

UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC THESIS

JOURNALISM ETHICS

ASSIGNMENT: RESEARCH PAPER

TOPIC: BIAS IN THE MEDIA

Select one of the topics listed for study this semester. Write and research a paper on the issues arising from this topic in two countries. In your answer consider the difficulties journalists might face in adhering to particular ethics requirements pertaining to your chosen topic.

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Most code of ethics for journalists would have requirements of unbiased reporting and this is notwithstanding the codes of the United States (US) and Singapore (IJNET 2005a, 2005b). There are many ways bias can infiltrate journalism and these include perceived ideologies, financial conflict of interest, negligence, corporate and government influences, and self-censorship (Kirkman 1996:1-2; Warren 1999; MEAA 1994:239-249).

This paper will first define the meaning of bias in the media, before proceeding to look into issues leading to bias reporting in the US and Singapore. Examples will be provided to illustrate situations involving bias practices in journalism, and explain why the application of ethics in the real world is subjective. Difficulties facing journalists in adhering to ethics requirements will also briefly be discussed.

The term 'media bias' is defined by the Wikipedia encyclopedia as describing "a real or perceived bias of journalists and news producers within the mass media, in the selection of which events will be reported and how they are covered" (Wikipedia 2005). Bias, according to the *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies*, "generally belongs to the realm of perception," where accusation "tends to be predicated on the assumption" of "an opposite – objectivity; that there is an attainable ideal called impartiality" (Watson & Hill 2000:26-27). These definitions essentially mean media bias is a perception and assumption of what is fair and impartial, and what falls beneath journalistic objectivity. Media bias is therefore the exact opposite of conscientious effort in striving "to serve the

public with thoroughness and honesty” in “seeking truth and providing a comprehensive account of events and issues” (IJNET 2005b).

Bias in the media involves many types, and these include bias by commission, omission, story selection, placement, source selection, spin, labelling, policy endorsement and condemnation (Baker 2005). This paper will however only focus on two of the many types of media bias: bias by omission and bias by story selection.

Bias by omission, according to media coalition activist group *FairPress.org*, refers to the ignoring of facts “that tend to disprove liberal or left-wing claims, or that support conservative beliefs”. This means in essence, the omission of certain information in maintaining the neutrality of a news story due to a deliberate act or negligence (Baker 2005; Sharkansky 2004; *The Email Activist* 2005). To write a story in a manner to side a particular view over another entails bias by omission. This is when facts opposing a particular desired view are ignored to exclude from a story so as to provide a *slant* view (Kramer 1990:16-21).

Bias by story selection, on the other hand, refers to “a pattern of highlighting news stories that coincide with the agenda of the Left while ignoring stories that coincide with the agenda of the Right” (Baker 2005). This means the deliberate act by a media outlet to choose a story of a study released by a particular group while ignoring another, such as the liberal

group or the ruling party instead of similar researched topic released by another group, such as a conservative group (Baker 2005).

An example of bias by omission due to negligence or slant view may be seen in the news coverage by Reuters in the US on an Israeli missile strike in Gaza last year (Sharkansky 2004). The story said, “An Israeli helicopter fired a missile into a Palestinian refugee camp in Gaza ... killing an elderly civilian man and wounding at least three people”. This account is accurate, except for its failure to mention the intent or reason why the attack took place. The same story covered by BBC mentioned, “The Israeli army said it had targeted a group of militants preparing to fire a rocket into the Jewish settlement.” This information omitted by Reuters can lead to a dissented view of the Israelites if wired to news media in other parts of the world.

Another example of bias by omission may be seen in the news coverage relating to casinos operating in Singapore. The local news media played down the negative effects of gambling to present a positive view of economic benefits that may be derived from the approval of the casino operation, justifying more than half of Singapore citizens are already gambling even without a casino anyway (AFP 2005a; MCYS 2005; Koh 2005:27; Majid 2005; Rahim 2005). This is notwithstanding reports by foreign news media that said many critics have slammed the government’s decision for the casino approval despite strong opposition (AFP 2004, 2005b).

In the case of bias by story selection, an example may be seen in the imposed restriction of media coverage on opposition views. According to US Department of State report on Human Rights 2004, Singapore uses statutory laws, such as the Films Act, to ban political films so as to put “opposition parties at a disadvantage” (BDHRL 2005). The result is far less coverage of opposition parties’ views, which suggest a government-influenced press and media (BDHRL 2005). In a statement by opposition party Singapore Democratic Party, the spokesperson said the local media has breached journalistic ethics in refusing to publish the opposition’s press releases and replies to the public (*Singapore Windows* 2005).

