

ANATOMY OF A MERGER

The Elusive Search for Fairness at the Journal/Sentinel

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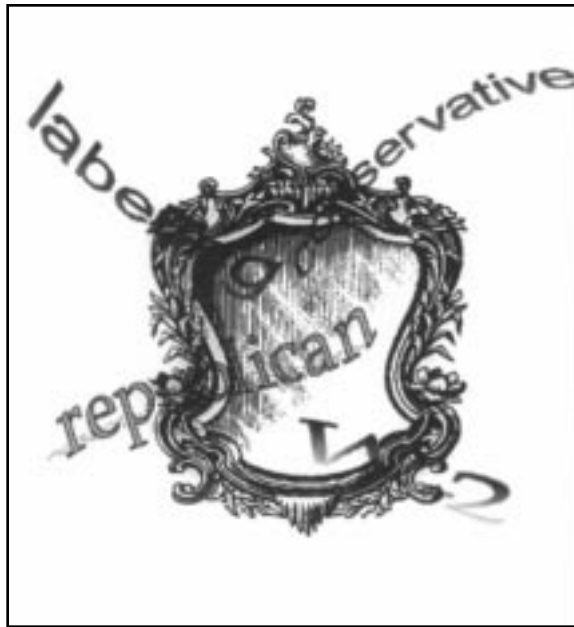
When the Milwaukee *Journal* and the Milwaukee *Sentinel* merged to become the *Journal Sentinel* in April of 1995, the new paper's editorial board set forth a few guiding principles in a piece entitled, "Where we stand at the *Journal Sentinel*." Some of the highlights were as follows:

— "We must constantly police our own prejudices, particularly as they relate to individuals or causes we have grown either to respect or distrust."

— "We will strive to be accurate and fair."

— "We are independent, beholden to no special interest or political party."

The greatest threat to the pursuit of such ideals is not, as some would claim, a raging liberal bias. Yes, reporters tend to have more liberal political beliefs than the average citizen. Take it from the most trusted man in America, Walter Cronkite: "Everybody knows that there's a liberal, that there's a heavy liberal persuasion among correspondents."¹ But the



correspondents themselves know that it is both unethical and self-defeating to allow their views to pollute news coverage in deliberate, blatant, systematic ways.

More subtle forms of inaccurate and unfair coverage can manifest themselves fairly easily, however, unless reporters, editors, and editorial writers take great care to avoid them. A paper might, for example,

attach ideological labels to one group of political actors more frequently than another. Or it might seek comments from those on one side of a debate without seeking counterbalancing comments from those on the other side. Or it might not always trouble itself with the facts when it is confident of an editorial position. Or it might not be sufficiently skeptical of the sources it cites in news stories.

As indicated by the *Journal Sentinel's* own standards, avoiding these problems requires aggressive self-examination and vigorous efforts to check and re-check each story and editorial for flaws. Such work is neither

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enjoyable nor easy, particularly in the context of daily deadlines. It would not be surprising, therefore, if extensive efforts to ensure a high level of accuracy and fairness took a back seat to the need to get out a reasonably accurate and fair product every day, day after day. Not surprising, perhaps, but unfortunate. And unfortunately, that appears to be what is happening at the *Journal Sentinel*.

What Does Fair Coverage Look Like?

Charges of media bias fly freely, often reflexively, in American politics. Newt Gingrich protests that Republicans are not really "cutting" Medicare, as the press would have us believe. President Clinton complains that talk radio is full of voices hostile to his administration. And Ross Perot insists that a small, well-financed cabal of dirty tricksters is agitating to keep him from buying commercial network time.

It is easy to dismiss such allegations as the self-serving rhetoric of political gasbags. Thanks to modern technology, however, the discussion need not end there. A number of multi-media publishing houses now publish the full text of city newspapers, including the *Journal Sentinel*, on compact disc. In this CD-ROM format, the newspaper's contents are searchable by keyword, key phrase, subject matter, and section. With this capability, one can conduct tests of the fairness and accuracy of newspaper coverage that range from the very simple, such as looking for consistency in the use of ideological labels, to the more complex, such as an examination of whether the paper's coverage of a particular issue is factually accurate, and whether it gives equal time to all relevant viewpoints.

