

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION 
TRANSCRIPT **Challenging media**

CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC OPINION

HOW POLITICIANS & THE MEDIA MISREPRESENT THE PUBLIC

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How Politicians and the Media Misrepresent the Public

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INTRODUCTION

[News: George Bush] Invest your money in the future

[News: Al Gore] Invest in the future

[News: George Bush] I've been talking about clean air.

[News: Al Gore] We've got to clean up our air.

[News: George Bush] I support a ban on soft money

[News: Al Gore] We would get all of the soft money out of the campaign.

[News: George Bush] God bless you!

[News: Al Gore] God bless you!

[Montage of News clips, Music: Testify, Rage Against the Machine] Who controls the past now? Who controls the future? Who controls the present now? Who controls the past now? Who controls the future? Who controls the present now? Now testify. Testify! Its right outside your door!

JUSTIN LEWIS: One of the most important beliefs that people have about politicians is that politicians do whatever polls tell them to do. We hear a lot of complaint about the lack of strong leadership, that politicians find out what the public wants, and then they pander to it, or at least they say they'll pander to it. Now what this idea of the poll driven politician creates is the impression that the political system may have all kinds of problems but on the whole it's responsive and accountable to the public. But once you actually start to look at public opinion in a more detailed way, what you discover is that the idea of the poll-pandering politician is really a myth. For example, there's broad support in the US for a whole range of policies. Polls show that most people support increased spending on inner cities, more spending and regulation on the environment, more spending on education, more spending on health care. We also find the majority support increases in the minimum wage, stricter gun control, and campaign finance reform. In other words, if politicians really were poll driven, then they'd be in favor of a whole range of liberal or left wing policies, when in fact they're not. Now the question that this raises in a democracy is how is this mismatch between what the people want, and the policies pursued by their representatives possible?

POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

JUSTIN LEWIS: Now let's look at what the terms liberal-left wing, and conservative-right wing stand for in terms of the role of the government in the economy. Liberals believe that government intervention is needed to protect the rights of all individuals in the community, while conservatives believe that individuals are best served by minimizing government intervention. So in general, liberalism is associated with high spending on social programs like education or health care, and conservatism is associated with low spending on social programs. Now what's interesting is that when you look at public opinion, you find that people are often in support of vague conservative themes, but when you ask them about specific policies, then they tend to shift away from abstract notions like individual freedom and instead, they support policies which require government spending or regulation.

For example, a Harris poll asks people about the regulation of private property. They asked whether the government should have the right to regulate or whether that right should be left solely up to the property owner. Now in response to this very vague question, that pitches individual freedom against government regulation, you find only 38% support government intervention. But when the poll asks the same question in the specific context of regulating private property to protect the environment, everything changes, and an overwhelming majority now support government regulation.

So, why do people support conservative ideas, but liberal policies? Well, in part it has to do with the misleading nature of labels. Polls show that large numbers of people prefer the label moderate to liberal or conservative.

[ABC News] Among the biggest news from our exit polling on Tuesday was that the Electorate has a more moderate cast than it has in recent years. Take a look at the numbers. In 1994, 45% of the voters called themselves moderates, but this year that number is 50%.

JUSTIN LEWIS: Now in media discourse, the word moderate usually has very positive connotations. You know, moderates are good, extremists are bad. So really it's not surprising that most people prefer that label. At the same time, many people who are well to the left of the mainstream on a range of issues are really quite suspicious of the label Liberal. So for example, on economic issues, you find that blue-collar workers support what you could call liberal policies, but they're often very skeptical about people who call themselves liberals. Again that's because of the way the phrase liberal is used in the media. Where liberals are generally portrayed as being affluent rather than working class, and as being progressive on civil liberties rather than on bottom line economic issues.

Labels aside, when you look at a range of public positions where there's majority support on an issue, when people are giving a conservative response like

support for the death penalty then you'll find that opinion very well represented in government. But when people are giving more liberal responses on issues, then they're often actually to the left of most Democrats in Congress or the White House. In other words, on economic issues in particular, the public are often further to the left, or more liberal than the people who are supposed to represent them.

