



# Journalists Give Workers the Business

*How the Mainstream Media Ignores  
Ordinary People in Economic News Coverage*

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## Introduction and Summary

**T**he mainstream media has a profound impact on politics, helping everyday Americans determine what topics people think are important, shape how they feel about issues, and even how they vote.<sup>1</sup>

Alternative media outlets such as blogs and social networking sites have proliferated in recent years, yet most people still receive their news from the mainstream media, which is especially true for economic news.<sup>2</sup> This report focuses on how the mainstream media covers the economy, a subject where fundamental political questions arise about how income is generated and allocated among individual Americans and the businesses and companies they work for and sometimes invest in. Specifically, in its coverage of economic issues, does the media provide a balanced discussion of who gets what and why? Or instead is coverage biased toward a particular interest group?

Based on a unique, quantitative study, this report finds that media coverage of economic issues is biased and consistently fails to live up to expectations of balance and fairness. On a range of economic issues, the perspective of workers is largely missing from media coverage, while the views of business are frequently presented. The findings are based on analysis of coverage of four economic issues—employment, minimum wage, trade, and credit card debt—in the leading newspaper and television outlets in 2007.

Included in this analysis is coverage by the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *U.S.A. Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*—the five papers with the largest circulation nationwide—alongside the three major TV broadcast networks, ABC News, CBS News, and NBC News, as well as the three leading cable news networks, CNN, FOX News, and CNBC.<sup>3</sup> The four economic issues were chosen because they represent a range of economic issues that impact ordinary citizens and that many citizens have defined opinions about.

Following is a highlight of the report's findings:

- Overall, representatives of business were quoted or cited nearly two-and-a-half times as frequently as were workers or their union representatives.
- In coverage of both the minimum wage and trade, the views of businesses were sourced more than one-and-a-half times as frequently as those of workers.

- In coverage about employment, businesses were quoted or cited over six times as frequently as were workers.
- On only one issue that we examined, credit card debt, was coverage more balanced, presenting the perspectives of ordinary citizens in the same proportion as those of business.

Biased coverage matters for three primary reasons. Our belief in democratic debate demands informed citizens, and requires that different points of view are allowed to be heard. Journalistic standards of objectivity call for balanced coverage. And, perhaps most importantly, media coverage influences people's opinions and behavior.

Critics often claim that the media has a political bias, with most of the debate focusing on whether the media is liberal or conservative, and whether coverage favors Democrats or Republicans.<sup>4</sup> This debate, while important, ignores a more fundamental question about which points of view are allowed to be heard at all.

Because the model of objective journalism calls for sources, not journalists, to give opinions about news, quotations and citations are the way journalists tell their stories. Who journalists choose to include in their stories sets the range of debate, and determines the kinds of perspectives the public is allowed to hear. The mainstream media represented in the range of publications surveyed for this report serves as a gatekeeper, amplifying the voices of some while making it more difficult for others to reach a mass audience.

Although the media cannot and should not give equal credence to each and every perspective, both journalistic standards and our expectations for democratic debate call for the media to accu-

rately represent all sides of a story and allow the major players to have a voice. We should expect, for example, that balanced coverage of economic issues would commonly include the perspectives of both business and workers.

After all, these groups represent primary actors in the economy. Each has a significant interest in the topic, and each group often, but certainly not always, has a defined point of view.

Of course, different businesses and different groups of workers boast complex inter-relationships—as bosses and workers, as holders of equity in companies either directly or through pension funds and mutual funds, or as citizens in local communities where businesses are based and workers live and work. These inter-relationships are not easily quantified, yet the four economic issues chosen to survey in this paper illustrate a profound bias in favor of business over workers in mainstream press coverage.

Indeed, the report's findings of biased sourcing may not be surprising to those who follow the media closely. But they are stark and raise serious questions about whether the media is fairly covering economic issues, whether the media is living up to its own standards, and whether the media is properly serving democracy.

There are many potential explanations for this kind of biased coverage, all of them probably true to some degree. The influence of corporate ownership and advertisers, the decline of the labor beat and “shoe-leather” journalism, the failure of unions to effectively communicate with the media, and the personal and political biases of reporters and editors are all common and reasonable explanations.<sup>5</sup>

But the best explanation for the kind of bias described in this report is that journalists have a preference for elite sources, such as government or business representatives, over ordinary citizens.<sup>6</sup> In short, it is just easier for a reporter to talk to a professional, such as a business spokesperson, than to find a good quote from a worker or ordinary citizen who does not represent a set interest group.

This is not to say that mainstream reporters do not talk to average workers or individual citizens for their stories. Coverage of pure consumer issues, for example, often give the perspective of ordinary citizens equal treatment—often in conflict with business interests that deliver

consumer goods and services. Indeed, the results of the survey show that on the one economic issue that is also a consumer issue—credit card debt—reporters do seek out ordinary citizens for their stories.

The other three economic issues surveyed in this report show that in economic coverage of the news by the mainstream press there is a decided preference for elite sources, especially business representatives. More importantly, the report suggests that, whatever the source of bias, it can be overcome. If editors and journalists actively seek out the perspective of workers, as they do for consumers, media coverage of the economy would significantly improve.

