

The Subjectivity of Objective News:
An Analysis of Bias in *The New York Times*' Education Coverage

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In 1994, *The New York Times* reported that 96 charter schools were open in the United States (Applebome 1994). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 4,400 of these schools were in operation by 2008 (NCES 2011). Despite this apparent explosion of charter school operations, there is little consensus among researchers as to whether these schools offer superior education to their more than 1 million students (Dillon & Schemo 2004; NCES 2011). Furthermore, the U.S. government samples only around 10 percent of charter and public schools for research purposes, which further complicates matters (Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). Thus, it is difficult for anyone to draw objective conclusions regarding the differences between education at charter and public schools.

Are the media accurately reporting on this matter? It is challenging for the public to make

sense of information regarding such a polarized topic. The complicated nature of the charter and public school debate make this issue a difficult one for journalists to report on.

Such is the context for this study. This paper seeks to add to the existing body of research pertaining to the media's impacts on perceptions of U.S. schools. Darleen V. Opfer has summarized this research, concluding that most studies indicate that media coverage of education-related issues has a negative impact on perceptions and support for public education (Opfer 2007, p. 166). However, a juxtaposition of charter school and public school coverage is noticeably absent from the current body of research. Thus, this paper seeks to evaluate how the media portray both types of institutions.

The following pages present a content analysis of 34 articles about charter and public schools published by *The New York Times*. These articles were selected based on relevance from a list developed by searching for entries with the words "charter," "public" and "schools" using the *LexisNexis* search engine. The earliest article was published Oct. 12, 1994 and the latest was published Feb. 7, 2011. The articles were examined in an effort to establish whether coverage of this issue was presented to readers in a fair and objective manner, reflecting the problems described in the opening paragraph of this paper.

In order to accomplish this, qualitative methods were employed. It is acknowledged that ambiguous concepts such as "fairness" and "objectivity" are difficult to define, as noted by W. Lance Bennett, and that this presents a significant obstacle to a study like this one (Bennett 2003, pp. 192-193). Thus, in the interest of accuracy this examination defines the concepts in the same way journalists do, using the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics. This code is voluntarily embraced by hundreds of journalists all over the country (SPJ 2011).

The analysis identifies when and how *The New York Times* strays from this code, and evaluates whether the resulting coverage reflects negatively on charter schools, public schools, both, or neither. All ethical guidelines set forth in the Code of Ethics were considered; however, only the most apparent and significant trends are presented in this paper.

Four such trends were uncovered in the research: the press's failure to adequately identify sources, failure to ensure headlines are clear and accurate, failure to ensure cultural values of writers are not imposed on readers, and failure to distinguish between analysis and news reporting. In relation to these guidelines, the analysis suggests that *The New York Times* has strayed to some degree from the goal of providing a "fair and comprehensive account of events and issues" involved with this public debate (SPJ 2011). However, the findings do not indicate that this results in noticeably positive or negative coverage for either category of institution.

Source Identification

"[Journalists should] identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability." – SPJ 2011

Several shortcomings were discovered regarding source identification. One of the most prominently involved writers merely summarized the beliefs of charter school "advocates" and "critics." This type of summarization was present in some form in 16 of the 34 articles analyzed. No support is given for these summarizations. The result is that it is unclear as to where the writers procured this information.

One of the most striking examples of this is evidenced in a 1999 article written by Linda Saslow. The article, titled "Charter schools: the road ahead," offers readers some explanation about why charter schools have been developing so rapidly (Saslow 1999). It also

includes descriptions of the latest legislation relevant to charter school development (Saslow 1999).

But Saslow also includes two entire paragraphs devoted to summarizations of “advocate” and “critic” beliefs, and she does not cite any sources. One sentence reads: “Supporters say charter schools will improve education through healthy competition” (Saslow 1999). How does she know that? Who are the “supporters” she is referencing? She provides no context, and thus the reader is left guessing.

Saslow does not stop there. The paragraph about advocates’ beliefs also details what supporters “envision” and “picture” (Saslow 1999). Her article reads: “[Supporters] envision schools in which creative teaching strategies will motivate even those students with special learning needs, in which children of diverse races and academic abilities will learn side by side” (Saslow 1999). Nowhere in the article does she attribute this information to anyone. In this paragraph, Saslow is articulating not only the beliefs but also the visions and dreams of individuals who support charter schools. It is impossible for her to be sure of what these people “envision” and “picture” (Saslow 1999). Thus, the reader might assume that Saslow is using her own imagination to paint a picture of what the outcome of more charter schools could be.

This paragraph certainly seems to be putting charter schools in a positive light, but Saslow fails to use proper citations to articulate the visions of charter school critics, too. In the next paragraph, Saslow writes: “[Critics] envision independent schools that will be impossible to control, that will foster racial, ethnic and religious separation and deal a crippling blow to the finances of the current public schools” (Saslow 1999). Again, this description is not attributed, leaving readers to assume that Saslow may be articulating her own ideas.

This analysis has demonstrated that Saslow's 1999 article presents unattributed beliefs of advocates and critics of charter schools. However, because Saslow uses unattributed information in support of both groups' viewpoints, the article does not seem to be written in favor of either group. This was not always the case in the articles sampled.

