

News Decisions: Journalists as Partisan Actors

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Journalists in the Western democracies define themselves primarily as news professionals who are committed to a form of journalism marked by its objectivity and political neutrality. Yet they are also partisan actors whose political beliefs affect their news decisions. This conclusion is backed by evidence from a survey of journalists in five countries: the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. In all five countries, there is a significant correlation between journalists' personal beliefs and their news decisions. The relationship is strongest in news systems where partisanship is an acknowledged component of daily news coverage and is more pronounced among newspaper journalists than broadcast journalists, but partisanship has a modest impact on news decisions in all arenas of daily news, even those bound by law or tradition to a policy of political neutrality.

Keywords cross-national research, journalists, media bias, news decisions, news media, news systems, newspapers, objectivity, partisanship, television news

The press and political parties were once closely linked. The nineteenth-century press was rooted in partisan advocacy and supported by party patrons, in and out of government. Today, however, partisan news organizations are nearly nonexistent in the United States, and they have been in a long-term decline in Europe (McQuail, 1994, p. 15). Modern journalists view themselves as professionals committed to the norm of objectivity (Johnstone et al., 1976; Tuchman, 1978; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986). "The height of professional skill," says Denis McQuail, "is the exercise of a practical craft, which delivers the required institutional product, characterized by a high degree of objectivity, key marks of which are obsessive facticity and neutrality of attitude" (1994, p. 145).

It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss political advocacy as an insignificant component of modern journalism. Vestiges of the old-time partisan press remain. Many of the national dailies in Europe are associated with a particular party or ideology. Of course, they differ in important ways from their nineteenth-century forerunners. Financed by circulation and advertising revenues rather than government or party subsidies, their news is professionally produced and aims more to inform than to persuade. Nevertheless, the vitality of these newspapers flows in considerable measure from their role as political advocates and from the staunch

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loyalty of their partisan readers (Donsbach, 1983; Köcher, 1986; McQuail, 1994, p. 15).

Other newspapers also take a partisan stance but seemingly confine it to their editorial pages. Studies have found, for example, that most U.S. newspapers are relatively consistent in their editorial positions and candidate endorsements (Gaziano, 1989). Nor are broadcast organizations completely outside the fray of partisan politics. In Germany, Italy, France, and some other European countries, broadcasting has at times been structured in ways that allow the parties to control some newsroom appointments (McQuail, 1994, p. 172).

There is also the question of whether "hidden" bias pervades objective reporting (Tuchman, 1978). In recent years, claims of media bias have been an issue in nearly every Western democracy at one time or another. Most scholars have not found much evidence to support these claims (Hofstetter, 1976; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; but also see Lichter & Rothman, 1981). Research on the topic is relatively sparse and relies mainly on content analysis, which, as will be argued later, can be effective in detecting patterns of news coverage but is less useful in explaining the underlying causes.

This article attempts to describe more fully the partisan role of news journalists. It examines journalists' partisanship in the context of their news organizations, audiences, work situations, and news decisions. The analysis includes a quasi-experimental test of partisan bias. The findings indicate that journalists are partisan actors as well as news professionals. Journalists' partisanship affects their news decisions, even when they operate within organizations committed to the principle of partisan neutrality.

Research Design: Cross-National Media and Democracy Project

This article is based on a five-country survey of journalists in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden, and the United States. The questionnaires administered to the journalists of the different countries were identical except in references to particular news and political organizations and in the language employed (there were English, German, Italian, and Swedish translations). Drafts of the questionnaire were evaluated by scholars in the countries where the survey was to be conducted, and the questionnaire was pretested on a small sample of journalists from these countries.

The questionnaire was administered by mail to journalists involved in the day-to-day news coverage of politics, government, and current affairs, including, for example, coverage of the environment, labor, and business. Thus, journalists who produce television news documentaries or who work for weekly news magazines were not sampled. Also excluded were daily journalists covering areas such as sports, travel, and entertainment.