Take the issue of abortion, for example. Groups or individuals that support abortion rights like to be referred to as "pro-choice." Groups or individuals that oppose abortion like to be called "pro-life." For a newspaper to adopt either group's preferred terminology is to give weight to that group's argument – that the abortion issue is really

about freedom of choice or is really about preserving human life. Fair coverage of abortion-related news, therefore, dictates that the phrases "pro-choice" and "pro-life" either not be used at all or be used with roughly equal frequency.

So how does the *Journal Sentinel* do on this score? At the time the research for this article was completed, the CD version of the paper was current through July 31, 1997. I undertook a search to identify all *Journal Sentinel* news stories from January 1, 1996 through July 31, 1997 that contained any of the following phrases: "right-to-life," "pro-life," "anti-abortion," "abortion foe," "abortion opponent," "pro-choice," "abortion rights," and "abortion-rights."² I read each story to determine the extent to which the phrases "pro-choice" and "pro-life," as opposed to the more neutral phrases, were used to describe individuals and groups involved in the abortion debate.

In the vast majority of cases, the *Journal Sentinel* used neutral language to describe the relevant groups and individuals. In describing abortion-rights advocates or organizations, the paper referred to them with neutral language 76% of the time (108 out of 143 stories). The corresponding number for groups or individuals opposed to abortion was 79% (202 out of 257 stories). Stories that referred to "pro-choicers" as such constituted only 18% of all stories describing abortion-rights supporters; stories making reference to "pro-lifers" were only 14% of all stories about abortion opponents. The remaining stories in both categories used both neutral and non-neutral language (see Table 1 below for a summary of these and other word/phrase count data). In general, then, the paper's coverage of the abortion issue seems fair and balanced, at least in the application of labels used to describe politicians, activists, and organizations involved in the debate.

Republican Extremists

Unfortunately, the *Journal Sentinel* fails to live up to the high standards of its abortion

coverage in a number of other areas. The paper routinely, for example, provides a forum for those who consider Republican politicians or issue positions “extreme,” or connected to the “hard right” or “far right.” The paper almost never paints Democratic politicians in equivalent terms.

I performed a keyword search of news stories that contained the words “Republican” or “Republicans” and also the words or phrases “extreme,” “extremist,” “extremists,” “hard right,” “far right,” or “radical right.” This search turned up 70 stories across the two years that described Republicans in terms suggesting ideological extremism. A typical story quoted the campaign manager of Lydia Spottswood, Rep. Mark Neumann’s Democratic opponent in the last election, as calling Neumann “an obsessed extremist” (11/2/96). Another referred to meetings of “the Republican hard right” on Capitol Hill (11/14/96). In another, the paper quoted Democratic state senator Chuck Chvala’s comments about the “radical right-wing agenda” of Assembly Republicans (5/27/97).

Similar references to Democrats are few and far between. A keyword/keyphrase search for such references produced only seven stories in 1996 and 1997. Thus, Republicans and Republican issue positions are portrayed as “extreme” or as representing the party’s extreme elements about 10 times as often as Democrats and Democratic issue positions are characterized similarly.

Three important qualifications must be made to these data. First, in 16 of the 70 stories about Republicans, the person making the allegation of extremism was also a Republican

(mostly Bob Dole describing Pat Buchanan in the 1996 campaign). Yet even if one deducts these stories from the total, the ratio of Republican “extremism” stories to Democratic stories remains about eight to one.

Second, 70 stories over the course of 19 months of news coverage is clearly a very small proportion of the total number of stories on politics in that time. Even with only 70 stories, however, three or four times a month readers encountered a new depiction of Republican extremism, either from an author or a quoted or paraphrased source. The paper carried similar stories about Democrats only once every few months.