Another example of bias by story selection in the US may be seen in the media as highlighting news stories that coincide with pro-government views. In a case pertaining to North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme, what gets covered in the news was North Korea’s violation of a 1994 agreement. What is not covered is that North Korea had gone ahead with its weapons programme only because the US refused to honour its end of the same 1994 agreement that promises “regular shipments of heavy fuel oils along with newer and safer nuclear reactors” to North Korea (*The Email Activist* 2005). The US although had “pledged to provide formal assurances against the threat or use of nuclear weapons against North Korea”, did not fulfill its promise, but the press continues to condemn “the North Koreans for violating a treaty that the US violated first” (*The Email Activist* 2005).

The examples mentioned above illustrate how bias by omission and bias by story selection can occur. As seen in the four examples, journalists adhering to the Code of Ethics to maintain unbiased reporting are seldom possible. In the first example of Reuters' report on Israeli's attack on Palestinian refugee camp, a mistake due to omission can result in bias portrayal of the Israelite's intent and present a slant view to the world. In the case of casinos operating in Singapore, the media is "strongly influenced" by the government, which urged the news media to "support the goals of the elected leadership and help maintain social and religious harmony" (BDHRL 2005). This same influence explains why coverage of views by opposition parties is also controlled, and not unlike Singapore, the US also practices similar expectation of the journalists in the example of the North Korea nuclear issue.

In practice, ethical codes that expect journalists to "be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable" and "defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and dissemination of news" are seldom enforced or practical in the real world (IJN 2005a, 2005b). The code of ethics is essentially just a guideline where discretion is still necessary to decide between economic viability and neutrality of news, notwithstanding the type of media system being enforced, whether self-regulated or government-controlled (Kirkman 1996:2).

(1,225 words)

APPENDICES

Koh G (2005) 'Casino debate: Laying out all the cards', *The Straits Times*, 14 January 2005. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings: 27.

The Straits Times: Review, (page 27), Friday, January 14, 2005

Casino debate: Laying out all the cards

By Gillian Koh

THE Singapore Government has spelt out social safeguards and parameters within which a proposed casino here must operate, and will leave it to private operators to see if they can work them into their feasibility plans for an integrated resort.

The targeted group of investors seems to be the large casino resort operators based in the United States - the likes of Hurrah's Entertainment and Kerzner International.

As we understand it, the casino resort industry in the US is seeking opportunities for expansion in Asia, an under-developed yet promising market given the rising affluence in China and India.

Singapore is attractive because it is a jurisdiction where rules of corporate governance are strong and are enforced. The largest casino operators are those listed on Wall Street and based in Nevada, under the jurisdiction of the Nevada Gaming Control Board. They will not jeopardise their listing and licences in countries which cannot assure them that their stringent rules of governance will be upheld there.

The casino is integral to the business model of this targeted group of resort operators. It is a revenue and profit-generating centre that cross-subsidises and makes other non-gaming facilities and services feasible. The latter could include a large, world-class convention centre which will generate high-value traffic for the casino, and the hotel, food and beverage sectors of the resort.

But will it be able to generate growth for the entire economy - not just the resort? To succeed, it must attract visitor traffic greater than what the resort can absorb so as to minimise trade diversion or cannibalisation of existing enterprises. Casino proponents count on the spillover effect being a positive one.

But there are no guarantees. Operators will seek to recoup their investments. They might try to channel some of their clients in other locations to the new venture.

Given that the casino will be the key money spinner, we can count on the operators to market it aggressively. It will certainly not be some pokey little den or a low-key, subtle attraction in the resort.

The Government has announced that it will set an upper limit of 15,000 sq m for a casino, and up to 2,500 slot machines, which is more than what

some of the largest resorts in Las Vegas have. If the casino cross-subsidises the resort's non-gaming amenities and activities, it will pose a market distortion to similar businesses. If the project flounders, the operator could be tempted to undercut the market as it has the casino as a financial buffer.

It is likely that patronage of the casino will depend greatly on the local population. The measures to limit the physical size, the percentage of gambling revenue to total revenue (in force five years after the contract for development is awarded), and a government levy for entry imposed on Singaporeans and permanent residents indicate the sort of balance that the Government seeks to achieve in allowing for the development of an attractive tourism product which it knows poses some level of social risk.

However, the proposed safeguards are not without economic costs or constraints. Already, the Government will allow the casino to pay a preferential tax rate on gross gambling revenue of 15 per cent, significantly lower than the 40 per cent applied in Macau.

