



# Truth in Labelling

*By Megan McArdle*

EconLog has some critiques of media bias that I do think hold water; [one from Henderson](#), and one from [David Boaz](#). The Boaz quote sums up the problem:

[M]ainstream (liberal) media regularly put an ideological label on conservative and libertarian organizations and interviewees, but not on liberal and leftist groups. In a [report](#) about states accepting stimulus funds, reporter Kathy Lohr quoted "Jon Shure of the Washington D.C.-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities," "Maurice Emsellem with the National Employment Law Project," and "Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst with the fiscally conservative Cato Institute in Washington, D.C." (Thanks! And I'd say the label is correct, even if I might prefer libertarian.)

Those are all legitimate sources for the story. But only one of them gets an ideological label -- even though the other two groups are clearly on the left...

Back on March 23, I noted but did not blog about references on "Morning Edition" to "the libertarian Cato Institute," the "conservative American Enterprise Institute," and "the Brookings Institution." No label needed for Brookings, of course. Just folks there...

When I was starting out as a journalist, I had an editor who didn't touch references to left-wing sources, but insisted that I identify someone as hailing from "the ultra-libertarian Manhattan Institute". I took the reference out rather than allow such ham-handed manipulation. It was especially stupid because the substance of the quotation wasn't particularly controversial; it just happened that the think-tanker had phrased it the most neatly.

Of course, I also had a book review killed at a right-wing publication because I said that the United States is not on the right-hand side of the Laffer Curve, and therefore cannot raise total tax revenues while lowering rates. The difference is, the higher-ups who spiked my piece clearly knew that they were engaging in ideological manipulation--and to a large extent, their readers too understood that the publication was there to advocate a particular point of view.

The fellow who insisted that only conservatives need ideological identifiers didn't understand that he was putting his thumb on the scales. Indeed, frequently writers and editors of this stripe will carefully identify Hoover or AEI as conservative, while referring to a place like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities as "non-partisan", which is technically true, but of course, is also true of the conservative institutions they so carefully label. This gives both the writers and their readers a false sense of what

"mainstream consensus" is. Perhaps that's why so many of them get so angry about openly partisan journalism from the other side.

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