In three articles written by Diana Jean Schemo, she acknowledges unattributed beliefs of charter school advocates without doing the same for critics' beliefs. The most prominent example of this is in an article titled "Charter schools trail in results, U.S. data reveals" (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17). This article details the results of a new study that indicates that charter schools are doing poorly compared to public schools.

In one paragraph of this article, Schemo provides a sentence of unattributed information regarding critics of charter schools followed by attributed information about supporters' beliefs. The first sentence of the paragraph reads, "Detractors have historically accused charters of skimming the best students, those whose parents are most committed, from the poorest schools" (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17). The fact that Schemo does not attribute this information may mean readers will assume Schemo is weighing the potential downfall of the schools herself. Readers might get the impression that she does not have a source because there are not many detractors of charter schools. Otherwise, the reader could infer, she would be able to attribute that information.

Her treatment of the supporters' beliefs is much different. In the next sentence of the paragraph, Schemo writes: ". . . Supporters of charter schools said the data confirmed earlier research suggesting that charters take on children who were already performing below average" (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17). Schemo followed this with a quote from a president of an organization representing charter schools, validating where she obtained this information (Schemo 2004, Aug.

17). The fact that Schemo attributes her information to a specific charter school advocate strengthens her statement about the advocates.

Thus, in this article it seems that unattributed information helps to favor supporters of charter schools. Because she validates her claims regarding supporters and not those of critics, the reader is given the impression that critics' claims are unsubstantiated.

Schemo was not the only writer to include unattributed information regarding only advocates or only critics. Nine of the 16 articles that contained some unattributed information summarizing the beliefs of charter school critics and advocates provided this sort of information about only one side or the other. Seven different people wrote these articles.

It is also significant that of these articles, five of the nine provided unattributed information only to advocates of charter schools. Providing unattributed information may give one side of the debate an advantage if there is no unattributed information for the other side.

It is acknowledged that unattributed information could also be construed as a disadvantage for one side of the debate if the same type of unattributed information is not provided on the other side. As previously noted, it is possible that the reader will assume a source is not identified because one cannot be found. In this case, this sort of unattributed information is a disadvantage to the article. However, in the articles studied here, it would appear more likely that this sort of unattributed information is an advantage. Without being balanced by information from the other side of the debate, extra context is provided for one side at the expense of the other.

The most prominent example of this again comes from an article written by Schemo. An article titled "U.S. cutting back on details in data about charter schools" reveals that the U.S. government will limit the information it publishes regarding charter schools' effectiveness

(Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). The last sentence of the article reads: “Other advocates of charter schools say that those schools take in children who are below average academically to begin with, and that the national assessment offered only a snapshot of achievement at one point in time” (Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). Again, this is unattributed information, and thus the reader may assume Schemo is imagining what advocates might be thinking.

Nowhere in this article does Schemo include any summary of how critics might interpret national assessments of charter schools’ performance. The inclusion of this sentence, then, would seem to provide additional context for the reader to interpret findings through the lens of charter school advocates. Thus, her failure to attribute this information may lead readers to believe that advocates’ beliefs are more valid than critics’. As noted above, this situation happened on four other occasions.

The above analysis of cases in which writers summarized beliefs of “advocates” and “critics” thus reveals that in six cases information seems to favor the advocates of charter schools. One of these six articles, Schemo’s “Charter schools trail in results, U.S. data reveals” provides unattributed information regarding critics followed by attributed information about advocates’ beliefs. The remaining five articles that seem to favor advocates’ beliefs provide summarizations of their points without balancing this with critics’ beliefs.

In comparison, three of these 16 articles seem to favor critics’ analyses. In each of these three cases, writers summarized the points of critics and did not include any summarizations of advocates’ viewpoints. Thus, the overall trend seems to be that *The Times*’ summarization of advocates’ and critics’ beliefs in its coverage of charter and public schools presents information in favor of advocates’ beliefs. However, this bias does appear to be a minor one, and it is most prominent in the writing of Diana Jean Schemo.

Another prominent issue uncovered by this research is the fact that writers oftentimes come to conclusions without identifying what sources helped them do so. This was an issue in virtually every article studied. These statements have the potential to drastically influence how readers view this issue.

This problem is evidenced quite clearly in a 2011 article written by Fernanda Santos, titled “On West side, charter school faces hurdles” (Santos 2011). While discussing the trend toward more charter schools, Santos writes: “In Baltimore and Cleveland, for instance, officials are using charter schools to lure white families into the city, or keep them from leaving” (Santos 2011). How does she know?

In this sentence, Santos is putting forth information about the political motives of city officials in both Baltimore and Cleveland. Santos cannot possibly be certain that this is true. In the absence of further information, it would appear that Santos is simply making an educated guess as to what the motives of officials in these cities might be. If Santos has called the city officials and asked them about it, the names of the individuals she talked to should be in print. Otherwise, the information represents little more than Santos’ personal assumption about city officials.

It was not just Santos who drew conclusions like this and failed to support them with sources. In an article titled “Public vs. charter schools: a new debate” writer Elissa Gootman used a similar technique to actually predict politicians’ behavior (Gootman 2006). While detailing legislative proceedings in Albany, Gootman predicted that Albany would address one of the mayor’s next initiatives. Gootman writes, “Now Albany is likely to turn its attention to Mr. Bloomberg’s request to lift the cap on 100 charter schools statewide . . .” (Gootman 2006).

