

## **The Shouting War and the Shrinking Message** *Information Source Bias and Moral Development*

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### **Introduction**

Communication unites our society and gives us a foundation for interaction. We communicate our needs, desires, and opinions through different information modes such as written and spoken language, images, and even purchases. Communication is also a catalyst for moral principle development. When people cannot experience issues firsthand, they rely on sources of information to develop attitudes towards those issues. If those information sources are biased, and alternative sources are lacking, people will inevitably develop biased values, attitudes, and opinions.

There is an increasing need to encourage a *genuine debate* when communicating to develop balanced moral principles. This can only happen in an environment of civility where there is an opportunity for alternative arguments to be considered. Ultimately, the responsibility to

listen involves *critical* evaluations to develop the ‘right’ principles, while avoiding the trap to simply agree on ‘wrong’ principles.

To be critical is to consider the issue from multiple angles to determine facts or attitudes, and to uncover fallacies. In the past, people debated issues in person or read books and newspapers to educate themselves. Information sources have evolved in the form of radio, television, magazines, and the internet, making more data available than ever before. We no longer need to search out information to educate ourselves; instead we are overwhelmed with motive-driven media.

This analysis breaks down the information flow to illustrate the different factors that shape its distribution and bias, and the tendencies we have as a society when incorporating that information in our moral development. I will start by describing how moral principles are developed, and then detail information source structures as well as general communication spheres and how they influence our judgment. The argument is that information and communications are so prevalent in modern society that competition for attention has become a reality. To keep pace with the world around us our information sources have abbreviated their messages, and to stand out in order for their message to be heard they are increasing their visibility by becoming more opinionated and sensational. In the end, increased competition for attention, revenue, and information is resulting in skewed perceptions by reducing civility and discouraging genuine debates.

### **Developing Our Moral Principles**

All people have values and beliefs that shape their perceptions and guide them in decision making. Separate from law, these principles

are developed and refined through knowledge and experiences, and are guidelines for our actions. Moral principles should promote justice and represent our collective commitment to treat people fairly.<sup>1</sup>

However, these principles should not be confused with rules. Rules are often a way to avoid difficult decisions by deferring to an established statute. Rules and laws are generally agreed upon by the citizens they govern in an effort to establish definitions of what is 'wrong.' Having these rules deters citizens from undesirable behavior (as long as they know the rules) and sets benchmarks for relative levels of deviance to objectify persecution. This optimization is put into place by authorities such as our government, churches, and schools.

For example, a Christian executioner may ignore the church's rule that 'thou shall not kill' because he has developed principles supporting payback and vengeance (there is a loophole in U.S. law that permits him to be an executioner, because a job needs to be filled). Whereas laws can be found in text, principles are developed from personal exposure to the subject and evaluations after the experience. The executioner's set of principles may stem from past crimes committed against him or his family, justifications through historical tradition, or an environment of capital punishment activists.

Nonetheless, the executioner's principles are not concrete; with time and exposure to alternative viewpoints he may develop principles rooted in the preservation of life and reevaluate his occupation. Rules can be ignored, whereas principles are developed internally to define a person and dictate their actions. This is a dynamic process, and can only be facilitated through self-reflection and introspective analysis. Self-reflection occurs through our personal experiences and interactions as well as our interpretations of local, national, and world issues. When

people do not experience certain issues firsthand, they defer to varying sources of information to develop attitudes towards those issues.

We are exposed to innumerable sources of information and opinion, both actively and passively, and they all compete for our attention. Now that information sources are so abundant, it is hard to put information in perspective due to a shortage of attention on the receiving end.<sup>2</sup> Competitive sources secure attention by shortening messages so that they are more digestible, or formatting the messages in loud and hard to ignore ways.

It is important to be critical of information sources and their motives before we use them to establish our own moral principles, making sure not to blindly accept the values we are exposed to. The first step in being critical is to understand the influences that structure information distribution.

### **Information Distribution**

Information is a resource, and it costs money to produce and consume. Availability, function, motive, distribution, and bias are all information characteristics that reflect investment. These factors determine how raw information is filtered and dispensed as research, statistics, journalism, and entertainment media.

First, the raw information must be available to be discovered by information sources, or sometimes found directly by ourselves. The modern world of 24-hour news networks means that there is a constant demand for information. Information sources are constantly monitoring our world through research and surveillance, collecting statistics and identifying patterns. This demand is not only fueled by a population

accustomed to staying current on world issues, but also fueled by the fact that communication sources must report a minimum amount of information according to their circulation or transmission.