A journalist was defined as an individual within a news organization who makes decisions that affect news content directly. The category thus includes both reporters and editors. In some news organizations, other roles, such as that of owner or newsroom manager, were also included. Participation in daily coverage of politics and public affairs was the sole criterion for inclusion in the sample.

The samples were chosen through random selection using a stratified design. One stratum was medium of communication. In each country, 50 percent of those sampled were newspaper journalists and 50 percent were broadcast journalists.

The broadcast journalists were weighted toward television: In each country, seven of every ten broadcast journalists surveyed worked in television, and the rest worked in radio.

The sample was also stratified on a national–local basis. In the United States, for example, CBS News and the *New York Times* are widely regarded as national news organizations, whereas WIXT, a television station in Syracuse, New York, and the *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, a newspaper in South Dakota, would be considered local or regional news organizations. Although the assignment of news organizations to the national or local level is somewhat arbitrary, the national–local dimension is nonetheless significant in a study that seeks to address issues of political influence. Half of each country's sample was selected from the national category and the other 50 percent from the local category.

The procedure for random selection varied, depending on the information available. In the case of Italy, the sample was drawn from the membership list of the National Union of Journalists, to which all Italian journalists belong. Each of the Italian journalists sampled was contacted directly by mail. Since there is no national roster of journalists in the other four countries, the samples were obtained through random selections made from organizational rosters in some instances and by news editors in others. For example, the British sample includes 15 journalists from the London *Daily Telegraph*, a national newspaper, and one journalist from the *Kent Evening Post*, a local paper. To select the 15 *Daily Telegraph* journalists, we obtained from the *Telegraph* a complete roster of its journalists and randomly selected 15 individuals from the list, who were then contacted directly by mail. In the case of the *Kent Evening Post*, we wrote to the news editor, who was asked to give the questionnaire to a randomly selected journalist. The name and address of the *Post's* news editor was obtained from *Benn's Media Directory*, a standard reference book on the British media. The selection process in the United States, Sweden, and Germany was similar, although the proportion of journalists who were contacted directly and through news editors varied slightly in each case.

The survey included an original mailing and a follow-up. In each country, 600 journalists were contacted. The surveys were done sequentially in the 1991–1993 period, beginning with the United States and concluding with Italy. The response rates in the five countries varied from 51 percent (303 replies) for Germany to 36 percent (216 respondents) for Great Britain. The response rates for the United States, Sweden, and Italy were 46 percent (278 respondents), 45 percent (272 respondents), and 49 percent (292 respondents), respectively.

Partisanship: Journalists, News Organizations, and Audiences

Journalists have been described as social critics whose personal beliefs are more likely to be liberal than conservative (Schulman, 1982). This conclusion is supported by the results of the five-country survey. When asked to place themselves on a scale "where 7 is right, 1 is left, and 4 is the center," journalists in each country identified more with the left than with the right (see Table 1).¹ Italian journalists, with a mean score of 3.01, were the most liberal group. British and German journalists, with average scores of 3.46 and 3.45, respectively, were the least liberal. Journalists cannot be described, however, as fervent left wingers. Except in Italy, where 11 percent of the respondents placed themselves on the far-left position on the 7-point scale, fewer than 5 percent of the respondents in any country

Table 1
The left–right positioning (self-identified) of journalists in five countries

	Country				
	U.S.	U.K.	Germany	Italy	Sweden
All respondents	3.32 (1.09)	3.46 (1.19)	3.39 (1.10)	3.01 (1.30)	3.45 (1.23)
National newspaper journalists	3.26 (1.13)	3.59 (1.24)	3.44 (1.06)	2.82 (1.51)	3.31 (1.10)
National broadcast journalists	3.45 (0.99)	3.37 (0.96)	3.49 (1.21)	3.26 (1.38)	3.63 (1.25)
Local newspaper journalists	3.15 (1.12)	3.42 (1.48)	3.38 (0.96)	2.97 (1.23)	3.85 (1.38)
Local broadcast journalists	3.45 (1.08)	3.47 (1.12)	3.22 (1.15)	3.04 (1.10)	3.00 (1.06)

