

Opinion



Another Viewpoint

Media bias is tricky

By Jason Salzman
Last month, two UCLA professors produced a study alleging liberal bias in the mainstream media. In their study, titled "A Measure of Media Bias," the professors first tallied how often members of Congress cited 200 prominent special interest groups. Then the researchers assigned these special interest groups ratings based on the voting patterns (liberal or conservative) of the members of Congress who cited them in speeches.

The UCLA professors then studied how often the 200 special interest groups were mentioned in news articles.

Media outlets that cited the *Heritage Foundation* were given a more conservative rating; those that cited Children's Defense Fund were assigned a more liberal score. And it turned out that most of the national media lean left, with only FOX News and *The Washington Times* on the right.

It sounds convincing, but the study was completely flawed.

As the media watchdog group *Media Matters* pointed out, a researcher cannot analyze one type of source (special interest groups) and make broad conclusions about overall bias. Reporters consider a quote from Vice President Dick Cheney as a source. Yet this type of source would not be counted in the UCLA study. So a newspaper article that included a quote from the vice president alongside a quote from a Greenpeace campaigner would be considered to have a liberal bias, because the quote would not count as a source.

Consider the following fictional news brief:

The Bush administration announced more cuts today aimed at streamlining government, fulfilling an overdue campaign pledge. The cuts were mostly in education and health. "Too many people claim to be poor and sick, when in reality they can take care of themselves," said Republican Vice President Dick Cheney.

"We're looking out for the little guy," said former Republican House Speaker Tom Delay. "We need funds for the Iraq War and tax cuts," said Pat Robertson, a Bush supporter. "Why can't the richest nation in the world provide health insurance for its children?" asked Jane Doe from the Children's Defense Fund.

Under the UCLA study's methodology, this article would have a liberal bias because three out of four sources for the article (Cheney, Delay, Robertson) are people, not special interest groups. Yet, it's obvious that this article has a conservative bias. The flawed UCLA study highlights the complexity and danger in alleging media bias. It's complex because so many factors (story placement, story selection, story length, story sources, etc) intertwine with one another in the daily coverage of news outlets.

For example, a newspaper might run a long front-page article that could be shown to have a liberal bias, and then bury a small brief, like the one above, inside the paper that has a strong conservative bias. How do you weigh one measure of media bias against another? The answer is, it's very difficult.