Conclusions about what politicians think and how they may behave with no identified sources were found in about half of the articles studied. These instances do not seem to bias a reader one way or another about charter schools in general. However, the absence of clear attribution and the fact that these statements appeared in news articles means that some readers may interpret these statements as fact. Taking these conclusions as statements of fact could significantly affect the way readers analyze these issues. According to the Code of Ethics, the journalists should be identifying where facts came from. In these cases, the journalists are skipping this step.

Ten of the 35 articles also present conclusions made regarding parents' beliefs and motives, without identifying their sources. One of the most prominent examples of this issue is evidenced in a 2011 article written by David W. Chen, titled "Charter school cries foul over a decision to close it" (Chen 2011). While discussing a decision to move a charter school to a new location, Chen writes: "Parents of that school opposed the move . . ." (Chen 2011).

In this statement, Chen is asserting that every parent of that particular charter school opposed its being moved to a new location. Even if Chen did interviews with the parents, it is highly unlikely that he did interviews with all of them. Thus, Chen's use of this unattributed statement gives the reader the potentially inaccurate perception that all parents of this charter school were opposed to its being moved. Using the word "some" would have been more appropriate.

An article written by Jennifer Preston, titled "Trenton senate votes support for made-to-order schools" draws conclusions about parents' thinking that are even more dangerous. While discussing a particular piece of legislation, Preston provides unattributed information about parents' beliefs (Preston 1995). She asserts that the legislation was enacted "...in response to the

growing numbers of parents asking for more options and control over their children's education" (Preston 1995).

Preston is sending readers the message that a growing number of parents believe there are major flaws with the educational system. If this information were attributed to someone, it would not be a problem. However, because it is not, it would appear that Preston is only making assumptions about parents' beliefs. If readers take this statement as fact, and begin to perceive that other parents believe there are issues with the education system, they may begin to form a favorable opinion about charter schools and other educational options that deviate from the norm. Thus, this particular article presents unattributed information about parents' beliefs that favors the advancement of the charter school agenda.

Conclusions without sources regarding parents' beliefs that seemed to directly favor charter schools appeared in seven of the 34 articles. In contrast, only one article contained assumptions regarding parents' beliefs that favored public schools. Assumptions made regarding politicians' beliefs did not seem to directly favor either side. Therefore, it seems that unattributed statements that draw conclusions for the reader generally favor charter school advocates in this sample. However, this trend is not pronounced.

In conclusion, it should be noted that there was at least some form of unclear attribution in every article studied. This analysis suggests that when *The Times* provides this sort of unattributed information, it is most likely information that is favorable for charter school advocates. However, this trend is far from pronounced, and there is at least some evidence that both sides are sometimes represented favorably as a result of these deviations.

Headlines

“[Journalists should] make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.” – SPJ 2011

Perhaps the most serious breaches of the ethical guidelines set forth in the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics were uncovered in the analysis of headlines. Although this issue was only present in seven of the 35 articles, the potential consequences of poor headline writing can have a substantial impact on a reader’s interpretation of the issues, as will be discussed below.

Of the seven articles with misleading headlines, five failed to place information in the proper context. Gootman’s article published in 2006 is a good example of how this happened. The headline for this article reads: “Public vs. charter schools: a new debate” (Gootman 2006). The problem is that this debate is not new at all.

This article is about the decision regarding whether charter schools should be placed inside of public school buildings, consequently sharing the space of these public school buildings (Gootman 2006). The headline suggests that this is a new conflict. However, Gootman’s article includes information that would suggest otherwise. Her article reads, “There are already 27 charter schools inside traditional public school buildings . . .” (Gootman 2006).

If the reader does not go beyond the headline, he or she will completely miss this information. The reader would likely infer from the headline that the incidents highlighted in the article are the first examples of disputes regarding this matter. However, the 27 other charter schools currently sharing space with public schools suggests that this is likely not the case.

This headline gives the impression that there are new conflicts arising as a result of continued charter school growth. As demonstrated above, this is not correct. Thus, the

misleading headline appears to result in unfavorable coverage for charter school supporters. Readers may get the impression that charter schools are continuing to produce new conflicts within the communities in which they are arising. This is a direct result of *The Times*' failure to write a headline that adequately puts the events detailed within the article in context.

The fact that this headline focused on conflict is extremely important. Of the five articles that presented information out of context, four of them focused on conflict at the expense of accuracy. A 2009 article written by Jennifer Medina carries this headline: "City's schools share space, bitterness, with charters" (Medina 2009). Because of the word "share," a reader would reasonably conclude that individuals involved with both charter and public schools are bitter about sharing space resources. However, this is not the case.

Much like Gootman, Medina has information within her article that renders the headline inaccurate. When discussing a charter school called PAVE that shares space with a public school, Medina writes: "In Red Hook, Spencer Robertson, PAVE's founder, said he expected to stay in P.S. 15 for two more years . . . He said that while community meetings about the school have often erupted in shouts, 'they've been a good neighbor in general, and we don't even know there's a conflict most days'" (Medina 2009).