Note: Based on 7-point left–right scales. The top number is the mean score for the group; the bottom number is the standard deviation. Respondents were asked: "On a scale where 1 is left, 7 is right, and 4 is the center, where would you place yourself?" Thus, the lower the mean score, the more left of center are the respondents as a group.

took such a position. A substantial majority of journalists in each country placed themselves at or adjacent to the midpoint on the left–right scale.

The respondents' partisanship was unrelated to the news arena in which they worked. As Table 1 indicates, journalists in the broadcast and newspaper industries at both the national and local levels were all somewhat left of center in their beliefs.

Journalists view themselves as more liberal than the news organizations for which they work. In all five countries, the mean editorial position of news organizations, as perceived by the journalists, was significantly ($p < .01$) to the right of where the journalists placed themselves. In fact, the mean editorial position of news organizations was slightly to the right of center in three of the five countries (Britain, 4.36; Germany, 4.17; and Sweden, 4.22). The U.S. news system was the most "centrist" by this measure; the mean editorial position of U.S. news organizations (3.98) was at nearly the precise midpoint on the scale. Only in Italy (3.76) did journalists perceive news organizations, collectively, to have a left-of-center bias.

Journalists in all countries also located themselves to the left of where they perceived their news audience to be. The difference between journalists' mean position on the 7-point scales and where they positioned their audience was greatest in the United States, where more than a full point (3.32 and 4.47, respectively) separated the means. The gap between journalists and their news audiences was smallest in Sweden (3.45 and 4.11, respectively), with Italy and Britain close behind. In all cases, however, the differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$). Journalists regard themselves as substantially more liberal than the news audiences they serve.

Individual Journalists and Their Jobs

One way that journalists could promote their partisan values is to seek a position with a news organization that subscribes to the same values. However, the opportunities for such employment vary substantially (Patterson & Donsbach, 1993). The British national newspaper system, for example, provides numerous opportunities for right-of-center journalists but relatively few for those on the left. The *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* are among the few national newspapers on the political left, while the *Daily Telegraph*, *Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun*, *Daily Express*, *Star*, and *Today* are among the many on the right. In contrast to Great Britain, *Il Giornale* is one of the few right-of-center national papers in Italy; most of the other national dailies have a liberal bias. Germany and Sweden are more evenly balanced in the left-right distribution of their national newspapers; in both countries, there are several major news organizations on each side of the political spectrum.

The editorial positions of local newspapers vary widely. Most local papers are located near the center of the political spectrum, a positioning that reflects a commercial reality: They are usually the only daily paper in their locality and try to appeal to a politically diverse readership. Nevertheless, some local newspapers are positioned to the left or right of center, particularly those in areas that contain a more homogeneous audience. For example, U.S. local newspapers in the South are more likely than those elsewhere to have a right-of-center editorial position, and British local newspapers in industrialized regions are more likely than those elsewhere to have a left-of-center position.

In comparison, broadcast organizations tend to locate themselves near the center of the political spectrum. This tendency stems mainly from laws that prohibit broadcasters from favoring a political party and from broadcasters' effort to reach out to the largest possible audience. However, as was noted earlier, the tendency is stronger in some news systems than in others. Italian broadcasters by law and tradition are relatively free to pursue a partisan agenda. Swedish and German broadcasters also have greater opportunities for partisan advocacy than their U.S. or British counterparts.

These differences across countries in partisan opportunities are associated with the employment pattern of journalists in these countries. As Table 2 indicates, there is virtually no correlation between U.S. journalists' political beliefs and their perception of the editorial position of the news organization for which they work. When U.S. journalists are divided into subgroups, the picture is much the same; at both the national and local levels and for both newspaper and broadcast media, U.S. journalists' partisan beliefs are essentially unrelated to their news organization's editorial position.