Presuming that there is no shortage of news to be reported, why do we see the same stories reported repetitively and in more focus than others? First, there are economic constraints to the amount of research and production, and funding is budgeted within the organization. The other reason for diminishing diversity is the increasing level of source competition for attention as more communication channels emerge. Individual attention is becoming more valuable and the total combined attention potential also continues to rise.

When looked at with a supply and demand perspective, information demand can be increased in two ways. The 'pull' method involves information delivery corresponding directly to consumer interest, catering to popular opinion. With a 'push' method, supply is increased by the supplier to make the 'purchase' cheaper and easier for the consumer. This is a 'take it or leave it' approach and it takes advantage of our tendencies to defer to what is easily available. When making decisions as to what to produce as an information source, bias develops relative to the goals of the organization. The distribution of information then becomes a means to an end.

Bias is aligned with the organization behind the source, as most are interested in promoting their own ideals. Bias can also develop through polarity when one source develops bias to directly counteract another source. There are many other types of bias in the media. Ethnic bias refers to racism and nationalism. Corporate bias is the reporting of issues to favor the interests of the news media owners or its advertisers, centered on revenue. Class bias favors one social class while ignoring or

exaggerating class differences. Political bias is the alignment with political parties, candidates, or policies. Religious bias is present when one religious viewpoint is given preference over others. Sensationalism is bias in favor of the extraordinary over the ordinary, whereby exceptional news may be overemphasized, distorted or fabricated to boost commercial ratings. Exaggerated influence of minority views is a type of sensationalism to emphasize the new and different over the status quo, usually in an attempt to appear fair. Finally there exists a bias towards expediency, where already widely reported and available information is re-reported, either to save on research costs or to fill broadcasting/publishing requirements.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of bias, communication and information serve different functions. Publishing and broadcasting are rooted in entertainment and investigative reporting, but less credible than scholarly research papers for educational purposes. The function of advertising is to create demand for advertised products. Our government releases information in order to keep the public informed and aware of government operations. Besides all other characteristics, information control is achieved through selective distribution, and how available certain information is to both active and passive agents through research and exposure, respectively.

Our contact with various information sources is relative with their accessibility. 99% of households in the U.S. have at least one television (average of 2.24 televisions per household<sup>4</sup>), making TV a large influence in comparison to other information channels. 41.5% of households have internet access<sup>5</sup> and there are 55 million newspapers in circulation daily<sup>6</sup> (22% of households). Alternative sources are more specific and in-depth regarding subject matter, but require increased effort to find and use.

Unfortunately, we allow ourselves to use the easiest information channels the most often, limiting our comprehension potential.

A few theories support the idea of deferring to the most accessible, entertaining, and agreeable sources. Comprehension has been observed to increase when stimulation is paired with information, rather than just presenting the information itself.<sup>7</sup> This is known as Activation Theory and helps explain why sensationalism is so effective. Additionally, Media Dependency Theory states that people depend on media for information, entertainment, and parasocial relationships, and that the source that fills that individual's needs best will gain influence as the individual becomes dependent on that source. "If someone is so dependent on the media for information, and the media is that person's only source for information, then it is easy to set the agenda. The individual falls victim to Agenda Setting [Theory]."<sup>8</sup>

This psychological approach identifies the problem as the exploitation of dependency to set agendas and purposely shape opinion. This is unethical when viewed through a virtue framework, as it directly inhibits personal opportunities to grow and develop values of justice, wisdom, and moderation. Exploitation of dependency and attention also diminishes fair representation and balanced moral development.

Our society's principles are highly influenced by the structure and availability of information sources, a structure dominated by television and the government. The popular media is often supplied with incomplete information only to report the story regardless. Our government is notorious for operating in secrecy and carefully selecting the information they report to the public. The distribution of information can be controlled so that recipients form moral principles corresponding to their

exposure to the topic. Lack of disclosure on the topic leads to skewed perceptions and underdeveloped moral principles, even if self-reflection is taking place. The audience of a one-sided debate is likely to agree with the presenter and their opinions when supplied with no other alternative viewpoints.

Because the media has sources of its own, it must choose what to report. Credibility and fact-checking vary between organizations, leading some sources to be more reliable than others. Although there is an implied duty to be objective as a journalist, publications and television networks are businesses, and entertainment is always a priority. Therefore, sources who claim to be reliable impose a huge duty upon themselves to actually be balanced and unbiased.

Oprah Winfrey has few opponents and usually promotes a good message, so her viewpoints are widely respected and rarely questioned. However, she continued to endorse a fabricated memoir<sup>9</sup> after it was exposed as a hoax (by thesmokinggun.com). Her credibility was on the line because she had made the book famous by supporting its content. She and her supporters responded by promoting the 'underlying message' of the book regardless of its factual integrity.<sup>10</sup> Oprah failed to check the facts before she put her reputation on the line, and because she did not know the truth, she promoted a fallacy.