Finally, defenders of the *Journal Sentinel* no doubt would point out that the paper cannot control what the likes of Lydia Spottswood and Chuck Chvala say to reporters. The paper can control, however, what it prints and what it does not. And the *Journal Sentinel* clearly prints the “extremist” language much more often when it comes from liberals and Democrats than from Republicans and conserv-

atives.

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Read the Label and Follow the Money

The *Journal Sentinel* also seems to be of two minds when describing policy-research organizations like the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI), the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Employment and Training Institute (ETI), the LaFollette Institute in Madison, the Institute for Research on Poverty in Madison (IRP), and the Public Policy Forum in Milwaukee (PPF). In 1996 and 1997, the paper mentioned WPRI in 23 stories. In 10 of those stories, the institute was described as “conservative” or “conservative-

leaning,” or was described as receiving funding from the Bradley Foundation, or both. Thus, it was not uncommon to read descriptions such as “the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, a conservative-leaning think tank” (10/5/96) or the qualifier, “the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute is funded by the Bradley Foundation, which often supports conservative causes” (7/17/96).

Significantly, however, the paper fails to provide similar information about the other major research institutes in the state. In 1996 and 1997 there were 129 stories in the *Journal Sentinel* referring to LaFollette, ETI, IRP, or PPF. In not one of those stories was there any description of these organizations’ ideological orientations or their funding sources.³ Thus, where WPRI is referred to as “a conservative, Milwaukee-based institute” (10/9/96), the other institutes either are not described at all or are described with innocuous language such as “a non-profit research organization” or “a non-profit, non-partisan organization.”

Granted, many of the paper’s references to the other organizations were incidental to the subject matter here. The Public Policy Forum, for example, might be mentioned in a

newspaper story on one of its board members, or the Institute for Research on Poverty might be cited as the sponsor of a public forum. But even in the cases in which representatives of such organizations are taking a stand on a policy issue, presenting research results, or being cited as a source for data, not once is there any indication of the organizations’ political leanings or of who funds their operations.

Journal Sentinel news stories on politics reflect the same basic approach to labeling, perhaps not surprisingly. I performed a keyword search of all 1996/1997 news stories containing the words “conservative” and “Republican” or the words “liberal” and “Democrat,” or both sets of words. Examining the hundreds of news stories produced by this search, one finds the word “conservative” or its cognates used 1128 times, and the word “liberal” and its cognates used only 345 times. That is slightly greater than a three-to-one ratio.

Of course, not every use of the word “conservative” in a news story describes the political views of a person or organization. Budget estimates, for example, might be described as “conservative,” as might someone’s attire or investment strategy. But the word “liberal” can be put to similar, non-political uses as well. In any event, because the news-story search included the words “Republican” and “Democrat,” the vast majority of stories produced by the search used “liberal” and “conservative” as political labels. And as noted above, the “conservative” label was used far more frequently than the “liberal” one.

Covering Welfare Reform

Fairly simple analyses such as the ones described above are instructive, but the available technology also allows one to

TABLE 1 *Journal Sentinel* Keyword/Keyphrase Search Results, January 1, 1996 - July 31, 1997

Keyword/Keyphrase Category	Frequency
“Abortion Rights” Language	76% of stories
“Anti-Abortion” Language	79% of stories
“Pro-Choice” Language	18% of stories
“Pro-Life” Language	14 % of stories
Republican “Extremists”	70 stories
Democratic “Extremists”	7 stories
WPRI, “Conservative” or Funding Source	43% of stories
Other Think Tanks, Label or Funding Source	0% of stories
“Conservative” Label	1128 stories
“Liberal” Label	345 stories

identify the entire population of stories and editorials on a specific subject. One can then assess that body of work in some depth to determine its accuracy and fairness. Because I have spent much of the last two years studying welfare reform in Wisconsin for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, I chose to do a detailed analysis of *Journal Sentinel* news stories and editorials on welfare.