## What Is Different About This Study

This study differs from most other critiques of the mainstream media in four important respects. First, the report, unlike the vast majority of other studies, is based on quantitative evidence that provides for a more objective measure of bias.<sup>7</sup> Second, the study looks for several types of bias—examining the types of groups that are sourced as well as partisanship and ideology of sources—to provide a richer and fuller understanding of media bias.

Third, the study examines both television and print coverage, rather than focusing exclusively on one kind of media. Fourth, the study examines a range of different types of economic issues, including both worker and consumer issues, allowing for a better understanding of the sources of bias.

Some potential explanations for the source of bias can be ruled out if bias is only found in certain types of issues. For example, a general preference for elite sources can be ruled out if consumer stories source ordinary people with equal frequency to business. That's why the methodology of this report is crucial to the results.

### Methodology

This report studies the leading print and TV outlet's coverage in 2007 of four economic issues: the minimum wage, trade, employment, and credit card debt.<sup>8</sup> The issues were chosen because they represent a range of economic issues that affect ordinary citizens and that many citizens have defined opinions about. As a result, this study represents a “hard test” of the theory that media coverage is biased against the perspective of workers.<sup>9</sup> Any findings of a bias toward business will be particularly robust.

The newspapers included in the study are the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *U.S.A. Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*—the five papers with the largest circulation nationwide. The TV broadcast outlets covered are ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, and the leading cable news networks are CNN, FOX News, and CNBC.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the proliferation of alternative media outlets, most people still receive their news from the mainstream media.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the mainstream media tends to heavily influence and often drive the coverage of the alternative media. Thus, this study provides a good overview of the kinds of stories the public is most likely to consume, and probably understates the degree of bias in overall media coverage because there are so

many specialized business publications, but relatively few worker publications.

It is worth noting that each of the media organizations studied has its own institutional culture. One outlet, for example, may tend to focus on the inner-working of government, another on economic and financial news, and another more on entertaining its audience. This study attempts to control for these idiosyncratic differences by reviewing a wide range of outlets and aggregating the results.

The study examines bias by counting and categorizing the sources that are quoted or cited in a story. That's because the model of objective journalism calls for sources, not journalists, to give opinions about news. Quotes and cites are the way journalists tell their stories. Who the journalists choose to include in their stories sets the range of debate and determines the kinds of perspectives the public is allowed to hear. As a result, studying the sources used

in a news story is a standard way to examine media bias in academic studies.<sup>12</sup>

Sources were coded into the following categories: labor unions, businesses, other interest groups, ordinary workers or consumers, government or elected officials, and other.<sup>13</sup> Government or elected officials were further categorized by their political party. Interest groups that directly represent businesses, such as the Chamber of Commerce, were counted as businesses.

Other interest groups were further categorized by their ideological leaning, using the methodology developed by UCLA political scientist Tim Groseclose and University of Missouri Economist Jeff Milyo.<sup>14</sup> Their methodology counts how often interest groups are cited positively by elected officials and then gives the interest group a ranking based on the ideological leanings of the elected officials who chose to cite the group.

## The Results of the Survey

Individual articles about the economy, on initial examination, rarely seem biased. But when coverage is looked at comprehensively and through the lens of what perspectives are heard, the media's bias in coverage of economic issues becomes clear. Stories are presented from far above the lives of ordinary people, focusing instead on the viewpoint of businesses.

In all stories reviewed—on issues that were specifically chosen because they are of concern to the general public—business representatives were quoted or cited 230 percent more frequently than ordinary workers or their union representatives combined.<sup>15</sup> Overall, business accounted for more than one third (34 percent) of all sources used. Unions were 3 percent of sources and ordinary workers 11 percent.

Government or elected officials accounted for 31 percent of sources, advocacy organizations 10 percent, and academics 6 percent. Three percent of sources fell into the other category, a group that generally consisted of book authors and journalists. In short, business is the dominant group cited in stories about the economy, while other perspectives, especially those of workers, are given short-shrift.

The overall trend of a bias toward business is the main finding of the study, holding true no matter how the data is analyzed. Business is the dominant group sourced and the position of the other groups does not change, whether considering just those who are quoted or those who are cited without a direct quote. Whether looking at print or television coverage, business is sourced far more frequently than workers.<sup>16</sup>

The overall trend holds for every issue that was considered as having a worker perspective—minimum wage, employment, and trade—though the degree of the trend varies. In coverage of the minimum wage, for example, the business perspective is given 1.6 times as frequently as that of workers. Businesses represented 27 percent of sources, while unions comprised 6 percent and workers 11 percent. Government represented 39 percent of sources in minimum wage stories, advocacy organizations 9 percent, academics 6 percent, and others 2 percent.

In coverage about employment, the business perspective is even more pronounced. Businesses are sourced 6.7 times as frequently as that of workers. Businesses represented 57 percent of sources, while unions comprised 2 percent and workers 6 percent.



Government represented 19 percent of sources in employment stories, advocacy organizations 8 percent, academics 7 percent, and others 0 percent.

