

HOW MEDIA PARTISANSHIP AGGRAVATES CONFLICTS BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE A STUDY ON NEWS OBJECTIVITY OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Minha Kim ^{a, b}, Hyun-Jin Kwon ^a

^a Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, South Korea

^b Corresponding author: minha.kim@skku.edu

© Ontario International Development Agency. ISSN 1923-6654 (print)

ISSN 1923-6662 (online). Available at <http://www.ssm.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

Abstract: The sharp increase in heinous crime in recent decades in Korea has caused controversy over the issue of abolition of capital punishment. While a significant portion of the public consents to the idea of social justice reinforced by executing the death penalty, its opponents argue for the right to life of criminals. This study examines how the mass media in South Korea cover the issue of the death penalty in light of their fulfillment of news objectivity. Content analyses demonstrate that newspapers have tendency to pursue ostensible balance, compared with television news showing higher levels of factuality and neutrality. Liberal newspapers were found to be more proactive in advocating their perspectives than conservative ones. The study concludes that the media's fulfillment of ostensible balance does not always lead to reducing social conflicts, and more attention needs to be paid to 'how' objectivity should be pursued in covering controversial social issues.

Keywords: Capital Punishment, Media Partisanship, News Objectivity, Human Rights, Social Justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

The sharp increase in heinous crime in recent decades in Korea has caused controversy over the issue of abolition of capital punishment.

While a significant portion of the public consents to the idea of social justice reinforced by executing the death penalty, its opponents argue for the

right to life of criminals (McKelvie, 2006). Such human right perspective spanning from humane execution to abolitionism, stepping together with political liberalism, exerts a strong persuasive impact on public opinion in Korea. Given that news media strongly influence public opinion of controversial issues such as this (Bennett, 2008; Bovee, 1999; Harcup, 2003), it would be worthwhile to investigate whether the South Korean media objectively cover the issue by balancing those divided views and to what extent they pursue news objectivity on this matter.

II. NEWS OBJECTIVITY OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A critical determinant of news objectivity is media partisanship in a way that strong partisanship is likely to place stronger emphasis on delivering a point of view in news stories rather than limiting its journalistic conduct to objectivity principle alone. It seems because news people—at least some, though not all—have perception that complete news objectivity is literally impossible (Schudson, 2001). As is the case in many western societies including the US and Canada, opinions about capital punishment elsewhere are often determined by political orientations such that conservatives are in favor of the death penalty and liberals are often found to be abolitionists or at least argue for amelioration towards humane punishment (Lipschultz and Hilt, 1999; McKelvie, 2006).

TABLE I
Crosstabs of types of media and four categories of objectivity

Categories	Y/N	Television	Newspaper	X ²
Factuality	Y	73(72.3)	159(62.1)	3.291
	N	28(27.7)	97(37.9)	
Total		101	256	
Quantitative Balance	Y	40(39.6)	120(46.9)	1.548
	N	61(60.4)	136(53.1)	
Total		101	256	
Qualitative Balance	Y	42(41.6)	147(57.4)	7.292*
	N	59(58.4)	109(42.6)	
Total		101	256	
Neutrality	Y	59(58.4)	133(52)	1.217
	N	42(41.6)	123(48)	
Total		101	256	

df=1, * p<.05 ** p<.01

However, the way the news media aggravate conflicts between the two perspectives is that they often deliver news messages depicting conflict-oriented arguments in the name of objectivity. Ostensible balance between two different points of view can actually result in exaggerating social conflicts. This means that fulfillment of news objectivity does not always lead to alleviation of social conflicts, but in fact, it sometimes amplifies public perception of conflicts, reducing the room for building reasonable consensus. What is more important is 'how' the news media portray the issue objectively and therefore fulfilling journalistic objectivity rather than ostensible balance between multiple points of view.