As one would expect, the paper has devoted extensive space to issues of welfare and low-wage work in Wisconsin, both on its editorial page and in straight news stories. The editorials, at least, do not lend themselves to the same sort of analysis performed above. Indeed, well-written, forceful editorials necessarily will rely on opinion-laden phrases, words, and rhetoric designed to express the author's viewpoint. One would hope, however, that they would be free of inaccuracies, erroneous assumptions, and insupportable logic. They are not.

In a December 14, 1996 editorial, the paper's editorial writers worried about the capacity of W-2 mothers to handle child-care costs: "under W-2, scheduled to start next September, the state subsidizes day care, but the parent (typically, the mother) has to come up with money out of her pocketbook, too." In fact, the vast majority of welfare mothers do not have to come up with money out of their pocketbooks for child care. Census Bureau data indicate that among all welfare mothers who work and have children under age 15, only about one third pay for day care. The rest use informal arrangements – relatives, neighbors, friends – or place their children in school during the day, or are able to bring their children to work with them.

On October 2, 1996, and on many other occasions, the paper fretted about W-2's lack of guaranteed support for program participants: "...under W-2 a parent can play by the rules, but still won't be statutorily assured of assistance. Yes, state officials say not to worry; such parents will be helped. That may be true – until money gets tight and the state looks for costs to cut." But for the first 28 months of W-2 operations, the state has fixed-dollar contracts with the W-2 agents in each of the state's counties, and with the five providers operating in Milwaukee. The state cannot "look for costs to cut" without violating the terms of those contracts. In other words, the state has made an essentially unbreakable commitment *not* to cut spending on W-2 over the program's first 28 months, even if money does get tight.

On April 29, 1996, the *Journal Sentinel* editorialized in favor of an increase in the minimum wage. The paper acknowledged the potential for job loss due to a minimum wage increase but added, "a wage floor is government's way of saying that jobs with pay below that floor are inher-

ently unfair and socially undesirable." Would the *Journal Sentinel's* editorial writers rather see unskilled men and women out of work, or working at low-wage jobs subsidized through refundable state and federal tax credits?

A September 23, 1996 editorial expressed concern that under Wisconsin's welfare reforms, "mothers have apparently given a higher priority to holding down jobs than to going to school to learn skills." One might wonder why women who already have jobs need to learn job skills. Perhaps so that they can get better jobs? A noble aspiration, but it is still an open empirical question whether a classroom education and training strategy for

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welfare mothers, as opposed to an immediate job-placement approach such as that under W-2, is cost-effective to the government and leads to better, higher-paying jobs for participants. There is some evidence in support of that proposition and some to the contrary.⁴

A July 25, 1996 editorial criticized federal welfare reform legislation because it requires more of recipients, "but, contradictorily, reduce(s) federal expenditures for needy families." The editorial fails to note, however, that funding levels under the federal legislation are pegged to state caseload numbers from the early-to-mid 1990s. Because caseloads have fallen sharply since then (more than 30%), states actually have enjoyed an infusion of federal cash. A July 13, 1997 *New York Times* article indicated that "under the new law, states will receive about \$2 billion more this year, 16 percent more than they otherwise would have." That totals about \$650 in additional funds for every welfare family in the country – not a "reduction" in anyone's dictionary.

There are other, smaller mistakes and missteps in the editorials as well. On April 29, 1996, the paper supported a minimum wage increase, arguing in part that the infrequency with which the wage is increased "helps to swell the ranks of the working poor." Yet Census data show that the "ranks of the working poor" have shrunk since the early 1990s. A March 7, 1996 editorial bemoaned the lack of training and education opportunities under W-2. The editorial failed to mention, however, that community-service workers, who arguably are most in need of such opportunities, can be required to spend up to 10 hours a week in education and training activities, as much as many college students. And an August 2, 1996 editorial erroneously referred to "the legal duty government had to cushion (children's) fall into poverty" under AFDC, W-2's predecessor. Actually, because states were not required to participate in the AFDC program, neither they nor the federal government was legally bound to provide assistance to poor children.

