because the media was susceptible to a number of real biases exploited by his candidacy. The media's tendency to put eye-catching narrative and entertainment over policy substance, to report on scandal, outrage and negativity, to erase "the line between electoral politics and reality TV" were all driven by an incentive to garner the most viewers and pageviews and intuitively exploited by a savvy candidate (Schiffer, p.110). Thus, the book argues, the media outlets who have made the choice to cover politics in this way in some sense facilitated the early success of the Trump campaign.

Overall, the book hits its mark as a clear and concise introduction to the subject of media bias for readers beginning to dive into the subject. If I were to offer an additional direction to explore going forward, it would be to consider how underlying changes in the media landscape that have resulted in *informational interdependence* between traditional media outlets, social media, and the views held by the public (a notion articulated by Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro in their handbook chapter *Public Opinion and the Media in the New Communications Era*) have altered the direction and magnitude of real (and partisan) media biases. For example, to what extent are biases amplified and compounded by the social media ecosystem?

Furthermore, in an era where the mainstream media sometimes puts sensationalism over substance, where partisan media sources report news as if from different realities, and where misinformation spreads virally with the click of a button, what should consumers of media be doing to navigate this unsettling moment?

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