ECONOMIC FORCES

JUSTIN LEWIS: Now the kinds of issues where there is some real difference between mainstream politicians are in terms of what we might call civil liberties. And the defining thing here is that money isn't central to how you think about it, so on issues like abortion, or the death penalty, or gay rights, there are very real difference between Democrats and Republicans.

[NBC News] *The Texas governor acknowledges for the first time today that the conservative judges he would appoint to the Supreme Courts might try to overturn the landmark abortion rights decision Roe vs. Wade.*

JUSTIN LEWIS: Now the reason for this is that these issues often don't involve money, but on economic issues like health care or wages or the environment, then you find that Republicans and Democrats are really very close together. And when it comes to raising money, then these economic issues are vitally important because politicians have to raise huge amounts of money just to get elected. Most ordinary people don't contribute to political campaigns. Instead that money comes from a very small group of wealthy people.

[NBC News] *There are forty-five co-chairmen here who raised or gave \$250,000. Those co-chairmen include the NRA, and Phillip Morris; other key players represent the HMOs.*

JUSTIN LEWIS: But the Democrats and the Republicans get most of their money from corporate interests and in order to keep raising campaign funds, politicians have to support policies that favor those business interests. Now politicians who aren't prepared to heed those more conservative voices are really unlikely to raise enough money to be viable. So that left wing or very liberal candidates tend to be weeded out before they can ever make it to the ballot. In the 2000 Democratic primary for example, the only candidates able to raise enough money to be competitive were Bradley and Gore who were both moderate rather than liberal Democrats.

Now repeated studies have shown that corporate interests are economically conservative. They tend to put making a profit above social community concerns like the environment, or public education or access to health care or homelessness. So while the general *public* support community concerns, politicians are likely to ignore those kinds of opinions because there's very little money in it for them.

MEDIA COVERAGE

JUSTIN LEWIS: So, how do we explain this contradiction between the myth that politicians reflect the public and the reality that on most economic issues, they actually ignore public opinion? Well let's look at how the news media covers public opinion. When the media report on polls, what they're actually doing is telling a story about what public opinion is, rather than just reflecting it. They're constructing how we understand public opinion. And the news media have a lot of power here, because they choose what questions to ask and what questions not to ask. Ordinary people's opinions usually only count in as much as they respond to that conversation.

When Washington was focused on alleged scandals in the Clinton White House then that's what many pollsters asked questions about, even though many people stated in those polls that they were actually much more concerned about other things. One of the issues that in recent years people have said they're most concerned about is education. Now if you read the polling data on this issue, you'll find that more people tend to think that more money should be spent on public education. But when the networks do their own reports on education, they often ignore the issue of spending. So for example, ABC began a report on education by saying that people cared about it.

[ABC News] As we said at the beginning of this week in virtually every poll that tries to measure the state of public opinion, the public says that education is one of the country's most important issues.

JUSTIN LEWIS: But the story they tell us is about a school that has done well without increased spending.

[ABC News] Tonight a closer look at one school that is turning itself around without having a lot of money.

JUSTIN LEWIS: We then here the various improvements the principal of this school has inspired. The implicit sentiment here is directly opposed to what public opinion tells us. People say they want more money spent on education. ABC is telling us that money isn't the answer.

The next question we should ask is: Does the media coverage of public opinion recognize the gap between a public that on economic issues tends to be pretty liberal and mainstream politicians, whether they're Democrats or Republicans, who hold conservative views on those issues? And the answer's a very clear No. Because when you closely examine the way the media report on public opinion, you find that the left wing or liberal side of it more or less disappears. This makes the public appear to be more conservative than it really is.

Now there's lots of reasons for this. The major one being what we call the elite oriented nature of reporting. Not everyone has the same access to newsmakers. The people with the most access to the media are powerful political figures because the news media tend to define politics in terms of the words and deeds of politicians, not on public opinion. I call politicians *elite* in as much as they have a lot more power and control and money than the average citizen because they set the stage for what we talk about and how. Now since politicians are much more conservative than the public, and the media take their lead from these conservative politicians, the poll reporting by the media, tends to replicate elite agendas. As we've seen, this agenda places corporate financial interests above citizen preferences.