In coverage about trade agreements, the business perspective is given 1.7 times as frequently as that of workers. Businesses represented 15 percent of sources, while unions comprised 5 percent and workers 4 percent. Government represented 55 percent of sources in trade stories, advocacy organizations 11 percent, academics 8 percent, and others 2 percent.

Standing in stark contrast to the overall trend, coverage about credit card debt displayed a completely different pattern. In coverage of credit card debt, ordinary people were sourced with nearly equal frequency to business. Business represented 33 percent of sources, while ordinary consumers represented 30 percent of sources, and unions 0 percent. Government represented 10 percent of sources in credit card stories, advocacy organizations 12 percent, academics 5 percent, and others 10 percent.

## Other Types of Bias

The study also examined two other types of bias: partisan and ideological. The study finds that the elected officials sourced showed a slight Democratic bias, with 46 percent of government sources coded as Democratic and 39 percent Republican. This partisan bias is most likely an artifact of how partisanship was coded. The partisanship of government sources was only coded when it was very easily determined, and it is likely that this coding method undercounted Republican sources.

During 2007, the period of the study, Republicans controlled the White House and executive branch, but the partisanship of many administration sources was not readily apparent, and thus these sources were coded as non-partisan to be conservative in our estimates. As a result, it is possible that at least some of these administration officials should have been coded Republican.

When the non-partisan and Republican sources are combined, they add up to 52 percent of the government sources, while Democratic sources were 46 percent (international elected officials represent the remaining 3 percent). If only a small percentage of the non-partisan sources are actually Republican, then the partisan bias would be eliminated.

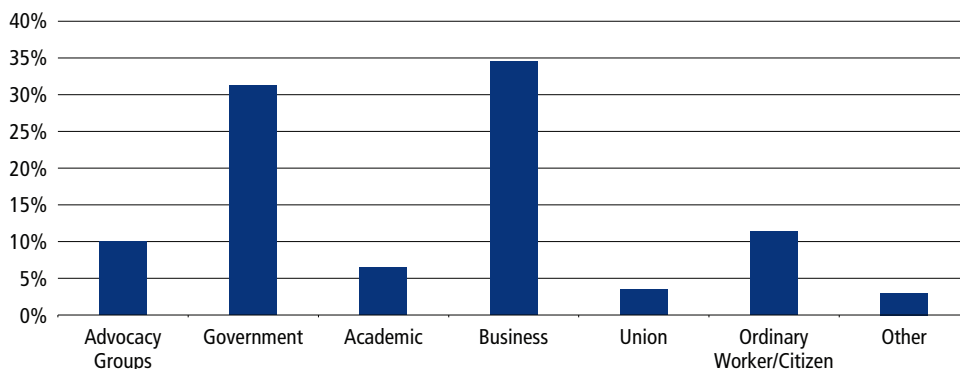
The report also finds that the advocacy groups sourced tended to have a liberal bias.<sup>17</sup> On a 0 to 100 scale with 0 being the most conservative, 50 being neutral, and 100 being the most liberal, the average ideological score of the think tank and advocacy organizations sourced was 63, putting the average organization slightly to the left of center. To put this in perspective, a 63 on this scale is between former Republican congresswoman Connie Morella of Maryland and former Democratic Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina, two former members of Congress who were used to create the scale.

The mainstream media's choice of sourcing centrist but slightly more liberal advocacy organizations could be thought by some to compensate for the bias toward sourcing business organizations, but this logic is flawed in a number of respects. First, and most importantly, the appropri-

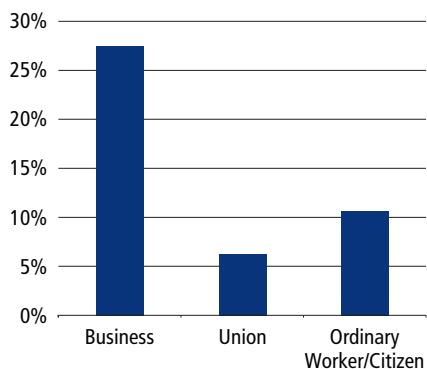
## Press Coverage of Economic Issues

### *Snapshots of the Results of CAP's Survey*

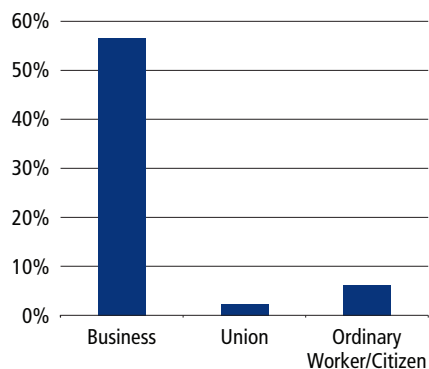
#### SOURCES IN OVERALL COVERAGE OF ECONOMIC ISSUES



