

Detecting Bias in the News Media

News stories are influenced by the attitudes and backgrounds of interviewers, writers, photographers, anchors, producers, and editors. Most bias in news stories is not on purpose, but you should be tuned in to the following ways that bias can creep in to the news:

Bias by choice of words: 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.

This example appeared in TIME magazine, August 14, 2000, page 37:

FISHING FOR DONATIONS

House Speaker Denny Hastert led 35 donors last Monday on a predawn fly-fishing excursion in Valley Forge, Pa. Each donor got a personal guide from the local Trout Unlimited. Minimum donation: \$5,000; number of fish caught: 1.

Bias through selection and omission: An editor can express bias by choosing whether or not to use a specific news story. 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.

For example, if people boo during one of President Clinton's speeches, the booing can be described as "remarks greeted by jeers" or the boos can be ignored as "a handful of people who disagree".

Bias through Limiting Debate/Spin: People in positions of power often try to use the media to promote their positions or their "spin" on events. Sometimes, especially in cases of national security, government officials have an interest in limiting or eliminating debate. They hope that their interpretation of events is accepted, rather than questioned, by the media. They would have us believe that their view of events should be shared by all right-thinking people. Sometimes the media, or at least some media, wittingly or unwittingly act as debate limiting agents. They accept the official position without adequately scrutinizing the assertions of those officials.

Bias through sources: The objective to look at who the sources are instead of trying to interpret what the sources are saying. Determine where the sources are from and what which sources are missing. Categorize the sources for evidence/quotes. Are they all from one perspective? All corporate? All small business? All government? All male? All United States? Etc.

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.

Schmoozapalooza 2000

In the August 7/14 issue of The Nation, Eric Alterman adds this descriptive headline to his article about the party conventions.

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 this a good picture of Al Gore?

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*.

For example, a person can be called an "ex-con" or be referred to as someone who "served time twenty years ago for a minor offense."

Bias through framing/placement: Where a story is placed influences what a person thinks about its importance. Stories on the front page of the newspaper are thought to be more important than stories buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run stories that draw ratings first and leave the less appealing for later.

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COVER

Tiger wins TIME's cover space.

Coverage of the Republican National Convention begins on page 26.