In the European news systems, there is a closer connection between journalists' partisanship and that of their news organization. The correlation (Pearson's r) is particularly strong among Italian (.47) and German (.54) journalists who work for the leading national papers but is also relatively high among their British (.24) and Swedish (.23) counterparts.

When local newspapers in Europe are considered, the correlations are positive in direction, except for Sweden, but much weaker than at the national level. In the case of European broadcasting, on the other hand, there is a significant positive correlation only among Italian national broadcasters.

In sum, journalists' partisan leanings are only in some instances related to their

Table 2
The correlation (Pearson's *r*) between journalists' partisan beliefs
and their perception of the partisan editorial position
of their news organization

	Country				
	U.S.	U.K.	Germany	Italy	Sweden
All respondents	.03	.03	.13 ^a	.20 ^b	.10
National newspaper journalists	.03	.24 ^a	.54 ^b	.47 ^b	.23 ^a
National broadcast journalists	.03	-.31 ^a	-.03	.23 ^a	-.15
Local newspaper journalists	.09	.03	.16	.11	-.01
Local broadcast journalists	-.11	-.28 ^a	-.03	-.17	.03

^a*p* < .05.

^b*p* < .001.

employment situation. There is no consistent tendency for left-of-center or right-of-center journalists to work within news organizations that are similarly positioned in their editorial policy, except for European journalists who work for national dailies. It would appear that, unless they work in an arena where news organizations are overtly partisan, journalists' partisanship is a small factor in determining the job they hold.

News Decisions: A Quasi-Experimental Test

In the final analysis, the issue of journalists' partisanship is the question of whether it affects their news decisions. If, as news professionals, they make their choices almost entirely in the context of prescribed journalistic norms and practices, their partisan beliefs are largely immaterial. On the other hand, if their decisions are substantially affected by their partisan loyalties, these loyalties are significant, especially in news organizations that are deemed either by law or organizational policy to be politically neutral.

Studies of media bias have relied primarily on content analyses of the news. Although this research method is useful in detecting tendencies in news coverage, it is limited in its ability to isolate and identify bias. It is exceedingly difficult to determine, for example, whether negative coverage of a politician or issue results from partisan bias, adverse circumstances, or other factors. The press's watchdog role also confounds content-analytic judgments about bias; almost no politician or party escapes criticism when personal or policy failings are at issue. For example, the fact that the liberal, scandal-scarred Edward Kennedy received more negative coverage than the conservative Ronald Reagan during the 1980 presidential campaign led to Robinson and Sheehan's (1983) conclusion that partisan bias is a relatively small factor in U.S. reporting.

In an effort to obtain a more precise estimate of the impact of partisan bias on news decisions, the five-country survey included an innovative quasi-experimental component. Respondents received textual descriptions of four situations and were asked to make six news decisions about each of them—a total of 24 decisions. The situations were developed from actual news stories and were identical in each of the five questionnaires except for references to country-specific institutions.

The following example, involving the issue of industrial pollution in the British version, is one of the four situations contained in the survey. The other three situations dealt with taxes, prisons, and Third World debt obligations.

Situation. Broad government regulations aimed at eliminating thousands of tons of air pollutants at chemical plants each year were put into effect today. The regulations, developed under authority of environmental protection laws, were put into effect despite company arguments that the cost of plant modifications to meet the new standards could cripple the industry.

A chemical industry spokesperson contended that the rules could cost more than £50 million over the next decade, although environmental officials have estimated the cost to be much lower. The chemical industry has also asserted that the new rules would have little effect since companies are already removing more than 90 percent of the pollutants at issue.

Newsworthiness. How would you rate this situation in terms of its newsworthiness?