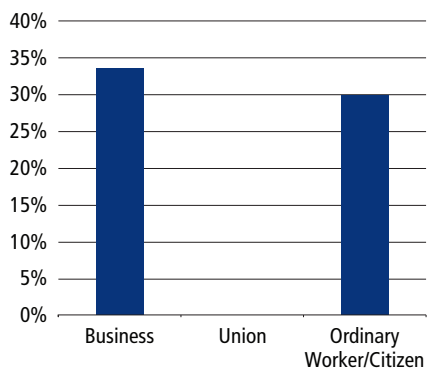
#### SOURCES IN COVERAGE OF MINIMUM WAGE



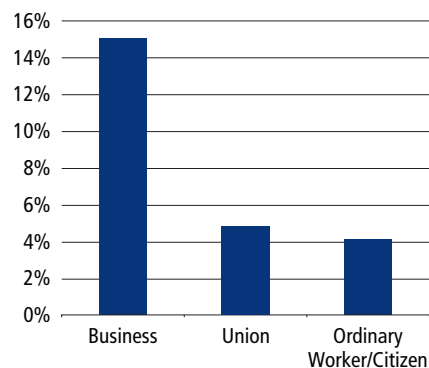
#### SOURCES IN COVERAGE OF EMPLOYMENT



#### SOURCES IN COVERAGE OF CREDIT CARD DEBT



#### SOURCES IN COVERAGE OF TRADE



### THE COMPLETE RESULTS OF CAP'S SURVEY

Reporters Turn to Businesses First, and Unions Last, When Sourcing Economic Articles

Story Category and Medium Counts (from 480 articles reviewed)	Advocacy Group Quote			Advocacy Group Cite			Advocacy Group Quotes & Cites			Government Quote			Government Cite			Government Quotes & Cites			Academic/Professional Quote			Academic/Professional Cite			Academic/Professional Quotes & Cites			Business Quote			Business Cite			Business Quotes & Cites			Union Quote			Union Cite			Union Quotes & Cites			Worker/Citizen Quote			Worker/Citizen Cite			Worker/Citizen Quotes & Cites			Other Quote			Other Cite			Other Quotes & Cites			Quotes Total			Cites Total			Overall Total																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																						
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ate counterpoint to the business perspective is the perspective from workers or their representatives. Advocacy groups, regardless of whether they have a liberal or conservative viewpoint, are not a perfect substitute for the perspective of workers. Workers should be allowed to speak in their own voice, or through their chosen representatives (unions) rather than have a surrogate chosen for them.

Second, even if somehow these advocacy groups were a surrogate for workers' voices, far more of them would need to be sourced to make up for the overwhelming business bias. If all of the advocacy group quotes are combined with the worker and union quotes, then they still fall far short of the number of business quotes. Business is still sourced 1.6 times more frequently than advocacy groups, ordinary workers, and unions combined.

## Examples of Media Coverage

Coverage of economic issues tends to fall into three categories. The first type appears to be fairly balanced because it presents some debate about the topic at hand, but the story is covered without any direct contact with workers' perspectives. The second type of story emphasizes the business perspective, because that is the focus of the story, with only casual or no mention of workers. The third type is more balanced coverage that provides the viewpoint of both workers and business.

An April 7, 2007 *New York Times* article presents a good example of the first type of coverage, which initially seems balanced because it presents divergent opinions from several sources, yet the perspective of workers is not heard—neither directly nor through a union official as a representative of workers. The April 7 article features economists representing business and economists from advocacy groups discussing whether the job market is strong. An industry economist argues “the job market is very, very healthy,” while an economist from an advocacy organization suggest employment may be harder to find because “the data are not reflecting real employment trends.”

The article is tied to the release of Department of Labor employment figures, and thus is grounded in empirical evidence, and, as an individual article, may not need the voice of a worker. However, the type of coverage it represents is repeated again and again, with workers noticeably absent from the discussion. The article would have a different feel if it had a worker or union member saying whether they think the job market is good or not.

The second type of coverage is simply focused on the issue from the business perspective, though it may give some slight mention of the perspective of workers or unions. An example of this type is a June 26, 2007 *Wall Street Journal* article that discusses a report by the nation's largest financial services companies. The 1,200 word article follows the argument of these companies about the need to “defuse protectionist sentiment in the U.S. and promote free-trade agreements,” and quotes extensively from the report's authors, including the CEO of Wachovia Corp.

The article does note that one of report's recommendations is “likely to meet stiff resistance from organized labor.” But the focus of the article is the report and the concerns of these businesses with promoting free trade. Because the article is tied to the release of a business report, it does not necessarily need to give equal weight to the perspective of workers, though it could have perhaps allowed a union to present their opposition to the policy proposal.

Yet when similar articles comprise the bulk of stories, the perspective of business is given disproportionate weight. Very few articles focus on an issue from the perspective of a worker without giving significant weight to the perspective of business.

A few of the articles reviewed could serve as models of balance, and represent a third type of coverage. For example, a January 10, 2007 *Washington Post* article discusses a U.S. House of Representatives vote on whether to raise the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 from the perspective of several workers earning near minimum wage and their small business employers. Workers and business owners are quoted extensively, offering nuanced opinions about increasing the minimum wage.