The first research question is, therefore, whether strong partisan media tend to melt their point of views into news messages they deliver on capital punishment. An interesting frame of comparison to satisfy this research question would be newspapers versus television news about the issue. It is more common that newspapers have tendency to attach relatively stronger partisanship to their stories while broadcasting companies in Korea are reinforced to fulfill journalistic objectivity to reflect the ideal of public spirit (Applegate, 1996; Zeldes and Fico, 2006). A comparison between newspapers and broadcasting news will reveal a pattern of correlation between

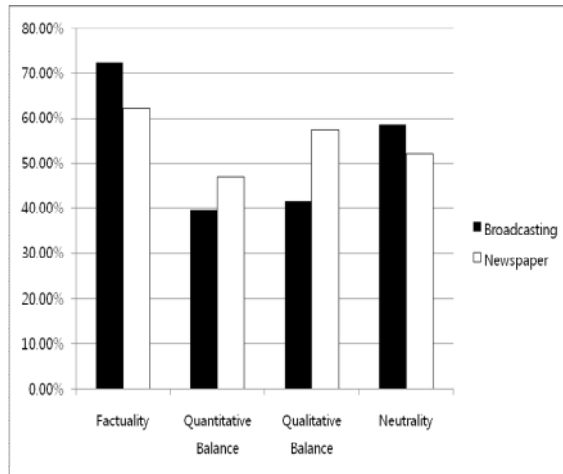
strength of media partisanship and objectivity on this specific matter.

The second research question growing out of this is which of conservative or liberal media is likely to fulfill journalistic objectivity: i.e. if there is any difference between conservative and liberal media in terms of strength of their partisanship reflected in their news coverage of capital punishment. Just as other political issues, news objectivity of the capital punishment issue rests on direction of media partisanship, resulting in a pervasive impact such as media framing (Iyengar, 1991). Media organizations leaning towards conservative ideology tend to melt their sympathetic view of the death penalty into their news stories whereas liberally-oriented news media are likely to cover the issue from a critical point of view. Taken into account the context that conservative newspapers were likely to be more outspoken on controversial issues, it is hypothesized that their news messages of capital punishment convey stronger partisan orientations than those of liberal newspapers do. To this end, conservative and liberal newspapers will be compared in light of both quantitative and qualitative measure of objectivity and bias regarding the death penalty.

II. METHOD AND RESULTS

Content analyses have been conducted to compare four major newspapers (Chosun, Dong-A, Hangyoreh,

FIGURE I
Level of objectivity compared between TV and Newspaper



Kyunghyang) and two television networks (KBS, MBC) in terms of contents of news messages and modes of presentations by selecting a set of samples of news reports covered between 2008 and 2010.

FIGURE II
Level of objectivity compared between conservative and progressive paper

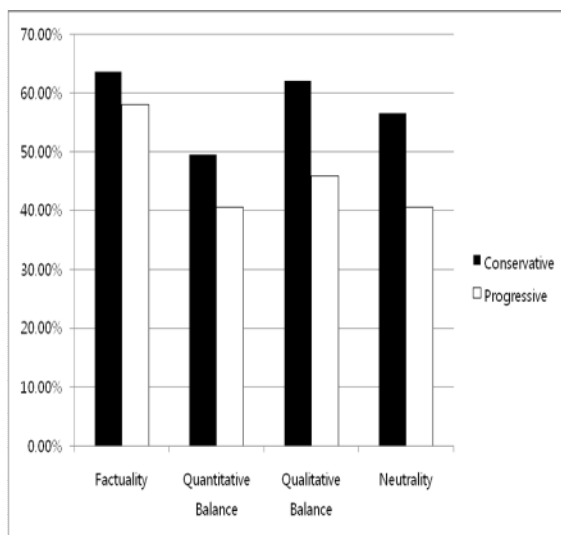


TABLE III
Itemized List of Credibility

Categories	Credibility
Type of media	1.00
Political orientation of media	1.00
News media	1.00
Factuality	.86
Quantitative balance	.78
Qualitative balance	.83
Neutrality	.89
Average	.90

As a result of the analyses, it was found that newspapers had overall tendency to stray from the objectivity principle by strongly attaching their perspectives to their news stories, otherwise supposed to be neutral and unbiased. In particular, their levels of factuality and neutrality are lower than those of television networks. Meanwhile, both quantitative and qualitative balances were found to be higher in the case of newspapers than television news (See Table 1 and Figure 1). It seems that the tendency of media placing two opposing perspectives in contrast is stronger in the news messages delivered by newspapers.

