

# Bias and PR

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There is a cliché: “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but no one is entitled to his own facts.” The cliché is inaccurate. Opponents frequently assemble facts to contradict facts in “data wars.” These are often seen in the legislative arena. One side assembles evidence in support of proposed legislation. The opposing side assembles evidence showing why legislation is harmful. The two bodies of fact collide in hearing rooms and in dueling white papers. There are no meta-facts integrating the two sets. There may not even be agreement on what the problem is. One’s view of either set of facts is conditioned by one’s bias. The conundrum is that while the only possibility of certainty is facts, facts are often uncertain.

However, it makes little difference that bias obscures facts. PR still must communicate. As a result, the temptation to misuse or select facts is great in messages, and it takes courage and hard work for practitioners to strive for balanced views.

## Bias

There are numerous reasons for uncertainty in developing and communicating messages. There is an inability to collect facts because they don’t exist or are inaccessible, and there is bias in selecting facts. There are so many biases that what follows is a lengthy but partial list. It is given here to show how difficult it is to know what we know and how we know it. There is:

- **Ignorance:** One does not know either the facts or questions to ask.
- **Data quality bias:** The information found may not be good -- a charge often leveled at Wikipedia.
- **Biological bias:** Senses do not accurately record what they see, hear, taste, touch or smell. The brain plays tricks on the senses and vice versa. Along with this is **Recall bias**. One may not remember things they way they happened.
- **Researcher bias:** The person looking for information has an agenda that causes him or her to ignore some information. This includes **Ethnocentrism**, bias from the culture in which one has grown; **Class bias** based on socioeconomic status; **Political bias**, based on political leanings and **Religious bias** based on belief.

- **Narrative bias:** In writing, one selects facts to construct a narrative and in the process slants the story. This includes **Framing bias**, playing up one angle and downplaying another.
- **Peer pressure bias:** Following the crowd in observing and writing about events. This includes **Political Correctness bias**.
- **Nonrandom sampling bias:** By talking to a nonrandom sample of people, one gets a distorted view of what an audience is thinking. This includes **Noncoverage bias**, missing populations that are hard to reach.
- **Noncomparability bias:** Comparing elements that shouldn't be compared.
- **Geographic bias:** Two individuals witnessing the same event come away with different facts based on their positioning in relation to the event.
- **Contextual bias:** The context of an event or its impact upon an observer or on others in whom they have emotional interest affects fact gathering and analysis.
- **Language bias:** Information in another language is not found as easily as information in the speaker's native language.
- **Instrument bias.** A tool used for measurement is miscalibrated or too crude or using the wrong metric. Surveys ask the wrong questions or questions are framed incorrectly and yield incorrect answers.
- **Confounding bias:** Unintentional mixing of potential causes for events.
- **Retrieval bias.** Everyone looks in the same place for information and overlooks non-obvious places for information.
- **Estimation bias:** Partial facts require supposition or estimation of what total facts might be. Two individuals may reach widely different conclusions. For example, the exact impacts of global warming are unknown and estimates vary widely on what might happen 50 years from now.
- **Time and resource bias.** One doesn't have time or resources to do prolonged investigation. He or she relies on the credibility of "others." But, "others" might be biased.

## Bias and PR

Being pragmatic and under deadlines, many PR practitioners work with facts they are given or evidence acquired through hasty research. They assume facts are

correct, and they acquiesce to sources rather than questioning them. The issue of bias might arise but only if it is obvious someone is twisting a story or a reference source is clearly inaccurate. As a result, without realizing it, practitioners can jeopardize the accuracy of messages they send because they might have missed essential facts. When asked questions, they are often unprepared and “have to get back” to reporters because they don’t know the facts. When answering questions, they parrot messages that may be inadequate and fail to take into account evolving events or understandings different from theirs. They may ignore facts when they know them because they are promoting or defending clients. They lack flexibility in communications because they lack understanding. Rather than thoughtful individuals, they come off as biased “spinmeisters” bending facts to fit clients’ views rather than counselors helping clients adapt messages to a larger and more accurate understanding.

### Responsible practitioners

There are, however, responsible PR practitioners who understand the need to be accurate and to avoid bias in order to make the strongest case for clients. These practitioners work constantly to learn their clients’ businesses and justifiably feel “put down” when lumped with practitioners who see themselves as “conveyor belts” of information or salespersons merchandising messages of the day. Responsible practitioners place a primacy on accuracy. They have four characteristics that help them spot bias and head off inaccurate or slanted messaging. They are:

- **Data omnivores:** They read widely and study constantly to understand businesses they represent, competitors and marketplaces in which they work. They use multiple sources and are better-prepared than average practitioners.
- **Cultivators of relationships with client sources:** They know who to call three, four and five levels down in an organization to get accurate information. Over time, they build internal networks of communication that help them find information quickly and spot inaccuracies.
- **Skeptical:** They ask hard questions before others do. They substitute for reporters and ascertain whether claims or events are accurately portrayed before making public statements. They know if they don’t believe it, the media won’t either.
- **Information resources to clients:** Because they scan the environment constantly, they find information of relevance to clients and communicate it to them quickly. This puts them in the position of counselors who help clients respond accurately to new information, reframe and deepen messages and head off potential embarrassments.