The *Journal Sentinel* news pages, too, are full of stories on W-2 and welfare reform. A keyword search from 1996 and 1997 for stories with "W-2" or "Wisconsin Works" in the text and "W-2," "Wisconsin Works," "AFDC," or "welfare" in the headline produced a total of 227 stories. In general these stories are free from major errors and appear to bring accurate information to bear on the important issues and events surrounding W-2 (although often in heavily anecdotal form). But accuracy of this sort is not the same as balance and fairness. Welfare reform, connected as it is to issues of race, poverty, and child welfare, tends to bring forth vocal advocates and critics with sharply differing viewpoints. As long as their arguments reside in the mainstream of political discourse and are espoused by credible groups and individuals, news coverage ought to give a roughly equal airing to all sides. All too often, however, the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage of W-2 and welfare reform fails this test

Again, it may be useful to establish a benchmark with a balanced, fair story on welfare reform. A story run on January 12, 1997 addressed the 60-day residency requirement for participation in W-2. The story quoted Pat DeLessio of Legal Action of Wisconsin as follows: "You're penalizing people because they have moved. The Supreme Court has found that that's unconstitutional. You can't discriminate against someone just because they're a new resident when these are necessary, vital services." The story's author got a response from David Blaska, a spokesman for the Department of Workforce Development: "We feel we're on solid ground. We believe that we can proceed. We're not doing this on a lark." Finally, the author sought clarification of the issue from a presumably neutral source, the state Legislative Reference Bureau, and found that "experts there have not been able to determine whether the residency rule is constitutional."

What makes this story balanced is the author's effort to get input from actors on both

sides of the debate. Though Mr. Blaska gets somewhat less ink than Ms. DeLessio, both are allowed to say their piece. The presentation of information from a third, disinterested source also greatly enhances the credibility of the story.

Unfortunately, the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage of W-2 and welfare reform is replete with stories that fall short of this standard. Those stories are of two varieties. The first type gives advocates of one point of view a greater forum for airing their arguments than those on the other side (or sides) of the debate. A July 22, 1997 article, for example, discussed the ongoing legislative debate over whether education and training activities should count as "work" under W-2. The article quoted one of the advocates for such a provision, Rep. Rebecca Young (D-Madison), as follows: "Education is key to moving families out of poverty and to keeping our state's work force attractive to businesses paying family-supporting wages." No proponent of the "labor force attachment," or "work first," position was quoted.

A June 27, 1997 story quoted Richard Oulahan, executive director of Esperanza Unida, a southside job training and service agency as saying, "There's a mentality out there that says we don't want to invest money in training people to get off welfare because it doesn't pay off." The story then described some of the agency's successful programs and quoted Oulahan again: "In September, programs like this will not be eligible activities for welfare." Defenders of W-2's work-first approach were not represented in the article.

A January 2, 1997 article discussed the major statutory changes in Wisconsin in the

year to come, among which was the W-2 program. The article noted that "President Clinton has hailed the project," but then offered this comment from Madison resident Lynn Doyle: "I think they need to back off and look at it more. I don't see it working because some people are going to have to pay for the mistakes other people have done." State residents who support the program were not quoted in the article.

An August 1, 1996 story on the president's decision to sign federal welfare reform into law recorded the response of Wisconsin "family advocate" groups. Among the quotes: "The White House must be a pretty nice place to live if someone's willing to put so many children in harm's way in order to stay there" (Marcus White, program coordinator of Interfaith Conference). "I am just sorry and sick that (Clinton) didn't have the courage to veto this. The desire to get elected has overwhelmed the desire to get things right for kids" (Anne Arnesen, director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families). "(Clinton's

decision) marks a sad and fundamental change in our nation's priorities" (Marjorie Morgan, chairwoman of the Coalition to Save Our Children). These expressions of concern were unbalanced by quotes in support of the president's decision, other than one by Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist commending Clinton "for the significant step he took today to end welfare."

