

Bias and perceptions (W.Post opinion editorial piece)

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A Column Feeds Perceptions of Bias

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Thursday seemed like Valentine's Day to some Post readers, who felt a Style section piece on President Obama's news conference Wednesday was little more than a mash note.

The president answered reporters' questions "earnestly, disarmingly, enchantingly," wrote The Post's Tom Shales.

He described Obama as "a truly flabbergasting president. And in a good way -- not the way some of his predecessors were."

To "disbelievers" who accuse Obama of wanting to expand the size of government, Shales said "many are just the predictable strident voices of the kind of partisan pedantry that Obama has said he abhors."

Some of those "predictable strident voices" contacted the ombudsman in a rage, citing Shales's piece as evidence that The Post is in the tank for the president. Others echoed those sentiments in comments on washingtonpost.com.

"The sycophantic, syrupy praise Shales has spewed out is enough to put me in a diabetic coma," wrote [ynot4tony2](#).

"Your fawning is shameful," said [yourekiddingright](#).

Shales, a Post veteran who now writes for the newspaper on contract, has won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism. But Thursday's piece did not identify him as a critic, an analyst or a columnist (although he was labeled that way online). To some readers, he appeared to be a reporter writing a straight news story.

The reaction, coming as Obama marked his 100th day in office, serves as a reminder that a large swath of The Post's readership sees pro-Obama bias. Each month I receive hundreds of e-mails and calls insisting that the paper is reflexively partial to the president.

Critics gained ammunition last week when a study concluded that Obama "has enjoyed substantially more positive media coverage than either Bill Clinton or George W. Bush during their first months in the White House."

Conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, the survey was based on a sampling of stories on network television newscasts and in national publications, including The Post.

The study found that "positive stories about Obama have outweighed negative by two-to-one" -- 42 percent to 20 percent -- while 38 percent were neutral or mixed. At

my request, Pew broke out data for The Post. Project director Tom Rosenstiel said they show "The Post's coverage, while mostly positive, is slightly more negative than the media overall."

Most reporters and editors see themselves as impartial truth-seekers. But many readers who oppose Obama see them as hopelessly influenced by ingrained anti-Republican, anti-conservative ideology.

Post reader Dean Dykema of Laurel, who frequently complains about coverage, said he sees a "bias by omission" in failing to report "anything that might make Obama look bad."

Increasingly, readers complain about what isn't in The Post. They see a story elsewhere -- often another publication or Web site that mirrors their ideology -- and cite it as an example of The Post suppressing news.

James T. Hamilton, director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy at Duke University, said it's a growing trend. A "proliferation of media choices" has "accentuated the perception" of bias, he said.

So far this year, among readers who gave reasons for ending their Post subscriptions, only about 1 percent cited biased reporting. But many who still take the paper complain that "liberal bias" makes The Post less believable.

Which brings us back to Shales. He has written frequently -- and flatteringly -- about Obama's television appearances. But he also wrote glowingly of President Ronald Reagan's command of the cameras.

As a TV critic, it's his job to offer a viewpoint.

"I never talk about policies," Shales told me. "I talk about how Obama comes across on TV. I like him based on what I see on television."

The Style section, where he appears, is edgy and filled with criticism. "I believe that readers of The Washington Post Style section are familiar with what they are getting day in and day out," said Steve Reiss, its editor.

But judging from the steady flow of complaints after each Shales review, a surprising number don't see a distinction from the news pages.

Identifying his work as a "review" may seem minor. But it would remove any confusion. Reiss acknowledged it's a "fair question" whether Shales should be labeled.

"Clear labeling is always a good idea in journalism," said Rosenstiel. He said editors often don't label on the "assumption that readers already know the rules of the road in the paper."

But, he said, "research shows that inferences journalists make about what readers understand, or don't understand, are often wrong."

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Remedying the Bias Perception

BYLINE: Deborah Howell

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Thousands of conservatives and even some moderates have complained during my more than three-year term that The Post is too liberal; many have stopped subscribing, including more than 900 in the past four weeks.