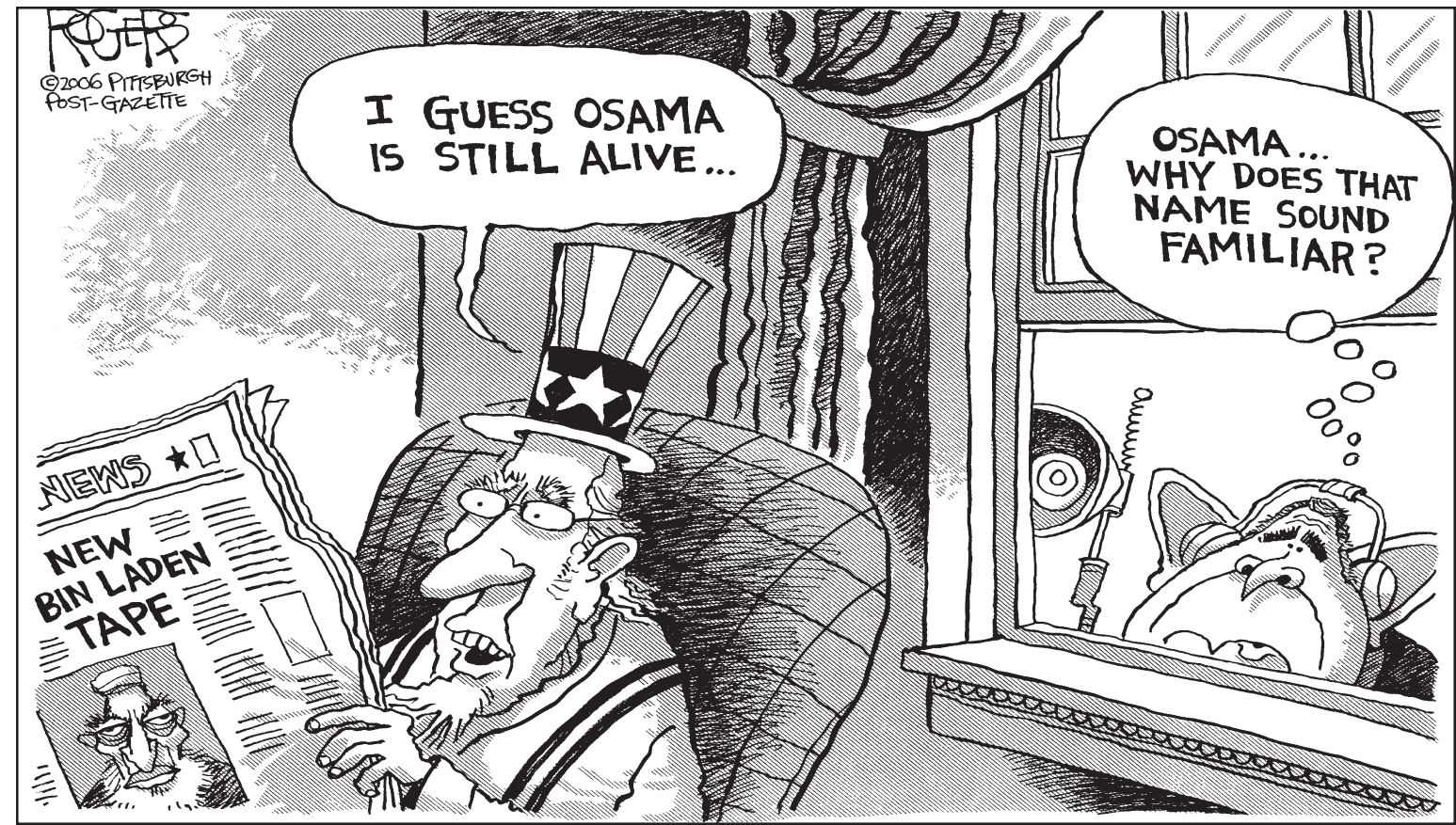
So here's what happens. Liberal and conservative partisans both accuse the media of having a bias-and most often the partisans don't have data-just anecdotes-to back up their accusations.

It would be more reasonable to dispense with broad accusations of bias completely, and focus instead on specific coverage. Media watchdog groups like *Media Matters* or the UCLA professors should point out flaws in media coverage of a specific issue or event-and focus on the work of specific media outlets.

For example, was media coverage in *The New York Times* of the build-up to the Iraq War fair? Were reasonable opinions represented? Did the issue get sufficient space? Were anonymous sources used ethically? With specific accusations of media bias on the table, citizens can debate them honestly-and journalists can defend their work and be held accountable.

But when activists-either on the left or right of the political spectrum-make sweeping accusations of media bias, they do a disservice to the public. The real issues are hidden. The credibility of journalism, already low, in the public eye is diminished, and citizens are given yet another reason to tune out.

Jason Salzman is author of "Making the News: A Guide for Activists and Nonprofits" and a media critic for the Rocky Mountain News.



Been there, done that

John Van Nostrand

• Line in the Dust



Supreme Court justices should be concerned about.

There is much more in front of the Supreme Court. What about eminent domain? Should a local government have the right to take private property and give it to private business all under the subtle intent of benefiting from more property tax dollars? We don't know because those stories are not being written enough.

We are also swamped with the efforts of turning Iraq into a democratic nation.

Again, too many of the same stories have been written about Iraq's entire election process, the foundation for democracy.

What is being overlooked is how Iraq is supposedly implementing democracy in other ways. Former dictator Saddam Hussein must still have some influence if he does not have to show up to his own trial everyday. The trial has also had several delays.

