Real World Graduation: Question 39
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Question 39

Media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are important sources of news and information to the voters. Because the success of a democratic republic requires voters to be well-informed, it is important for the media to report on issues in a truthful manner. The First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law … abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…". This means that the government is bound in principle, and the officers of the government are bound by oath, to recognize the pre-existing right of the media to be immune to governmental interference; that is, the media themselves are free to develop their own standards for accuracy in their reporting. Because there is no formal system or standardization imposed by the government, what standard have the media imposed on themselves? This question does not apply to the internet.

a) Media outlets are prohibited from reporting facts, even in news stories.

b) Media outlets are prohibited from expressing any opinions or biases by reporters, management, or editors. The only opinions that are allowed are those of readers in "Letters to the Editor" or by viewer emails in the case of radio and television.

c) When reporting "news", the media reports only the facts. The media outlet may be biased in their opinions, but those opinions are reserved solely to portions of articles or broadcast segments clearly labeled as "Opinion" or "Editorial".

d) Opinions of reporters and editors reflecting their personal biases are allowed within news stories, but are segregated in their own section, and clearly labeled as "opinion".

e) Although the exact practice varies from state to state, and from market to market, nearly every media outlet has adopted either c) or d) as an informal standard.

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Answer to Question 39

This is a trick question. All of the answers provided are incorrect. Answer (a) is obviously incorrect: if the local TV station reports that a celebrity wore a green dress to an awards ceremony, or that a hurricane swept through the Bahamas, you can be reasonably certain that those events actually occurred because there are so many ways to independently verify that it occurred. Answers (b), (c), and (d) are all incorrect. It is true that Editorials and "Opinion columns" appear in broadcasts and newspapers, but those are not the only places that opinions occur.

Every media outlet is "biased" to some extent. Contrary to popular myths, media bias does not generally consist of reporting falsehoods as if they were true. The nature of media bias consists instead of cleverly mixing opinion with facts in such a way that you, the reader or listener, get an impression that is contrary to the facts. The media then is able to exert its biased influence, without being open to accusation of lying directly. It does not claim that an opinion is necessarily factual. The bias of the media is most efficiently propagated and concealed by using the following formula:
a. Finds an opinion held by respected experts that support the media's bias, and reports the FACT that a respected person holds that OPINION. It is easy to find any desired opinion among the wide variety of "expert" commentators.
b. Supplement the opinion by a definition that is true, but not relevant, so long as this fact can be used to infer the validity of the opinion held by the quoted expert.
c. Cite some of the facts as they really are, but add an additional commentary that reinforces the bias.

Here are two examples of bias. Suppose one media outlet favors the tax policies of the current administration and desires to show that the tax policy is keeping the economy out of recession. The other opposes the tax policy, and desires to demonstrate that those policies are driving the economy into recession. The facts are as follows, as of November of the current year:
a. A recession is defined by two consecutive quarters (3-month periods) in which the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declines.
b. The economic data for the last three quarters shows:
    1) Jun - Sep: GDP decreased 0.3%
    2) Mar - Jun: GDP increased by 0.6%
    3) Jan - Mar: GDP increased by 1.2%
c. Therefore, the economy is not currently in recession, but will be if the current quarter (Oct - Dec) also shows negative GDP growth.

The media that favors the current policies will report the news as follows (both of these are fictional):

Economy Holding Stable
(Cleveland Pony Express, Nov 13, 20XX)

> The recent talk of recession appears to be premature, according to economic figures released today by the U. S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. Some economists had predicted a very steep decline in gross domestic product (GDP), but were surprised by figures showing only a modest 0.3% decline in growth rate. Economics professor James P. Silverlining commented, "In my opinion, this small 0.3% decline demonstrates the resilience of the economy in these otherwise competitive times. I was expecting much worse.". The growth in GDP in the previous two quarters were positive (at 0.6% and 1.2% respectively). This one quarter of negative growth may well be a temporary lull in an otherwise healthy economic outlook. An economy is technically in recession when there are two consecutive quarters of negative growth in the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is reasonably clear that the economic policies of the current administration have helped the econ-

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> omy avoid what could otherwise be a much bigger problem. We expect those same policies to contribute in the coming months to overcoming this minor glitch in the GDP.

Let us parse this passage. The first sentence is patently false, since the figures themselves say nothing about whether "talk of recession is premature" or not. They are simply economic figures. The second and third sentences are true but irrelevant, since they pertain to opinions held by those who happen to agree with the reporter at the Cleveland Pony Express. The fourth sentence is true, but note that the growth figures are given out of order, to imply that the rate of growth was increasing in the two quarters prior to the most recent quarter. The fifth sentence is speculation; it may be true, it may not, and the current figures neither support nor contradict it. The sixth sentence is a true definition of a recession. The seventh and eighth sentences are opinion and optimism.

The media that opposes the current policies will report it as follows.