It pains me to see lost subscribers and revenue, especially when newspapers are shrinking. Conservative complaints can be wrong: The mainstream media were not to blame for John McCain's loss; Barack Obama's more effective campaign and the financial crisis were.

But some of the conservatives' complaints about a liberal tilt are valid. Journalism naturally draws liberals; we like to change the world. I'll bet that most Post journalists voted for Obama. I did. There are centrists at The Post as well. But the conservatives I know here feel so outnumbered that they don't even want to be quoted by name in a memo.

Journalists bristle at the thought of their coverage being viewed as unfair or unbalanced; they believe that their decisions are journalistically reasonable and that their politics do not affect how they cover and display stories.

Tom Rosenstiel, a former political reporter who directs the Project for Excellence in Journalism, said, "The perception of liberal bias is a problem by itself for the news media. It's not okay to dismiss it. Conservatives who think the press is deliberately trying to help Democrats are wrong. But conservatives are right that journalism has too many liberals and not enough conservatives. It's inconceivable that that is irrelevant."

Here are recent news decisions that brought conservative complaints; readers can judge for themselves:

• The Post put on Page 1 two long stories about "Troopergate" -- the allegation that Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin fired her state's public safety commissioner because he wouldn't dismiss her ex- brother-in-law from his state trooper's job. One of the Page 1 stories was eight paragraphs long, under a one-column headline on an inside page.

• The Oct. 10 Metro section front featured a story and photo about Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) as a "giant-slayer" who had "won plaudits" for his work as head of the House Democrats' national campaign committee. The story only briefly mentioned his

Republican opponent, Steven J. Hudson. A campaign story on both ran inside the paper.

• A Post Magazine spread on Oct. 5 about Michelle Obama, with a cover picture of the Obamas, was timed to the release of a book by Magazine writer Liza Mundy. There was no cover for John and Cindy McCain.

• Robin Givhan's Oct. 23 column exploring the disconnect between Palin's fancy duds and her hockey mom image ran on the Style section front just above an upbeat story about Jill Biden, the wife of Vice President-elect Joseph Biden. Conservatives thought that the placement's message was "Bad Palin, Good Biden."

Combine these with the drumbeat of polling stories saying Obama and the Democrats were likely to win, a few Tom Toles cartoons and TV critic Tom Shales's debate reviews -- both are liberals who are paid to offer opinions -- and conservatives decided that The Post was cheerleading -- especially since they felt the paper hadn't sufficiently scrutinized Obama. The opinion pages have strong conservative voices; the editorial board includes centrists and conservatives; and there were editorials critical of Obama. Yet opinion was still weighted toward Obama. It's not hard to see why conservatives feel disrespected.

Are there ways to tackle this? More conservatives in newsrooms and rigorous editing would be two. The first is not easy: Editors hire not on the basis of beliefs but on talent in reporting, photography and editing, and hiring is at a standstill because of the economy. But newspapers have hired more minorities and women, so it can be done.

Rosenstiel said, "There should be more intellectual diversity among journalists. More conservatives in newsrooms will bring about better journalism. We need to be more vigilant and conscious in looking for bias. Our aims are pure, but our execution sometimes is not. Staff members should feel in their bones that unfairness will never be tolerated."

Bob Steele, ethics scholar at the Poynter Institute, which trains journalists, thinks editors should be doing "ongoing content evaluation of candidates and issues to provide scrutiny on photos, stories, placement of stories and what are the weaknesses and strengths of the candidates." He also recommends "prosecutorial editing" as one way to "minimize the ideological bias and beliefs that all journalists have. It would greatly reduce the news content being skewed by beliefs."

The Post and other news media can work harder on eliminating even the perception of bias while never giving up the willingness to follow stories that will inevitably tick off some readers.

One more factor will kick in soon. After Obama is inaugurated, he will be the authority the news media challenge. It happens in every administration.

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