The most prominent way that happens is through media coverage of what we might call "horse race politics," trying to figure out which politician is going to win an election, who's popular and who's not. Now when responding to polls like these, people can only reply with simple, brief answers. There's no room to give complex answers. No way to shift the terms of the debate, to say how neither politician really reflects the person's views. The problem with candidate-centered polls is that people are steered into giving an opinion about a mainstream politician. And this implies that they are endorsing not only one or other of the main politicians on offer, but the policies those politicians are supporting. In fact because the media spend very little time actually telling us what those policies are, most people are really expressing little more than an opinion about a loosely constructed image rather than a well-understood political program. So these horse race polls actually tell us very little about what people want, but their prominence in media discourse makes it appear that people are more or less in line with their political representatives. This perception would be much more difficult to sustain if the media looked closely at public opinion on policy preferences.

Examining an issue like health care would make it explicit that public opinion is really at odds with the opinions of the main presidential candidates. Instead of rocking the boat, the media force people to side with those candidates by the questions it asks. So when an NBC report shows a brief glimpse into public unhappiness with the current health care system, the popular alternative – a single payer health care system – which is a non-for-profit system with universal coverage – is never discussed.

[NBC News] *Seventy-nine year old Eleanor Chapin belongs to a different HMO in Kentucky, which recently tripled her premiums. She sees these questionable expenses as a waste of her tax dollars.*

JUSTIN LEWIS: We only hear what political elites have to say.

[CNN News] *Gore's solution, a more modest plan to provide health insurance for children.*

JUSTIN LEWIS: The single payer option is so completely excluded from discussion that when the news media do discuss solutions, they're always in the context of existing, private insurance, market-based systems that leave millions of Americans without health coverage. And this is how the media coverage leaves the current profit based corporations and the politicians who back them at center stage.

Another implication of this focus on candidates and not issues is that the media create the impression that the American public has a real choice. You can choose Bush, or you could choose Gore, the implication being that they're both very different. But on substantive budgetary, or economic issues, the differences between them are really on the margins. Both leading Democrats and Republicans support a privatized health care system, they support corporate-backed global trade agreements, they support maintaining a Cold War defense budget, and they generally favor the interests of Big Business. That the media give the impression that Democrats and Republicans represent a broad range of opinion by focusing on civil liberty, non-monetary issues, like gay rights or abortion. Where Democrats and Republicans really do differ. And this masks the degree of the lead consensus.

The other way in which public opinion is narrowed to fit elite agendas is much more subtle. Polls frequently ask people which issues they care about, and when these get reported on, the media don't really explore any further. They don't ask, why do people care about this issue? Or what policies do they support? CBS reported a poll on traffic congestion.

[CBS News] *Crime has been replaced by traffic congestion as the most important local issue according to a poll out this week.*

JUSTIN LEWIS: One reason for so much traffic congestion in US cities is that many mass transit rail systems since the 1950s have been either ripped up or left to wither away. And this happened despite high levels of public support for public transit and rail systems. Now polls suggest people want the choice of rail and roads, not just roads. Public opinion in other words leads us towards a long-term solution to traffic congestion. But the CBS report ignores this long term and popular solution because serious investment in public transportation is not on Washington's agenda. Instead they focus on new tracking devices, which might at some unspecified date in the future, give people information about traffic jams.

[CBS News] *His invention uses monitors atop already existing cell phone towers. When drivers talk on their phones, the device tracks the signal, which shows how fast the traffic is flowing.*

JUSTIN LEWIS: Again, Washington, spurred on by big interests like the auto industry, have only one response to traffic congestion and that's to build more

roads, so public support for rapid urban transit is simply not discussed. Instead, the only polls we do get are about how much people love their cars.

[NBC News] *According to a recent Gallup poll, 42% of Americans say they would consider buying an SUV, and those who own them now, love them. 73% of people who already own SUVs, say their next car will be another SUV.*

THE PHANTOM LIBERAL

JUSTIN LEWIS: Most people are actually quite cynical about the influence of money in politics. And although the media do report this cynicism, it gets muted by a sense that the political system does more or less represent the people, and that contained within it, is the full range of the political spectrum. So the assumption is that politics covers the broad range of opinion from left to right or from liberal to conservative, where the Democrats are on the left and the Republicans are on the right.