LOW							HIGH
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

Heading. How would you rate the following as a possible heading for a news story based on the situation?

"CHEMICAL INDUSTRY PREDICTS HIGH COST AND LITTLE EFFECT FROM NEW REGULATIONS"

UNACCEPTABLE						ACCEPTABLE
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Visual. Suppose an editor asked you to select a visual to accompany a story based on the situation. If the following visuals were available to you, what would be your preference among them? Please rank them from 1 (first preference) to 4 (last preference).

RANK

- a photo showing dark smoke emerging from a plant's smoke stacks
- a photo of the chemical industry spokesperson at the press conference called to protest the new regulations
- a graph that shows the decline in air pollution over the last ten years
- a graph showing the projected improvement in air quality as a result of the new regulations

Each hypothetical situation dealt with an issue that is a source of partisan conflict. In addition, 17 of the 24 news decisions were framed in a way that favored a partisan view; the others were neutral in tone.² For example, the proposed headline

in the pollution situation ("Chemical Industry Predicts High Cost and Little Effect from New Regulations") presumably has a right-of-center bias, because it conveys the chemical industry's view of the situation rather than the regulatory agency's perspective. On the other hand, the last of the visual options ("a graph showing the projected improvement in air quality as a result of the new regulations") highlights the expected benefits of the new regulations and hence suggests a left-of-center bias.

In developing the survey's four news situations, we aimed to construct decision options where the partisan bias was subtle. We sought to create plausible options that the respondents might actually face in the newsroom, rather than blatantly partisan options that a professional journalist would reject out of hand. In this way, if the respondents expressed a preference for options that were slanted toward their point of view, we could reasonably infer that partisanship had influenced the decision.

Journalists' Partisanship and Their News Decisions

In our test of the effect of journalists' partisanship on their news decisions, we used, in addition to the left-right scales, issue-attitude scales specific to each news situation. For example, as the companion to the industrial-pollution news situation, respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "Economic growth should take precedence over environmental protection when the two are in conflict." In order to disguise their purpose, the issue-based scales were included in a different section of the questionnaire than were the news situations and were intermixed in a battery of questions about a wide range of topics.

The relationship between respondents' political beliefs, as measured by the 7-point left-right and the 7-point issue-specific scales, and their news decisions is shown in Table 3. Because of the small size of the samples—the average n is about

Table 3
Percentage of positive correlations between journalists' partisan beliefs and their news decisions

	Country				
	U.S.	U.K.	Germany	Italy	Sweden
Left-right scale	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)
Issue-specific scales	71% ^a (12/17)	71% ^a (12/17)	94% ^d (16/17)	88% ^c (15/17)	71% ^a (12/17)

Percentages are the proportion of news decisions (17 total) in which journalists' partisan beliefs correlated positively with the partisan direction of their news decision.

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$.

^c $p < .001$.

^d $p < .0001$.

250 respondents—the table is based on the significance of the aggregate distribution of the correlations rather than their individual significance. Each of the 17 news decisions can be compared to the toss of the coin. If the relationship between partisanship and news decisions is random, a single test is as likely to yield a negative correlation as a positive one. On the other hand, if partisanship affects news decisions, a single test is more likely to yield a positive correlation and most of the 17 decisions will be positive in direction.

The probability of a particular outcome (Prob) where the assumed likelihood of a positive or negative correlation is equal can be determined by the binomial probability formula (Weinberg & Goldberg, 1990, p. 187):

$$\text{Prob} = \left(\frac{n!}{(k!)(n-k)!} \right) p^k q^{n-k}$$

where p = prob. of positive correlation = $\frac{1}{2}$
 q = prob. of negative correlation = $\frac{1}{2}$
 n = number of tests = 17
 k = number of successes (positive correlations)
 $n - k$ = number of failures (negative correlations)

When the probabilities for all possible outcomes (0 positive correlations through 17 positive correlations) are determined, a binomial probability distribution for 17 tests can be constructed.³ Statistically, if 12 or more of the 17 tests are positive, the chance probability of the outcome is about .05. If 14 or more are positive, the chance probability is about .01. And if 15 or more are positive, the chance probability is about .001.