In the article, a worker is quoted describing the difficulties of living on near-minimum wage: “It’s just so hard for people. I mean, it’s hard.” The worker also describes how he felt about his recent raise to \$7.25, “Inside I was doing the cha-cha-cha ... It was like going from lower class to lower middle class.” Another worker feels torn about increasing the minimum wage, and is quoted saying: “I have mixed feelings. I know that people can’t afford to live on \$5.15 an hour. But on the business side, small businesses can’t afford to pay it.”

One business owner thinks it might be fair to increase the minimum wage, but worries that he will have to cut workers’ hours. If wages go up, the business owner in the story wonders, “hours will have to come down, and the question will become: Whose?” Another small business owner says if the minimum wage were increased that “I’m going to have to raise my prices.” Another business owner

notes that the increase could cost him profits, stating, “And why would I want to make less money?”

In short, the article is fair and balanced because it allows both workers and business to present their perspectives on the issue.

A March 25, 2007 *New York Times* article about a Supreme Court case to decide whether homecare aides should qualify for federal minimum wage and overtime protections is also a model of good coverage. Both homecare workers and homecare businesses are quoted.

“I loved my work, but the money was not good at all,” one homecare worker is quoted saying. In response, the homecare business worries that defeat in court could increase costs so much that the company would be put out of business, stating: “This would be horrendous for the entire industry because the reimbursement rate we get won’t cover that type of money.”

This kind of coverage is the norm for stories about credit cards. A typical story is CNN’s March 7 coverage of a congressional hearing about credit card fees. Members of Congress, both Democrat and Republican, are quoted providing an overview of the subject and the reporter cites a recent study of the issue by the Government Accountability Office.

An ordinary citizen is then quoted as saying he wouldn’t have charged his wedding on credit cards if he knew what he knew now, stating of his debt: “It just really seemed like there was no end in sight.” A representative of the banks that create credit cards then responds, noting that: “I think it’s important for them

to understand that this is a loan. It's an unsecured loan to millions of people every day, only based on the promise." The story also quotes an advocacy organization calling for change.

Unfortunately, such balanced coverage of the economy is relatively rare. The kind of balance displayed in these articles leads to better stories because all important perspectives are heard from and because it makes clear how ordinary people are impacted.

Some might argue that providing the perspective of ordinary people may make sense for credit card stories, but isn't relevant for other types of economic stories. But, the worker issues reviewed in this study—minimum wage, employment,

and trade—were chosen specifically because they impact ordinary people.

Of these issues, trade could be considered to have the least direct impact on workers. But even on this issue, polls consistently show that the public is very concerned about how trade affects their lives.<sup>18</sup> The public cares deeply about the issue, and is divided about the costs and benefits of trade.

In addition, articles without balanced sourcing lack the dimensions that would give them appeal to a wider audience, and are perhaps a reason for the declining audiences of most mainstream media outlets. Without the perspective of an ordinary worker, media outlets give their audience far less to relate to.

## Why Bias Matters

**B**iased coverage matters for three primary reasons: our belief in democratic debate demands informed citizens and requires that different points of view are allowed to be heard; journalistic standards of objectivity call for balanced coverage; and, perhaps most importantly, media coverage influences people's opinions and behavior.

### Democratic Debate

The mainstream media, and journalists in particular, can be a bulwark in the democratic structure, providing citizens and elected officials with much of the information they need to make decisions, and exposing them to the full range of debate about an issue. Journalists, however, have failed to achieve this goal in their coverage of economic issues. Media coverage doesn't do a good job making the link between an economic issue and its impact on workers, and consistently fails to provide the worker perspective on economic issues.

When the media limits the range of debate about an issue, our capacity for democratic debate is weakened. In order for democracy to properly function, citizens need to be exposed to a wide range of ideas and points of view, and understand the impact of different policies so that they can make informed decisions.<sup>19</sup> While citizens can potentially learn about differing sides of a debate through other channels, such as their personal experience, most citizens are exposed to public policy issues through the news media.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, the media helps bring the views of regular people to policymakers who are already somewhat distanced from the public, and who often depend on media coverage to provide them with access to the views of the public. If the media fails to provide the perspective of regular people, then policymakers fail to gain an accurate perception of the public's views. As a result, biased coverage of issues prevents democracy from functioning as well as it should.

### Journalistic Standards

The professional standards of journalism call for fairness and balance in stories, equal treatment for ideas and points of view.<sup>21</sup> Some scholars even argue that the most important goal of journalism should be to provide a diverse range of perspectives.<sup>22</sup>

While achieving perfect balance or fairness in any story is nearly impossible, the discrepancy between the goal and reality is far too wide to be ignored. The disparity between how economic issues are actually covered and how they are supposed to be covered threatens to undermine the noble goals that journalists have set for themselves.

## Behavioral Effects

Mainstream media bias matters for more than just ideals about democracy and journalism. It also has tangible effects on how people think and act. Studies consistently show that the media has the ability to help determine which issues people think are important, and prime people to help decide which particular piece of an issue is important.<sup>23</sup> According to Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, who are generally viewed as the leading political scientists studying media influence, the mainstream media “set the terms by which political judgments are reached and political choices made.”<sup>24</sup>

The media can also help shape people’s opinion about an issue. Studies have

shown that when a news story is tilted to support a particular policy, public support increases for the policy.<sup>25</sup> Even if people are skeptical about the way an issue is presented to them, over time, they tend to remember and accept the information as true.<sup>26</sup> In short, so long as an issue is presented in a plausible manner, people are more likely to think about an issue in the same way as it is covered in the media than to challenge or reject that point of view.

