

ATTENTION STUDENTS REGISTERED FOR THE JUNE 27th WPA:

For information about preparing for and taking the WPA, go to www.umt.edu/writingcenter or call The Writing Center at 243-2266. If you have failed a recent WPA, make an appointment to review your exam with a tutor to help you develop successful strategies for the upcoming exam.

If you decide NOT to take the June WPA exam, please DROP the WPA at the Registration Counter in GrizCentral. Registration for this exam closes at 4:30 pm on Wednesday, June 24th. You cannot cancel your registration after that date.

OTHER REMINDERS ABOUT THE EXAM:

1. Check your class schedule in your Cyberbear account to find out where and what time you will take the test. If the exam time and date do not appear on your schedule you are NOT registered for the exam. **There is no on-site registration, and no one will be admitted to the exam who is not on the registration list.**
2. The times listed for the exam are START times. You should arrive at the exam 15-20 minutes early. Doors close several minutes before start time and NO ONE will be admitted after the proctor has started the exam.
3. NO ONE will be admitted to the exam without picture ID.
4. If you are signed up the bluebook section of the exam in NULH but wish to use a computer, you may go to a computer section to wait for an open seat. If you are signed up for a computer section but wish to write your essay in a bluebook, you may go to NULH before the beginning of the NULH section. We do not guarantee that room will be available in any section other than the one you are registered for. We are not responsible if while waiting for a seat at one venue you miss the test you were registered for.
5. Do not take the test more than once per exam day. You will receive no score for the exam if you do so and you may be subject to disciplinary action under the Student Conduct Code.
6. Bring something to write with. Do not bring a bluebook to the NULH section of the exam.

It is each student's responsibility to know how to meet the WPA requirement. Go to www.umt.edu/writingcenter > Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam to find out what you need to know to do this.

THANK YOU.

Escaping the News Prison: How People See Beyond the Walls

W. Lance Bennett

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A small percentage of people stand in sharp contrast to the majority who absorb and expel news information as though they were contestants in a lifelong trivia match. Some people seem to have an inside line on the politics behind news reports. . . .

Consider two facts that help explain who becomes liberated from the political confines of the news. First, we already know that the news consists overwhelmingly of "objective" (or at least "fair") "documentary" reports that pass along, with little analysis, the political messages of official spokespersons. Less than 1 percent of mass media coverage contains any sort of independent analysis from the reporter's perspective, while around 90 percent of the news originates from circumstances that give officials substantial control over political content. Second, consider the fact that most Americans who are politically active, system-supporting citizens have been socialized in environments (family, school, workplace) that discourage analytical or ideological political thinking. This combination of nonanalytical news with nonanalytical people does not bode well for much analytical thinking in response to political messages in the news.

A third factor further undermines the critical thinking of the public. Political actors tend to construct simplistic political messages that appeal to myths and unquestioned beliefs held by large segments of the public. Such messages are seldom brought into focus because of the absence of analysis in the news and the lack of analytical dispositions in the audience. As a result, most news messages appeal directly to unconscious myths and unquestioned beliefs. In short, the propagandistic, nonanalytical qualities of mass news mesh smoothly with the well-conditioned, nonanalytical orientation of the citizenry.

This profile of the news prisoner contains an obvious clue about those who escape. *In order to escape the news prison, people must develop some independent, analytical perspective from which to interpret the news.* So much for the obvious. More difficult is to identify the sort of perspective that helps

people understand the news more clearly. There are actually several orientations that would enable people to break through the layers of subtle persuasion in the news and think sensibly about what might be going on behind the stories. For example, *a grasp of American history would provide a perspective on the patterns of myth and rhetoric in political events.* A common technique of political propaganda is to blur the relationship between past and present. When historic disasters like foreign involvements or economic collapses seem to be on the verge of recurring, public officials can be expected to persuade the public that important differences distinguish present circumstances from the past. At other times, when the signs of change seem entirely clear, threatened elites may try to persuade the public to avoid the fearsome future and step back into the comforting shadow of the past. The repeated and successful use of these communication patterns suggests that the American people can be led easily to see differences where none exist and to ignore distinctions where they are apparent.

A firm grasp of political history would provide people with a more secure foundation than they now have from which to resist political pressures and with which to develop alternative understandings. Unfortunately, most school boards look with disfavor on history curricula that offer coherent interpretations of American politics. As a result, the majority of American children suffer through several years of the same history course—a course that emphasizes disconnected facts and events, reinforces basic myths that leave people vulnerable to political rhetoric, discourages people from developing a secure understanding of power and politics in American society, and, above all, emphasizes the deeds of great national heroes. This "hero history" not only brings myths to life but also encourages people to trust contemporary hero-leaders to do their thinking and acting for them. There are, to put it bluntly, few Americans with an adequate grasp of their country's history.