This statement directly conflicts with the assertions of the headline. Robertson is arguing that more often than not there is no conflict between these two schools (Medina 2009). Thus, a headline asserting that the charter school "shares" in the bitterness is incorrect, according to Robertson.

The headline on Medina's article groups all public schools together and all charter schools together, asserting that all of these schools are bitter toward one another. As proven by

Robertson's quote within the article, this is simply not true. The failure of *The Times*' editors to realize this represents a significant breach of this ethical guideline.

It seems that this coverage is again unfavorable for charter school advocates. By not writing a headline that accurately reflects the reporting, *The Times* ignored the fact that at least one charter school supporter does not see a problem with the current arrangement. However, it is unlikely that this headline does any good for the public school supporters either.

Although there are no quotes within the article that suggest a public school supporter does not mind sharing a building with a charter school, it is highly unlikely that every public school supporter is opposed to the idea. The headline inaccurately suggests that *The Times* has reported on every instance in which charter and public schools are sharing space, and found that there is always bitterness. It is impossible for the publication to cover them all, and thus writing a headline like this puts the conflict in an improper context, suggesting that all public schools can be grouped together and all charter schools can be grouped together.

As noted above, this happened in four of the five cases in which information was placed out of context by a headline. However, in one case *The Times* failed to provide context in a different way.

In the article written by Diana Jean Schemo and published August 17, a headline made a basic assertion about charter schools that was inaccurate. The headline read as follows: "Charter schools trail in results, U.S. data reveals." The article was about a study that revealed charter school students performed lower than their public school counterparts (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17). The problem lies in how a reader interprets the word "results."

The sources in the article repeatedly stated that this data represented only a measure of how students are doing in these schools at this particular point in time. The effectiveness of

charter schools as educational institutions was not being measured. The article reads “[Professor Amy Stuart Wells] said the results reflect only ‘a point in time,’ and said nothing about the progress of students in charter schools” (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17). The article goes on to explain that both Wells and even the individual responsible for the survey believe more research is needed to determine how well charter schools are doing.

Furthermore, these sources also point out that charter schools cannot be grouped together as one complete bloc. ““These schools are really uneven in terms of quality,”” Wells is quoted as saying (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17).

Thus, this headline is placing these results dangerously out of context. The “results” of charter schools are still unfolding, according to these sources, and this data is only an indication of where charter school students are now (Schemo 2004, Aug. 17). In addition, it is not feasible to write about charter schools as a complete bloc. However, as a result of this misleading headline, a reader could reasonably determine that charter schools as a whole are not as effective as public schools at educating students.

This headline is the most striking example of unfavorable coverage for charter schools as a result of deviation from the ethical guidelines used in this analysis. The headline inaccurately suggests that these findings reveal important trends about charter schools. This headline significantly inhibits a reader’s ability to analyze this issue accurately.

The other two headlines that breached this ethical guideline oversimplified the information presented in the articles. As noted above, the public and charter school debate is a complicated one, and there are few clear answers. However, these headlines seemed to suggest otherwise.

An article written by Sam Dillon and published Oct. 14, 2010 provides an important example of this. The headline for this article reads: “Washington chancellor’s departure isn’t expected to slow public school change” (Dillon 2010). The article is about Michelle Rhee’s decision to resign as Washington schools chancellor (Dillon 2010).

The problem with this headline is that it indicates to a reader that school change will not cease just because Rhee has stepped down. The article does not send that exact message (Dillon 2010). Instead, the article simply states that presumptive mayor Vincent Gray said he would not retreat on policies Rhee had already enacted (Dillon 2010). The article reads, “Mr. Gray announced that Kaya Henderson, the deputy chancellor who is a close associate of Ms. Rhee’s, would take over as interim chancellor, and he pledged that school improvement policies Ms. Rhee enacted would continue after he takes office” (Dillon 2010).

This statement does not indicate that policies fostering change will be enacted under the new chancellor. The statement only reveals that Gray believes Rhee’s existing policies will still be in effect. In order for change to be occurring, new policies must be in development. The article does not suggest this is the case. Politics is a complicated process, and just because Gray does not think the new chancellor will change anything, this is not necessarily true.

Furthermore, the article’s wording suggests that no one in the world believes Rhee’s stepping down will mean less change. This is simply not true, and the article invalidates that claim. While discussing the resignation, Dillon writes: “In an interview last month, Ms. Rhee said it had been disheartening to receive e-mails from friends and read media accounts that interpreted Mr. Fenty’s defeat and her likely departure as a major setback for their movement” (Dillon 2010).

This statement suggests there are actually plenty of individuals who believe that Rhee's resignation will have a considerable impact on the amount of change Washington schools will be subject too. To imply that all individuals everywhere do not think her resignation will change anything is oversimplifying the matter. There are diverse opinions and viewpoints regarding this matter, and not all of them are so optimistic.

An article written by Diana Jean Schemo and published Aug. 29, 2004 also features an oversimplified headline. The article is about U.S. data on charter schools (Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). The headline reads: "U.S. cutting back on details in data about charter schools" (Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). The headline implies that the U.S. government collects less information about charter schools than other types of educational institutions. However, the truth is the U.S. government collects the same amount of information on all schools.

