

## ICPSR Data Brunch Podcast Bonus Episode: Episode 9: Media Bias and Reliability

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### Transcript

Dory Knight Ingram:

(Music) Hey everyone. And welcome to Data Brunch with ICPSR. If you love data, this is going to be food for thought. I'm Dory.

Anna Shelton:

And I'm Anna.

Dory:

We are recording these episodes live from our remote offices. So please excuse cameos from canine colleagues, kids in class and other unexpected moments.

Anna:

Welcome back to Data Branch Dory.

Dory:

Welcome back. It's good to be back. You know what? We have a great season in the works and everyone listening, we'd love to hear from you. We have two new buttons on our website, one for suggesting guests and topics and the other for giving us feedback. We would love to hear from you. You can also use the hashtag Data Brunch to tag us on social media.

Anna:

So this season will be a little bit different. And for our longtime listeners, we would love to hear what you think. And wow, do we have an incredible guest this week?

Dory:

And we have something special at the very end for those who stick with us after the interview.

Anna:

We sure do. So some quick business upfront. Like Dory said after the interview, we'll be highlighting some new data, including a new transgender study that's just come in. It's the TransPop data and we could not be more excited. But for now, if you're listening to this episode at a later date, you can always visit [icpsr.umich.edu](https://icpsr.umich.edu) to see our current job listings and upcoming events. And I'm going to mention a few things right now. First, we are hiring. And as of this recording, we have eight job openings, including a research analyst and software engineers and more. And we will link to those in the show notes. And we do want to invite you all to join us for our virtual conference, which is taking place in October 2021. And that conference is all about data doing good. And we have presentations on data ethics and diversity equity and inclusion data.

Anna:

We have practical resources. We have some amazing guest speakers. So please do join us. If you haven't yet, you can sign up for our email newsletter and we'll give that link in our show notes to get registration information. This conference is free and it's open to the public and you can also register by just going to our homepage of our website and you'll find a link there. And I also want to let you know, we have some upcoming webinars. There's going to be one about using GIS data.

Anna:

There's a really interesting one about research on higher education. They're going to talk about psychological series of student engagement and what goes on in college classes. And there's a few others. There's a lot of webinars coming up, so you can register for those on our homepage. So up next, we are so excited to have this incredible guest with us for our first episode of the new season. Over the last couple of years, we have just fallen in love with this chart, looking at bias in media. It's something that all of us nerds over here at ICPSR have really gravitated towards. And we are so excited to have the creator of that come on and talk to us about the data behind it and just how important it is. So with that, I'm going to turn it over to you Dory.

Dory:

Welcome back everybody. This is actually our first episode of season two. And we are just starting off large, okay. So we have with us today Vanessa Otero, who is creator of the Media Bias Chart and also founder and CEO of Ad Fontes Media. Welcome Vanessa.

Vanessa Otero:

Hi, thanks so much for having me today.

Dory:

And because today's conversation might take a little bit of a different structure, I just want to make sure you know we have some guests in the virtual room with us. We have ICPSRs Jenna Tyson, who is a multimedia designer. Hey Jenna.

Jenna Tyson:

Hi everybody.

Dory:

And then we have ICPSRs Anna Shelton.

Anna:

Hi everybody.

Dory:

So, we are here to talk about the pretty amazing Media Bias Chart. And so I have a little bit of a disclosure to make. So for almost 20 years of my life, I spent time as a newspaper journalist. And so of course I am very interested in this chart. My priors are, the Detroit Free Press, the Boston Club, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Tampa Bay Times. So I know where they all are on the charts.

Vanessa Otero:

Excellent publications. Rated very highly in our chart.

Dory:

Yeah so it is interesting. And so one reason why I'm happy that Jenna is here is, if you work in the media, the things that are in the Media Bias Chart it's second nature. So you might not really think about it as you consume other media. You pretty much know where people fall. But it was really cool when my colleague Jenna said, hey, I found this really cool resource. And I was like, oh yeah, I know about that. And so Jenna, if you wouldn't mind, I want to hear your story about how you were introduced to it and then that'll lead into our questions for Vanessa.