Media coverage can even influence how people vote. Studies have found that as Fox News expanded into new towns, these areas were increasingly likely to vote for Republican candidates.<sup>27</sup> People who were randomly chosen to receive subscriptions to the *Washington Post* instead of the *Washington Times* were more likely to vote for Democratic candidates.<sup>28</sup> Another study showed that viewers of ABC News were influenced to vote for Ronald Reagan over Walter Mondale because Peter Jennings used more positive facial cues when talking about the president than he did when talking about the challenger.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, media bias isn’t just an academic concern but one with real political implications.



## Why Bias Occurs

This study was not designed to fully examine the sources of media bias, though it is able to shed some light on the subject. Researchers have argued that biased coverage occurs for a number of different reasons. The influence of owners and advertisers, the failure of advocacy groups such as unions to effectively communicate with the media, and the personal and political biases of reporters and editors are common targets.<sup>30</sup>

But the most common explanation for the kind of bias described in this report is that journalists have a preference for elite sources, such as government or business representatives, over ordinary citizens.<sup>31</sup> “Most research on news and public affairs information bias,” an academic study argues, “centers on the use of selected elite sources.”<sup>32</sup>

Although many journalists may believe that “the job of the newspaper,” as turn-of-the-last-century syndicated columnist Finley Peter Dunne wrote more than 100 years ago, “is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” studies note that elite sources tend to move in many of the same social circles as reporters. The two alleged antagonists share similar backgrounds and experience. Business elites understand reporters’ needs and constraints, and perhaps most importantly are easy to identify and access for reporters on a tight deadline. And they can deliver what reporters seek. In short, it is just easier for a reporter to talk to a professional, such as a business spokesperson, than to find a good quote from a worker or ordinary citizen.

Yet, there are several reasons to be skeptical of this explanation. First, unions could serve as an elite source that provides the perspective of workers, yet labor unions are rarely sourced. Second, and most importantly, coverage of one type of economic issue defies this preference for elite sources. Stories about credit card debt are typically covered from the perspective of the consumer, with ordinary citizens sourced as frequently as businesses.

This indicates that reporters can overcome a tendency toward elite sources. It also suggests that the sources of bias are likely to go beyond just a preference for elite sources. But whatever the source of the bias, it is clear that reporters need to talk more frequently to workers and unions to get their perspective.

This is especially true because there are a number of factors that make it difficult for reporters to get the perspective of most workers without actively seeking them out. As economic historian William Greider documents in *Who Will Tell The People*, reporting

used to be more of a working-class profession, giving reporters more of a natural affinity for regular workers, and more frequent contact, too. Today, however, it has become more of an elite profession.

Shoe-leather reporting has declined, in part because of staff reductions at many media outlets. Polling suggests that journalists who cover national politics and/or economic policy for major outlets tend

have more conservative and pro-business views on economic issues than the general public.<sup>33</sup> Finally, many papers have eliminated a dedicated labor beat, meaning that there are fewer reporters who focus specifically on organized labor and workers.<sup>34</sup> When combined, these factors are likely to limit reporters' and editors' exposure to the perspectives of ordinary workers, and make it all the more important that they actively seek it out.

## Conclusion

This study finds that mainstream media coverage of economic issues does not do a good job of providing the perspective of workers, and generally over-represents the perspective of business.<sup>35</sup> This means the media often fails to uphold its standards of fairness and balance, and that members of the public do not receive all of the information they need to be good citizens. Such biased coverage potentially affects the public's views and behaviors in significant ways, including helping determine how people think and vote.

While the report highlights a significant failing, it also provides room for optimism. The report indicates that coverage of economic issues, such as credit card debt, that are viewed through the perspective of the consumer, tend to balance the views of business with the views of ordinary citizens. On these issues, the media demonstrates that it can find out how complex economic issues will impact ordinary people and present the news from their perspective.

As a result, the study suggests that media is capable of providing much more balanced coverage of economic issues than it currently provides. If the media covered the economy the way it covered credit cards, then the perspective and views of workers and their unions would be given the same weight as those of business, and the public would have a much better idea how policies of major importance impact ordinary people.

Balanced coverage of the economy will require action from both the news media and concerned citizens. Members of the media should educate themselves about how they typically cover the economy and think through ways of doing a better job of providing the worker perspective in their coverage. Editors and journalists should institutionalize the need to at least consider the worker perspective in the same way they have with the need to consider both sides of a story.

