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WKU professor tackles alleged media bias in new book

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Rich Shumate
 Submitted

What drives the perception among many U.S. political conservatives that the news media largely skew left?

It's a thorny question that Rich Shumate, a professor in Western Kentucky University's School of Media, aims to unravel in his new book, "Barry Goldwater, Distrust in Media, and Conservative Identity: The Perception of Liberal Bias in the News," published by Lexington Books.

"I do think that we need to start from the point of trying to understand why this is," Shumate told the Daily News in a recent interview.



He hopes his new book will be a bridge to a more nuanced perspective on the question of media bias.

No doubt, it's a perennial question that's difficult to pin down. What counts as bias in the media in the first place? And how do you measure it in a solid, concrete way? Many researchers have tried, but their methods (and results) have diverged.

For example, a 2020 study published in the journal *Science Advances* found that although a dominant majority of journalists identify as liberals or Democrats, “little compelling evidence exists as to ... whether journalists’ political leanings bleed into the choice of which stories to cover that Americans ultimately consume.”

Despite that, the public’s perceptions of media bias are clearly real and widening in some measurable cases.

Following up on a major 2014 report on the issue, the Pew Research Center in 2020 assessed how trust in 20 media outlets included in the earlier report had changed.

“One of the biggest changes we saw was increased distrust among Republicans for 14 of the 20 news sources included in both studies, with particularly notable increases in distrust of CNN, The New York Times and The Washington Post – three frequent targets of criticism for President Donald Trump,” Pew Research Center senior writer and editor John Gramlich wrote.

“While there has been far less change on the Democratic side, two exceptions are The Sean Hannity Show and Breitbart News, which are now distrusted by a larger share of Democrats than in 2014,” Gramlich wrote in 2020.

Instead of diving headfirst into what the book’s blurb calls the “highly subjective quagmire of attempting to measure bias,” Shumate offers an explanation based on social identity and in-group, out-group dynamics.

In other words, a phenomenon driven by conservatives’ desire to foster and reinforce their identity as conservatives, thus leading them to “perceive content from elite news media outlets as biased when it did not validate the way they saw the world, deeming it hostile and, by extension, ‘liberal.’ ”

To get at this question, Shumate examined the origins of the perception among conservatives during the early 1960s, when they lined up behind then-Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater when he sought the Republican party nomination for president.

In the 1964 general election, when Goldwater lost in a landslide to Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, conservatives “ultimately came away from the experience bitter with the belief that the news media had stacked the deck against their candidate of choice,” the book’s blurb said.

Shumate, a former journalist who wrote and edited at CNN for 10 years, said the question of media bias has staying power that has allowed it to reverberate into more contemporary times, citing the violent siege of the U.S. Capitol by protesters on Jan. 6, as one stark example.

“As we all saw after Jan. 6, conservatives refused to believe news media reports of a fair and fraud-free election, after being primed by nearly six decades of believing the media had a liberal bias,” Shumate said. “This research sheds light on why this perception persists, which is the key step in trying to cope with its effects.”

– *The book can be ordered through Lexington Books at rowman.com/Lexington.*

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