

Media Bias – Summer of the Shark

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In an era of ever-increasing competition between print, broadcast and online media the credibility of news organizations has been significantly undermined as the result of numerous scandals involving bias and exaggerated reporting of various events (Murphy, Ward & Donovan, 2006). However, the perceived degree of media bias concerning the one-sided reporting of an event is often somewhat tempered based upon whether the information aligns with the personal ideology of an individual (Stone, 2011). This premise provides consumers of information with the ability to filter left or right wing information provided by the media and find somewhat of a middle ground for a given issue. Nevertheless, the editorial bias which results in sensationalistic and alarmist reporting of events for the purpose of an increased audience share has the potential to create unwarranted fears and false beliefs that can significantly erode the reputation of the news media as a whole (Bangalore & Messerli, 2013).

Events Hidden in the Shadow of 9/11

In the late summer of 2001, the news media was focused on the disappearance of Chandra Levy, an intern at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and allegations that she had an affair with married U.S. Representative Gary Condit. Given the attention to this event as well as other issues such as the war in the African Republic of Congo and collapse of the political and financial infrastructure of Argentina, the year 2001 was not void of newsworthy events (Ballve, 2009). Therefore, it was somewhat surprising that the media became worked into a frenzy with reporting of shark attacks along the United States coastlines, to include an in-depth investigation into the year of the shark by Time magazine (McCarthy, 2001). However, despite the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, alarmist reporting of shark attacks would have likely subsided when the coastal tourist season came to a close with the passing of summer into fall.

One of the numerous issues which quickly became overshadowed by the events of September 11, 2001, was associated with the actions of President George W. Bush to restrict access to the papers of past presidents (Presidential Records Act, 2001). This issue began as President George W. Bush took office in January 2001 with the final decision regarding the restricted release of presidential papers to be made in September 2001 (Presidential Records Act, 2001). Amid public outcry that the issue was undermining democracy and violated the Freedom of Information Act, implementation of the 2001 Presidential Records Act was a festering controversy that was simply awaiting increased media coverage and political infighting to erupt. However, although the Presidential Records Act was mired in controversy until it was repealed in 2009 by President Barack Obama, the attention of the media at the time of implementation was focused almost entirely on the events of September 11, 2001.

Presidential Election Years Since 2001

Presidential election years bring an entirely different meaning to the term media bias with news organizations promoting differing political agendas and virtually casting aside all other newsworthy events (Stone, 2011). The 2008 presidential election year provided ample opportunities for outspoken critics from all sides with the Democratic party nominating the first black candidate to head a major party ticket and the Republican party nominating only the second female vice presidential candidate in history (Current Events, 2008). Accordingly, the media remained focused on the election from the national party conventions in the late summer of 2008 until Barack Obama was elected President of the United States on November 4, 2008. As the result of this intense focus upon election year coverage, the media generally failed to recognize the significance of the impending financial crisis which ultimately lead to: a decline in the United States financial markets in March, 2009 that exceeded the pace which resulted in the

Great Depression; and projection by the World Bank in June, 2009 that annual global production would experience the first decline since the second world war (Lambert, 2010). Although the media did not completely ignore indications of the impending financial crisis, reporting on the issue was not accomplished with the same enthusiasm as may have occurred if election-year politics had not consumed reporters. Other events which received minimal coverage during the same period included: Fidel Castro stepping down from power; tornadoes ravaging portions of the United States; researchers decoding the genome of a cancer patient; the California Supreme Court deciding that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry; and California voters later overturning the same-sex marriage decision (Current Events, 2008).

Potential Scandals Impacting the 2012 Perennial Election

In 2011, having survived the global financial crisis of the previous decade, the Obama administration had generally been recognized as being a scandal-free (Gurdon, 2011). As the 2012 election year approached with President Obama seeking a second term in office, numerous events began to unfold which had the potential to become serious campaign issues: American soldiers were photographed posing with the corpses of Afghan insurgents; Secret Service agents were caught hiring prostitutes in Columbia, South America; the General Service Administration was accused of excessive spending for a lavish Las Vegas retreat; and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives was suspected of selling guns to buyers who were supplying Mexican drug gangs (Wolfe, 2012). Although rival politicians and news agencies seized the opportunity to publicize each scandal, the reputation of the Obama administration was virtually unscathed, and there was no measurable impact upon the decision of voters. However, had the individual issues been collectively addressed as more of an overall management failure of the Obama administration, the opinion of the voting public would have likely changed.

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