Concerned citizens should remind the media that coverage isn't balanced and pressure them to change. While additional steps are needed to ensure that the media will actually do a better job incorporating the perspective of workers into its coverage of the economy, this study shows that it can be done.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Iyengar and Kinder (1987); Gentzkow and J. Shapiro (2006); Page, R. Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987); DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007); Mullen et al. (1986).
- 2 The Project for Excellence in Journalism. 2008.
- 3 Exact programs searched described in methodology on page 4 and in endnote 10.
- 4 On the debate about liberal or conservative bias, see for example: Groseclose and Milyo (2004); Alterman (2003); Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder (2007); Howard (2002).
- 5 See for example, Witt (1999); Croteau (1998); Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder (2007); Sutter (2001); Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987); Sahr (1993).
- 6 Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum (1999); Howard (2002); Gans (1979); Weaver and Willhoit (1991) Hess (1989); Graber (2002); Manning (2001); Cottle (2003); Atton and Wickenden (2005).
- 7 On the rarity of objective studies see Lott Jr. and Hassett (2004).
- 8 “Minimum wage,” “credit card debt,” “employment and jobs,” and “free trade” were searched in the headline and lead paragraph for print sources. “Minimum wage,” “credit card debt,” “employment” and “free trade” were searched in the headline and lead paragraph for television sources. Searches used Factiva for television sources and Nexis for print sources (except the *Wall Street Journal*, which was searched in Factiva). Letters to the editor, editorials and op-eds were not coded.
- 9 For a more complete discussion of easy and hard tests, see George and Bennett, 2005.
- 10 The TV shows searched were the following: CBS News: 48 Hours Or CBS News: 60 Minutes Or CBS News: 60 Minutes II Or CBS News: Evening News Or CBS News: Evening News - Saturday Or CBS News: Evening News - Sunday Or CBS News: Face the Nation Or CBS News: Morning News Or CBS News Special Report Or CBS News: Sunday Morning Or CBS News: The Early Show Or CBS News: The Osgood File Or CBS News: The Saturday Early Show; ABC News: 20/20 Or ABC News: Good Morning America Or ABC News: Good Morning America - Sunday Or ABC News: News Brief Or ABC News: Nightline Or ABC News Now: ABCDVD Or ABC News Now: Ahead of the Curve Or ABC News Now: All Together Now Or ABC News Now: Breaking News Or ABC News Now: Couch Potatoes Or ABC News Now: Daily Download Or ABC News Now: Eat and Greet Or ABC News Now: Good News, Really! Or ABC News Now: Guilt or Innocence Or ABC News Now: Healthy Life Or ABC News Now: How To Or ABC News Now: In the Mix Or ABC News Now: Influential Or ABC News Now: Inside the Newsroom Or ABC News Now: Inside Washington Or ABC News Now: Live Event Or ABC News Now: Money Matters Or ABC News Now: Perspectives Or ABC News Now: Politics Live Or ABC News Now: Popcorn with Joel Siegel Or ABC News Now: Seen and Be Heard Or ABC News Now: Special Report Or ABC News Now: Stealing Scenes Or ABC News Now: Stylin’ Or ABC News Now: Time Tunnel Or ABC News Now: Top Priority Or ABC News Now: What’s the Buzz Or ABC News Now: World News Now Or ABC News Now: World Piece Or ABC News Now: World View Exclusiva Or ABC News Now: Worldview Or ABC News: Primetime Thursday Or ABC News: Special Program Or ABC News: Special Report Or ABC News: This Week Or ABC News: World News Now Or ABC News: World News Saturday Or ABC News: World News Sunday Or ABC News: World News This Morning Or ABC News: World News with Charles Gibson; NBC News: Dateline NBC Or NBC News: Meet the Press Or NBC News: Nightly News Or NBC News: Saturday Today Or NBC News: Special Report Or NBC News: Sunday Today Or NBC News: The Chris Matthews Show Or NBC News: Today; CNN & Time Or CNN: Ahead of the Curve Or CNN: American Morning Or CNN: Anderson Cooper 360° Or CNN: Both Sides Or CNN: Breaking News Or CNN: Burden of Proof Or CNN: Capital Gang Or CNN CLOSING BELL Or CNN: CNN Newsroom Or CNN: CNN Tonight Or CNN: Crossfire Or CNN: Diplomatic License Or CNN: Dolan’s Unscripted Or CNN: Early Edition Or CNN: Earth Matters Or CNN: Evans Novak Hunt & Shields Or CNN First Evening News Or CNN: First Evening News Or CNN: Greenfield At Large Or CNN He Said / She Said Or CNN Headline News: Glenn Beck Or CNN Headline News: Nancy Grace Or CNN Headline News: Showbiz Tonight Or CNN: House Call with Dr. Sanjay Gupta Or CNN: Inside Politics Or CNN: Larry King Live Or CNN: Larry King Weekend Or CNN: LATE EDITION W/WOLF BLITZER Or CNN: Live at Daybreak Or CNN: Live From... Or CNN Live Saturday Or CNN: Live Today Or CNN: Lou Dobbs Or CNN: Lou Dobbs This Week Or CNN: Lou Dobbs Tonight Or CNN Morning News Or CNN: Movers with Jan Hopkins Or CNN: News from CNN Or CNN: News Site Or CNN: Newsday Or CNN: Newsnight With Aaron Brown Or CNN: Newsstand Or CNN: NEXT@CNN Or CNN: On the Story Or CNN: Open House Or CNN: Page One Or CNN: Paula Zahn Now Or CNN People in the News Or CNN: Pinnacle Or CNN Presents Or CNN: Reliable Sources Or CNN SATURDAY NIGHT Or CNN: Saturday Morning Or CNN: Showbiz Today Or CNN: Showbiz Weekend Or CNN: Special Investigations Unit Or CNN: Special/Live Event Or CNN Student News Or CNN Sunday Or CNN: Sunday Morning Or CNN SUNDAY NIGHT Or CNN: Take Five Or CNN: TalkBack Live Or CNN: The Point. Or CNN: The Situation Room Or CNN: The Spin Room Or CNN: The Turnaround with Ali Velsh Or CNN: The World Today Or CNN: This Week at War Or CNN: Today Or CNN: Travel Now Or CNN: Wolf Blitzer Reports Or CNN: World Report Or CNN: World View Or CNN: WorldBeat Or CNN: Your Health Or CNN: Your Money Or CNN: Your World Today; Fox News: Beltway Boys Or Fox News: Big Story Weekend with Rita Cosby Or Fox News: Crier Report Or Fox News: Drudge Report Or Fox News: Fox Files Or Fox News: Fox News Sunday Or Fox News: Fox News Watch Saturdays Or Fox News: Hannity & Colmes Or Fox News: Hannity’s America Or Fox News: Live Event Or Fox News: O’Reilly Factor Or Fox News: On the Record w/ Greta Or Fox News: Special Report with Brit Hume Or Fox News: The Big Story Or Fox News: The Journal Editorial Report Or Fox News: Your World w/ Neil Cavuto; CNBC: Business Center Or CNBC: Capital Report Or CNBC/Dow Jones Business Video Or CNBC: Early Today Or CNBC: Hardball with Chris Matthews Or CNBC: Kudlow & Company Or CNBC: Louis Rukeyser’s Wall Street Or CNBC: Rivera Live! Or CNBC: Special Report With Maria Bartiromo Or CNBC: Squawk Box Or CNBC: The News on CNBC Or CNBC: Tim Russert.

