IDENTIFYING MEDIA BIAS

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What is it?

Bias means prejudice, partiality or favouritism toward something or someone. Media bias is expressing prejudice when reporting in print, online or by broadcast. This means that readers, listeners and viewers are presented with a view of events which may be inaccurate or unfair, and moreover, they may be unaware of this due to the subtle ways in which our responses are manipulated. Familiarising yourself with the following types of bias will help you identify the ways in which the media might try to manage your response to a story and why that might be problematic.

Types of media

Media bias is present in most media and much of what you read will have some kind of agenda, including:

- television
- radio transcripts
- newspapers
- films
- blogs
- social media
- public and privately-owned media

> **Identifying Media Bias - charts:**
> ➢ Media Bias Chart - static
> ➢ Media Bias Chart - interactive
> ➢ Australian Media Bias Chart
>
> **Misleading and Fake News - Infographics:**
> ➢ Spotting Fake News
> ➢ 10 Types of Misleading News

Types of media bias

(Several of these may be present simultaneously).

1. Word Choice

Spin bias involves choosing words which:

- are deliberately vague
- are designed to invoke a positive or negative emotional response.
- make the reader take a positive or negative position in line with that of the media source.

What's the difference between '**refused to say'** and '**did not mention'?** Which one makes you think there was something to hide? Consider emotive words like **rant, gloat, rage, inspire, crucial, major: t**hey all add an angle

or present a position beyond the basic facts. Remember that **terrorists** and **freedom fighters** are the same people depending on whose side you are on.

Sensational language is frequently used to suggest that a story is more important than it is, or that it is the final outcome of a long saga. When '**Breaking News**!' flashes across your screen, the story isn't always as dramatic as you anticipated. Look for exaggeration through choice of words like **shocking, chaos, explosive, bloodbath…**

2. Leaving things out

Slant or viewpoint bias involves deliberately telling only part of a story, ignoring alternative viewpoints or excluding conflicting data. Consider the relatively pro-Liberal stance of the Courier Mail compared to the pro-Labour Guardian regarding what Scott Morrison knew of the Brittany Higgins scandal. The Courier Mail does not acknowledge the inconsistencies in the timeline reported by the Guardian, but rather paints Morrison in a flattering light by stating that he 'has confirmed he will support an independent external review'.

Bias by omission happens when media outlets don't report particular stories or deliberately leave out conflicting perspectives. This is often politically motivated – for example, right-wing media is much less likely to report on climate change stories in the same manner or quantity as left-wing media.

3. Sources/Attribution

Unsubstantiated statements are presented as if they are fact, but without evidence/sources to back them up. For example, if an article states that Jeff Bezos could make every American a millionaire, there should be a source to check that assertion. Avoiding unsubstantiated claims is often done by using words like '**allegedly'** to show that the veracity of the claim has not been established.

Missing source bias: an informative, balanced article should also provide the background or context of a story, including naming sources. Responsible journalists who mention "**baseless claims**" or "**debunked theories**" should give background information or link to the basis for that conclusion. Reporting that "**immigration opponents say**," or "**critics say**," without identifying the sources may be necessary to keep an identity secret, but this does make the information less reliable.

4. Opinion Presented as Fact

There is a big difference between facts which are observable (everyone would agree that they are true) and personal interpretation. Be aware of word choice which expresses the writer's feelings or opinion, rather

than conveying facts. For example, what is the difference in your reaction to the following statements?

- A blue SUV, which drove along the street at 3pm…'
- 'A **suspicious** SUV, which **may have** been following schoolchildren…'.

Sometimes journalists *'mindread'* by pretending to know another person's feelings without proof, or they present their own world view as fact. Consider when public figures are said to be **distraught, conflicted, furious, driven** – but without any direct proof of this.

5. Placement or Selection Bias

Editors know that *stories at the top of a page* (print or online) or first in a broadcast are more likely to be read or heard, and likewise, stories can be 'buried' by putting them in less popular sections or timeslots.

Commercial considerations also influence coverage – stories which attract the most traffic make more advertising revenue, so stories which can be sensationalised may be prioritised.

Visual selection also plays a significant role in manipulating our response to an article. Consider the difference in reader perception between viewing a mugshot or a family photo.

6. Situational Bias

Geographic, ethnic and racial complexities also come into play: whether a story is covered depends on where the media outlet is based, where it is accessed, the language it is delivered in, the predominant political viewpoint of the readers/viewers, and which stories will most interest or affect that particular set of consumers. Western media is often criticised not only for being pro-western in their coverage generally, but for being guilty of racial, sexual, religious and gender bias in the way they present stories. Consider racial bias of image choice here, the discussion of cultural bias in disaster reporting here and an exploration of gender bias here.

While looking at media relating to your group or issue, ask whether the group/issue is presented differently in:

- different types of media
- media aimed at young/middle-aged/older people
- media aimed at different geographical
- populations
- media aimed at different ethnic or cultural
- communities
- media aimed at different socio-economic groups in society

Ad Hominem (Latin for 'to the person') This bias seeks to damage a person's credibility by *attacking them personally instead of their argument or idea*. Sometimes these attacks are obvious (especially in political circles, like referring to Donald Trump as Cadet Bone Spurs) but other times more difficult to spot – for example referring to someone as ultra-liberal is not a positive or objective descriptor in a conservative publication

Identifying the effects of media bias on particular groups:

In this media piece:

- ☐ Which group(s) of people does the report/article concern?
- ☐ Is the group portrayed in a positive way, a negative way, or a mixture?
- ☐ How will people INSIDE this group feel about this portrayal?
- ☐ How will people OUTSIDE this group feel about the way the group is portrayed?
- ☐ Are there different perspectives or opinions presented about this group in THIS report/article, or just one?
- ☐ What could have been included in this report/article to bring more balance to the piece?

In the media generally:

- ☐ Who talks about this group/issue in the media? Are they part of the group/issue or outside it?
- ☐ Is the way this group/issue is portrayed in the media generally negative, generally positive, split between two main opinions, or split across several different standpoints?
- ☐ Are there positive outcomes from the way this group/issue is represented in the media?
- ☐ Who benefits from these positive outcomes?
- ☐ Are there negative outcomes from the way this group/issue is represented in the media?
- ☐ Who suffers from these negative outcomes?
- ☐ Are there outcomes that are negative for some people but positive for others?