Jenna Tyson:

Sounds good Dory. I don't know if I can remember exactly how I stumbled across the Media Bias Chart, but it was when I was trying to navigate leading up to the presidential election and all of the Black Lives Matters stuff and the COVID stuff and trying to find sources that weren't biased basically, or I was looking for accurate information and I came across the media chart and it's actually changed my life because now I use AP news or Reuters. And that's where I get my news. And if I see something crazy or something that makes my anxiety spike, I think, you know what, let me check on AP news or Reuters. And then if it's not there, then I'm like, okay, let me check again on like Snopes or some of those places that talk about these crazy things that you see on Facebook. And so that's how I came in contact with it. And I've been recommending it just so many people because it's just so hard to find reliable unbiased information.

Dory:

Thank you Jenna. So it sounds like you have something in common with Vanessa who a patent attorney was hearing friends fight over the legitimacy of sources during the 2016 election. And just sounds like Vanessa, you just got frustrated and did something about it. So tell us about that.

Vanessa Otero:

Yeah. In the run up to the 2016 election, but the specific thing that bothered me was people fighting with each other very ineffectively on social media, particularly Facebook, by throwing links at each other from sources that they thought were reputable. And then they would fail to convince whoever they were arguing with because the other person would just dismiss it as biased. And in a lot of cases it was. I thought I just wanted to talk to my friends about the news and this concept that some new sources are more reliable. I'm sure there's people refer to it as fake news, but there are sources that are sort of in the middle of that. There's a lot of opinion on analysis content out there. And then there's left and right things, but then there are things that are way out there and extreme.

Vanessa Otero:

And as a patent attorney, I knew that I explain things in words and pictures, but pictures really drive a lot of understanding for folks. So as you said Dory, if you're in the media, you're like very media savvy, you're exposed to a lot of different news sources. You sort of understand that different sources fall in different parts of the landscape intuitively, but not everybody does. And so I was sort of shocked at how popular this got, when I created this as a hobby. As I like to say, I'm a huge nerd, which is why as a hobby, I was making pictures of the news landscape in the evening, while on my day job was a lawyer. So yeah, it got really popular and I just got pulled into this line of work.

Dory:

So this being Data Brunch, I was really struck by a description on the Ad Fontes website that says and I quote, "Junk news is like junk food. And just like junk food has caused massive health epidemics in our country. Junk news is causing a massive polarization epidemic." That just really stuck with me. And do you want to expound on that?

Vanessa Otero:

Yeah. Junk food and in junk news. This analogy I think is really apt because in the fifties and sixties, when there was all of a sudden leaps forward in food processing, which solved one problem, which is food insecurity and storage and cleanliness issues. But then all of a sudden we had more calories and anybody really needed. So it wasn't until years later where we realized the adverse health effects of that. And I think we're in a similar space now with junk news. We've got a massive proliferation of information that we've never had to deal with before, which is great. And ultimately like a net benefit, but we're experiencing these growing pains of having to deal with, how to process more information than we ever had available to us at once.

Vanessa Otero:

So for information we're at these early stages where we're learning, okay, what's good, okay and bad as far as like information, how do I discern that? And then how do I demand it? How do the publishers that produce it, they've got incentives. People like it, they get the dopamine hit from bias, confirming junk news. So how do we break those cycles? So I think there's corollaries to healthy diet and exercise, like healthy information diet. And what I like to call civic exercise, doing things like voting and volunteering and talking to real people that you disagree with. Those are forms of civic exercise. And in addition to cleaning up your information diet, I think we can improve where we're at and adapt to the information environment that we're facing right now.

Anna:

Awesome. I could not agree on that stuff more. And oh my goodness, could we have a whole other podcast talking about food because this is yes, right up my alley. So as a fellow self-professed nerd, you're bringing up some interesting questions for me about how you do develop your own data. So could you tell us a little bit about how you collect your data and how do you make sure that your own data and your own analysis are not biased?