Would we have let that happen to Timothy McVeigh during his trial regarding the Oklahoma City bombing? I highly doubt it — and we want everyone to be a democratic nation.

Terror suspect Osama bin Laden's voice was confirmed on an audiotape released last week. The moment authorities said it was the coward, much of the nation's media went back to its files and again brought out the heightened security

stories. More footage of cops walking through New York City subways and security officials in the L.A. airport were shown. Those have been the same stories since post Sept. 11, 2001. Nothing new was added to the stories, just the dust was knocked off and blanks filled in.

Now, if bin Laden offered to privately meet with President Bush in neutral Switzerland to discuss his truce — now that's a story. (And what happened to the color-oriented security level in America?)

Even the recent stories of when American troops will come home from Iraq is becoming repetitive. The quotes are the same, only the retired military official they come from changes. The story to do is find out if we will build a permanent military base in Iraq, like we did in Japan and Germany after World War II.

Having the same story is also a struggle with smaller media outlets, even the *Free Press*. I don't want to bore our readers when nothing new has happened in the search for a new president at Colby Community College. Now, the college needs a new trustee.

I'm also leery of repetitive, unseasonable weather stories. One story a season is enough.

I've got a feeling somebody really knows why Colby High Athletic Director Jeff Quenzer's contract was not renewed and why football coach Greg Koenig resigned, but is afraid to publicly say it because of fear of what may happen.

But until then we will have to report the standard quotes like, "Our search is continuing" said a Colby School board member.

And readers will fill in the blanks on their own to the fight the boredom.

John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press

Kansas legislature health committee online

My Health committee public access is nearly ready to go live now. The URL (not yet announced) is <http://www.kslegislature.org/hhhs/>. This location will provide you with the agendas, minutes video and audio of our meetings.

The audio and video is live and is not archived for later viewing but it can be recorded by anyone watching. We have NO restrictions on any of the content of live open meetings. My Health committee and the Senate Utilities committee are the only two in the world that have this level of openness. You also have access to all the printed and PowerPoint presentations conferees present to the committee.

Later we will open the committee to the public for live comments (like a live radio call in show) and also allow testimony to be presented without the conferee needing to be in Topeka. Furthermore you can, to a degree yet to be determined, interact with the committee member's one on one. More about that later.

Kansas owned and operated casinos are being discussed. Kansas makes about 50 percent from the lottery proceeds, a small amount from the dog and horse racing and nothing from the Indian casinos. Some believe that a State operated casino would provide substantial money to the



Jim Morrison

• Capitol Review

State. I am told it would be more than we currently receive from the lottery by a large margin. If you are a fan of gambling or not this issue will be discussed.

I do not favor gambling but have not yet committed to voting for or against it. I will wait and see what the options are later.

Education lobbyists are amazingly quiet. At this point no one seems to really know what action(s) we are likely to take.

ANYTHING you might hear is just conjecture at this time and there are numerous rumors about what might happen. Listen but question what you hear and please contact me with your ideas, thoughts and wishes as it relates to education, or anything else for that matter.

