Bias in News Sources

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson students consider the meaning of the words "bias" and "prejudice" and consider how bias may be found even at the level of individual words due to connotation. Students are introduced to the key media literacy concept that media contain ideological messages and have social and political implications in considering why it is particularly important to consider possible bias in news reporting. The key concept that each medium has a distinct aesthetic form is introduced as students learn about the "inverted pyramid" structure of news reporting and consider how this may lead to bias. Students then evaluate a variety of news sources with regards to the degree of bias and then demonstrate their understanding of the concept by creating an intentionally biased news report.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand the concept of bias
- identify a point of view based on word choice
- understand the role of subjectivity and perception in media
- understand the reasons why bias might occur in news
- recognize the different ways in which bias can occur in news reporting
- demonstrate an understanding of how bias occurs in news reporting
- write in a given literary form

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following documents:

- *How to Detect Bias in the News*
- *Bias Evaluation Worksheet*

Procedure

Begin by writing the word "Bias" on the board and ask students to define it. (The definition should read similar to "A positive or negative attitude towards something, often based on preconceived prejudices or viewpoints rather than evidence.")

Discuss the relationship between bias and prejudice (a bias may be the result of prejudice, but encountering biased information may lead someone to become prejudiced). Explain that bias can be found even at the level of individual words. Write on the board:

Egotistical	Scrawny
Proud	Underweight
Confident	Slender

Point out that these are synonyms that do not really mean the same thing: the first in each list is always meant in a negative way, the second could be positive or negative, and the third is positive.

Introduce the idea that *media contain ideological messages and have social and political implications* and ask students why news is particularly significant when it comes to bias. (Because we expect news to be objective and unbiased; because we use news to learn about and understand what's going on in the world.) Ask students to brainstorm other ways in which bias might occur in news sources: what choices might writers, editors, producers, and so on, make (consciously or unconsciously) that would lead to a biased view of the subject they're covering?

Distribute the article *How to Detect Bias in the News* and either have students read it and answer questions or go through it as a class. Compare the forms of bias in the article to the list the students brainstormed in the previous activity. Which forms of bias did they miss? What about these forms of bias might be difficult for people to notice if they're not aware of them? (For example, "Bias through omission" might be difficult to detect because we don't often think about what's **not** in a story, or what news **isn't** covered.)

Now introduce the idea that each medium *has a unique aesthetic form* and discuss the "inverted pyramid" (described in *How to Detect Bias in the News*) to understand how **where** in a story something appears that might affect how a story is read. (Point out that TV and radio newscasts are written in the same way, but because time is so much more precious on TV the background and context that form the "bottom" of the pyramid is often left out.)

Select an issue in the news relating to diversity issues (consider issues relating to visible minorities, religious minorities, aboriginals, gays and lesbians and persons with disabilities, as well as bias against youth or elders).

Divide the class into 4-6 groups and assign each group a different news/information source https://www.newspapersland.com/canada-newspapers/ with which to research the topic.

Have students evaluate the material they have found using the *Bias Evaluation Worksheet* and report their findings to the class. What forms of bias did they find? Were some news sources more or less biased than others? Were some kinds of bias more difficult to detect or recognize than others (for example, "Bias through omission" can be difficult to detect unless we know from other sources that a story is going unreported)?

Evaluation Activity

Each group selects 10 stories from their news source. The group then creates two news products (a newspaper or filmed/acted out newscast): one where bias techniques are applied to create as positive view of the stories in that paper as possible and one where bias techniques are used to create a negative view. **Note that this bias will not relate to any identified group – it will simply be casting the provided news stories in a positive or negative light – e.g. "Sports team loses 5-4/Close game /Sports team loses game".**

Extension Activity

Have each student select a minority group and a news source. For a period of one week, have students follow their chosen news source and make note of every story or article that involves members of their chosen minority group. At the end of the week, students should analyze what they have found using the *Bias Evaluation Worksheet* (remind students that a lack of coverage is itself a form of bias).