As the data in Table 3 indicate, journalists' partisanship is significantly related to their news decisions in all five countries. When the left-right scales are used as the indicator of journalists' partisanship, 14 of the 17 tests ($p < .01$) in each country yielded a positive correlation. Similar results were obtained when journalists' issue-specific attitudes were used as the partisanship indicator. Among German journalists, the correlation was in the predicted direction in 16 of the 17 decisions ($p < .0001$). In Italy, 15 of the 17 tests ($p < .001$) resulted in a positive relationship. For the United States, Britain, and Sweden, 12 of the 17 tests ($p < .05$) produced a positive result.

The individual correlations (Pearson's r) were not particularly large, however. The average positive correlation using the left-right scales was highest for Germany (.16) and nearly as high for Italy (.13) and Britain (.12); it was lowest for the United States (.09) and Sweden (.05). With the issue-specific scales, the ranking differed but the average correlation was still relatively small: Germany (.14), Sweden (.11), Britain (.10), Italy (.09), and the United States (.08). The correlations suggest that the hues of journalists' partisanship tend to shade the news rather than coloring it deeply. Partisanship is a measurable but not a robust influence on journalists' news decisions.

News Decisions and Partisanship in Different News Arenas

Partisanship intrudes on news decisions to a measurable degree among both print and broadcast journalists at both the national and local levels. Table 4 shows the pattern that emerged when the left-right scale was used as the indicator of journal-

Table 4
 Percentage of positive correlations between journalists' partisan beliefs
 (left–right scale) and their news decisions, by level and medium

	Country					All countries combined
	U.S.	U.K.	Germany	Italy	Sweden	
National newspaper journalists	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	88% ^c (15/17)	84% ^e (71/85)
National broadcast journalists	76% ^a (13/17)	76% ^a (13/17)	94% ^d (16/17)	76% ^a (13/17)	53% (9/17)	65% ^b (55/85)
Local newspaper journalists	71% ^a (12/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	71% ^a (12/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	65% (11/17)	74% ^e (63/85)
Local broadcast journalists	41% (7/17)	41% (7/17)	94% ^d (16/17)	82% ^b (14/17)	71% ^a (12/17)	66% ^b (56/85)
All categories combined	68% ^b (46/68)	71% ^c (48/68)	85% ^e (58/68)	81% ^e (55/68)	69% ^c (47/68)	

Percentages are the proportion of news decisions (17 total) in which journalists' partisan beliefs (as measured on 7-point left–right scale) correlated positively with the partisan direction of their news decision.

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .01$.

^c $p < .001$.

^d $p < .0001$.

^e $p < .00001$.

ists' partisanship. The relationship between partisanship and news decisions was statistically significant at the .01 level for national newspaper journalists in all five countries. The relationship is also statistically significant ($p < .05$) for national broadcast journalists in all countries except Sweden. The relationship weakens somewhat at the local levels. For local newspaper journalists, the relationship is significant at the .01 level in Britain and Italy, at the .05 level in the United States and Germany, and not significant—although positive in direction—in Sweden. For local broadcasters, the relationship is statistically significant in Germany ($p < .001$), Italy ($p < .01$), and Sweden ($p < .05$), and not significant in the United States and Britain.

When journalists' issue attitudes are used as the measure of their partisanship, the results are similar. Of the 20 subgroups, the relationship is statistically insignificant in only five cases: Italian newspaper journalists at the national level, British broadcast journalists at the national and local levels, U.S. broadcast journalists at the local level, and German broadcast journalists at the national level.