Vanessa Otero:

Yeah. That was sort of the first thing we had to wrestle with, well, I had to wrestle with by myself when I just created this as a hobby and everyone would ask a couple of things. One of the things they would ask for was what the data is and what the methodology is. And could we rate some more news sources of course. And then they say, well hey, isn't this bias because you're biased? And I thought, oh yeah, that's true. I am biased because I'm a person. How do we solve that? And I really wanted to make this better as soon as I saw it got popular because people were using it in schools and that sort of a lot of responsibility. I came from a legal background and was in law school.

Vanessa Otero:

And I appreciate the rigor that goes into academic publishing. So I wanted to make it, it set out on making this as good as it could possibly be. So I knew that there would need to involve like a better samples, controls for how we select our samples and then ultimately diversity across all the relevant

domains, which is certainly political affiliation, diversity, and then across gender, race, age, and other abilities. All sorts of things that you'd go into people's experiences because people come to the news with their own subjective experiences. And especially like the political diversity, because we're rating a lot of political things on the left right spectrum, it's very important to people to know that we're being as fair as possible with that.

Vanessa Otero:

So the first multi analysts ratings project we did in 2019. And I recruited a group of about 20 analysts and spent a few months getting our first big sets of a few thousand articles. We had about 7,000 articles total and a little bit over 120, 130 total news sources. And I developed a content analysis methodology. I developed a taxonomy for what is at the top and what's in the middle and what's at the bottom of the news landscape. And there's a lot that goes into that. There's certain principles of journalism and law and philosophy that went into like, why something's good, why something's okay, why something's bad. So ultimately at the top, we put the work journalists do up there in the original fact reporting in fact reporting. Right below that, there's a section called complex analysis and analysis.

Vanessa Otero:

Now analysis is still really good and some of the best news sources are in that section right there. But the reason we put the fact reporting collection of information and reporting of information at the top, the work that journalists do, is because the analysis couldn't occur without it. So we need that at the top of the news landscape. And so below that is opinion. It's still usually based in truth not lies. But so opinion, not as valuable. Everybody's got them. And then below that are things that are problematic. Below that things that are misleading, and below that things that are inaccurate or fabricated. So that makes sense to most people. And then the left-right is like a contemporary US left-right spectrum. But I could dive into each of these topics. But with our analysts, I created a methodology where we have first created, it was by going through articles and individual sentences, individual headlines and pictures and trying to pick out like for each of these, what are the things that make us value them on each of these domains?

Vanessa Otero:

And we broke it down into things like expression, like this expresses fact analysis or opinion, and then veracity. Everyone thinks of like reliability as like fact fullness or truth or something like that. And it's ultimately the veracity scale, which condenses a lot of those principles. But then there are other things like, the headline and graphic and how will those match up to the article. So those are really our main factors, and there were some other sub factors. And then for bias, sub factors are, political position, language, like how you refer to your opponents or how you refer to an issue and things like comparison, topic selection, and omission.

Vanessa Otero:

So there's number of different sub factors in there. Train the analysts on each of those and they give scores for each one and then they give an overall reliability and bias score that's numeric. So we have like a somewhat arbitrary seeming scale from zero to 64 for reliability, and minus 42 to plus 42. It's basically eight categories for reliability and seven categories for bias. And ultimately how we come up with our overall source ratings is, we'll take a representative sample of the web source or the TV show or the podcast, because now we do all those different mediums.

Vanessa Otero:

And the minimum for articles is like 15 articles. But the bigger sources that we've got, we've got hundreds of articles rated for those. And the overall source score is a weighted average of those sample articles. So it's a weighted average because we wait really low reliability and really high biased scores heavier, because when people come across a piece of news or news like content that is misleading or problematic or fake or extremely biased, that weighs very heavily in the minds of the people who are consuming that news source. So New York Times opinion articles or Wall Street Journal opinion articles are going to impact the overall view of the bias of that whole source.

Jenna Tyson:

So you were talking about, you went through articles and podcasts and you'd look at photos and all this sort of stuff. And I just was wondering when you're looking at photos and you're rating for some of these different categories, can you give us an example of what that would look like?