If any students wish to analyze bias against a group that you feel is dominant or advantaged (Whites, males, heterosexuals, etc.) take a few minutes to do the *Unpacking Privilege* mini-lesson and make your decision based on the students' analysis in that activity.

How to Detect Bias in the News

At one time or another we all complain about "bias in the news." The fact is, despite the journalistic ideal of "objectivity," every news story is influenced by the attitudes, assumptions and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors.

Not all bias is deliberate. But you can become a more aware news reader or viewer by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow bias to "creep in" to the news:

1. **Bias through selection and omission**

   An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. This has a significant impact on what audiences think is important: for many years large news outlets didn't cover police violence against Black people in Canada or the United States, but when they began to public opinion on the issue — and public perception of whether or not it *was* an issue—began to change significantly. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported.

   Remember that the biggest bias is always towards what journalists see as being "newsworthy" — but this question is always political, even if it isn't seen that way. Though crime is more likely than many other topics to be seen as newsworthy, research has found that in most cases there needs to be something else about a crime—something unusual about the perpetrator or victim, something that makes the crime seem like a violation of our sense of right or wrong, or some connection to a broader issue — to make the news. Stories about a single event are also more likely to be seen as newsworthy than about something that's ongoing, and stories about specific people are more newsworthy than stories about groups or systems.

   Bias through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this form of bias be observed. You can use the News tab on Google or MediaSmarts' custom News search (bit.ly/news-search) to see how different outlets cover the same story.
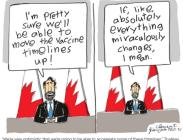
2. **Bias through placement**

   Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Online news puts the most important stories on the home page and promotes them on social media. What section a story appears in matters too: if a story about sexual harassment in the movie industry appears in the Entertainment section, example, we'll probably take it less seriously than if it appears in News.

   Bias through placement can also happen when a story is placed *near* something else. Putting a news story next to an opinion article on the same topic, or a political cartoon about the subject of the story, changes how we read it.

   How the story is organized is also significant. Most news stories are written in what is called "inverted pyramid" style, beginning with what is considered the most newsworthy facts, followed by the important details relating to

News / Canadian Politics / Canada

Trudeau 'very optimistic' vaccine rollout can be accelerated and move closer to U.S. goals

Trudeau held to his September target, but said with vaccine deliveries being moved up and new candidates being approved, the timeline could be moved up

Ryan Tumilty
Mar 03, 2021 • March 3, 2021 • 4 minute read • ☐ 119 Comments

"We're very optimistic that we're going to be able to accelerate some of these timelines," Trudeau said. PHOTO BY GARY CLEMENT/NATIONAL POST

those facts, and finally background information to provide context. The last part of the story contains information that readers are least likely to read and editors are most likely to cut. This can be a form of bias because context often helps you fully understand a topic: for example, if an article about the number of sufferers of mental illness in prison (the newsworthy facts) waits until the fourth paragraph to note that sufferers of mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else (context), readers who only read part of the story may come away with a very inaccurate view of mental illness and violence.

3. **Bias by headline**

Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. Headlines are the most-read part of a paper. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists. They can express approval or condemnation. Even when a story avoids significant bias, because headlines are shorter they often give a much simpler and more biased picture.

4. **Bias by photos, captions and camera angles**

Some pictures flatter a person, others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, the choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. The captions newspapers run below photos are also potential sources of bias.

5. **Bias by word choice**

What words are used to in a story has a major effect on how we read it. For example:

- Using metaphors like describing a politician as "attacking" an issue can provoke an emotional reaction.

- Sentences in the passive voice make it seem like an event just happened, without anyone doing it: compare "Three protestors were injured by police" (passive voice) to "Police injured three protestors" (active voice).

- The choice of verb to describe an action affects what we think about it: Compare "Police *confiscate* gun collection," "Police *seize* gun collection" and "Police *grab* gun collection." Was something a "death," a "killing" or a "murder"? Did a politician "state" something, "claim" it or "allege" it?