Practitioners with respect for accuracy categorize facts in three ways.

- **Common facts:** They identify and maintain facts for which there is supporting evidence and about which there is general agreement. They make these available to all. Such facts include financial data, bios, information about products, services and marketplaces, organizational facts, studies, presentations, speeches, etc.
- **Uncommon claims:** They identify claims with no basis in records or multiple sources. There may be no disagreement about these but no corroboration either. For example, company histories may have colorful stories about founders. Surviving records neither corroborate nor deny the stories, so they live on and can get into public reports. Responsible practitioners are careful to let the media know there is no validation of such facts and to use them with care.
- **Disputed claims:** They isolate claims about which there is no agreement and no forthcoming resolution. They are careful to inform the media and others that there is no verification of these claims, and they may not be facts at all. They are vigilant in following up with media who state disputed claims as facts in order to educate reporters and get corrections.

Practitioners with a dedication to accuracy set and maintain **editing standards** that hew to common facts and acknowledge difficulties with uncommon and disputed claims. They build messages on common facts and avoid uncommon and disputed claims. They **evaluate facts** constantly for accuracy, completeness and pertinence to messages. Frequently, practitioners will find discrepancies or determine that available facts prove less than what has been claimed, or that messages haven't been balanced by listening to a broader audience. They determine **what can be said accurately and without bias** and counsel clients accordingly. They help set the boundaries on messages sent to target audiences in order to maintain credibility for clients. They may advise clients that there is no compelling message to send and to hold off until one arises.

### Avoiding temptation

The temptation to put a positive spin on uncertain facts is ever-present. However, knowledgeable practitioners know this is a mistake – even in the political realm where it is done regularly. In the internet era, opponents or others doing their own digging can use their discoveries to embarrass and overwhelm a message. Knowledgeable practitioners are committed to transparency and communicating facts as they emerge. They know facts may not win a case, but facts can blunt counterarguments and make them more difficult to prove. They are as well brakes on clients who ignore facts to make points and who succumb to “spin.”

One doesn't have to work in PR for long before hearing stories about practitioners who have little regard for facts. Some feel they need to bend facts to protect clients from a worse fate. Others feel pressured to lie in order to save their jobs. There is a reason that some journalists believe all PR practitioners liars.

### **Contending with bias**

It is understandable, if not acceptable, that a PR practitioner may resort to bias, or even lying, when the practitioner has a weak sense of ethics, a strong desire to sell a point and is under client pressure. However, responsible practitioners know it is better to stay silent than to resort to communications that place an organization in a worse position. They understand that the verbal warfare used by Nick Naylor in *Thank you for Smoking* may win short-term arguments but inevitably loses the long-term war. The public and media grow weary and cynical about efforts to gloss the ugly, avoid response, attack the opposition or otherwise divert attention. Responsible practitioners accept facts as the price of entry in argument and persuasion. Facts are not ancillary because bias can be shown too easily.

Responsible PR practitioners know the client's point of view, but they are too wise to accept it until proven so. They are constantly searching for evidence that an organization's or individual's assumptions are at odds with the facts and perceptions of the world around them. Just because a CEO has said something as fact, responsible practitioners do not take it so. They check to make sure the CEO wasn't misinformed, self-deluded or making up facts that were directionally right but inaccurate. They know that quoting the CEO's inaccuracies not only jeopardizes the CEO but damages their own credibility. Knowledgeable practitioners understand that a key duty is to get details right, to reduce bias, to increase transparency and to protect clients. They understand that it takes courage to ask tough questions when everyone else is afraid to speak, but they do so anyway, and they learn the art of asking carefully to avoid too-aggressive questioning.

When the facts are on their side, responsible practitioners use them forcefully to fashion messages and make cases. They are players in data wars. When facts are against them, responsible practitioners seek to change views internally before a client is put in an untenable position. Practitioners are ever alert to bias but understand it is inevitable. They know truth and falsehood are murky, especially when dealing with intentions of others. They accept that there is no such thing as a clear view of the world – only one that is less blurred --, but they are dedicated to making it as transparent as possible.

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