

Contextualizing and Reframing News for a Balanced Worldview

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Abstract

The portrayal of news in international journalism significantly shapes public perception of global events, cultural nuances, and societal roles. However, current media trends often favour unfavourable stories from emerging regions, frequently depicting women through a narrow lens as "fragile" or "defenceless" victims. This study explores how such imbalanced framing, characterized by an emphasis on violence and instability, overshadows narratives of resilience and empowerment, particularly in developing nations. Beyond gender and regional bias, the paper examines the influence of media framing across various sectors, including politics, health, and travel. It highlights how social media platforms serve as critical tools for youth political engagement and travel decision-making, while also noting how traditional health reporting can fail to be inclusive, as seen in the gender-skewed framing of family planning in Uganda. To combat these systemic biases, the research emphasizes the need for active contextualization and reframing. Key recommendations include diversifying news sources to provide a "marketplace of ideas", implementing inclusive storytelling to challenge stereotypes, and providing regular cultural sensitivity training for media professionals. Ultimately, the paper argues that by prioritizing source diversity and inclusive reporting, the media can better fulfil its role as an accurate reflection of the global society's multifaceted narratives.

Keywords: International Journalism; Media Framing; Gender Representation; Source Diversity; Inclusive Storytelling; Social Media; Public Perception; Developing Regions.

The way news is showcased can deeply shape how the public views different matters in society. How we perceive events, cultural nuances, and the bigger global picture can largely be traced back to how the media paints them. Thus, the trend of emphasizing unfavorable stories, especially those focusing on certain groups from emerging regions, is worth considering.

There's an evident bias when women are mostly depicted as 'victims' (Geertsema, 2009). Such portrayals not only perpetuate negative stereotypes but also present an imbalanced reality. By majorly highlighting women from developing regions as victims, numerous accounts of their resilience, leadership, and empowerment are overshadowed. This is further exacerbated by the underreporting of the everyday lives of women in international news (Bullock & Cubert, 2002), which further alienates them, amplifies gender disparities, disempowers them and deprives the public of a complete understanding of women's multifaceted roles and societal contributions. Also, Moeller (1999) and Hojer (2004) observe with concern the media-depiction of "better victims", highlighting those viewed as fragile, defenseless, and untainted. Often, women fall under this description, and their portrayal can unintentionally strip them of empowerment and representation, solidifying the notion of their fragility.

News coverage often emphasizes themes of violence, instability, and death, skewing perceptions of the developing world as inherently tumultuous. Such portrayals can overshadow the many positive strides and stories emerging from these regions. The framing of these stories, especially concerning violence towards women, children, and the elderly, plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. Notably, domestic violence is frequently underrepresented, leading to misconceptions about its prevalence and systemic nature. Media often depicts it as an individual or family issue, reinforcing male dominance and overshadowing the broader societal implications. However, when seen within a wider social framework, the portrayal tends to be more accurate and empathetic towards the victims.

In politics, social media has been proven to play a significant role in shaping political efficacy mostly among youth who are highly involved in social media activities given that it provides a platform for learning about political issues and participating in political discussions, which can battle political apathy. (Tareen & Adnan, 2021). Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli & Müller (2022) in a study exploring the role of social media in shaping political agendas in Switzerland, particularly with regard to the interrelationships between the traditional media agenda,

and social media agenda of politicians, underscored the potential role of media in shaping political agendas.

In health, media framing has the power to influence and shape public perception and policy-makers' views. For instance, the framing of the uptake and use of family planning by the media in Uganda has typically focused on women, neglecting the role of men in family planning as users of some of the family planning options like vasectomy, condoms inter alia. This is self-defeating to a nation like Uganda which is struggling to harness the demographic dividend with its 40-million plus-majorly-youth population.

In the travel industry, social media has become a key reference point to inform travel decisions of tourists. Sites like facebook offer public review and rating platforms of previous user experience. As such, the way these reviews are framed, unexposed to gatekeeping, are a yardstick in informing uptake of services or products like accommodation and excursions through good reviews, references, experience sharing and popularizing new tourist attractions through user-generated content (Wibowo et al., 2020).

However, to combat biases perpetuated by the media, there is a need to actively contextualize and reframe its content. This entails diversification of news sources, key in combating ideological segregation and bias, which is crucial for providing a marketplace of ideas and ensuring a broad range of perspectives are represented. News sources play a critical role in defining and directing the form of a news story, and limiting those viewpoints constrains the information available to policymakers and citizens. Greater source diversity increases public access to a variety of perspectives and allows underrepresented voices to be heard (Watts & Maddison, 2014).

Furthermore, inclusive storytelling has the power to fight the prevailing stereotypes and prejudices by offering a genuine portrayal of varied life experiences. Studies indicate the power of story framing in molding opinions and sentiments about contentious topics (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997)). As opposed to victimizing women as powerless and helpless, emphasizing stories of growth and empowerment, comprehensive narratives can negate adverse stereotypes, question established societal benchmarks, accentuate comprehensive narratives and foster compassion, insight, and inclusivity.

Regularly training media professionals on cultural sensitivity, bias recognition, and inclusive reporting is essential in equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to produce well-rounded coverage that is free from bias, and inclusive. Through this, media professionals can navigate the complexities of diverse societies, while upholding journalistic integrity, and contribute to a more informed and inclusive public discourse. (Tuchman, 1980; Tatarnikova et al., 2022; Lau et al., 2016; Ortiz, 2007).

More so media regulatory authorities and media houses should design guidelines that underscore the need for source diversity and diction that depicts the broadness of issues or phenomena in a bid to foster a deeper, more multifaceted comprehension of societal matters. This in turn will harness the media agenda setting role by informing public perception in a broader and more inclusive manner.

Evidently, the media is a lens through which the world is viewed by society which is key in informing perceptions, decisions, and attitudes. A distortion of this lens narrows our view and hinders our collective ability to engage in informed, nuanced discussions. A shift towards inclusive storytelling, promoting source diversity, and educating media professionals can combat prevailing biases, creating a platform that truly mirrors the intricate tapestry of global society. By prioritizing these measures, we can pave the way for a more informed, empathetic, and inclusive discourse, ensuring that media serves its role as a true reflection of society's multifaceted narratives.

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