Vanessa Otero:

Yeah. I think the most common example is a highly unflattering picture of an opposing politician. That's sort of the main one that would contribute heavily to bias. Or another example is, if you're talking about like topic selection or omission, we noticed this a lot last year when there were protests over the summer in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. If the paper wanted to focus on like violence, destruction and looting and have a picture of like a burning building and cars overturned, that's a different focus and it has a different meaning for bias than a picture of a large group of peaceful protesters walking down the street in the middle of the day.

Dory:

That's a great question Jenna. That's another one of those things that it's like second nature. It's almost like a hobby. When I read the headline and I see the picture or I see the picture first, I already know what tone the headline is going to be, based on whether the person is smiling or sad or it's a gotcha moment or they look confused. Yeah. It's interesting.

Jenna Tyson:

Yeah, it's so interesting. So I was going to ask you, why does bias in the media even matter? But I think that you've addressed that. And I think that that's something that we know intrinsically, but it's interesting to be able to identify it. But then kind of following up on that, if we got this right. So say that everybody was checking this out and looking at the Media Bias Chart and only paying attention to the least biased places. If we had that more media aware consumer, how would that change things? How would people's lives be different?

Vanessa Otero:

Well, I think we see the problems of having a non-savvy or non-information literate electorate society right now. If people can't discern good information from bad information, it affects our very lives and our health. People will say, what would be the worst thing that could happen if this misinformation problem continues? I don't really think it needs to get any worse. I think it's already been about as bad as it can get. 700,000 people have died in the pandemic that did not have to be this polarized or politicized. People literally stormed the capital to try to undo the election based on misinformation. So that's pretty bad. That's pretty dire. And other real life consequences of polarization, I feel like polarization is the main thing that is a main problem that's exacerbated.

Vanessa Otero:

I mean, not that like there wasn't polarization before there was media. There've been periods of polarization before. We didn't need Facebook to have the civil war. People have been polarized. But I think it's an accelerator the information that environment where we get sucked into these bias confirming loops and become really resistant to new information that might cause us to shift our beliefs because they become so tied to people's identities. So since polarization and identity and the political decisions and the life decisions that you make are so often tied up together, you have people that just for some reason, they've decided that they are against vaccines and pro any other treatment that's floated out as a possible cure, whether it be like vitamin D or hydroxychloroquine or ivermectin, just because it's like going against the grain and they just see value in like going against the grain.

Vanessa Otero:

So what could it look like if we just focused on better information, getting better information? Well I think what that would look like is, more people being okay with the fact that problems are complicated and require complex solutions and just being able to sit in that for a little while. Things aren't so binary, things aren't so like, oh my side versus your side. Having things be binary and polarized is a way of simplifying things and like coping with all the information that we've got in the world. I mean, it's a coping mechanism.

Vanessa Otero:

It's hard to deal with all the problems in the world. So if you could just say, all right, my team believes this and I'm just going to stick with that. And I don't have to think about it any further, that's easier. It's more uncomfortable to say, oh, we don't know what the solutions to these problems, like how to get past this pandemic or how to solve healthcare, or how to solve immigration, or how to solve a number of these problems that we face. So I think if we move towards people complexifying their thoughts a bit and complexifying their understanding, that would be a good thing.

Anna:

So I have a question, I know that we're running short on time, so I'm trying to be respectful of that and I have a thousand questions. But one thing I'd love to know very quickly is what are some things that people could look out for when they're reading a news article, watching a news broadcast, looking at their social media. What are some quick tells that people could be looking out for to see that bias quickly?

Vanessa Otero:

Yeah, great question. Jenna you said, when things make you really anxious. So if something stirs a strong emotion, either really positive or really negative, that's a good signal. And we're consuming information really quickly, especially on TV. There's so much coming at you visually and auditorily at the same time. It's sort of like, remember when you first started driving, it's like wow, there's a lot of information to take in. But then over time it becomes second nature. So sometimes we just let this information, especially on cable news, just wash over us. And we just ingest it and accept it. It's really helpful to just slow down and think about just the expression itself of the content.