Finally, every issue must compete for a limited amount of public attention and awareness. There has always been a problem surrounding overexposure and sensationalization of issues to capture attention, sell publications, and increase ratings. It has become increasingly competitive as globalization is realized, and as world issues are having more

substantial influence in American society. In response, sources have 'turned up the volume' in what - and how - they distribute information.

The concept of loudness applies to both media and advertising. We have seen advertising increase in both frequency and intensity with creative marketing techniques that integrate advertising into our daily lives. It has become more entwined with the media through product placement and corporate sponsorship of all kinds of events. Journalism and entertainment are placing increased emphasis on the messages they distribute, and this translates into more focused reports of certain issues. Other issues are crowded out, and these diminished accounts suffer from less visibility. There is a tendency to assume less visible issues are less important, an assumption that places trust in the source to act as a filter. Knowing that sources are acting as filters, we should be curious to learn what information was screened out, why it was screened out, and where we can find it in the general spheres of communication.

### **Classic Information Sources (CIS)**

Every information source has a motive behind its production. Classic Information Sources are composed of the mass-communication industries of journalism and entertainment. Television's main objective is entertainment, and even news channels compete for the attention of channel surfers. Magazines and the Internet are focused on delivering entertainment, with the Internet now acting as an extension of TV networks, newspapers, and magazines. Journalists write articles for magazines that are interesting and engaging, and books follow the same formula. Articles are published by organizations promoting and advocating certain philosophies that align with those of the organization.

Classic Information Sources have financial motives as their common characteristic, and are also widely available, accessible, and filtered.

A major Classic Information Source, business information, is incorporated into all types of media as both news and advertising. Businesses use all available information channels to advertise products and services with the goal of increasing demand and revenue. Businesses can also be a primary data source as it generates economic data. Businesses produce a steady stream of financial data, how much money changed hands and what was purchased, to record inventory and keep stakeholders informed. Primary source business information is different because it reports the quantitative aspect of society, concerned with how Wall Street and financial news will affect the economy and standards of living. However, even these hard numbers are subject to biased interpretation depending on which CIS it is reported through.

The communication sphere centered on revenue is the domain of Classic Information Sources. Economic pragmatism is the reason for this alignment, which unfortunately results in an overshadowing of virtue ethics in information distribution. This dichotomy of revenue versus values is nothing original, but it takes a certain amount of disparity before the discrimination becomes intolerable. Increased competition has uncovered how influential financial stakes are for Classic Information Sources. Recently, a new sphere centered on ideas and opinion has been growing in response, as it becomes easier for independent sources to distribute information.

### **The Modern Information Proliferation (MIP)**

There has been a rise in independent information sources since the creation of the internet. They are regulated less by the government and less concerned with stakeholder interests or profit than Classic Information

Sources. They are also less visible but still widely available, accessed most often by directed searches. For example, scholarly journals are written by experts, for experts, presenting new research and ideas, verified and agreed upon through a peer review process.<sup>11</sup> They are arguably the most objective sources available, but they are difficult to locate and can be expensive without access to a university library.

The internet has spawned a new variety of sources including Wikipedia, blogs, discussion and ratings boards, e-newsletters, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and independent websites. These are great sources for raw information, by the people, for the people, but they often lack accuracy and credibility. For this reason they are a valuable contrast to Classic Information Sources, but they should be viewed through a skeptical eye nonetheless.

Empowering the world to contribute individual opinions to the rest of the world is a progressive leap in communication. This introduces even more competition for awareness, but it is still only a whisper in a room full of megaphones. Hopefully, those interested in hearing that whisper will quiet the shouting by turning away from loud sources and listening. A loud room is entertaining for only so long, and people should welcome a trend towards intelligent conversation after being caught in the middle of a deafening debate.

### **Information Surveillance**

Surveillance is integral to communication spheres as both a primary producer of data and a regulatory instrument. All information is monitored through Information Surveillance as purchases and communications are monitored by the U.S. government for national

security purposes. Information Surveillance activities are made public after the activities and patterns of society and business are monitored, recorded, and then selectively reported to Classic Information Sources through Information Surveillance agents. This is a major information channel in the development of CIS news stories. Of course, CIS make their own observations and research to supplement intelligence reports. Information Surveillance (here, the FCC) then regulates what Classic Information Sources report back to society.

