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Ideological bias of Fox News and CNN: News reports on national school board association letters published on October 1st

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Abstrak: Artikel ini membahas liputan Fox News dan CNN tentang surat Asosiasi Dewan Sekolah Nasional kepada pemerintah federal. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menemukan bias ideologis yang mendasari pemberitaan kedua media tersebut. Artikel ini merupakan analisis wacana dan menggunakan struktur wacana berita Van Dijk sebagai kerangka analisis penelitian ini. Analisis dilakukan dengan memeriksa tiga tingkatan analisis, yaitu struktur makro, struktur atas, dan struktur mikro. Berdasarkan analisis data, artikel ini menemukan bukti bahwa kedua media tersebut jenuh dengan bias ideologis di semua tingkat strukturnya. Artikel ini juga menemukan bahwa Fox News memiliki ideologi konservatisme berhaluan kanan sedangkan CNN adalah media liberal berhaluan kiri. Kajian ini dapat diterapkan dalam jurnalisme kontemporer dan kajian media, khususnya kajian media Amerika. Artikel ini akan berguna dalam mengungkap bagaimana bias politik direpresentasikan dalam media berita.
Kata kunci: bias ideologi; analisis wacana; wacana berita; National School Board Association

Abstract: **Abstract:** This article examines Fox News and CNN coverage of the National School Board Association letter to the federal government. This article aims to find the ideological bias underlying both news media reports. This article is discourse analysis and uses Van Dijk's news discourse structure as the analysis framework of this study. The analysis is done by examining three levels of analysis, namely macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure. Based on data analysis, this article has found evidence that both news media are saturated with their ideological bias in all levels of their structures. This article also found that Fox News has a right-leaning conservatism ideology while CNN is left-leaning liberal media. This study is applicable in contemporary journalism and media studies, particularly American media studies. This article will be useful in revealing how political bias is represented in the news media.
Keywords: ideological bias; discourse analysis; news discourse; National School Board Association

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Introduction

Fox News and CNN both published news report on the same event of National School Board Association's letter to the government, however despite the exact same event, Fox and CNN reported this differently. This difference seems to hint at the underlying ideological bias that both networks have. This article focuses on how both networks portray and build their narrative differently and what message that they are trying to impart to the readers based on their underlying ideology.

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News is an integral part of every society, especially a democratic one. In a well-functioning democratic society, the news is crucial to impart worthy information on what is happening in society. News in a democratic society function as information, investigation, analysis, social empathy, public forum, and mobilization (Schudson, 2008). It is argued that news media professionals, with all their expertise, aid the public good by selecting stories or narratives and explaining them to the benefit of the general population (Goode, 2009). This means that news media are obliged to give an objective report and analysis of events or information to the public.

As far as history is concerned, impartiality and non-bias news has been the benchmark of a good news report from the late 19th century to the early 20th century (Boudana, 2016). This means that journalism should not have a political tendency to ensure the objectivity of the news. Another research adds that the objectivity of news is attainable and should be pursued by journalists (Figdor, 2010). However, postmodernism suggests that true unbiased impartiality is essentially nonexistent in this world. This postmodernism tenet certainly reflects the current landscape of mainstream media.

Several researchers have demonstrated that partisanship, either in mainstream or online news media, is common especially in regards to politics (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015; Brundidge et al., 2014; Ohme, 2020; Vargo et al., 2018). They have shown that different news media with their political leaning will cover same stories differently, either in their words, framing, or news aspects selection. This also affects the viewers, where they will choose the news channel based on their political preferences. Achieving political gain during election campaigns is one of the main reasons that partisanship and bias prominently occur in news media. These agendas of political gain have polarized the news media in terms of partisanship.

Concerning the mainstream media landscape in the USA, the polarization between Fox News and CNN on several controversial issues has been fairly noticeable in recent years. It has also been recognized by the general public that Fox News generally leans to the right and CNN to the left. These two news media often have different narratives and different framings when discussing certain topics, such as climate change, the Iraqi war, Black Lives Matter, presidential candidates or campaigns, immigrations, or even COVID 19 (Brundidge et al., 2014; Calvillo et al., 2020; Coe et al., 2008; Feldman et al., 2012; Glover, 2011; Hoewe et al., 2020; Hyun & Moon, 2016; Karaliūnas, 2021). These studies have shown that these two major news media are opposed to each other in the terms of their ideological agenda, constructing different rhetoric, and influencing the viewer's perception over contentious topics.