Now as we've seen that's not really true because the influence of money skews elite politicians to the right, so that the Democrats who in any other country will be regarded as centrist in terms of economic policy are perceived as being left wing. In fact they're no longer is a left wing in Washington, and yet the media continues to cover politics as if it's a battle between left and right.

Take a Democratic President like Bill Clinton. Now it's very broadly agreed that Clinton hails from the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. And through his two terms he pursued an economic agenda that was really very much in line with his Republican predecessor. In fact his advisor, Dick Morris boasted that he had remade Clinton into a moderate Republican. And throughout his two terms, Clinton supported conservative trade policies like NAFTA and GAT, that corporations were very much in favor of, and that Labor, and public opinion, opposed. And yet throughout his two terms, the media consistently portrayed Clinton as representing the left or liberal side of politics, and the news media leads people to make all sorts of incorrect assumptions and to assume that as a Democrat, he must also support liberal economic policies and positions. Clinton supported the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which was strongly supported by Big Business and was opposed by most left leaning public interest groups. And yet most people thought he took the public interest line and opposed it, rather than the Big Business position that he actually adopted.

[ABC News] Today when President Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, he ushered in a complete revision of communication law written sixty-two years ago.

JUSTIN LEWIS: The same is true of his position on a treaty that would have banned the use of landmines. Few people knew or guessed that he took the conservative position of refusing to sign in, while as many as 44% of the public actually thought he had taken a liberal position and supported it.

[CBS News] More than one hundred nations today endorsed a treaty to ban anti-personnel land mines. The United States declined.

JUSTIN LEWIS: The same is true of health care reform. The public, almost 60% of them, actually assumed that he had supported the more liberal single payer

health care system. So when it came time to place him in terms of the Democratic Party as a whole, even though he's been connected with the conservative wing of the Democrats for many years, a majority of the public, 51%, regard him as a liberal, rather than a moderate or conservative Democrat.

Now, all of these issues were to a greater or lesser extent, covered by the media. But research suggests that when it comes to news, most people actually don't pay much attention to specifics. Instead, they're guided by the general framework of news coverage. And in those frameworks, Democrats represent liberal ideas, and the Republicans, conservative ones. You might say that Clinton may not have been a liberal, but he played one on TV.

MILITARY OMISSIONS

JUSTIN LEWIS: We've looked at how the media cover public opinion, but to what extent do they influence that opinion? Well, media influence on public opinion has been studied for many years now. We know for example that the media often play what's called an agenda-setting role. Public concern about issues tends to follow media coverage of those issues, rather than any changes in the real world. A few years ago, the degradation of the environment, issues like global warming, destruction of wilderness and chronic air, water, and soil pollution started to get a fair amount of media coverage. Accordingly, polls suggested this was one of the most important issues for people. But then the news media started to lose interest. And even though most of the environmental problems have actually become worse since then, polls showed public concern decreasing. Or take an issue like drugs. Over the last two decades, public concern about drugs has gone from 3%, to over 50%, and back to 3% in polls. And those shifts have absolutely nothing to do with the scale of the problem, and everything to do with the volume of media coverage.

The power of the media to define what issues are seen as important has to do with the relationship between what the media report and what they don't. Media influence in this sense is subtle but profound. The media can help shape or modify what we know about an issue.

Take something like the military budget for example. Now how the public thinks about the military budget is very important because military spending in the US is *huge*, it's the biggest discretionary area of the federal budget. In terms of direct payments, this amounts to \$300 billion a year being spent on the military sector. That's more than the entire economy of most countries in the world. And the scale of it in comparison with what other nations spend on the military is staggering. The United States spends five times as much on the military as the next biggest spender, which is Russia. Now if most of the other big military spenders in the world were unfriendly to the US, this might be understandable, but in fact most of the other big military powers are actually US allies. In other words, if the US spent nothing at all on defense, the balance of power would still be stacked in the US' favor.