Renewable energy (wind-solar-geothermal

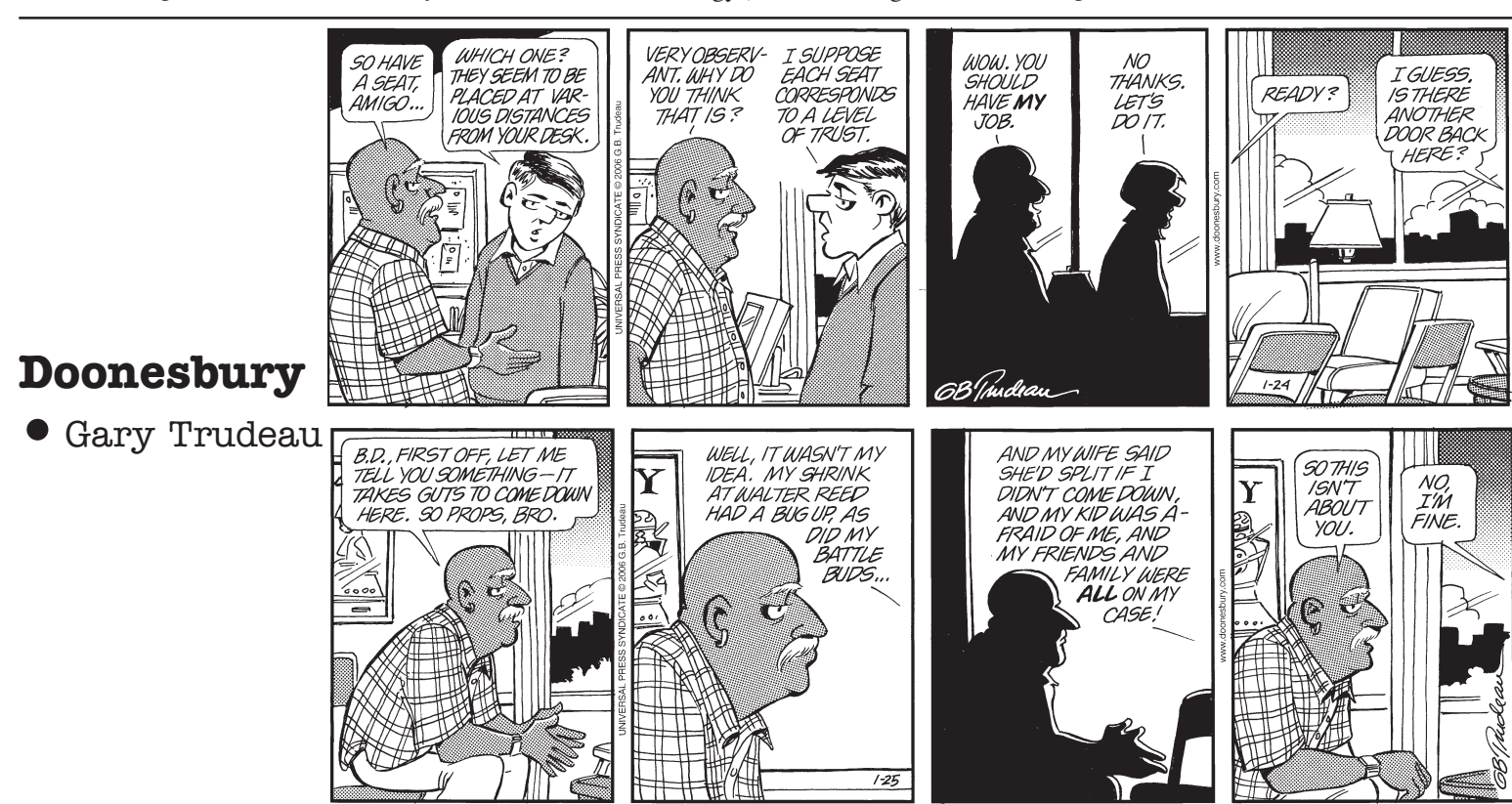
etc) is getting front and center this session. Several bills encouraging use and construction of facilities are making their way to the Utilities committees. Ethanol production and "clean" energy power plants are also going to be discussed and likely will have some tax favorable treatment this session. Biofuels are also going to be a lively topic.

Kansas, especially northwestern Kansas, is a great place for wind, solar, biodiesel and ethanol production. For once our area is getting some good attention. Our water, wind, dry air seem to be something Legislators are now interested in developing.

Please contact me if you have questions or especially if you have answers to issues before the Legislature. I will do all I can to make our needs and views known so that we have a fair treatment in taxation, business and anything the state does. This is the second week and enclosed is information about some of what took place. Thanks for your help in getting information to the district.

If you want anything in particular or know something folks are especially interested in please let me know.

Again, THANKS!



Doonesbury

• Gary Trudeau

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