In explaining the study, Schemo writes: ". . . for a periodic report that provides a detailed national profile of public, private and charter schools" (Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). The headline only mentions charter schools.

The headline suggests that the U.S. government has decided to cut down on information it collects regarding charter schools. This is true. However, the headline does not convey the fact that this cut down means the same amount of information is now being collected about each type of school. This oversimplification means that if a reader did not read the whole story, he or she might believe charter school data is less complete than the data for other schools. This is a way in which *The Times'* coverage might impact perceptions about this and related issues.

In conclusion, it should be noted that deviations from this ethical principle did not seem to favor either side of the debate. However, this analysis indicates that *The Times'* failure to

adhere to this ethical guideline, although infrequent, represented an extremely important way in which readers could be misinformed.

In at least two cases, readers could be factually misinformed on the issue as a result of deviation from this principle. In five other cases, deviations had less of an impact on readers. Nevertheless, headlines that oversimplify and present information out of context represent a significant concern for analysts of *The Times*' coverage.

Imposition of Cultural Values

"[Journalists should] examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others." – SPJ 2011

As indicated by the Code of Ethics, it is also expected that journalists take care so as not to make their cultural values the values of the reader as well. In 10 of the 34 articles analyzed, journalists did not take care to avoid this. Some of them involved measures of "success" for both students and schools.

Perhaps the most startling example of this problem can be found in the 2004 article written by Julia Lawlor, titled "In Newark, graduates ace the final" (Lawlor 2004). This article provides details about a charter school in Newark called North Star Academy (Lawlor 2004). Throughout the article, Lawlor uses her own cultural values to evaluate how successful this school is.

While discussing the degree to which the school has been a success, Lawlor writes: "To be sure, not all 36 students who started in North Star's first sixth grade met with success. Of the 17 students who are no longer with the class, four left to attend other schools and will be going to college in the fall, while another plans to go to a technical school" (Lawlor 2004).

In this passage, Lawlor is implying that because the other 12 students did not go on to further their education, they have not been successful. This is a serious problem. Lawlor obviously places a value on education as a measure of success, but that does not mean the reader should too. She provides no information about what the other 12 students are doing, and thus has no basis for stating that they have not had success.

Although defining success in this way does not seem to be an advantage for either side of the charter vs. public school debate, it is important to note that this sort of writing could have a serious impact on a reader's comprehension of this and other issues. Certainly, not all readers would agree that the only path to success is through the doors of an educational institution. However, it is possible that after reading this article a reader would logically assume that this is a valid cultural value. Thus, the next time a reader sees any information that leads him to believe that either charter or public schools produce more college graduates than other types of education, he is likely to interpret this information accordingly. In this way, the reader's perception of the issue could be drastically impacted. The writer is subtly influencing what the reader thinks are important cultural values.

This happened on several other occasions. In the Jan. 2, 2011 article by Fernanda Santos, Santos imposes his cultural values on a reader in much the same way (Santos 2011, Jan. 22). While discussing schools on the Upper West side of New York, Santos writes that this area is "home to some of the best public elementary schools in the city . . ." (Santos 2011, Jan. 22).

How does she know that? She places cultural value on test scores. In the next sentence, Santos writes: "But beyond those highly regarded schools, most of the district's schools do not score well on tests . . ." (Santos 2011). The inference Santos is making is that those districts with high test scores are the best districts in the area.

This is a problem. Although she acknowledged that testing is the measure by which society judges how well a district is performing, Santos' writing is taking it one step too far. The sentence should read: "Some of the schools on the Upper West side of New York score comparatively high on standardized tests." Instead, Santos states that these are some of the best schools in the area, as if this piece of information is a fact that can be objectively measured.

Thus, in much the same way as Lawlor, Santos is using her own cultural values to make statements of fact in a news article. It is worth noting that in this case Santos is specifically pointing out that there are public schools doing well in this area. It would seem that this favors charter school critics.

Again, although it can be argued that an emphasis on test scores may not be making a strong case for or against charter schools overall, this is a dangerous way in which a reader's comprehension of the issue could be tainted by cultural values long term. In the case of this article, the writing favored charter school critics.

But Santos' deviations from this ethical principle did not always favor charter school critics. In an article dated Feb. 22, 2011, Santos deals with the topic of turning public schools into charter schools (Santos 2011, Feb. 22). One sentence reads: "... charters that, in many cases, do better than their predecessors" (Santos 2011, Feb. 22). In this case, Santos provides no justification for her argument that these schools do better than others (Santos 2011, Feb. 22). Thus, although it is not clear where she is getting her information from, it is clear that she is placing on a cultural value on some measure that she takes to be a good indication of success.

Four of the 10 articles that imposed cultural values on a reader dealt with measures of success. The third example is in a 2009 article by Jennifer Medina, in which Medina calls certain public elementary schools "failing" schools (Medina 2009). She does not explain why the

schools are considered failing. Thus, readers may use whatever cultural value Medina does to define what it means to be a “failing” school.

As discussed above, these articles did not always present biased information to readers directly, but they had the potential to impact reader perceptions in the future. This was the case in the 2004 article written by Julia Lawlor.

