

Student Handout 3: Comparing Ideological Slant in the News

Background: In the “Age of Broadcast News,” the sources for political information were primarily the nightly news and newspapers, both of which were committed to telling both sides of the story and in most cases (except in the newspapers editorials or the news program’s “commentary” section) were committed to telling both sides of the story. People were presented with information and perspectives they may not agree with but these were usually accompanied with those that they did agree with. Today’s sources for political information through cable news and the Internet let citizens choose the ideological slant of nearly all information they receive. These sources often provide both sides of the issue, through their own commentary and guests, but a quick listen to the phrasing of news stories and tone of voice or a quick perusal of their website headlines provides a clear indication of their ideological perspective. What does this mean for democracy?

Directions: In this activity, you will review three newscasts on the Arizona immigration law passed in April, 2010. Each newscast represents a journalistic style distinct from the others. These are only single representations from each of these sources and shouldn’t be considered a comprehensive examination of every story presented by these news networks. However, for the purposes of this activity, viewing these examples provides good opportunities for discussion of the news Americans are consuming, digesting, and making decisions on for the political future of the country.

Video Clips

- PBS NewsHour background story (4/23/2010) and guest commentators on the Arizona immigration law http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/law/jan-june10/immigration_04-23.html
- *Fox News*’ Sean Hannity hosts a debate (4/28/2010) on the Arizona immigration law <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xC65jShJYXs>
- *MSNBC*’s Keith Olbermann discusses the Arizona immigration law with Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhmG1_oD-nE

Discussion Questions

- What similarities and differences do you see in how each newscast sets up the featured debate/discussion? Do any of the set ups indicate a potential bias or slant? If so, which ones and how?
- What similarities and differences do you see in how the hosts facilitate the discussion? What impression does this facilitation style give you as to the bias of the facilitator?
- Explain whether the hosts have other agendas besides the topic of the segment? If so, describe these agendas.

- Do you feel any of the newscasts provided a complete picture of the Arizona immigration law? If so, which ones and how? Which newscast did you feel was the most compelling to watch? Why?
- How might these newscasts provide a feeling of validation for their intended audiences? Do you feel any of the newscasts create a polarization of political discourse? If so, which ones and how?
- If people received their political information from only one of these sources all the time, how might it affect their political positions on issues and how might it affect their participation in American democracy?

Assessment Assignment:

Individually, write a paragraph on your findings. Be sure to include your thoughts on the discussion questions. Address the statement, “Obtaining political information from only one ideological source results in Americans holding false and distorted views of reality.”