Vanessa Otero:

Is it expressed in a bunch of like fact statements? Is it expressed more as like analysis where they say like, here's a fact but then here's a conclusion or some inferences and statements of meaning about that

fact, or are they just spitting out opinion after opinion, after opinion, after opinion. And I think just recognizing that those distinctions between, let me give you examples that you can bring to mind immediately.

Vanessa Otero:

You watch your half hour nightly news on the major networks like ABC, NBC, CBS, or PBS news hour. They'll cover 12 to 15 stories in 30 minutes, which does not leave a lot of time for opinion and analysis. It's just like, this is what happened, this is what happened, this was what happened. If you watch CNN, Fox, MSNBC, you can watch it for like six hours and hear four stories and 38 pundits. So that's a lot of analysis and opinion content. It's further away from news. It's cheaper to produce. It's like the junk food of news. It's like the donuts and fries of the media landscape. Like yes, it's delicious and satisfying and it's technically food, but not the most nutritious.

Dory:

Thank you, the way to bring it full circle. Like the junk buffet. How can listeners find out more about this or contact you?

Vanessa Otero:

Yeah. Go to our website, which is [adfontesmedia.com](http://adfontesmedia.com). A-D F-O-N-T-E-S media.com. You'll see our static media bias chart and our interactive Media Bias Chart. And we provide all sorts of resources for individuals, schools in other use cases for our data, because that's where we're here about, data. We have news reliability and bias data. That's a unique in the world and can help a lot of people navigate the news landscape.

Dory:

Okay. Well a huge thank you to you Vanessa. This is an honor. We are biased. We like the Media Bias Chart. I mean, can you imagine the kids learning this in school, how they will be when they get our age, what kind of media consumers are going to be? So kudos to you.

Vanessa Otero:

I hope so. And on a hopeful note I feel like it seems like we're in a tough time right now, but just like a generation can learn to go from illiterate to illiterate in just one generation, so can a society learn to go from media illiterate to media literate in one generation, as long as it's taught in the schools. So, that's what we got to work on.

Dory:

Thank you so much.

Vanessa Otero:

All right. Thanks all.

Anna:

All right. Thank you so much Vanessa for joining us. We do want to tell you about some new data that's come in over the summer. And we are so excited to have the TransPop study come to live at ICPSR. And if you haven't heard of the TransPop study, this is the first national probability sample of transgender

individuals in the United States. It does also include a comparative cisgender sample. And we have a really great recorded webinar on how to use these data and why these data are important and that's on our YouTube. So we'll put that in the show notes. Please do check that out.

Dory:

And while we're talking about a national dataset. I wanted to note a new entry in the ICPSR bibliography. An article in this month's issue of pediatrics talks about Baby's First Years and the principal investigators describe the studies goals, design and data collection, along with its potential contributions to science. According to the authors, Baby's First Years is the first randomized controlled trial in the United States that is quote, "Designed to identify the causal impact of poverty reduction on early childhood development."

Anna:

Awesome. I can't wait to see what people do with these new data. So, that is the end of the episode. Thank you so much for being with us.

Dory:

If you aren't already subscribe now on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts, tell us what you like to hear by filling out the feedback form on our website and share your thoughts on social media using hashtag Data Brunch.

Anna:

And thank you as always to the over 700 members of ICPSR. This podcast would not be possible without all of you. And we want to give a warm shout out to our newest members, the Western Economic Association International. And thank you to our producer Scott Campbell in the background.

Dory:

You can get in touch with us by visiting our website, [icpsr.umich.edu](http://icpsr.umich.edu) or emailing us at [ICPSR-Podcast@umich.edu](mailto:ICPSR-Podcast@umich.edu).

Anna:

You made it. We promised you something for everyone who stuck with us this far. So Dory, tell them what they won.

Dory:

Yay. You have won an opportunity to show us how you Data Brunch and become ICPSR famous. We'll be giving away some ICPSR swag to someone out there. Here's how you get it. Take a picture and tag us on social media, using hashtag Data Brunch, or send us an email at [icpsr-podcast@umich.edu](mailto:icpsr-podcast@umich.edu). We can't wait to see it.

Anna:

I'm Anna.

Dory:

And I'm Dory. And thanks for joining us at ICPSR Data Brunch.