In other cases, journalists imposed their cultural beliefs regarding the importance of certain issues onto readers. This happened in two cases.

In a 2011 article by Sharon Otterman, Otterman is describing what *The Times* has discovered from an internal document leaked to the newspaper by Department of Education (Otterman 2011). In describing the importance of this document, she writes: “WikiLeaks it is not . . .” (Otterman 2011). By downplaying the importance of this document in comparison to the ones obtained by the WikiLeaks organization, Otterman is certainly imposing her own cultural value on a reader. She is pointing out what she thinks is important.

It is worth noting that this certainly does not favor one side of the debate or the other. In fact, it downplays the importance of both sides. However, this is certainly an example of Code of Ethics breach by a *Times* journalist. To some parents, this document might be more important than anything found on WikiLeaks.

An article by Susan Dominus published in 2010 makes a similar cultural value judgment. In reporting an interview she held with the new schools chancellor in New York, Dominus obviously used her own judgment in selecting which issues to cover. However, she reported the facts as if her cultural judgments were the only ones.

While talking about the interview, Dominus writes: “On the key issues of the day, Ms. Black was more cautious” (Dominus 2010). Dominus is using her own judgment to determine

the key issues of the day. It would be unreasonable to suggest that all readers would agree with Dominus on what these issues are. Thus, this statement is a breach of the Code of Ethics. It is worth noting that if Dominus stated that Black was cautious on “some” key issues of the day, it would have been a considerable improvement.

These two articles certainly represent deviations from the Code of Ethics. However, these deviations would not appear to favor either side of the debate.

The rest of the 10 articles that imposed cultural values on a reader did so in ways that are difficult to group. These articles did not seem to impose cultural values in any particularly biased way. However, impacts on reader perceptions of the issues could certainly be affected.

To begin identifying the other ways in which writers might impose cultural values, Dominus’ article can again provide a good example. While describing Black’s qualifications for the position, Dominus writes: “. . . to suggest that someone privileged but committed could never really understand poor people’s perspectives is to insult both sides of the equation” (Dominus 2010). In much the same way as the journalists measuring success, Dominus is in this case placing an emphasis on education. She is suggesting that with enough dedication, someone who is educated can understand the problems of those who are living in poverty.

It is highly likely that some readers would disagree. Dominus’ cultural value on commitment and dedication may not be shared with readers. By claiming that any reader’s objection to her statement is insulting, she is essentially imposing her values on a reader. This is certainly an issue, although it does not seem to reflect a bias regarding this particular issue.

The remaining incidences in which journalists imposed cultural values on readers were minor in nature. Notable examples are Michael Winerip’s claim that certain schools are “small” schools, without providing any context for it and Santos’ calling a particular apartment “stylish”

(Winerip 2011 & Santos 2011, Jan. 22). Essentially, the journalists are using their own frames of reference in order to analyze issues. Four articles contained these types of breaches. There did not seem to be any evident bias and impact on readers' comprehension was generally minor.

To conclude the discussion on cultural values, it is important to note that there was no clear bias toward either side of the debate. Interestingly, however, the only two articles written by Fernando Santos included readily apparent examples of imposition of cultural values. It is also important to point out that although this ethical breach did not evidence any clear bias, there was a potential for reader perceptions of this and other issues to be considerably impacted in some cases.

Analysis vs. News Reporting

“[Journalists should] distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.” – SPJ 2011

Another problem that is apparent within this analysis is that writers oftentimes provide analysis when they should be stating facts. As the Code of Ethics suggests, anytime a writer is analyzing a trend or event and not just reporting the news, this should be pointed out to the reader. In 26 of the 34 articles studied here, the reader was not properly informed of analysis when it occurred.

One of the most prominent examples of this can be evidenced in a 2006 article written by Diana Jean Schemo. This article is reporting to the reader a study released by the Federal Education Department (Schemo 2006). According to the article, these scores indicated that public school children tended to have higher scores on reading and math tests (Schemo 2006).

Schemo did not just report, though; she also analyzed. Mark S. Schneider, who was responsible for releasing the results of this study, is quoted as saying: “We know they are not doing harm, so they pass a fundamental test of policy analysis” (Schemo 2006).

In the paragraph directly following that quotation, she analyzes it for the reader. Her article reads here, “But this was weak praise considering that proponents of charter schools have long argued that students at these institutions would show progress far greater than those at neighborhood schools,” (Schemo 2006). This sentence cannot be proven and is not attributed. It is clearly an analysis.

In this sentence, Schemo has essentially taken a quote from a government official and examined it from the standpoint of a charter school critic. If this sentence were to appear in a column, there would be no problem with it; but as it did not appear in a column, it is a breach of the Code of Ethics.

Schemo was not the only writer who did this. Six of the 26 articles that featured a breach of this kind involved analysis of a quote or assertion made by a source. In a 2004 article, Julia Lawlor takes information from a quote and reaffirms it with her own analysis.

The article is providing some explanation for the growth of a few charter schools’ popularity in the Newark area (Lawlor 2004). A representative of the Center for Education Reform is quoted as saying: “Kids aren’t dropping out, families aren’t leaving or moving away. People tend to stay in communities where the schools are healthier” (Lawlor 2004). Lawlor is quoting a source, and that is acceptable.