In terms of the comparative scheme of conservatism versus liberalism, unlike the hypothesis, newspapers classified as conservative ones such as Chosun and Dong-A were found to be more likely to be objective in dealing with the issue than liberal newspapers (Hanyoreh and Kyunghyang) more active in advocating human rights perspectives (See Table 2 and Figure 2). As mentioned earlier, a possible explanation for the way newspapers aggravate conflicts between human rights and social justice is that they deal with those two perspectives in a stark contrast in their news stories. Although conservative newspapers such as Chosun-Ilbo appeared to be more likely to be objective, their story formats convey that the perspectives of human rights and social justice are in strong conflict. Rather than seeking a common ground between the two perspectives, those conservative papers exaggerate conflicting views in the name of objectivity.

IV. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Implications of this study are concerned with how a focal media policy should be implemented to harmonize news objectivity and media’s perspectives in order not to distort public views of capital punishment and human rights issues. This academic endeavor aims to reduce the conflicts between human rights and social justice aggravated by the mainstream news media in the South Korean context.

TABLE II
Crosstabs of types of newspapers and four categories of objectivity

Categories	Y/N	Conservative	Progressive	X ²
Factuality	Y	116(63.7)	43(58.1)	0.708
	N	66(36.3)	31(41.9)	
Total		182	74	
Quantitative Balance	Y	90(49.5)	30(40.5)	1.677
	N	92(50.5)	44(59.5)	
Total		182	74	
Qualitative Balance	Y	113(62.1)	34(45.9)	5.607*
	N	69(37.9)	40(54.1)	
Total		182	74	
Neutrality	Y	103(56.6)	30(40.5)	5.431*
	N	79(43.4)	44(59.5)	
Total		182	74	

df=1, * p<.05 ** p<.01

REFERENCES

- [1] Applegate, Edd. (1996). *Print and Broadcast Journalism – A critical Examination*. Praeger
- [2] Bennett, W. Lance. (2008). *News: The Politics of Illusion* (8th edition). Longman.
- [3] Bovee, Warren G. (1999). *Discovering Journalism*. Praeger.
- [4] Harcup, Tony (2003). *Journalism Principles and Practice*. Sage Publications.
- [5] Iyengar, Shanto (1991). *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. University of Chicago Press.
- [6] Graber, Doris A. (2007). *Media Power in Politics* (5th edition). CQ Press
- [7] Lipschultz, Jeremy H. and Hilt, Michael L. (1999). Mass media and the death penalty: Social construction of three Nebraska executions. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43, 236-253.
- [8] McKelvie, Stuart J. (2006). Attitude toward capital punishment is related to capital and non-capital sentencing. *North American Journal of Psychology* 3(8), 567-590.
- [9] Schudson, Michael. (2001). The objectivity norm in American journalism. *Journalism*, 2(2), 149-170.
- [10] Zeldes, Geri Alunit and Fico, Frederick (2008). Partisan balance and bias in network coverage of the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 52, 563-580

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ABOUT THE FIRST AUTHOR

Dr. Minh Kim is currently Assistant Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sungkyunkwan University in Korea. She obtained her PhD in Political Communication at the University of Manchester in the UK where she worked as a Hallsworth Research Fellow after completing her doctoral degree.

She received the Arthur McDougall Prize for Best Dissertation from the Political Studies

Association in the UK in 2006. Her research themes include peace journalism, mathematical modeling of communication behavior, and soft power and public diplomacy, and proposed a number of theories including news anthropology, social contents, psychological movement, and lateral and vertical structures of politics.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Minha Kim is Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul 110-745, South Korea (phone: +82 2 760 0688; fax: +82 2 760 0390; e-mail: minha.kim@skku.edu)

Hyun-Jin Kwon is MA Student, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul 110-745, South Korea (e-mail: chloe0811@skku.edu)