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Subject: News from Kenya McCullum, Communication Specialist
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COM 101: The Theory Behind The Practice

January 2006

Dear Kenya,

According to the Pew Research Center, 60 percent of Americans believe that news organizations are "politically biased in their reporting"—a belief that only 45 percent held in 1985.

Although many people may see Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel as one of the worst offenders when it comes to biased reporting with a political agenda, a study by Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan would surprise them. DellaVigna and Kaplan found that not only does the Fox News Channel have no real impact on the outcome of an election, it has no real effect on whether or not viewers actually vote.

(Source: Krueger, Alan B. Fair? Balanced? A Study Finds It Does Not Matter. *The New York Times*. August 18, 2005.)

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Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer and not-so-recovered academic based in San Francisco. Her M.A. in Communication has given her a theoretical framework that is the foundation of her writing craft, but the truth is she's also genuinely fascinated by communication theory. This newsletter is an extension of Kenya's love of things academic, and she hopes that you will find these communication tidbits as interesting as she does-- or at least that COM 101 will be an entertaining diversion from your busy day.

Whose Bias Is It Anyway?



While the Pew Research Center reports that distrust in the media is on the rise, one study suggests that, though this is true, the cause may not be journalists.

Although journalists strive to remain objective in their reporting, they rely on sources that aren't. In order to offset this problem, reporters will seek biased sources on both sides of a debate to keep their stories fair.

However, consumers of media may not be aware that some of the bias in news reports is more the result of a subject using the media to advance an agenda, rather than the reporter trying to advance one through the sources. Another problem is that the general public cannot always identify the nuances of sources' differing opinions—so people may erroneously believe that only one side of an argument is being represented, when there are actually two.

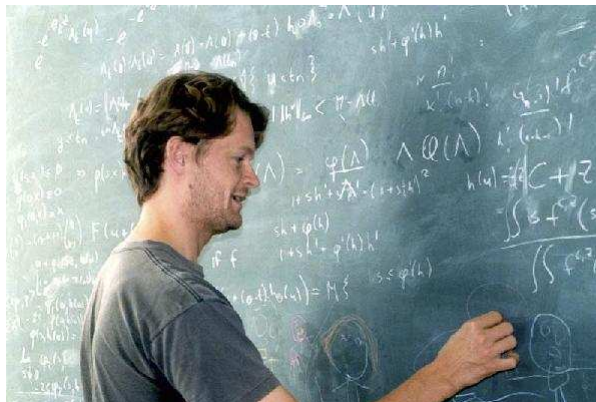
Because news consumers are more likely to blame journalists for bias—rather than sources for manipulation—reporters may benefit from trying to see the news from the consumers' eyes, and present it in a way that the audience can accept.

(Source: Rouner, D., Slater, M.D., and Buddenbaum, J.M. (1999). How Perceptions of News Bias in News Sources Relate to Beliefs about Media Bias. *Newspaper Research Journal* 20(2).)

Lies, Damn Lies, and Inflated Statistics

Sex sells—even in science.

Last November, a study released by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) reported that the amount of sexual material on television had doubled since 1998. That's a lot of sex on TV, right?



What the KFF failed to mention is that it released findings of a similar study back in 2002. The foundation did not base the 2005 study on the data collected in 2002, but

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instead compared the amount of sex on television in 2005 to that in 1998, thus making the figure much larger.

If the 2005 KFF study had actually compared the amount of sexual content on television in 2005 to that in 2002, the increase would only have been 26 percent—hardly a brow-raising result.

(Source: TV Sex Study Sexed Up. www.stats.org. November 18, 2005.)

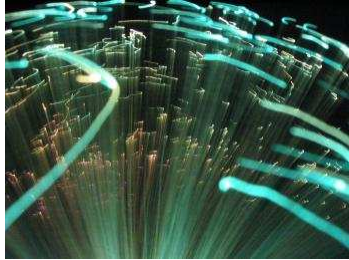
Contracting Trust

What do contracts have to do with interpersonal trust? A lot, when organizational and personal contexts cross paths. In fact, in order to reduce uncertainty in interpersonal interactions during work situations, formal guidelines like contracts can be necessary. However, in cases where a strong sense of trust has been established, parties may not feel the need for the rigid constraints of a contract to define relationships.

Malhotra, D. and Murnighan, J.K. (2002). The Effects of Contracts on Interpersonal Trust. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 47(3.)

Random Facts of Senseless Communicating

- A Glendale, California man expressed his anger about receiving a parking ticket in a fiery way—arson, that is. Bruce Morrison decided to say it with fire by setting the city's 30-foot Christmas tree ablaze. Morrison caused \$7,500 in damages and was arrested for arson.


- A man and wife in the midst of a divorce are now running against each other for a state representative seat in South Texas. Although Jessica Reyes-Martinez said she is "running for office, not against him," she just happened to throw her hat into the ring 30 minutes before the deadline. Ever the politician, the incumbent husband Armando Martinez only responded, "Everyone is free to run."

Quick Communication Quote of the Week

"Tis better to be silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt."

-Abraham Lincoln

Stay Tuned!

In the next issue: There's a new addiction in the psychological community—Internet addiction disorder—and therapists at the Internet/Computer Addiction Services clinic are treating more and more patients suffering from it.

email: kmccullum@mindspring.com
phone: 415-661-9706; fax: 415-520-0246

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