Among the most controversial issues in 2021 that was covered differently by Fox News and CNN is the incident where the National School Boards Association (NSBA) sent a letter to the federal government. It started around mid-June when parents, especially conservative leaning ones, began to protest school boards regarding their left leaning policies such as COVID policy, Critical Race Theory being taught in schools, and transgender policy. Loudoun County, Virginia has been the focal point where these protests are the most heated. The protests has escalated considerably since mid-June that the National School Board Association sent a letter to President Joe Biden on September 29th asking the federal government for protection for the school board members. Both Fox News and CNN covered this extensively. The first news reports released by both media were published at the same date on October 1st. Fox News released an article entitled "School board group asks Biden to use the Patriot Act against parents over opposition to COVID measures, CRT"1 and CNN News published an article entitled "School board group asks for federal help to stop threats and violence in debates on Covid and critical race theory"2.

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The natures of the October 1st articles are breaking news. Both Fox News and CNN published the articles on a same date, which indicates there are certain competitions to deliver their messages faster than the competitor. Usher (Usher, 2017) has suggested that the immediacy of breaking news is a way to exert informational authority to audiences. Thus, the study of these two news reports will be beneficial in discovering what kind of discursive power they are trying to retain over their audiences.

Although it is fairly obvious that both news media wrote the articles on their websites differently, it is should be noted that the method under which they are constructing the narrative is not quite clear. Studies have found that social actors may manipulate discourse to attain a certain effect(Ahlstrand, 2021; Creech, 2020). While it has been suggested before that Fox tends to strategize their discourses to oppose CRT in contrast to CNN's supports (el-Nawawy & Hamas Elmasry, 2021), it is still important to ask whether their ideological biases are reflected in the October 1st articles. Examining these manipulations by scrutinizing the linguistic resources utilized in the text and analyzing the contexts seems like a logical course of action for this study.

This article tries to uncover the discursive strategies employed in the October 1st articles written by Fox News and CNN and to reveal their ideological biases underlying the articles. At the time of writing this article, there has been only a few studies conducted to highlight these two news reports and none of them compare the different manipulation of the discourse about the incident. Therefore, the analysis contained in this article will enlighten how mainstream medias shape and manipulate the particular incident to fit their agendas, specifically about this incident. The analysis from the perspective of discourse analysis will shed some light on these questions by examining the language mechanisms by which they are constructing the narrative. This article uses the news discourse model proposed by Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 2013) who explains that there are 3 levels of structure namely macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure in news texts. This paper uses this approach to reveal the discursive strategies utilized in the text. The discursive strategies in the text reveal whether ideological biases play role in constructing the discourse then aim to integrate these three levels of analysis with a broader contextual analysis.

Methods

The method of this article is discourse analysis, specifically news discourse analysis. The data analyzed in this study are two news reports taken from Fox News website and CNN website published on October 1st entitled "School board group asks Biden to use the Patriot Act against parents over opposition to COVID measures, CRT" and "School board group asks for federal help to stop threats and violence in debates on Covid and critical race theory" respectively. Both of which report about NSBA letter sent to the federal government and what incites the sending of the letter. This study then examines the texts according to Van Dijk's framework, namely macrostructures, superstructures, and microstructures. The comparison is done in each structural level of analyses. This method of comparison allows for a detailed examination of the discursive manipulation in both texts. The analysis starts with the examination the microstructures to analyze the rhetoric, style, syntax, and semantics of both texts. After analyzing the microstructure, this paper continues with examining the superstructures to see how the texts are organized and the organization of both texts is also compared. Subsequently, the analysis continues with the examination of the macrostructures to find and compare the general theme or topic encompassing both texts. By doing those three levels of analysis and comparisons, this study finds the discursive strategies employed by the

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journalists to construct their discourses. These discursive strategies shows whether ideological biases play roles in constructing both text and how it connects to the social and political contexts

This article uses Van Dijk's concept of news schemata as a guiding framework in the analysis. This concept facilitates a more detailed examination of both Fox News and CNN articles. Van Dijk explains that the news discourse analyses have to take note of two levels of structures, namely global structure and local structures (Van Dijk, 2019). Global structures contain macrostructures that are concerned with global semantic meaning and superstructures which concern with formal structures of texts where meanings are delivered using the means of syntactic forms. On the other hand, local structures or microstructures encompass sentences and all the elements within them, namely phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic features.