Now if you accept the argument that the function of all this military spending is to keep the United States safe, then you have to think about the size of the potential threat. The State Department has identified seven countries as the most likely enemies. Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Syria, and Sudan. Now the idea that all these countries would go to war simultaneously with the US is almost unimaginable. But even if you add the military budgets of all these countries together, the United States outspends them by a factor of eighteen to one. And if you include the budget of the close US allies in that, these seven potential enemies are outspent by more than thirty-three to one.

Now, many people would argue that this level of spending is entirely disproportionate to the level of risk, and that Americans are actually much more at risk from things like lack of health insurance or pollution or acts of domestic terrorism, or domestic violence, or long term threats like global warming. And yet the US's capacity to deal with these more tangible threats is severely limited by devoting so much money and so many resources to the military.

Now research suggests that when you actually ask people to allocate proportions of the budget to various programs they tend to switch spending from the military to things like education and the environment, and yet there's very little outcry about the sheer volume of military spending, and one of the key reasons for that is that most people simply don't know how their tax dollars are being spent.

A survey during the 1992 presidential election asked people about the size of various areas of the federal budget and over 70% said that more money was spent on foreign aid or on welfare than the military. Now in reality, the military budget is so much bigger than the other two.

In another poll taken in May of 1999, people were asked whether the US was the world's largest military power. And nearly half said that it wasn't. Now given that the US is actually number one five times over, that's a pretty remarkable response. The media's role here is less a matter of misinformation than a matter of omission. The information about the size of the military budget may be part of the public record but most people are unaware of it because the media never give us those kinds of comparative figures. So the fact that people believe the military budget is much smaller than it may be, is wrong, but it's a rational response to the information the media have made available.

When NBC news did a preview of Clinton's last State of the Union address in the year 2000, they referred to his proposed increase of \$3 billion in education spending but made no mention at all of military spending increases that were several times as big as that. When the media do report on military spending, it's mostly in the context of declines in the budget.

If we take our baseline as the 1970s, the Cold War was raging and military spending was seen as necessary to counter the perceived Communist threat. When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, he increased spending to record levels. So the declines in the 90s have only really brought us back to Cold War spending in the 1970s. So now we have a Cold War budget with no Cold War. If you actually listen to the way leaders like George W. Bush justify these levels of spending, and actually increasing it, they're unable to talk about anything other than a vague unknown enemy. We don't know who they are, but they're out there somewhere. It's hard to imagine any other form of spending resting on such a feeble premise. If we cut the military budget even to be, say, twice as large as the next biggest military spender, we'd still be around eight times bigger than our seven enemies combined, and we'd save around \$180 billion. The budget would

still be clearly large enough to protect America militarily, but we could also think about protecting Americans in other ways too. Imagine all Americans being covered for free by a universally accessible health care system, no matter what their income is. Or students leaving college without any loans to pay back whatsoever. Or people being able to travel around the country on an affordable, efficient and convenient rail system. All of these will be easily achievable if you shifted priorities to the programs Americans actually most support. But we're not encouraged to think in these ways because we don't have the correct information. So the overall effect of media omissions is to suppress active public support for changing the current course. And it's hard to get upset about the proportions of public resources going to the military if you have no idea what those proportions are.

DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

JUSTIN LEWIS: It's interesting to look back and see what people thought polls would be used for when they were first being developed. For instance when George Gallup began to refine and to develop the art of public opinion polling in the first half of the twentieth century, he saw it as the dawn of a more democratic era. For him, the technology of the opinion poll meant that the public's input into the political process wouldn't be limited any longer to an election every few years. Political elites could actually act on the basis of what the people said they wanted on quite specific issues.

Now, nearly a century later, we live in a poll saturated culture, and the question is, has that democratic vision been realized? Are politicians responsive to real public concerns and unfortunately, the evidence is, that rather than being a mechanism for extending democracy, public opinion polls are used and reported in highly selective ways that match the agenda of political elites. When politicians do use polls, its not because they want to act upon that information, they use it as a kind of market research which allows them to focus on those pieces of their programs that are popular, and strategically ignore those that are not. It's a bit like the way the car industry deals with market research that shows that people are concerned about the environment, want cleaner air, and so on. Rather than promoting more environmentally friendly cars, they try to ease our concern with endless images of cars in pristine environments. And until the media start using public opinion to challenge the Washington consensus based on Big Money, it's hard to see how anything will change.