Another possible frame of reference for the news would be the sort provided in this book, namely, a theoretical grasp of how politicians and journalists act together to make the news. Such a perspective would help people to locate and interpret the gaps and biases in mass media coverage. When diplomatic talks are called "cordial and productive," people could assume immediately that nothing had happened and that the leaders involved had some other political reason to hold the conference. Flags would go up cautioning people to discount unverified rumors spread by "unidentified" officials. Similar skepticism would apply to "doublepeak" statements like this one in the news: "We've made no secret of our views," said a U.S. official who insisted on anonymity. "People could recognize political manipulation in the news through the use of leaks, pseudo-events, and various image-making techniques. After hearing 'both sides of an issue,' people might even begin to wonder what the third side looked like and why it was not reported."

Unfortunately, people are not required to take courses on how to interpret the news. To the contrary, most people are encouraged by every trusted

authority, particularly parents and teachers, to take the news seriously and at face value. The majority of us are taught to ingest large quantities of news and wait for an objective understanding of events to strike as if by revelation. Waiting for objective revelations from the news may be more satisfying than waiting for Godot, but it is surely as pointless. Children are quizzed in school on the content of classroom news supplements as though they represented the most accurate and comprehensive coverage of the known world. By memorizing the "right answers" to news quizzes, these children grow up thinking that knowing the facts in the news is equivalent to understanding something about the real world.

The news worship that begins in childhood is continued in adult life by the widespread support for the ideal of objective reporting. The notion that events can and should be presented without values or interpretation feeds the image of the good citizen as a concerned seeker of truth. At the same time, the widespread belief in objective reporting obscures the possibility that most "truths" that emerge from the news are likely to be the result of subtle political messages that appeal to subconscious beliefs and prejudices. People can hardly be blamed for thinking that they have found truth under such circumstances. After all, few things seem as objectively true as having one's deepest prejudices confirmed by respected authorities. Presenting two sides of every story with no critical "bridge" to transcend the differences between the sides only invites people to choose the version closest to their existing beliefs. Studies of newspaper readers (presumably the most critical information-seekers) have shown that newspapers primarily reinforce pre-existing political attitudes.

In the absence of a grasp of newsmaking theory or political history, the only other obvious source of independent news judgment is political ideology. Ideologies are formal systems of belief about the nature, origins, and means of promoting values that people regard as important. Not only do ideologies provide people with a clear sense of life's purpose, but they provide a logic for interpreting the world by giving rules for translating real-world events into illustrations of how those values are promoted or damaged. Thus, people who view the news through the lens of an ideology are likely to spot hidden political messages and translate them into independent political statements. The trouble with ideologies is that they can become rigid and limiting frames of reference, leading people to select only the information that fits them while rejecting all other input. For example, many people in the United States continue to hold a "cold war" ideology that views the appearance of socialism or communism anywhere in the world as inherently threatening to democracy, freedom, and the American way of life. For those who cling rigidly to the "cold war" belief system, many important distinctions about world politics may be lost. The emergence of Socialist governments in Europe may seem to be a threatening step along the road to world totalitarianism. Socialism in the Western hemisphere ("our backyard") seems intolerable. Lost in this ideological view is the understanding

that all Socialist and Communist governments are not alike, and that most of them do not pose threats to democracy, freedom, or the American way.

Since the news seldom explains how other political systems work from the standpoint of the people who live in them, we tend to hear mostly U.S. official and expert opinion about other systems. And when it comes to Communist or Socialist systems, the chances are pretty good that equal time will be given some venerable "cold warrior" quick to predict the end of democracy and communism on our doorstep. News consumers with kindred and rigid ideological views can use these familiar pronouncements to reinforce existing beliefs rather than learn something new about the world from another viewpoint.

If people recognized this vicious circle of news and popular belief, they might be more inclined to build an imperative for learning into their belief systems, turning ideology into a dynamic rather than a static outlook. *If used constructively, ideologies could create challenging understandings of the world by enabling people to find the inconsistencies, puzzles, and paradoxes in events.* Thinking through the puzzles in political events can broaden an ideology by adapting it to resolve the puzzles. This process of adaptation simultaneously creates new ways of seeing the world. For example, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were able to see beyond ideology to recognize the advantages of opening political and economic relations with once-dreaded "Communist" China. After high political authorities had pronounced China safe to think about, journalists began to cover Chinese events from a less rigid ideological viewpoint. If it is possible to do business with a one-party Communist state like China, why not a multi-party Socialist country like Nicaragua? The answer depends largely on whether one's ideology is open or closed to learning new things about the world.

In a perfect world, people would supplement their ideologies with a command of history and a theoretical grasp of news politics. Such a combination of perspectives would enable people to combat news propaganda with their own conclusions. This is not, as you probably guessed, a perfect world. It is unlikely that more than a tiny fraction of the public has an understanding of American history or news politics, and by even the most generous estimates, few people can be called self-reflective ideologues.

Even those few people who manage to construct a political worldview may find it a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they are able to understand political communication in comprehensive and personally satisfying ways. On the other hand, their ideological insights are likely to be discredited by the majority of their fellow citizens, who have been taught to wait for "objective" revelations to emerge from the news. Hence, another paradox: People who espouse a stance of objectivity toward the news are likely to accept blindly the institutional bias of the news media (if, indeed, they are able to form any political conclusions at all), while those who manage to form clear political perspectives are likely to be condemned for being "opinionated." . . .