Results and Discussion

This section reports the findings of the analysis of the news schemata of both news reports from Fox News and CNN. Table 1 provides a summary of both news reports regarding their headlines, their lengths, and their important features. This table helps give a clearer picture of the news reports.

Table 1

News Summary

No.	News Article	Number of words	Headlines	Key Features
1	Fox News report: Published 8 October 2021	666	School board group asks Biden to use the Patriot Act against parents over opposition to COVID measures, CRT	highlights National School Boards Association (NSBA) letter to Biden Administration, details about regarding protection from hate crimes and attacks, reports politicians' response, and reports previous protests from parents
2	CNN report: Published 8 October 2021	711	School board group asks for federal help to stop threats and violence in debates on Covid and critical race theory	highlights several key points written in the NSBA letter, mentions politicians' responses, and mentions how it brings up how the parents threatened the school boards.

It can be seen from Table 1 that both news reports are not that different. Both of them highlight similar important events. The following sections will analyze these more deeply regarding their microstructures, superstructures, and macrostructures to find and reveal the subtle differences and their implications in the overall discourse. Microstructures are semantic, syntax, stylistic

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and rhetoric aspects within sentences in the text (Abbas, 2020; Drid, 2018). Rhetorical aspects contain repetition, understatement, metaphor, metonymy. Stylistic aspects include word variations and choice. Syntax deals with structures of sentences (active/passive, coherence, cohesion). Semantics is concerned with implications, presupposition, detail, hyperbole, victim-blaming, euphemisms, denials, contrast, vagueness (Van Dijk, 2015). Examining these elements helps reveal writers' and the news' perspectives and also how they are mediated through the text. Superstructures refer to the schematics of the news discourse. It begins with an introduction followed by content and ends with the conclusion (Aini & Widodo, 2018). The introduction is represented by the first paragraph of the text which tells the readers what to expect from the news. Content is the main essence of the news and conclusion is the closing part of the news which usually contains the result, outcome, or comments. Macrostructures are the themes or topics that encompass the whole text. The thematic analysis can be done by examining the themes underlying the whole news. Our previous knowledge of the real world is vital in understanding macrostructures (Drid, 2018). By having previous knowledge of the world, discourses in the text can be coherently understood as a whole. Macrostructures are usually conveyed in the headlines and the first paragraphs of the texts (Abbas, 2020). Examining macrostructures is helpful in comprehending what are the underlying theme carrying the texts.

Microstructure

Fox News and CNN report's first paragraphs introduce the request for help from NSBA during their confrontation with parents. Both of the news media explain that there have been clashes between school boards and parents. As a result, NSBA is asking the Biden administration to review whether there is a violation of the laws; however, only Fox News specifically mentions the Patriot Act. These introductory paragraphs also mention the cause for parents' anger, namely COVID-19 and teaching of CRT in classrooms. Table 2 provides a summary of the microstructures found in both texts.

In terms of semantics, Fox News and CNN have glaring differences. Fox News details the contexts quite clearly by reporting about both NSBA letter and parents' actions; while CNN focuses more on the content of the letter and shows some vagueness regarding parents. Ideological biases usually reveal themselves in discourse and influence how the texts are construed (Kelsey, 2019) and these biases can be found in these two news reports. The explanation shown in the table above has shown that Fox News has a bias towards the parents which indicates conservative populism. This finding supports the argument that Fox News is a right-wing populist media (Peck, 2023). CNN, on the other hand, is inclined towards defending the authority of NSBA as the formal educator. Both news reports are also expressing the rift between parents and NSBA. This finding suggests the instance of ideological square between the positive self-representation and negative other-representation.

With regards to syntax, both media reports their news coherently and cohesively with a slight difference. Fox News is clear in referencing the parents' protest by referencing several different occasions that happened previously. Conversely, CNN heavily quotes and references the contents of the NSBA letter. CNN also uses passive sentences to express threats with NSBA as the receiving end. Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 2013) has explained that passivization suggests an underlying ideological position. Thus, the usage of those passive sentences shows that CNN ideologically supports NSBA and tries to portray the NSBA as a passive victim.

