

Detecting Bias in News Media

How does bias in the news manifest itself? Unfortunately, it's not always easy to recognize. No self-respecting reporter is going to come right out and say "And this next sentence is biased, so watch out!" Rather, we must try to find bias ourselves, and in order to do so we must know where to look.

Who are their sources? To portray issues fairly and accurately, media must broaden their spectrum of sources. Otherwise, they serve merely as megaphones for those in power.

Bias through selection and omission: Within a story, some details can be ignored, others can be included to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of sources can this type of bias be observed.

Is there a lack of diversity? Hearing stories from a couple of white men is far less effective than hearing the story from a diverse group of people. A 40 month survey of PBS's NewsHour found its guest list was 90 percent white and 87 percent male.

Bias by headline: Headlines are the must-read part of a newspaper because they are often printed in large and bold fonts. Headlines can be misleading: conveying excitement when the story is not exciting; expressing approval or disapproval.

Do stereotypes skew coverage? Does coverage of the drug crisis focus almost exclusively on African Americans, despite the fact that the vast majority of drug users are white?

Bias by photos, captions, and camera angles: Pictures can make a person look good, bad, sick, silly, etc. Which photos a newspaper chooses to run can heavily influence the public's perception of a person or event. On TV, images, captions, and narration of a TV anchor or reporter can be sources of bias.

Is the language loaded? People can be influenced by the use of positive or negative words with a certain connotation. People can also be influenced by the tone that a newscaster uses when saying certain words. Are they saying the "boo version of hooray" or vice-versa, the "hooray version of boo". Loaded language is a helpful tool in media to get an audience to perceive a concept differently.

Bias through placement: Some media outlets undermine important issues for their own advantage. Stories on the front page of the newspaper are thought to be more important than stories buried in the back. For example, if a media outlet has a liberal agenda, they will not thoroughly report on a story that can cripple the Democrats.

Bias through use of names and titles: News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places, and events. In many places around the world, one person's friend is another person's enemy.