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Navigating News Bias

Bias is ingrained into news outlets which leads to a significant change in our perception of reported events. This happens because of different tactics news outlets use in order to keep their user base. To retain their readership, news organizations use bias in their writing to ensure that their audience perceives the event in a way that aligns with their political perspective. This can be shown by examining three articles about the prosecution of Hunter Biden for a charge of possession of a firearm while struggling with a drug addiction. The three news media outlets, NBC News, Fox News, and Newsnation, were chosen because of their differences in storytelling which causes biases in the reader. There are three main ways news outlets can influence their readers: the actual structure of the writing, the knowledge they choose to show the audience, and the images they use.

The structure of the writing piece can influence the reader's opinion. An article's structure can usually be broken down into two parts; the word choice and line length. Word choice can heavily alter how the reader interprets the topic because of the difference between the denotations and connotations of different words. Looking at the NBC News article, the author writes using a very very evasive manner which gives the reader the impression that there is not enough evidence to convict Hunter Biden. The article uses phrases and words like “The court documents show” and “accuse” in order to make the claims seem less trustworthy (Gregorian). This wording makes the

indictment seem like they are charges at the wall to see what sticks. The wording suggests that the claims said in the indictment are not supported by sufficient evidence to back up the claim. If we look at the Fox news article however, they do the opposite and use phrases like “false and fictitious” in order to make the charges seem very strong and serious (Singman). Their word choice is much stronger and more severe. This causes the reader to become more skeptical of Hunter Biden and possibly wonder if his father, Joe Biden, had any involvement. Newsnation uses words that make the charge brought on Biden seem like an anomaly. They used the word “rare” repeatedly in order to describe how uncommon being charged solely for having an addiction to drugs when purchasing a firearm is (Whitehurst). Line length can also impact the reader’s perception of what is being shown because it requires the reader to take in and absorb more information which makes the article more difficult to understand. In both the Newsnation article and the NBC News article, the line length of the sentences were moderately long with an average words per sentence of around twenty-two. This is a very common sentence length for accurately describing events and explaining information to the reader. For Fox News however, the average words per sentence for their article was thirty-six! This is an extremely long average length per sentence and makes the charges from the indictment seem very extensive and serious. An example of this is with this sentence from the Fox News article “According to the indictment, ‘on or about October 12, 2018, in the District of Delaware, the defendant, Robert Hunter Biden, in connection with the acquisition of a firearm, that is, a Colt Cobra 38SPL Revolver with serial number RA 551363...knowingly made a false and fictitious written statement, intended and likely to deceive that dealer with respect to a fact material to the lawfulness of the sale of the firearm...in that the defendant, Robert Hunter Biden, provided a written statement on Form 4473 certifying he was not an unlawful user of, and addicted to, any stimulant, narcotic drug, and any

other controlled substance, when in fact, as he knew, that statement was false and fictitious.’”

(Singman). This sentence has so much information about specific minor details that it makes following the sentence difficult. Talking about the specificities of the type of gun and its serial number is not helpful to understand the reason why he was indicted. With these long sentences, the reader may have a more difficult time understanding the material and could misinterpret what the citation or sentence was actually saying. The reader may then walk away from it with thoughts and feelings that differ from what the article actually spoke about.

The author’s selection of information changes how the reader perceives the topic that is discussed. Authors can really impact the knowledge their readers have by what they choose to quote from a certain piece of work, and what background knowledge they give the reader about the event. NBC News chose to quote small excerpts from the indictment and paraphrase the context which made the information very easy to understand. This removed a lot of the confusing wording used in the indictment, and caused the reader to fully comprehend the charges Biden was prosecuted for. This choice to paraphrase made it very easy to understand the event and process the information. Fox News chose to quote very large excerpts from the indictment which caused the same phrases and ideas to be repeated multiple times. This makes the quotes more difficult to understand, and causes the reader to only grasp the repeated phrases within the quote. This pushes a certain narrative onto the reader that there is lots of evidence and charges put against Hunter Biden, and that he should be charged heavily for his crime. This is because there are many specifics about the crime, and the indictment uses very serious words when prosecuting. Overall, this would cause the reader to only focus on the serious lawyer speak and give the perception that Hunter is going to be charged for this indictment. Newsnation was very different from the other two articles because they chose not to quote the indictment, or even link

the indictment paper in their article. This made the reading experience vastly different from the other articles because they only slightly discuss what the indictment actually states and go more into detail on other related factors. Newsnation used a large portion of their article discussing the rarity of this charge and cited a quote from a law professor at the University of California that stated that “It’s relatively rare to prosecute someone for being a substance abuser in possession of firearms, absent other criminal activity, or unusual circumstances” (Whitehurst). This gives the reader the impression that this charge against Hunter Biden is unique and only brought about because he is the son of our current president Joe Biden. This would cause the reader to think that the charges Biden was prosecuted for were unfair and should be dropped. The choices of methods for telling the event and what they choose to cite, sway the readers perception of the article because they influence what information is known about the event.

Background knowledge is also a large driving factor in how the information is perceived by the reader. In both the NBC News article and Newsnation article they discuss how the gun charge would have been dropped in a plea deal if it wasn’t brought to light by the judge in the court hearing in July. Neither of the two articles mention any previous information about Hunter Biden’s drug history. This impacts the reader's perception on the duration and frequency of Hunter Biden’s drug addiction because there was no information shared on the subject, and would cause the reader to think the claims aren’t supported by enough evidence. This would cause the readers to think that the indictment put forth against Biden is not supported by sufficient evidence. Fox News stated in their article that “Hunter Biden was discharged from the Navy in 2014 after testing positive for cocaine” (Gregorian). This would sway the reader towards Hunter being indicted because it shows that he has a previous history of drug use. This would cause the reader to think that Biden is going to be charged for his crime because of his prior

implications with drug use with the Navy. Overall, the background information the author displays to the reader sways the reader's opinion on the current topic because of their ability to see and read about the subject's prior history.

The photographs and images news outlets choose to include impact and shape the reader's outlook on the event. NBC News used images that showed Hunter Biden being very upset and hugging his father Joe Biden. This image tries to garner remorse out of the reader and cause them to feel more empathetic. Newsnation used an image of Hunter Biden looking away from the camera and walking very uptight and apprehensively. This would cause the reader to feel empathy for Hunter Biden as well because he is looking very nervous and worried about his indictment. Fox News used an image of Biden with his hands on his hips looking very far in the distance. This makes Biden look smug and confident. This would sway the reader's opinion on the indictment because the reader may perceive that Biden believes he is above the law and that he is not worried about his upcoming indictment trial.

In conclusion, the reader's impressions of current news events can be swayed by the structural elements of the writing, the knowledge the author chooses to include, and their choice of images to include. As shown with the analysis of news articles discussing Hunter Biden's recent legal troubles, it is evident that the way authors frame their articles can sway the reader to interpret the event in different ways. Selective quoting of background information can distort the understanding and context surrounding the news event. Additionally, the images chosen by the author can evoke specific emotions and biases in the reader. In the current world of social media, seeing through an article's manipulation to understand the full context of the situation is necessary to completely understand the events that you are reading about. Awareness of these tactics can empower individuals to make more informed opinions and understand the biases

within themselves. By creating a media-literate society we can strive for a world where news is not a tool for maintaining an audience but a source of knowledge and insight that serves the public interest.

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