News Systems and News Arenas Compared

When the left–right and issue-specific attitude tests are aggregated for each country across the subgroups (Table 4), a pattern emerges that could have been inferred

from the other findings. The German news system is the most partisan. Of the 68 tests (17 tests for each of the four subgroups of German journalists), 58 were positive when the left-right scale was used and 56 were positive when the issue-attitude scale was used. The U.S. and British news systems are the least partisan. In the case of the United States, 46 of the 68 tests were positive using the left-right scale and 49 were positive using the issue-specific scale. For Britain, the positive tests were, respectively, 48 and 43 in number. Nevertheless, the probability that even as few as 43 of 68 tests would be positive in direction on the basis of chance alone is less than .01.⁴

We find another noteworthy pattern when the tests are aggregated across the countries. At both the national and local levels, newspaper journalists show more partisanship. Of the 85 tests (17 tests for each subgroup in each of the five countries) involving national newspaper journalists, 71 were positive using the left-right scales and 66 were positive using the issue-specific scales. This compares with 55 and 58, respectively, for national broadcast journalists. The differences between local newspaper and local broadcast journalists were similar. The probability that even as few as 55 of 85 tests would be positive in direction on a random basis is less than .01. The likelihood that 71 of 85 tests would be positive on the basis of chance alone is less than .00001.⁵

In sum, the survey provides substantial evidence that partisan beliefs intrude on news decisions. Journalists are not nonpartisan actors; they are simply more or less partisan, depending on the country and arena in which they work.

Discussion and Conclusions

In their U.S. study, Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman (1983) contend that journalists, particularly those who work for elite news organizations, constitute a "new class" of liberals whose views are substantially out of step with those of the society as a whole and who vigorously promote a liberal agenda. Our study does not lend much support to Lichter and Rothman's thesis. For one, journalists who work in the elite national news organizations have political beliefs that are similar to those of other journalists. Moreover, journalists' beliefs are more accurately characterized as slightly left of center rather than as unambiguously liberal. Herbert Gans's conclusion (1979) that most journalists hold "progressive" but "safe" views seems a more accurate assessment than Lichter and Rothman's thesis.

Gans's perspective also seems more convincing than the claim that journalists serve the conservative interests of the state and established elites (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). This claim may have some validity when applied to news organizations and their owners but cannot easily be reconciled with the evidence presented here. Journalists are not radicals, but neither are they conservatives. They are best described as a mainstream group with liberal tendencies. Indeed, journalists may act as a partisan counterbalance to the news organizations in which they work. Historically, conservative parties have been overrepresented by news organizations. The press receives a subsidy from business in the form of advertising, which has worked to the benefit of right-wing parties in the past. These parties still retain that advantage. Except in Italy, the journalists in our surveys viewed their country's news organizations as tilting to the right.

Any assessment of the influence of journalists' partisanship, however, must take into consideration the fact that most journalists would define themselves primarily

as news professionals. This helps to explain the very weak relationship that exists between journalists' partisan beliefs and their employment, except in the case of European national newspapers. Most journalists are apparently not driven to seek positions where they can exercise their partisan beliefs, nor would it appear that most news organizations weigh such beliefs heavily in their hiring decisions. Individuals with liberal beliefs are clearly more likely than those with conservative beliefs to enter the news business. Once they are in the business, however, their partisan beliefs are clearly secondary to a professional orientation.

Yet journalism is not a profession in the same sense as medicine, law, or economics. Sound medical practice is defined by adherence to scientifically or clinically verified practices. There is no similar codified body of knowledge that guides journalists' decisions (Patterson, 1996). When they move from facts to analysis, their decisions are subject to errors of judgment and selectivity of perception. As a result, partisanship can and does intrude on news decisions, even among journalists who are conscientiously committed to a code of strict neutrality. The evidence presented in this article indicates that partisan bias occurs at measurable levels throughout the news systems of Western democracies. In all likelihood, most of this nonobjective reporting is not the result of a conscious effort to take sides.