A March 18, 1996 story on transportation issues under W-2 quoted four individuals expressing major concerns about how program participants will get to and from work. Only one individual, a state official, was quoted addressing these concerns.

What makes this story balanced is the author's effort to get input from actors on both sides of the debate

In a March 14, 1996 article covering the state Senate's passage of W-2, four critics of the program were quoted. Among them was Sen. Gwendolynne Moore (D-Milwaukee), who said, "It's shocking that this body could hold in contempt those who are so innocent, so vulnerable." Sen. Gary George (D-Milwaukee) added, "It's no different from Caesar's time. If you don't work, we will kill your children." Sen. Fred Risser (D-Madison) said, "The bill is designed to keep the poor poor." And Sen. Joseph Wineke (D-Verona) offered, "It's big government at its worst." Only Sen. Carol Buettner (R-Oshkosh) was quoted in support of the measure: "In W-2 we're giving people the opportunity and resources to work."

A March 9, 1996 story described Milwaukee County's efforts to reduce its AFDC caseload by an additional 4,000 cases in order to qualify to operate the new W-2 program. The article then quoted Anne Arnesen of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families as follows:

I am worried because I think we're going to find people who will drop out of the program and end up struggling to get by without welfare. They won't be getting food stamps, or health care, or child care, or the level of support necessary to provide for their kids or for their shelter.

No source was offered to challenge this statement. In fact, the story's author noted that Clifford O'Connor, director of the Milwaukee County Department of Human Services, "also has said Pay for Performance and similar programs could put thousands of families into the child welfare system."

Finally, a February 4, 1996 story covered the W-2 program's requirement that mothers begin working as early as 12 weeks after giving birth. Eight different individuals were cited raising questions and concerns

about the provision. Only one defender was allowed to offer a rebuttal.

A second manifestation of unbalanced coverage appears in the *Journal Sentinel's* reporting on research results relevant to welfare reform. As anyone knows who has read research output from university professors, public-policy institutes, and advocacy groups, not all manuscripts are created equal. There is good research, and there is bad research. There are results driven by ideology, and there are results driven by rigorous empirical work. There are conclusions drawn from cautious interpretations of reliable data, and there are those drawn from a sponsor's bank account. And, of course, there are all manner of findings that fall somewhere in between.

For all of their virtues, newspaper reporters generally do not have the training to determine when they are looking at quality research and when they are not. Yet the *Journal Sentinel's* reporters often cover research related to welfare with an uncritical eye. In general, the paper's writers take research reports at face value, as if they show precisely what their authors claim they show. Thus, there is almost always an imbalance in these stories in favor of the individuals and organizations that produced the research.

This has significant consequences for the way coverage of welfare reform plays out in the *Journal Sentinel*. In the 1996 - July 31, 1997 time frame, and using the same set of welfare-related stories as above, I identified 16 stories devoted mostly or entirely to research results from new studies relevant to welfare reform. An additional three stories mentioned the findings of studies that had been released previously. Thus, about once a month the *Journal Sentinel* reported on research with a bearing on the debate over W-2.⁵

As noted above, when the paper reports on research by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, it often refers to the institute as "conservative," or as affiliated with the Bradley Foundation, or both. Though this

oversimplifies matters significantly – much of WPRI’s work is not funded by the Bradley Foundation, and much of it addresses issues that do not fall along a liberal/conservative axis – such labeling might be defended as a means, however imperfect, of putting research results into some kind of context for readers. The *Journal Sentinel* does not follow this practice consistently, however. In stories on research related to W-2, the paper failed to provide any description whatsoever of sponsoring organizations such as the National Center for Children in Poverty, Community Coordinated Child Care, Inc., the Center for Economic Development, the Early Childhood Education and Care Initiative, the Employment and Training Institute, *Working Mother* magazine, and the Institute for Research on Poverty.