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Table 2

Microstructures Summary

Features	Fox News	CNN
Semantics	- Fox News relatively gives balanced contextual details to the letter's content and parents' action. - Fox News also mentions the protests that happened all over the country. - Fox News contrast NSBA with parents	- CNN gives more contextual details detailing the content of the letter and only gives little contextual details about parents' actions that resulted in the letter. - CNN also downplays the protests (only in Tennesse, Virginia, and Ohio). - CNN contrast NSBA with parents
Syntax	- Fox News makes coherent and cohesive references to parents' class action across the country. Example: "Loudoun County, Virginia has become the epicenter of anger against such policies. A group opposed to the teaching of CRT, Free to Learn Coalition, recently launched a $500,000 ad blitz criticizing the local school board."	- CNN expresses coherent and clear points about the threats with clear references. - CNN uses passive sentences to express the threats against NSBA.
Stylistic	- *Demonstration* as the word for parents' protests to insinuate that what they were doing was within their constitutional rights. - Using the word *anger* to associate parents to insinuate what the parents are doing is a reaction. - Using the word *disrupt* which has a softer meaning than *heckle*	- negative word connotation to associate parents (*heckled* instead of protested, *accused* instead of stated/said/expressed, *heated* instead of spirited, passionate, *boil* to suggest volatile situation)
Rhetoric	- the word *angry and anger* were repeated 4 times to describe parents. - Patriot Act and Gun-Free School Zones Act were repeated once.	- the word 'threat' was repeated 14 times to emphasize that the protesting parents are dangerously aggressive.

Fox News and CNN have glaring differences in terms of their lexical choices. By analyzing the lexical choices, it can be seen that Fox News uses tamer words to describe parents and their actions. The word demonstration used by Fox News implies the parents' protests are within the confine of the First Amendment. This finding supports the argument from previous study which says Fox News has an ideological inclination towards American conservatism (el-

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Nawawy & Hamas Elmasry, 2021). In contrast, CNN associates parents with words carrying strong negative connotations such as heckled, accused, and heated. Considering lexical choices are influenced by underlying ideologies, it is obvious that CNN is building its discourses to pander to the left-leaning ideology of the NSBA. This is consistent with a previous study of CNN liberal ideological bias (Kim et al., 2022).

In terms of rhetoric, both news use repetitions to emphasize different viewpoints. Fox News repeats angry/anger 4 times to describe parents in their reports. This indicates that Fox News is trying to express the emotive experience of parents'. Moreover, Fox News implies that NSBA is the one who started the whole debacle. Fox News also repeats Patriot Act and Gun-Free School Zones Act in their report; Fox News tries to influence their readers into thinking that calling for these acts for prosecuting parents is beyond normal measures. In contrast, CNN tries to portray parents as dangerous by repeating the word 'threat' 14 times in the news report. By doing this repetition, CNN is demonizing the parents by regarding them as an aggressive group. The rhetoric by Fox News and CNN exemplifies the polarization of their ideological proclivities. This finding concurs with the notion of an ideological square where news discourse is trying to achieve positive 'us' representation and negative 'them' presentation by utilizing rhetoric devices (Sundari & Irawan, 2024).

These ideological biases continue to reinforce the polarization and the animosity between the conservatives and liberals. These polarizations in turn generates what is called a hostile media phenomenon wherein viewers perceive more bias with media that do not have their political standings. The hostile media phenomenon has been recorded to create skepticism and increase reluctance for viewers to accept news media, especially the ones without their political ideological bias, as a trustworthy source of information (Soontjens & van Erkel, 2022). This phenomenon may cause society to overlook some crucial facts distributed by the news media.

It has been proven that ideologically slanted programs have the capability of reinforcing polarization (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2014). Thus, it is fairly safe to assume that the ideological biases presented in Fox News and CNN also further divides the conservatives and the liberals. By reiterating positive 'us' and negative 'them' in their news media, dialogue between these two different ideological groups in the society will be difficult to accomplish. This is dangerous in a democratic society where political dialogues are needed to achieve mutual understanding and to better the society and its members.

Superstructure

Superstructures refer to the schema of the discourse, they start with introduction, followed by content, and ends with conclusion. Examining how both news networks arrange their schema for their news report uncovers their underlying ideology in building their narrative. Both networks have different schematic for their representation of the event that happened regarding NSBA's letter to the government.

Fox News and CNN report's first paragraphs introduce the request for help from NSBA during their confrontation with parents. Both of the news media explain that there have been clashes between school boards and parents. As a result, NSBA is asking the Biden administration to review whether there is a violation of the laws; however, only Fox News specifically mentions the Patriot Act. These introductory paragraphs also mention the cause for parents' anger, namely COVID-19 and teaching of CRT in classrooms.