With increasing competition from potentially less regulated casinos, there is the danger of pressure to lower the tax rate to keep the resort viable. The Government must ensure that sufficiently high consumer protection standards would be non-negotiable.

What about the social impact of gambling?

The key problem is that there is no definitive set of figures and certainly no systematic study for Singapore to form a conclusive case.

Comparative studies in other countries indicate that the prevalence of problem and pathological (P&P) gambling, or gambling addiction, can range from one per cent to 8 per cent of the adult population, depending on the location and design of the study.

Two major US government research groups - the National Research Council and the National Opinion Research Centre - estimated in a 1999 report that there were 7.5 million P&P gamblers. Assuming a base of 217,766 million resident adults (over 18 years old) in the US, this would translate to a 3.44 per cent incidence level.

The National Productivity Commission of Australia estimated in 1999 that 5 per cent of Australian adults were P&P gamblers.

If we were to use a conservative estimate - that 1.5 per cent of the Singapore adult resident population (above 20 years) were P&P gamblers, this would translate to 38,319 people.

Now for the social cost. Taking the average of eight research studies in the US, each P&P gambler incurred US\$13,586 (S\$22,160) per annum in direct social cost in so far as these costs could be imputed. These would

be the combined impact from productivity loss, bankruptcy, crime, suicide, illness, abuse, divorce and separation, social service and treatment costs.

Even if we made a very conservative estimate of \$5,000 per annum for treatment cost alone for each P&P gambler in Singapore, this would translate to an annual bill of \$192 million. If we took the US figure as an indication of the total cost instead, that would give us an estimate of \$860 million.

We are cautioned not to stop there. It is well established that the social impact of gambling is not confined to the problem gambler. Each would most certainly affect eight to 15 significant others - be they spouses, children, extended family or close friends. Taking a conservative estimate of eight, the circle of misery widens to an extra 290,400 people.

Another factor to consider is the marginal impact of expanded opportunities to gamble. Among the findings of the American report mentioned above is that the presence of a gambling facility within 80km doubles the prevalence of P&P gamblers.

If we translate that finding to Singapore, we could be looking at an increase from 38,300 to 76,000 P&P gamblers, with an additional 580,800 people affected.

The bill for treatment costs alone would double to \$384 million, with total costs reaching an estimated \$1.7 billion.

Some might feel that the marginal increase would be lower than in the US study, because a casino in Singapore could simply divert some of those Singaporean gamblers now going to Batam or Genting Highlands.

Also, it is difficult to believe that the absolute number of people with severe psychological disorders and social problems would be so high. Then again, it is possible that the current set of pathological gamblers, when faced with greater gambling opportunities, might affect more than just eight people.

Social service practitioners have been quick to admit that they are woefully under-resourced to deal even with current levels of gambling addiction and the attendant social issues. There are no more than 15 qualified professionals and one agency, Community Addictions Management Programme (CAMP) based at the Institute of Mental Health. The related issue is determining how the costs for treatment and other social services will be borne.

One positive outcome of the recent debate is that the Government is now committing itself to addressing existing problems from gambling addiction, and this after it conducts a much needed thorough review of the problem's size and scope.

At a recent forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on the casino proposal, views were split down the middle. Participants, who were opinion leaders in key stakeholder groups, were divided between not having such a resort, and having it but with all the critical social safeguards.

There were those who felt that Singapore would be able to introduce and enforce all the right social safeguards and rules of corporate governance to arrive at a uniquely Singapore model. There were others who held a deep conviction that the presence of a casino on Singapore soil would open the road to social implosion. Many who spoke up wanted Singapore to pursue more 'innovative' ideas to boost tourism.

If the resort were built, however, 83.3 per cent of the participants in the poll were at least prepared to tolerate the presence of a casino. The remaining 16.7 per cent indicated that they would actively campaign against it. Some would argue there was a clear majority in the room that day who would be 'mature' enough to allow for the freedom of choice and responsibility.

Singaporeans have been assured that if the risks prove too high, the Government is prepared to shelve the idea.

The casino debate is one instance where the Government is counting on the public to give its views. Will we achieve some kind of 'democratic consensus', or will an overwhelming number say 'no' to the casino? How will the Government tot up the responses?

We look forward to continued open and holistic engagement with the Government on the justification for the project, so that Singaporeans might all arrive at an informed and mature decision that will serve our people well in the long run.

The writer is a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), where she leads research on governance issues.

Majid H A (2005) 'Singapore's future looks good with integrated resorts decision: SM Goh', *Channel News Asia*, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com>, 30 April 2005.