In other cases the paper provided descriptors, but they were not very helpful in assessing an organization’s orientation and mission. The Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative, for example, was described as a “statewide grass-roots group,” and the Annie E. Casey Foundation was described as “a private charitable organization, based in Baltimore, that focuses on disadvantaged children.” Similarly, on the rare occasion when the paper identified the funding source for a study, it typically provided no relevant detail. Thus, a study was said to have been financed by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, or the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, or the Helen Bader Foundation. But how useful is that information to readers if they are not familiar with these organizations?

The paper’s reporters also do a poor job of seeking reactions to new research. In

some cases the research simply runs as its own story, without any response from individuals or organizations that might take issue with the findings. This was true in the 1996/1997 period for studies by the Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative, the Employment and Training Institute, the Midwest Anti-Hunger Network, and the Institute for Research on Poverty. In other cases the paper provides a forum for dissenting voices, but supporters of the research are cited in even greater numbers. This was true of reporting on studies conducted or sponsored by the National Association of Child Advocates and the Employment and Training Institute.

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The most serious problem with the *Journal Sentinel*’s reporting on welfare-related research results, however, is that even when the paper does seek a response from an individual or group that does not share the sponsoring group’s orientation, it rarely seeks out sources that are qualified to comment on the quality of the data used in the research, the appropriateness of the research methods, and the validity of the researchers’ conclu-

sions. Thus, the reader almost never sees a well-informed discussion of whether or not the new research results ought to be taken seriously.

One brief example illustrates what can happen as a result of this approach. An August 17, 1996 story reported on the findings of a research report issued by the Center for Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The report found, among other things, that there would be two job seekers for every available job in the Milwaukee metropolitan area through 2005. This would signify serious trouble for W-2 if true.

It is not true, however. Center for Economic Development researchers made two critical mistakes in calculating the job gap. First, they assumed that in addition to new entrants to the labor force – mainly W-2 mothers, new arrivals to the state, and young people going to work for the first time – jobs would have to be found for 26,000 individuals already unemployed in the Milwaukee area. This assumption ignores the economic fact of frictional unemployment and implies that zero unemployment at a given moment is both possible and desirable. It is neither. Second, having assumed away frictional unemployment, Center researchers then counted 26,000 unemployed individuals in every year of their calculations, as if there would be 26,000 newly unemployed to be accommodated every year, rather than just one time, in the first year of their calculations.

This simple math error accounted for the vast majority of the Center's projected job gap. Center researchers' decision to ignore frictional unemployment almost surely made up the rest. The two mistakes taken together rendered the most sensational "finding" of the Center's study demonstrably false. Unfortunately, the *Journal Sentinel* did not check with a source who would have known that, and therefore gave the Center and its research report prominent, undeserved coverage.

Are the other studies reported in the paper flawed in similar ways? I don't know. More important, however, is that *Journal Sentinel* reporters don't know either. Neither, therefore, do their readers.

There is at least one simple remedy to this problem, clearly demonstrated in a March 25, 1996 story on a report by Lawrence Mead for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. The report was entitled "The Decline of Welfare in Wisconsin." It concluded that the state's welfare caseload had dropped as sharply as it had not just because of the healthy economy, but also because of the

state's aggressive efforts to move welfare recipients into work.

This was a controversial finding, and the reporter who wrote the story, Mary Beth Murphy, naturally sought reactions to it. Her choice of sources was commendable – Michael Wiseman and John Pawasarat, both welfare researchers with the knowledge and experience to offer an intelligent assessment of Mead's research. As it turned out, Wiseman did not comment on the research itself, but Pawasarat did, expressing his doubts about Mead's conclusions. Thus, readers were left with an understanding that the findings were not undisputed. Whether one sides with Pawasarat or Mead, the important point is that the reporter in this case did something that *Journal Sentinel* reporters almost never do in presenting research results – she sought comments from someone competent to evaluate the research.