Additionally, searches within the Modern Information Proliferation are monitored along with the content made available and its author. Purchase and income data reveal financial activity such as items purchased, home and business locations, employer(s), travel, business contacts, and even hint at religious and political orientations. All of this is organized into massive databases maintained by the government and kept in secrecy under Pentagon authority. Corporations also use commercial databases that are constructed and maintained by private surveillance enterprises, often used to better understand and target individuals in respective markets.

Public awareness pertaining to the extent of government surveillance is limited, as most of the programs operate below the public's radar. There are at least 12 large-scale data mining and/or databasing operations currently in different departments the U.S. government.<sup>12</sup> One such program, the Total Information Act (TIA), aims to build a centralized database containing private transactional data on *all* Americans, including "records on credit-card purchases, plane flights, e-mails, websites, [and] housing."<sup>13</sup> The TIA was denied funding in 2003 due to public objection – only to go "underground" with funding directly from the Pentagon. There is no denial that "TIA-like activities could be continued to be pursued

outside the public's view,"<sup>14</sup> as reported in the Department of Defense Appropriations Act (2003).

Government surveillance and information monitoring are processes that the government justifies as a means to increase security, often using information data mining. Data mining identifies dangerous patterns of activity and communication in an attempt to proactively deter crimes. Video surveillance puts a face to the data (and the voices) - faces that are databased themselves. It may be impossible to know the extent of U.S. surveillance operations; nevertheless, 57% of Americans feel that the government is 'using expanded surveillance powers in a proper way.'<sup>15</sup>

The government discloses intelligence reports resulting from surveillance at its own discretion, with no accountability for complete disclosure by citing reasons of national security. We cannot know the true effectiveness of surveillance because our government has no legal responsibility to disclose infractions, errors, or inaccuracies in their practices. Furthermore, the agents who control the disclosure of surveillance information remain anonymous under the shelter of the Pentagon. The problem with surveillance is that a small group has authority to monitor and evaluate the larger population using secret criteria to classify and separate the population into possibly problematic groups.

### **Information Evaluation**

Developing balanced moral principles becomes difficult when we are only exposed to extreme and dramatic cases. As a society we have become accustomed to observing compromised values in our daily lives.

Truly shocking issues and events attract the most attention, and every time we cross a new moral threshold the media covers the story so in-depth that the extreme case becomes routine. Our awareness and knowledge of an issue can eclipse our personal experiences, resulting in untested, vicarious values.

We must contrast media sensationalization with normal behavior to understand the extremeness of the case. Our moral simplicity needs to be nurtured and safeguarded by sticking to well developed principles, and those principles must be grounded in the activities of real life.<sup>16</sup> Only then can we use these principles to identify moral dilemmas and evaluate the facts surrounding the issue. It cannot be assumed that information sources operate with transparency and full disclosure when it is advantageous for the producer to have more knowledge than the consumer.

For example, e-mail spam continues to be a nuisance to all e-mail users because of information selling practices. Most online purchases require an e-mail address from the customer. Usually there will be a noticeable 'privacy policy' link. Concerned customers who follow the link find a lengthy document in legal language that basically informs customers that their credit card number is the only information that they will not sell. Most assume that the lengthy contract must assure privacy and forgo reading it, and even if they do read it they are unlikely to comprehend. This assumption turns out to be a fallacy when the customer's e-mail account starts to fill with spam.

This is the simple, everyday experience that allows the customer to *evaluate* the appeal of internet shopping. A solution will come from analyzing the facts in light of personal moral principles. The dilemma is that online shopping is useful and effortless, but the websites cannot be

trusted with personal information which is necessary for the transaction. After evaluating the facts and implications, a solution could be to create a spam e-mail account to be used when making online purchases, an independent solution that is suggested nowhere in the privacy policy. A privacy policy is no more than a disclaimer because firms that profit from customer ignorance have little motivation to educate. Businesses aren't the only entities that benefit from ignorance; the government maintains a great deal of control by operating in secrecy.

Just as personal information is vulnerable to companies who wish to profit from it, our daily lives are vulnerable to scrutiny and evaluation through Information Surveillance. Our government benefits from gathering transactional data and personal communication so that it can better monitor its citizens. The popular justification is for increased terrorism protection, but a side effect is indiscriminate scrutiny and the labeling of individuals as dangerous or threatening. These evaluations are often made by computer algorithms based on rigid equations of suspicion and even coincidence of names. According to the theory of moral development, these processes cannot be ethical because there are no reevaluations, self-reflections or ability to adapt. Data mining computer programming therefore utilizes the goal of optimization, using rules instead of principles, a process where there is no opportunity for review, and unfair for persecution.