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**Title** : Singapore's future looks good with integrated resorts decision: SM Goh**By** : Hasnita A. Majid, Channel NewsAsia**Date** : 30 Apr 2005 2057 hrs (GMT + 8hrs)

SINGAPORE : Going ahead with the integrated resort projects was a brave decision by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, said Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

And because of this decision, he said Singapore's future looked good.

Mr Goh was speaking at the NTUC May Day dinner on Friday.

The event saw union leaders and workers paying tribute to Mr Goh, honouring him with a picture book of himself, including those from the early days of his political career.

And in his usual style, Mr Goh said the pleasure was all his - serving Singaporeans for almost 14 years.

He said although he made many decisions as Prime Minister, one of his best was when to step down.

Mr Goh said Singapore was in very capable hands under Mr Lee and his team who have shown their capabilities in a few short months.

Mr Goh said: "For instance, the **casino** debate. First to decide or moving ahead with the **casino** as part of the larger integrated resort requires courage. It requires political courage because it's not a cost-free decision. The economic costs are clear, but so too are the social costs.

"There got to be a balance and in the end, the PM was bold enough to make national calculations and to go forward.

"And also he and his team members exhibited skills in putting across the case for an Integrated Resort and a **casino**, and in successfully persuading many Singaporeans to back the decision."

Mr Goh said because of this decision, the road ahead for Singapore was a good one, and he was happy he stepped down at the right time.

He also thanked the unionists for working with him during the economic downturn.....and helping Singaporeans understand what they needed to do to survive.

Mr Goh said: "These were difficult and painful decisions which will not have been taken and executed without mishap unless the union leaders understood the larger purpose of the cut." - CNA/de

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Rahim A F (2005) 'Singaporeans can keep basic values amidst changes: MM Lee', *Channel News Asia*, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com>, 29 April 2005.

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**Title : S'poreans can keep basic values amidst changes: MM Lee****By : Farah Abdul Rahim, Channel NewsAsia****Date : 29 Apr 2005 2131 hrs (GMT + 8hrs)**

SINGAPORE: Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has expressed his optimism that Singaporeans and their value systems will stand the test of change, and that includes having integrated resorts with **casinos** built at their doorstep.

He was speaking at the World Economic Forum's Asia Roundtable in Singapore.

"Where it's a shift in the economic system, the traditions, cultures would have to change. But where I believe we would be able to retain basic essentials are the Confucianist system of relations, what I call human relationships.

"We are moving into uncharted waters, and I am hoping somehow in Singapore that we retain some basic relationships which we don't abandon lightly despite technology and changing economic structures."

Mr Lee also gave an upbeat assessment of the geo-political situation in the region, saying that he expects peace and stability over the next few years.

But one worry is China-Japan ties which have reached a low after the recent textbook spat.

Mr Lee called on both countries to put the past to rest.

He said: "Both sides should get together and say, 'let's get the facts, a third party - the Europeans or others not involved - to say what actually happened. Let's settle it and close this account.

"We can't go on like this. Every other year, there'll be a textbook correction and the Japanese would say it's a private textbook, some schools use it some don't.

"This is not a closed issue. This is troublesome and I fear in two years' time if there's a revision of Japanese textbooks again, this will flare up."

Mr Lee also took questions on terrorism and North Korea.

The special conversation with Mr Lee served as a fitting end to the two-day World Economic Forum's Asia Roundtable, which brought together more than 250 business and government leaders from all over the world.

The next Asia Roundtable will be held in Japan next year. - CNA/ir

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The Email Activist (2005) 'Media Bias', *The Email Activist*,
<http://www.theemailactivist.org/MediaBias.htm> (Accessed 7 October 2005).

Media Bias

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“Karl Marx held that history is shaped by control of the means of production. In our times history is shaped by control of the means of communication.”

- Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Half the news, all the time.

Although conservative pundits rail against the “liberal media,” it’s clear that quite the reverse is true. And while we at The Email Activist do not believe that everyone in the media industry is a Republican, we *have* noticed that those who own this nation’s newspapers and TV networks are all in the same tax bracket and have virtually the same interests. While the leading maxim at any newspaper or news station is “If it bleeds, it leads,” the second leading maxim is “Don’t embarrass the politicians who control how we run the business, and don’t offend advertisers who pay us to deliver an audience.” As a result, the major news outlets give us “news” that supports conservative causes far more often than they give us news that supports progressive causes.



The problem, of course, is a lack of diversity in the media industry. Back in 1996, the federal government deregulated the industry, asserting that government meddling was stifling competition among news and entertainment outlets. When the big federal referee stepped out of the game, however, the giants of the industry immediately swallowed up the smaller companies. In an orgy of mergers, several dozen fairly large corporations became just six gargantuan conglomerates. Instead of competition we had a massive consolidation, and a new age of media monopoly was born.

