

## Detecting Bias In News Media

Media have tremendous power in setting cultural guidelines and in shaping political discourse. It is essential that news media, along with other institutions, are challenged to be fair and accurate. The first step in challenging biased news coverage is documenting bias. Here are some questions to ask yourself about newspaper, TV and radio news.

### Who are the sources?

Be aware of the political perspective of the sources used in a story. Media over-rely on "official" (government, corporate and establishment think tank) sources. For instance, FAIR found that in 40 months of Nightline programming, the most frequent guests were Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, Elliott Abrams and Jerry Falwell. Progressive and public interest voices were grossly underrepresented.

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

What is the race and gender diversity at the news outlet you watch compared to the communities it serves? How many producers, editors or decision-makers at news outlets are women, people of color or openly gay or lesbian? In order to fairly represent different communities, news outlets should have members of those communities in decision-making positions.

How many of the experts these news outlets cite are women and people of color? FAIR's 40-month survey of Nightline found its U.S. guests to be 92 percent white and 89 percent male. A similar survey of PBS's NewsHour found its guest list was 90 percent white and 87 percent male.

Political coverage often focuses on how issues affect politicians or corporate executives rather than those directly affected by the issue. For example, many stories on parental notification of abortion emphasized the "tough choice" confronting male politicians while quoting no women under 18--those with the most at stake in the debate. Economics coverage usually looks at how events impact stockholders rather than workers or consumers.

### Are there double standards?

Do media hold some people to one standard while using a different standard for other groups? Youth of color who commit crimes are referred to as "superpredators," whereas adult criminals who commit white-collar crimes are often portrayed as having been tragically led astray. Think tanks partly funded by unions are often identified as "labor-backed" while think tanks heavily funded by business interests are usually not identified as "corporate-backed."

### 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? Does coverage of women on welfare focus overwhelmingly on African-American women, despite the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are not black? Are lesbians portrayed as "man-hating" and gay men portrayed as "sexual predators" (even though a child is 100 times more likely to be molested by a family member than by an unrelated gay adult—Denver Post, 9/28/92)?

### **What are the unchallenged assumptions?**

Often the most important message of a story is not explicitly stated. For instance, in coverage of women on welfare, the age at which a woman had her first child will often be reported—the implication being that the woman's sexual "promiscuity," rather than institutional economic factors, are responsible for her plight.

Coverage of rape trials will often focus on a woman's sexual history as though it calls her credibility into question. After the arrest of William Kennedy Smith, a New York Times article (4/17/91) dredged up a host of irrelevant personal details about his accuser, including the facts that she had skipped classes in the 9th grade, had received several speeding tickets and—when on a date—had talked to other men.

### **Is the language loaded?**

When media adopt loaded terminology, they help shape public opinion. For instance, media often use the right-wing buzzword "racial preference" to refer to affirmative action programs. Polls show that this decision makes a huge difference in how the issue is perceived: A 1992 Louis Harris poll, for example, found that 70 percent said they favored "affirmative action" while only 46 percent favored "racial preference programs."

Challenge the assumption directly. Often bringing assumptions to the surface will demonstrate their absurdity. Most reporters, for example, will not say directly that a woman deserved to be raped because of what she was wearing.

### **Is there a lack of context?**

Coverage of so-called "reverse discrimination" usually fails to focus on any of the institutional factors which gives power to prejudice—such as larger issues of economic inequality and institutional racism. Coverage of hate speech against gays and lesbians often fails to mention increases in gay-bashing and how the two might be related.

### **Do the headlines and stories match?**

Usually headlines are not written by the reporter. Since many people just skim headlines, misleading headlines have a significant impact. A classic case: In a New York Times article on the June 1988 U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow, Margaret Thatcher was quoted as saying of Reagan, "Poor dear, there's nothing between his ears." The Times headline: "Thatcher Salute to the Reagan Years."

### **Are stories on important issues featured prominently?**

Look at where stories appear. Newspaper articles on the most widely read pages (the front pages and the editorial pages) and lead stories on television and radio will have the greatest influence on public opinion.

<http://fair.org/take-action-now/media-activism-kit/how-to-detect-bias-in-news-media/>