Such bias is less robust than the overt advocacy of the partisan newspaper but in certain respects more problematic for a democracy. The partisanship of major European newspapers can convey significant advantage if the system heavily favors one party, but this form of partisanship is openly displayed and contestable through the normal process of partisan debate and competition. Moreover, accountability is provided by the partisan bond that connects each paper with its readers. Their loyalty rests upon their preference for a politically slanted version of reality. If they change their views, or their paper alters its stance, they can shift their loyalty elsewhere.

"Hidden" bias in news content is more difficult to contest and is less accountable. Indeed, journalists typically deny the existence of this bias, claiming that their decisions are premised solely on professional norms. There is, as a consequence, a perceptual gap between journalists' self-image and their actions, and it leads them to reject any suggestion that they are politically biased. Complaints from politicians are dismissed as self-serving and are sometimes portrayed as attacks on the press's freedom and a threat to its objectivity.

The irony is that objective journalism was developed in part as an effort to make the media more accountable. Theodore Peterson (1956) described the objective model as "a social responsibility theory of the press." Reporting would be based on "facts" rather than opinions and would be "fair" in that it presented all sides of partisan debate. As we have seen, however, journalists' opinions affect the interpretation of facts, and fairness leans to the left. It would be inaccurate to conclude that objective journalism is less factual than the known alternatives or grossly unfair to any mainstream political group. Indeed, objective journalism escapes close scrutiny from within and outside the news profession precisely because the bias it permits is difficult to detect. Nevertheless, as journalists go about the daily business of making their news selections, their partisan predispositions affect the choices they make, from the stories they select to the headlines they write. Since the influence is subtle, most of them probably do not recognize it. It flows from the way they are predisposed to see the political world.

Notes

1. Respondents were also asked about their party identification and the result, which indicated a tilt toward parties of the left was consistent with their responses to the 7-point left-right scale. However, the analysis for this article is based only on the 7-point scales. Cross-national comparisons are simpler and more direct when the 7-point left-right scale is the indicator of partisanship. We also believe that response bias was higher for the party-identification question; some respondents appeared reluctant to express a party identification.

2. The following items were judged to have a partisan direction, with the letter in parentheses indicating whether the content was designed to express a right-of-center (r) or left-of-center (l) bias: tax-issue situation—newsworthiness (r), heading (r), unemployed worker (l), union leader (l), corporate executive (r); prison-issue situation—newsworthiness (l), heading (l), social worker (l), prosecuting attorney (r); Third-World-issue situation—newsworthiness (l), heading (l), graph of Third World debt payments exceeding new aid (l), graph of total loans and total debt payments of Third World countries (r); pollution-issue situation—newsworthiness (l), heading (r), graph of decline in air pollution (r), graph showing projected improvement in air quality (l).

3. The following probabilities are associated with each outcome, with the first number referring to the frequency of positive correlations and the second number referring to the probability that this frequency would occur by chance in 17 tests of the relationship: 0, .0000; 1, .0001; 2, .0010; 3, .0052; 4, .0182; 5, .0472; 6, .0944; 7, .1484; 8, .1855; 9, .1855; 10, .1484; 11, .0944; 12, .0472; 13, .0182; 14, .0052; 15, .0010; 16, .0001; 17, .0000 (Weinberg & Goldberg, 1990, p. 592).

4. Estimates for determining significance levels when 68 tests are employed are as follows: if 40 or more are positive, $p < .05$; if 43 or more are positive, $p < .01$; if 47 or more are positive, $p < .001$; if 49 or more are positive, $p < .0001$; and if 53 or more are positive, $p < .00001$.

5. Estimates for determining significance levels when 85 tests are employed are as follows: if 50 or more are positive, $p < .05$; if 53 or more are positive, $p < .01$; if 58 or more are positive, $p < .001$; if 62 or more are positive, $p < .0001$; and if 67 or more are positive, $p < .00001$.

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