Following the introductory paragraphs, The Fox NEWS report main paragraphs highlight several key topics. They give several contextual details about NSBA's letter to the Biden

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administration and its content, parents' protests against the school board across the country, and politicians' responses. Fox News also alternates their topics between the content of the letter and parents' actions. Fox News also mentions several laws (Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, the Violent Interference with Federally Protected Rights statute, and the Conspiracy Against Rights statute.) cited by NSBA to review parents' actions. By organizing their news in this manner, Fox News tries to suggest that their readers that NSBA and parents are really at odds against each other.

CNN main paragraphs, however, emphasize more on the content of the letter and the justification of its arguments. CNN uses direct quotations from the letter to express the explanation from NSBA. CNN also gives more prominence to NSBA's claims (America's public schools and its education leaders are under an immediate threat; ...the classification of these heinous actions could be the equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism and hate crimes; The greatest number and the biggest concern we have are the threats of violence; Coupled with attacks against school board members and educators). These main paragraphs also support these claims by stating several threats and violent incidents that happened previously. Unlike Fox News, CNN does not alternate nor juxtapose their conflicting topics. The organization of the main paragraphs portrays NSBA as the victim of this confrontation.

Fox News concludes their news by reiterating Patriot Act and NSBA's request to the U.S. Postal Service to intervene letters from parents. This reiteration implies that the calling for Patriot Act by NSBA is drastic. Fox News also suggests there is an abuse of power being asked to the U.S. Postal Service. In this last paragraph, Fox News tries to emphasize the battle between oppressed parents and the oppressive NSBA authority.

CNN concludes their news by quoting "These threats and acts of violence are affecting our nation's democracy at the very foundational levels". This functions to emphasize the present danger against the school board. It also mentions "democracy at the very foundational levels" to express the extremity of these attacks and protests. This conclusion paragraph serves to portray the NSBA as the victim of the confrontation.

Macrostructure

Both Fox News and CNN reports seem to have similar topics in their reports. Both of them highlight the request for assistance from the federal government, although Fox News and CNN choose their wording differently. Fox News mentions 'Biden' while CNN chooses a more impersonal route with 'federal'. The key topics in both reports tells the readers about the requested help from the school board group as expressed in their headlines. Both of the news reports' readers expect to find how the school board asked for help and exactly what kind of help was requested.

However, they have an obvious difference. Fox News uses the phrase "against parents"; on the contrary CNN uses "to stop threats and violence". The NSBA has regarded the protests from the parents to be violent and intimidating. CNN carries on this presumption as expressed in their headlines. However, Fox News headline implies that they are defending the parents' actions. From examining these nuances, it is clear that Fox and CNN stand on different sides. This finding is consistent with previous studies which argue Fox News and CNN have opposite ideological positions (Yang, 2023).

These different headlines also leads to different expectations. Fox News readers expect to see NSBA and parents confrontation explained. CNN readers, on the other hand, are inclined to look further into the threats and violence. It seems clear that Fox and CNN are leading their readers to different directions.

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Conclusion

This article attempted to expose the ideological biases of Fox News and CNN as well as the discursive techniques used in their October 1st stories. Data analysis has proved that both Fox News and CNN have underlying ideologies. Their underlying ideologies influence their linguistic resources. These manipulations of linguistic resources help Fox News and CNN to construct their discourses. The examination of the news schemata has shown the saturation of ideological bias in the structures of the news. However, both media are standing on opposite of each other in terms of their ideologies. It must be noted, however, that the scope of the findings only pertains to ideological bias regarding CRT and school transgender policy. This article has shown that Fox News and CNN are at the opposite of each other. Fox News has a conservative ideology underlying their discourse while CNN is a left-leaning liberal media. These inclinations towards a certain ideology show that both media are not neutral news media. Their impartiality has been influential in the making of their discourse. Partisanship reflected in news reports proves to be an important factor in constructing news discourse.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, this study still lacks statistically considerable results. Therefore, this article suggests future research in this area to continue investigating ideological bias present in news discourses. This article recommends corpus linguistics methods to specifically study lexical choices in news discourse since corpus linguistics will allow more extensive and comprehensive data. This article believes that researching the lexical choices and their connotation will be greatly helpful to find ideological biases underlying news discourse in the media.

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