Economy Nearing Recession
(Phoenix Courier, Nov 13, 20XX)

> With unemployment up and hard-working families struggling, economic figures released today confirm what most people already believe: that the economy is heading into recession. "It has been my opinion for some months now that an overall economic slowdown is in progress, and we should expect to be in recession sooner or later", says noted economics professor Dr. Hiram Firam. He also noted that there were widespread expectations that figures to be released later this month will show an increase in the unemployment rate. The outlook continues to decline, as numbers released today by the U. S. Bureau of Economic Analysis indicate that the nation's GDP decreased by 0.3% last quarter, a decline of 0.9% from the growth reported in the previous quarter. An economy is technically in recession when there are two consecutive quarters of negative growth in the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It appears that the most recent quarter may be a transition between a normal economy and one in recession. These most recent figures show that the already gloomy economic trend is accelerating due to the policies enacted by this present administration. Look for more of the same in the months ahead.

Let us parse this example. The first sentence is patently false, since the figures simply are what they are. The figures do not "confirm" that the economy is heading into a recession, regardless of what people may believe about it. The second and third sentences are a factual report of an opinion held by someone who agrees with the reporter at the Phoenix Courier; the fact that this opinion was held is true but not relevant. Note also that the professor is speculating about another future report, not the one that is the topic of this article. The fourth sentence is true, but note that the author calls out "a decline of 0.9% from the previous quarter", conveniently omitting the fact that the previous quarter's growth was +0.6%. The fifth sentence is a true definition of a recession. The sixth sentence is speculation; it may be true, it may not; and the figures released today neither support it nor contradict it. The seventh and eighth sentences are opinion and pessimism.

Note that neither of the reports simply gives all the facts. Both provide opinions that are actually held by people who agree with the media outlet. Both give some of the relevant facts at hand, but are phrased in such a way as to bolster their preconceived notion. You might call this "practical creative writing".

In reality, bias exists in nearly every media outlet regardless of party preference. It is not so much a case of directly false statements; although these were easier to peddle in the past, the advent of the internet means that most blatantly false statements can be uncovered rapidly. Most of what we call bias is actually a result of false conclusions based either on unstated assumptions or a pre-conceived notion of what

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facts are relevant and which are not. In other words, very few media outlets are willing to spend the resources required to uncover all the facts or to present all of them. The picking and choosing of what is relevant constitutes the bias. It is difficult for a regular person get a suitably full picture to make up an informed opinion. For example, in debates about the merits of tax cuts, some will claim that tax cuts always benefit only the wealthy, and tend to increase federal budget deficits; and use the 1980's era tax policy under President Reagan as the benchmark. Others will claim that a tax cut always causes the economy to expand and the federal government gains revenue as a result, and point to the 1980s tax policy under Reagan as a benchmark. Here is a case where neither side is willing to present at least a summary of all the relevant the facts:

a) The high marginal tax rates of the 1970's (up to 70%) caused a great deal of capital to be held by its owners or placed in bonds rather than invested, since the net proceeds from investing in capital production after taxes was less than could be obtained from guaranteed bond returns. In other words, there was idle capital available, but not the incentive to risk it.

b) President Reagan convinced the Congress to lower marginal rates, the most excessive of which were (logically) placed on the highest incomes; Congress also reduced the number of tax brackets and somewhat simplified the tax code. The benefit of a reduction in marginal rates is of most value to those who were formerly paying the highest marginal rates. Therefore, the wealthiest taxpayers received the greatest reduction of tax burden, although everyone obtained some tax cuts.

c) The tax cuts had three major results:

1) Wealthy people with capital to invest did so, since investing was now economically viable;
2) This additional investment created opportunity for people to start businesses, and hiring rose, increasing employment;
3) Poor and middle class people, with some relief, either spent or saved the additional money, which either caused consumer demand to increase or capital for investment to increase; both of which tend to expand the economy;
4) Overall tax revenue to the federal government increased dramatically.

d) With the expansion of the economy, employment increased, sometimes with higher wages, and the Federal Reserve saw fit to reduce interest rates. The result was general economic prosperity at all levels of the economy.

e) Congress, having made a political deal with a President of the opposite party, also radically increased the rate of federal spending; in fact the federal spending increased twice as fast as the revenue increase.

f) Although the federal government received more revenue, it spent even more than it had before.

g) Consequently, the federal budget deficits and the national debt increased dramatically.

h) Half of the spending increase was devoted to improving military readiness for national defense, and half was for social programs.

It is rare to find all these facts stated in one place at one time in any mainstream media report. Those with a preconceived notion that tax cuts are inherently bad in general emphasize fact g) while excluding the others. Those with a preconceived notion that tax cuts are inherently good emphasize b), c), and d) while excluding the others. Those who believe that expansion of government is inherently good but must be made affordable, emphasize f) and part of h) while trying to prove that a) is always irrelevant. Those who argue for more tax cuts emphasize c) and d) while pretending that a) is always relevant. In reality,

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the formula used by President Reagan (and earlier by President Kennedy) worked as applied to the conditions that prevailed from the early 1960's to the early 1980's; repeating this tax formula under different conditions will not necessarily lead to the same revenue results. At the same time, reversing the tax formula will not reverse the negative aspects of the spending formula. Instead of a careful analysis of what tax and spending policy should be for the conditions that prevail now, we usually get arguments over which facts from two or three generations ago are relevant because they appear to support a chosen political philosophy. This is what passes for journalism today, and we should not be surprised that the public is frustrated.

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