- 11 The Project for Excellence in Journalism. 2008.
- 12 See for example, Groseclose and Milyo (2004); Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum (1999); Simon, Fico, and Lacy (1989); Atton and Wickenden (2005).
- 13 Note that while ordinary citizens are both workers and consumers, coverage overwhelmingly showed ordinary citizens as workers in stories about the minimum wage, trade, and employment, and considered ordinary citizens as consumers about credit card debt.
- 14 Groseclose and Milyo (2004).
- 15 While unions may not always perfectly represent the views of workers, this analysis considers a source as representing the worker perspective whether it is from an ordinary workers or a union representatives—assuming that because workers have a democratic voice in unions, union spokespeople represent the views of ordinary workers. This method could over-count the number of sources from the worker perspective.
- 16 Television coverage is not broken out in detail for several reasons. First, there were far fewer television stories than print, so the small sample size limits the reliability of the comparisons, though comparisons support the findings of this report. Second, the television search capability is not as refined as for print. Under each term, searches did not yield results for several of the television outlets. Third, the headline and lead paragraph of television stories are not exactly comparable to headlines and lead paragraph of print stories.
- 17 It should be noted that three quarters of advocacy groups sources found in this study were not ranked by Groseclose and Milyo and were thus not included in this ideological analysis. On initial review, it does not appear that these non-included groups have significantly different ideologies than those included.
- 18 Teixeira (2007).
- 19 Sartori (1987); Alford and Friedland (1985).
- 20 Lippmann (1922).
- 21 Sigal (1973); Gans (1980).
- 22 Porto (2007).
- 23 Gentzkow and J. Shapiro (2006); Iyengar and Kinder (1987).
- 24 Iyengar and Kinder (1987).
- 25 Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987).
- 26 Hovland and Weiss (1951–1952).
- 27 DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007).
- 28 Gerber, Karlan, and Bergan (2007).
- 29 Mullen et al. (1986).
- 30 Witt (1999), Croteau (1998); Larcinese, Puglisi, and Snyder (2007); Sutter (2001); Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987); Sahr (1993).
- 31 Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum (1999); Howard (2002); Gans (1979); Weaver and Willhoit (1991) Hess (1989); Graber (2002); Manning (2001); Cottle (2003); Atton and Wickenden (2005).
- 32 Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum (1999).
- 33 Croteau (1998). The survey also revealed that journalists tend to be more socially liberal than the public.
- 34 Evidence from this report suggests that labor beat reporters provide more balanced coverage. Note also, that this comment makes no judgment about the decision of papers to transition away from a labor beat—the declining power of labor unions may make such a transition entirely reasonable.
- 35 Danielian and Page (1994); Hoynes (1999); Howard (2002).

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Dr. David Madland is the Director of the American Worker Project at American Progress. He has written academic articles and books as well as op-eds and commentaries on a range of economic issues, including retirement, economic insecurity, health care, campaign finance, taxes, and public opinion. He has a Ph.D. in government from Georgetown University and received his B.S. from the University of California at Berkeley. Madland's dissertation was about the political reaction to the decline of the defined benefit retirement system.

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