We cannot allow algorithms and sets of rules to classify people as belonging to a dangerous class. This is no more than an agreement about which principles are 'wrong' and also requires huge amounts of resources to comb through raw data. These processes do uncover true threats, but the rigidity of the process allows for false positives and undeserved

labeling. With increased faith in surveillance and data mining our society loses trust in neighbors and communities to look after one another. All of these issues deter an environment of virtue ethics as individuals are deprived of opportunities to develop their own sovereign values. Segregating and classifying individuals according to past behavior confines them to a status quo, discouraging flexibility and change. As discussed earlier, moral development is a dynamic process, and using rigid guidelines to evaluate or predict moral behavior is very conflicting.

Considering the spam example, is there a way for our society to keep our lives from unwanted intrusion? Preventing the intrusion of loud, biased sources into moral principle development requires awareness and criticality. If surveillance is that intrusion, then we should try and find a way to lessen the impact and reclaim some control, again, through awareness and deliberation. Like creating a separate e-mail account for spam, we can choose to transfer our security safeguards into our own hands as individuals and community members. Increased information processing capabilities will guarantee ongoing and increasing surveillance. However, if members of society are competent in protecting one another, surveillance will become less justifiable and lose some influence.

Taking security into one's own hands is a huge responsibility. We will always need our government to defend us from attack, but we should maintain the democratic belief that we have the ability to govern ourselves and be free from oppression of a higher power. This belief is important if we do not want to become subordinate to the rule-makers, which hinders self reflection and true moral development. If we evaluate the information we receive in light of its sources, motives, and accuracy, we can then reflect on the implications and arrive at the decision that

promotes justice and represents our collective commitment to treat people fairly.

There are duties required for moral development to occur when using virtue ethics, as it is an active process. Every member of society has a duty to be critical of the information given to them, the information they seek out, and the information they provide. The next duty is to use self reflection after genuinely debating the issue to form moral principles, and to continually build upon them. People need to think for themselves to prevent being taken advantage of and consequently developing a need to be protected, or developing media dependency.

### **A Genuine Debate**

When we are evaluating the facts (or non-facts) on which we base our decisions, we must ensure that we have diverse information by investigating opposing viewpoints. The opposing arguments must be truly considered in the spirit of good will, which is the capability to give ground when a better argument is presented.<sup>17</sup> This fairness to disagreement is termed civility.

A common motive for expressing ones viewpoint is to elicit a response. When a source claims that 'something is being done' they usually have a recommendation for further action. Biased sources display moral exclusiveness, creating an environment where only one viewpoint can exist. Instead of adopting prevalent, 'louder' values, an ethical decision-maker will allow many sources fairness in opinion, and evaluate the issue after reflecting on differing information. The goal of ethical thinking is therefore to develop principles supporting what *should* be done, instead of *reacting* to what is being done.

## Solutions

With so many sources available, credibility can be difficult to evaluate. It is generally accepted that FoxNews is conservative, while CNN is more liberal. Both are monitored closely for accuracy, but each deliver a very different opinion on the same issue. Because what they say is accurate, some bias comes from what information they are *not* providing. In this example, a solution is as simple as flipping between the two channels to diversify sources. Nonetheless, both still neglect certain information. A solution could be a 'source of sources,' organized by issue, providing diverse opinions.

Even when there is a conscious effort to consider opposing arguments, bias can still be imputed by false or unverifiable information. One way to measure credibility is to measure concurrent sources, and investigate cited references. The assumption is that with more citations there is better fair representation. Also, certain sources are more reliable than others, so citing those sources increases dependability. Wikipedia is careful to verify its content, and warns users when there is little support for certain information:

**This section does not cite any references or sources.** Please improve this section by adding citations to reliable sources. Unverifiable material may be challenged and removed. (tagged since **September 2007**)

Along these lines, another solution could be an entity where louder (CIS) sources are required to submit citations. Inclined individuals could investigate opinions to gain insight into the types of sources being used. There could also be an intrinsic effect on loud sources to be more careful

and critical of their own citations, as well as a push to incorporate more diverse opinions into their own information.

Besides the FCC, there are already great watchdog organizations in existence such as Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and TheSmokingGun.com. FAIR has been challenging media bias & censorship since 1986, and tackles issues regarding credibility and media influence.<sup>18</sup> These sites need more support to compete with the loudness of the sources they monitor and increase awareness.

Most of all, responsibility falls upon the end user. Awareness of media bias is growing as we are all deafened by one-sided opinions. Awareness will help to keep information sources in check and promote better fair representation. Bias will never disappear, but we can fight fire with fire by developing independent biases that reflect our own sovereign moral principles.

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