- Similarly, how a person or group is described affects how we see them. Is a candidate an *experienced* politician, a *long-serving* politician or an *old* politician? If something is described as a *gang*, that can imply that it is a large, well-organized group—even if it's actually just a handful of young people.

- Using a particular word also suggests that the word describes something real. For example, in the 1990s the news media coined the word "superpredator" to suggest that there was a group of young offenders who committed crimes for fun and had no conscience. Although there was never any evidence this was true, its use in news stories promoted fear of youth crime and led to stricter sentencing laws in the United States.

6.   **Bias by source and quote**

Always consider where the news item "comes from." Is the information supplied by a reporter, an eyewitness, police or fire officials, executives, or elected or appointed government officials? Each may have a particular bias that is introduced into the story. Companies and public relations directors supply news outlets with press releases that hurried reporters can easily turn into news stories. Journalists will also often base their ideas of what is newsworthy on what they see on social media—which allows groups to engage in "source hacking" by manipulating trending topics or creating a fake controversy.

You should also always consider *who* is quoted. Are all of the quotes from authorities, like government and police? Are people from the community that is affected quoted? It's important to look past a single story: most news outlets quote men more often than women overall, and White people more than non-White people.

7.   **Bias through false balance**

It's important for news articles to give both sides of a story, and journalists take that responsibility seriously. Unfortunately, some groups take advantage of that fact—and the fact that many news outlets no longer have reporters who have special training in covering things like health and science—to make it seem like stories have more sides than they really do. The tobacco industry started doing this in the 1970s by trying to get "equal time" for idea that cigarettes don't cause cancer, when basically all scientists agreed that it did. Today, other groups use the same strategy to make it seem like there isn't a clear consensus on topics like climate change and vaccination.

8.   **Bias through statistics**

Many news stories include statistics: crowd counts, vote totals, temperature records, and so on. There can be bias in *which* statistics are included (showing temperatures dropping from August to December doesn't give you an accurate picture of the whole year, for example) and also in *how* those statistics are described or interpreted.

For example, the first of these stories focuses on the fact that "millions" of people in the US did not get their second dose of Covid-19 vaccine. The second story focuses on how many people *did* get it (the "majority") and describes the number who aren't as "only 5 million."

Both of these stories are from reliable news outlets, and both are biased! This shows that instead of looking for "unbiased" news (which doesn't exist) we need to learn to recognize bias so we can read through it.

Adapted from Newskit: A Consumers Guide to News Media, by *The Learning Seed Co. Reprinted with their permission*.

Bias Evaluation Worksheet

For your news source, list all examples you can find of each form of bias, along with a quote or other evidence that shows the bias is there.

Source: _____

Bias through selection and omission:

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Bias through placement:

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Bias by headline:

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Bias by photos, captions and camera angles:

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Bias through word choice:

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Bias by source control:

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Bias through false balance:

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Bias through statistics:

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Task Assessment Rubric: Newscast

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Use Skills and competencies that fall under "use" range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.	*Community Engagement:* advocates and practices safe, legal, and responsible use of information and technology *Finding and Verifying:* locates, organizes, analyzes, evaluates, synthesizes, and ethically uses information from a variety of sources and media	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Understand "Understand" includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about the world around us. "Understand" also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating, and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate, and solve problems.	*Community Engagement:* understands how meaning is produced through multimedia (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the Internet and social media in particular *Finding and Verifying:* understands the different purposes and contexts of news production use overt and implied messages to draw inferences and construct meaning in media texts	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Create "Create" is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video, and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming, and other forms of social media. The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.	*Finding and Verifying:* identify conventions and techniques appropriate to the form chosen for a media text they plan to create understand how meaning is produced through the news media (text, images, audio, video) and how culture is produced through the news *Community Engagement:* creates digital content that demonstrates critical thought and engages with a social or political issue *Creating and Remixing:* interacts, collaborates, co-constructs content, and publishes with peers, experts, or others employing a variety of digital environments and media communicates information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats contributes to project teams to produce original works or solve problems	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)