Conclusion

Are the foregoing findings disconcerting? Certainly. Do they suggest a serious bias in the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage of political issues? Probably not. Instead, they reveal two important shortcomings in the paper's reporting and editing. First, the paper's reporters, editors, and editorial writers sometimes pay insufficient attention to the details required to make a story balanced, fair, and accurate. Advocates and opponents of a particular viewpoint should be quoted in roughly equal numbers and given roughly the same amount of space in a story. Facts need to be checked and then checked again to ensure that editorials impart correct information to readers. Research results need to be subjected to comments by those with the training to assess their validity.

As the data in this article have made clear, failure to take such steps can result in stories and editorials that in one way or other misrepresent political reality.

Second, the findings presented above suggest a failure by the *Journal-Sentinel's* editors to keep an eye on the big picture. Referring to a think tank or a U.S. Senator or an interest group as "conservative" within an individual story or editorial is not necessarily grounds for concern. But when the same thing happens in story after story across months and months, the cumulative effect is that the political world appears to be populated by conservative actors and interests, with liberals popping up only here and there. Likewise, describing a group or politician as a member of the "far right" within an individual story might pose only a small concern, but when that is done repeatedly, while politicians on the left are rarely identified in similar terms, that cannot help but create an impression among readers, probably unjustified, about the unchecked influence of the "far right" in American politics.

Despite such problems, there is still some happy news to be gleaned from an examination of the *Journal Sentinel*. The paper's writers and editors clearly know how to do better than they are doing. In coverage of the abortion issue, for example, there appears to be a concerted effort to avoid "label favoritism" toward one group or the other. And in coverage of welfare, there are more stories that offer a balanced perspective on the issues than those that overrepresent the viewpoint of a particular group, party, or individual. If these practices could be extended to *all* stories and editorials across *all* subject areas of the paper, the *Journal Sentinel* would prove itself worthy of the noble aspirations expressed by the new paper's editorial board in April of 1995.

A note on the data. A researcher attempting a quick replication of the results presented here no doubt would fail. While exceptionally useful, the CD data are not perfect. A single keyword search, for example, often produces multiple occurrences of the same story. Thus, a search that produces 200 "hits," that is, individual stories, might in fact result in only 170 stories that can be used. Furthermore, many of the "stories" produced by a keyword search are in fact letters from readers, which also cannot be used. And though it is possible in theory to search for keyword/ keyphrases only among news stories, inevitably opinion/editorial pieces that have been miscoded show up in the results of such a search. The story

counts above reflect adjustments for all of these data deficiencies, and many others.

NOTES:

1 Media Research Center web page, <http://www.town-hall.com/mrc/reality/mrc96biasreport.html>.

2 All of the results reported in this article are based on data from the period January 1, 1996 through July 31, 1997.

3 On rare occasions the funding source for a particular study produced by one of these organizations was mentioned, but never with language that would allow one to identify the source's political orientation. See the discussion of this point below.

4 See Judith M. Gueron and Edward Pauly, *From Welfare to Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), and Larry L. Orr et. al., *Does Training for the Disadvantaged Work?* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1996).

5 The stories, in chronological order and with abbreviated CD-ROM citations, were as follows: "Welfare overhaul's foes take on plan," News 1 (1/4/96); "Work requirements," News 5 (1/7/96); "Still a work in progress?," News 4 (3/7/96); "State leads in welfare case reduction," B News (3/25/96); "Work often not enough," News 2 (4/12/96); "Many expected off rolls," News 1 (5/5/96); "Magazine says W-2 may impair," News 3 (5/28/96); "Number of children of working poor up," News 3 (6/3/96); "Child care shortage," News 3 (7/1/96); "Only 1 in 6," B News (7/5/96); "Family advocates say," A News (8/1/96); "Shortage of jobs," News 1 (8/17/96); "W-2 training load," A News (9/1/96); "More Hmong receiving AFDC," News 1 (9/16/96); "More children to be hungry," B News (10/17/96); "More poverty feared," A News (11/20/96); "W-2 child care burden," B News (11/27/96); "Study: welfare reform may not aid kids" (12/11/96); "For this single mother," B News (2/3/97).