If you’re interested in who owns whom, check out this [chart](#) of the current media industry. As you’ll see, every major news network is now owned by a giant parent company that’s not nearly as interested in providing accurate news coverage as it is in selling its many products to viewers and selling air time to advertisers. That’s the reason you’re seeing more entertainers on the news these days hawking their latest movies and CDs, in addition to more “consumer tips” segments that help you decide what to get your relatives for the holidays.



To give you an idea of how one-sided corporate news coverage has become, consider how the following stories, recently in the headlines, were covered in the mainstream press.

Story 1: North Korea’s Nukes

What gets covered: North Korea violated a 1994 agreement with the U.S. by developing a nuclear weapons program.

What gets neglected: North Korea went ahead with its weapons program because the U.S. refused to honor its end of that same 1994 agreement. You see, in exchange for North Korea’s giving up its nuclear program, the U.S. promised to send North Korea regular shipments of heavy fuel oils along with newer and safer nuclear reactors. The U.S. also pledged to provide formal assurances against the threat or use of nuclear weapons against North Korea. Now our press is damning the North Koreans for violating a treaty that the United States violated first.

Story 2: Lott’s Big Blunder

What gets covered: While celebrating the 100th birthday of Strom Thurmond, Senate majority leader Trent Lott made a comment suggesting that America would be better off today had it elected Thurmond president back in 1948 and adhered to its tradition of racial segregation.

What gets neglected: It took *six* days for the corporate media to begin reporting the story. Most major news outlets *still* have not provided the necessary background information by reporting on Lott’s segregationist voting record and his similarly racist utterances in the past. Try to imagine what would

have happened if a Democrat had uttered a similar comment. He or she would have been excoriated and eviscerated on the spot. Even now, the story angle that the major news outlets are covering is whether or not Lott should step down as majority leader. No one is asking him to explain what he meant by his statement nor what he believes regarding racial segregation today. (Read more about Lott's bigoted history [here](#).)

Story 3: Bush Blasts Lott

What gets covered: President Bush blasted Lott publicly for his segregationist comment.

What gets neglected: In 1994, when Bush was governor of Texas, he told a PBS producer that Yale "went downhill since they admitted women." While not a racist remark, this blatantly sexist comment clearly deserves much wider attention than it has so far received.

Story 4: Civilian War Casualties

What gets covered: Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

What gets neglected: Somewhere between 3,000 and 3,500 innocent civilians were killed by our effort to drive the Taliban out of Afghanistan. That's almost exactly the same number of innocent civilians as were killed in the World Trade Center attacks. Think about that. Think about the effect it has on Americans that they are not being shown pictures of the dead, the maimed, the orphaned. Americans do not know—do not *want* to know—what horrors are being committed in their name. Such amnesia made our invasion of Iraq virtually a foregone conclusion. Most Americans are under the impression that our military forces are so precise, so surgical, so humane that they can dig out an enemy "cleanly" without causing significant "collateral damage." That illusion—brought to you by the Pentagon and the corporate media—made it much easier for Americans to swallow the President's assertion that war would be a reasonable solution to the problem posed by Iraq.



At this very moment, the Federal Communications Commission is making plans to roll back media industry regulations even further. Needless to say, this will lead to even more consolidation of the industry and even greater domination by conservative business leaders who will slant the news and use the airwaves to deliver audiences to advertisers. FCC Chairman Michael Powell (Colin Powell's son) has given every indication that he would like to eliminate *all* industry regulations eventually. When asked to explain his understanding of the public interest, Chairman Powell once replied that he had "no idea" what it meant.

Here's what you can do to help.

First, direct everyone you know to this web page.

Second, learn more about the problem at our [News Blackout](#) page, our [Digital Larceny](#) page, and also check out our [Reading List](#) to find some excellent books on media issues.

Third, please support media watchdogs like [Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting](#) and other organizations that promote media diversification, such as the [Media Access Project](#) and [Reclaim the Media](#).

Fourth, file a comment with the FCC. The Center for Digital Democracy has a [form](#) that simplifies the process.

Fifth, send a short note to your representative in the House and to both of your U.S. Senators saying that you want the rules that limit media consolidation to be preserved and strengthened, not weakened. That's all you have to say. Really.

Thanks for your support of democracy through a diversified media industry.

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"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

- George Orwell

"It is possible to fool all the people all the time—when government and press cooperate."

- George Seldes

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