However, the next sentence of this article reads: “That is especially true of schools like North Star Academy, Academy Charter High School . . . and dozens of other successful inner-city charter schools” (Lawlor 2006). Lawlor has not provided us with any additional information.

She has only put her analysis of what the representative said in print. Apparently, she agrees with the representative's quote, and she is providing the reader with some cases in which she thinks the quote can be validated. She should not be expounding on this further without more evidence. This makes it her analysis, and it does not belong in a news article. The representative's statement might be true or it might not be. Either way, Lawlor should not be telling the reader what she thinks about it.

Analyses that affirm or refute assertions made by a speaker are dangerous for journalism. This study revealed that of the six articles that analyzed quotes in some way, five of them affirmed quotes from sources. This gives validity to the quotes, and advances their sources' opinions at the expense of others'. That is a direct violation of the principles espoused in the Code of Ethics.

It is important to note, however, that no clear bias emerged from this trend. Three of the six articles that offered some analysis of a quote analyzed a quote that neither favored nor opposed charter schools. One article favored critics, and two favored advocates. Thus, it again appears that there is a slight bias toward advocates of charter schools. However, it is an almost imperceptible trend.

But the vast majority of the 26 articles offering analysis did not offer it about quotes at all. In these cases, writers analyzed documents, decisions or other information in order to come to arrive at a conclusion. They then shared this with readers, suggesting that the statements are news and not analysis.

In a 2011 article David Chen analyzes a legal letter prepared by a lawyer on behalf of a charter school in response to a decision to close it (Chen 2011). "The letter could easily be construed as a desperate effort to salvage a school that has faced endless problems, from violence

in the school to unusually high staff turnover to poor test scores,” the article reads (Chen 2011). By presenting this statement in the context of a news article, a reader is led to believe that this is what this letter represents. In reality, the letter could have been written for a variety of reasons. Chen’s inclusion of only his analysis does the reader a disservice and is a breach of the Code of Ethics.

In her 2004 article titled “U.S. cutting back on details in data about charter schools,” Diana Jean Schemo predicts what impact new federal legislation might have on the U.S. educational landscape. While discussing data about private, public and charter schools, she notes that charter schools make up a relatively small amount of the population (Schemo 2004). However, she also predicts that more charter schools will open up.

Her article reads, “While charter schools currently account for a sliver of the nation’s 88,000 public schools, they are likely to grow tremendously under the federal No Child Left Behind Education Act, which prescribes conversion to charters as a remedy for chronically failing traditional schools” (Schemo 2004, Aug. 29). Although it is possible that this legislation may have the impact she suggests, she is making an assumption for the reader. According to the Code of Ethics, this is not acceptable. What Schemo should instead be doing is reporting the facts to the reader and letting the reader interpret them. Anything more than that should be labeled as an analysis.

A final example of how a writer provided analysis of information other than a quote can be evidenced in an article written by Fernando Santos and published in 2011. In an article about the Panel for Educational Policy’s vote to close some city high schools, Santos provides an analysis of the body itself at the end of his article (Santos 2011). The sentence reads: “The panel, which has the final word on school closings, was set up as a check on mayoral authority, but in

practical terms, it has been mostly a rubber-stamping body for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's and the chancellor's plans" (Santos 2011). Santos does not provide any factual information about this body's actions after this statement, which is the last sentence of the article. She only presents an interpretation of the body's role in government to the reader.

Santos' assertion is not a fact. It is obvious that she is analyzing recent events. However, as asserted by the Code of Ethics, this has no place in a news article. The reader should be left to make this decision for herself. The role of the media within the framework developed by journalists (the Code of Ethics) is to inform, not to interpret.

Twenty of the 34 articles studied analyzed information other than quotes and presented this information as news to the reader. This is an extremely important trend. If *The Times* is attempting to educate readers so that they can make their own decisions, this breach of the Code of Ethics should not be taken lightly. Journalists are playing an active role in shaping beliefs, without clearly labeling where they are doing so. That is unacceptable.

It again appears that breaching this ethical guideline did not result in coverage that was significantly favorable to either charter or public schools. Of the 26 articles that deviated from this principle, seven of them provided coverage that seemed to favor charter schools. One such article, titled "Teacher union faults oversight of charter schools," begins with an analysis of charter schools as a whole before delving into the main point of the story (AP 1996). The article is attributed to the Associated Press.

The article's lead sentence reads: "Charter schools that operate largely outside the control of the public school administrators can be laboratories for innovation, but some state laws governing them are too weak, a national teachers' union says" (AP 1996). The rest of the article provides no context for the assertion that charter schools are "laboratories for innovation" (AP

1996). Thus, this appears to be the writer's own analysis. The overwhelmingly positive tone of this lead in relation to charter schools is especially dangerous for reader perceptions, since the article is dealing with a negative trend that is alleged to be in existence among charter schools (AP 1996).

