

American Journalism's Ideology: Why the "Liberal" Media is Fundamentalist

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Evaluation of a news media outlet's coverage of a subject often focuses on a critique of how stories are covered, suggestions for how stories can be improved, and ideas for stories that currently aren't being covered.¹ Such an evaluation of XYZ's environmental coverage would be useful, but it also is crucial to consider more basic questions about the ideological framework in which the coverage goes forward.

Talk of journalism's ideology typically meets resistance, given that journalists routinely assert that they are non-ideological. If "ideology" is defined as a rigid, even fanatical, devotion to a set of ideas no matter what the evidence, then it is a good thing for journalists (and everyone else) to avoid ideology. But if ideology is understood as the set of social attitudes, political beliefs, and moral values that shape one's interpretation of the world, then everyone works within an ideological framework, including journalists. Then the task is to understand competing ideologies, including one's own, and not to imagine that anyone, or any institution, transcends ideology.

There are three key elements to the dominant ideology of the contemporary United States—involving world affairs, economics, and ecology—which can be best understood as forms of fundamentalism. Moving beyond the religious roots of the term, we can understand fundamentalism as any intellectual, political, or moral position that asserts a certainty in the truth and/or righteousness of a belief system. In that sense, the United States is an especially fundamentalist country.

First is national fundamentalism, a faith in the benevolence of the United States' projection of power around the world. From this fundamentalist position, the United States acts in its own interests but always to advance the

1 This essay is my response to an editor at a U.S. news organization who was soliciting feedback for a review of the organization's coverage of environmental news. From a conservative point of view, this newsroom is part of the "liberal media." My goal in the essay was to step back from that superficial, diversionary label and evaluate the deeper ideological commitments that shape mainstream news.

greater goal of creating a just and peaceful world. Even when there is a consensus that U.S. policy has failed, such as in Vietnam or Iraq, the unquestioned assumption is that the United States' intentions were noble and actions were morally justified. When journalists cannot step back to evaluate these claims, their accounts of the world inevitably reinforce the fundamentalism, even when those reports are critical of some of the specific ways that U.S. policy is executed.

Second is economic fundamentalism, the steadfast belief in the moral claims of capitalism and the efficiency claims of the corporation. From this fundamentalist position, corporate capitalism is not only the best, but the only viable, way to organize economic activity. Even when the system fails to deliver on its promise of shared prosperity and rationality, the only available responses are assumed to be minor shifts in limited government oversight. When journalists cannot step back to evaluate these claims, their accounts of the economy inevitably reinforce the fundamentalism, even when those reports highlight market failures and the corrosive nature of concentrated wealth.

Third is technological fundamentalism, the unquestioned assumption that the use of high-energy/high-technology is always a good thing and that any problems caused by the unintended consequences of such technology can be remedied by more technology. From this fundamentalist position, the industrial model is unchallengeable and any proposed solutions to environmental problems must conform to that model. Even when those solutions continue to create more problems, alternative paths based on different models are unacceptable. When journalists cannot step back to evaluate these claims, their accounts of the problems and potential solutions reinforce the fundamentalism, even when those reports present data that suggests that the solutions are inadequate or even counterproductive.

These three fundamentalisms are, of course, related. Aggressive U.S. foreign policy around the world typically serves the economic interests of a relatively small number of people; the capitalist growth imperative and conventional economic activity undermine the health of the ecosphere; military action is a tool for dealing with the conflict that emerges from, or is intensified by, ecological degradation and resource scarcity around the world.

All three of these ideologies also are in crisis, as the post-WWII dominance of U.S.-dictated economic arrangements erodes and the instability of the systems becomes more obvious. In each case, we can ask whether any current crisis is merely cyclical or more structural. Are relatively stable systems going through inevitable periodic corrections, or are the systems themselves running down? If the crisis in any one of these systems is structural, what is our best

guess on the time frame of the process of systemic change (which will be planned or chaotic, depending on our choices)?

Given human intellectual limits, it is folly to make definitive claims about, or offer precise timetables for, such questions and processes. But our inability to know definitively and precisely does not absolve us of our obligation to come to the best judgments we can, since public-policy decisions must be based on some account of what we expect will happen. No one can predict the future, but everyone is responsible for our actions that create the future.

Obviously, reasonable people can disagree on these questions, and in a healthy political system striving for informed democratic deliberation, it is important for citizens to be exposed to all relevant opinions. Journalists' task is not to settle these questions but rather help circulate the ideas, striving to identify and amplify the relevant competing points of view. The key term in those two sentences is "relevant." If journalists are trapped within ideologies that prevent them from identifying the full range of relevant views, they will fail at their central task.

When faced with such criticism, mainstream journalism's reflexive defense mechanism—"Look, conservatives hate us and liberals hate us, and so we must be doing something right"—is a shallow and inadequate response. A more useful approach would be for journalists to critically self-reflect on the ideological assumptions that define their reporting (such as the absence of foundational critiques of nationalism and capitalism) and how their professional practices (such as a heavy reliance on official sources) limit mainstream journalism's ability to contribute to democratic dialogue.