However, six of the articles that presented analysis as news favored critics' beliefs. Carol Pogash wrote one such article. In her 2010 article titled "Public financing supports growth of online charter schools," Pogash analyzes online charter schools and finds reason to question their credibility (Pogash 2010). One section of her article reads: "Behind the blue screen, however, is a host of unanswered questions about a system that seemingly requires little overhead" (Pogash 2010). She goes on to list some of these "questions," and does not attribute them.

Essentially, Pogash is analyzing online charter schools for the reader and deciding that there are still issues that need to be addressed. Again, this is a violation of the Code of Ethics. In this case, it benefits charter school critics.

However, half of the articles that provided analysis analyzed topics that did not run the risk of producing coverage favorable or unfavorable for either side of this debate. Santos' 2011 article that analyzed the Panel of Educational Policy provides a good example. As noted above, Santos calls this panel a "rubber-stamping body" for the mayor and chancellor's plans (Santos 2011).

This is a neutral statement concerning the charter vs. public school debate. It is an attack on the panel itself, but does not indicate to a reader whether either type of school is objectively better than the other. As indicated above, 13 of these articles provided this type of neutral analysis that was not labeled as such.

In conclusion, it appears that breaches of this ethical principle could be found in the majority of the articles studied. The articles again presented an almost imperceptible edge toward espousing advocates' beliefs regarding charter schools. Still, the prevalence of this deviation from the Code of Ethics is an important cause for concern. It is possible that readers are being led astray at the whim of writers' perceptions as a result of mislabeled analyses.

Conclusions

As demonstrated above, this analysis indicates that there are four recurring breaches of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics within *The New York Times'* coverage of the charter vs. public school debate. However, no clear conclusions can be drawn on whether these breaches produce negative or positive coverage for either public or charter schools. Concerning source identification and the inclusion of analysis within news, there was a slight bias in favor of charter school advocates. In the case of headlines and the imposition of cultural values, however, there was no detectable bias. Thus, it would be unreasonable to suggest that this study provided any substantial evidence that *The New York Times'* coverage is biased. Still, there were at least four important findings that surfaced as a result of this analysis.

First, this study demonstrates that ethical breaches may be nearly impossible to avoid. There were no articles amongst the sample in which some ethical breach could not be pointed out. Thus, the study suggests that *The New York Times'* assumedly earnest attempts to avoid ethical breaches are falling short of perfection. There is room for improvement.

Second, this study suggests that incomplete source identification and the inclusion of analysis within news stories are the most frequent breaches of the Code of Ethics. There were no articles among the 34 studied in which sources were identified completely and to the fullest

extent possible, and there were only eight articles in which analysis could not be found amidst news articles. These are the most prevalent problems.

Third, the logic presented within this analysis suggests that headlines and the inclusion of analysis within news articles may have the largest impact on readers' comprehension of the issues. In the case of headlines, this perceived impact is further exacerbated by findings at the Poynter Institute indicating that headlines are amongst the first aspects of any story examined by readers (Poynter Institute 2000). The Poynter Institute notes that not all readers continue with the story after reading the headline (Poynter Institute 2000).

Including analysis within news stories is especially dangerous due to the potential for readers to take these educated opinions as statements of fact. These opinions would be difficult to disprove, and therefore could have a profound impact on a reader's understanding of the debate. Any failure to adhere to the guidelines set forth in the Code of Ethics may be most damaging when these ethical principles are breached.

Taking these findings into account, the broader implication of this analysis is that *The New York Times* is not reporting on this matter in an entirely accurate way. This analysis demonstrates that *The Times'* headline writing often implies that charter schools and public schools can be categorized, despite the warnings from researchers that this is not the case. Headlines oversimplify.

In addition, journalists oftentimes analyze these issues for the reader despite the fact that there is no clear consensus amongst researchers on the topic. Sources are not being identified as completely as they should be. Cultural messages are being sent. In short, readers can and probably are being misled regarding this issue.

So, what can be done? This analysis has identified specific instances in which *The New York Times* deviates from the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics. But which needs revision, the practices of the journalists or the code itself?

It is worth noting that the problems uncovered by this analysis may be unavoidable. Is the Code of Ethics simply too lofty? In some cases, it appears that journalists cannot accurately report on the matter without providing the viewpoints of "supporters" and "critics." Should journalists do so, even if it means compromising the principles established by the code?

In addition, it is worth noting that analysis was most prevalent within the articles written by journalists who cover this issue most frequently. Diana Jean Schemo was the journalist whose articles appeared most in the sample. Her work was the most likely to summarize opposing viewpoints, and she provided a great deal of analysis. If "beat" reporters have the knowledge, should they be denied the right to examine the issue for readers? If journalists were permitted the right to provide opinions, would fewer readers be misled into believing there are objective answers?

These are important questions. This study's findings represent significant evidence that the Code of Ethics is not stringently followed. However, why it was so easy to locate breaches in the ethical code is a question that remains to be answered, and further research is needed before definitive conclusions regarding journalists' attempts to report the news in a "fair and comprehensive" manner can be reached (SPJ 2010).

For the time being, it is interesting to note that the Society of Professional Journalists' magazine, *The Quill*, published materials April 4, 2011 debating whether the Code of Ethics needs to be updated (SPJ 2011, April 4). The results of this analysis may suggest that an update may be crucial to the public's understanding of the public vs. charter school debate.

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