The implications of this analysis for coverage of international and economic stories requires careful argument, though the broad outlines are fairly clear (the stunted coverage of the 2003 Iraq invasion and NAFTA negotiations of the early 1990s offer clear examples). The role of technological fundamentalism in journalism, which has not been as widely discussed, deserves more attention. I'll address three aspects—how environmental issues are reported, the demand to focus on solutions, and the nature of the preferred solutions.

Contemporary journalism has long struggled to report on complex and multifaceted issues that aren't tied to specific events. Wars and elections are comparatively easy; social movements that develop over time and the daily reality of institutionalized oppression are hard. But the first and most important step in covering what are typically called "environmental issues" is to understand that any single issue is but one part of multiple, cascading ecological crises the world faces.

The plural—crises—is crucial. Look at any measure of the health of the ecosphere—groundwater depletion, soil erosion, chemical contamination, increased toxicity in our own bodies, the number and size of dead zones in the oceans, accelerating extinction of species and reduction of bio-diversity—and ask a simple question: Where we are heading? Remember also that we live in an oil-based world that is rapidly depleting the cheapest and most easily accessible oil, which means we face a huge reconfiguration of the infrastructure that undergirds modern life. Meanwhile, the desperation to avoid that reconfiguration has brought us to the era of “extreme energy” using more dangerous and destructive technologies (hydrofracturing, deep-water drilling, mountain-top removal, tar sands extraction). And, of course, let’s not forget global warming/ climate disruption.

Whatever assessment we make of a specific issue, an honest accounting of the state of the ecosphere should leave us frightened. Scientists these days are talking about tipping points² and planetary boundaries,³ about how human activity is pushing the planet beyond its limits. The problem is not just those who deny the nearly universal scientific consensus on climate change, but a much wider and deeper denial about the fragile state of the ecosystems on which our lives depends. Reporting on any environmental issue has to place any specific story in this context, no matter how resistant people are to this blunt accounting.

A common response to this analysis is “we know the problems, and so let’s focus on solutions.” That’s ironic, since it’s obvious that we don’t “know” the problems. The capacity of the ecosphere to support life, including large-scale human societies, is the product of complex interactions—among organisms, and between the living and non-living world—about which we know surprisingly little. This rush to solutions based on flawed assumptions of the depth of our ecological understanding is another feature of this denial. We know a lot through science, but scientists are the first to recognize how much of the complex working of the world remains unknown.

One reasonable conclusion is that the most responsible and viable solutions to these problems start with an immediate decrease in human consumption, especially of energy and non-renewable resources. Given that somewhere between a quarter and a third of the world’s population now consumes too little to guarantee a minimally decent life, that means the obligation to reduce falls on

² See the June 7, 2012, *issue of Nature*. <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v486/n7401/index.html>.

³ See the September 23, 2009, *issue of Nature*. <http://www.nature.com/news/specials/planetaryboundaries/index.html>.

the affluent sectors of the world, which means major changes in lifestyle in the United States and similarly situated societies. Given the limited effectiveness of individual action and market mechanisms, there's an immediate need for discussion of limits that would have to be enforced by mutual coercion (that is, collective action through some form of government). But rather than factor this into discussion of solutions—a difficult conversation in any system but especially in the growth-obsessed modern consumer capitalist system—policymakers, and the culture more generally, ignore this dimension.

As a result, technological fundamentalism defines the boundaries of the debate. Technology has to save us, and the unintended consequences of technology are, when considered at all, relegated to a footnote. For example, industrial agriculture has seriously degraded the amount and fertility of topsoil, and yet the dominant conversation about agriculture focuses on intensifying the industrial approach. In mainstream journalism, we find stories about the latest development in battery storage capacity or solar panel innovation. But stories about the need for the human species to immediately and dramatically lower this drawdown of the planet's non-renewable resources—and the moral, political, and economic changes that would be required for such a process—are rare.

Journalists may fear that pursuing such stories will open them up to criticism that they are biased. In some sense of the term, that's true—such stories indicate a bias toward taking seriously the data that is readily available. But, of course, not addressing these issues is also biased, toward denial of the data. Again, reasonable people can disagree, but today mainstream journalism is failing to engage all relevant views on the state of the ecosphere.

To return to the initial question: How well does XYZ cover environmental issues? My answer: Badly, but no worse than other media outlets that accept the ideological limits and professional practices of mainstream journalism. My proposal for change would begin with an ideological self-assessment by management and working journalists, at both the personal and institutional level. What assumptions about the way the world works guide XYZ's reporting? Are those assumptions undermining comprehensive coverage in ways that marginalize or eliminate key questions and opinions?

From there, journalists could begin the process of shaping the goals of the network, not just for the next program or even the next year, but for the coming decades, during which we almost surely will face much greater impediments to achieving social justice and ecological sustainability, making these questions more compelling.

Last thought: When I present this kind of analysis, I'm sometimes told, "That's a reasonable critique, but the problem is that people can't handle it." Whenever someone tells me that people (assuming that term refers to "ordinary" people

who aren't part of the journalistic/intellectual establishment) can't handle it, I interpret it to mean that the person I'm speaking to can't handle it and finds it easier to displace that fear onto an abstracted public.

That reaction is understandable. These multiple, cascading crises are a lot to handle, perhaps more than humans are equipped to bear. But however unfair that burden may be, denying the evidence and ignoring the implications of the evidence is not a winning strategy.