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Bias in News Sources

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I was at a family dinner and my grandmother said something pretty blatantly racist. She had no idea it was racist, but I and the rest of my family were in a slight shock at what she said. We all generally dismissed it and attested it to a generational difference, but she said something that caught my ear, “I saw it on the news.” I started wondering why a news station would report something like that. She grew up in a time where news was considered a fact and nobody would question it. When there were opinions or discussion stories it was made abundantly clear. Nowadays, the line between factual news and opinion/discussion writing is made unclear by different forms of bias. In fact, political leaders can use bias in the media to bring more people to their side of the argument and make the feelings of those already on their side stronger. Through textual analysis of articles from Reuters, CNN, and Fox News, the different tellings and focuses of the stories make clear the news’ that the current news outlets do not always fulfill the promise of factual news that my grandmother’s generation grew up on.

Before bias in the news can be discussed, we need to define what different kinds of biases exist. Generally, there are two kinds: implicit bias and explicit bias. An implicit bias, or implicit stereotype, is the unconscious attribution of particular qualities to a member of a certain social group.¹ Or, more blatantly, implicit bias is unconscious stereotyping. However, measuring implicit bias has been termed as pseudoscience by some experts in the associated fields.² Explicit bias, on the other hand, refers to the “attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level. Much of the time, these biases and their expression arise as a direct result of a

¹ “Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes,” CiteSeerX, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.411.2919>.

² Olivia Goldhill, “The World Is Relying on a Flawed Psychological Test to Fight Racism,” Quartz (Quartz, January 31, 2019), <https://qz.com/1144504/the-world-is-relying-on-a-flawed-psychological-test-to-fight-racism/>.

perceived threat.”³ While these are the most general forms of biases, there are more specific types that fall under either or both of these categories.

While there are many different ways of expressing bias the ones discussed in this paper are bias by headline, bias by word choice and tone, and bias by photos. Bias by headline is the exploitation of the fact that many people scan most headlines in a newspaper or website to present biases and prejudices. Bias by word choice and tone is just as it sounds, the use of words with some sort of positive or negative connotation can strongly influence the reader on a topic. Lastly, bias by photos is the clever use of pictures to influence opinion about the photos subject by, for example, including an unflattering picture of a political candidate that the news outlet has a bias against.

Headlines are arguably the most important part of a news story because most people skim all the headlines on a page before they decide to read one (if at all)⁴. Headlines are often the only thing a person reads, so the way a headline is written affects who reads the article and, more importantly, how many people read the article. News sources often create headlines targeted at their audience. For example, Reuters, a wire service with a very objective audience, wrote an article on the 2017 Women’s March that had the objective headline *In challenge to Trump, women protesters swarm streets across U.S.*. Conversely, Fox News, a generally conservative and pro-Trump news source, published a story about the same topic with the headline *Hundreds of thousands of women protest against Trump*. This title may seem pretty objective at first, but it’s factually inaccurate and targets their audience. Not only was the protest not made up of solely

³ “Explicit Bias Explained,” Perception Institute, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://perception.org/research/explicit-bias/>.

⁴ Chris Cillizza, “Americans Read Headlines. And Not Much Else.,” The Washington Post (WP Company, April 2, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/03/19/americans-read-headlines-and-not-much-else/>.

women, as the headline implies, but it says that they were protesting against Trump. While both of these points are partially true, according to the official Women's March Agenda⁵ there are a range of topics they're protesting for like "ending state violence" and "racial justice" just to name a few. The fact that Fox News said that the protests were against Trump in the headline makes their pro-Trump audience fired up and even more defensive. On the other side of the political aisle is CNN. Their article on the Women's March didn't even mention Trump in the headline: *Protesters rally worldwide in solidarity with Washington march*. Since CNN's audience is generally liberal, it makes sense their headline would appeal to liberal ideas. The language of the headline is generally sympathetic towards the cause, which promotes the ideas of the protest to their audience and grow the movement. Something CNN mentioned in the headline that neither Fox nor Reuters mentioned is there were protests "worldwide," which makes Trump look hated around the world, whereas the other articles make it seem like its an issue concentrated in the USA.

Once the headline hooks the reader, no matter the audience, the body of the article usually has the same political skew (if any) as the headline implies. Bias by mood and word choice may not be obvious by reading just one article, but it becomes apparent when you read two or more articles on the same subject, the differences become clear. In their article about the 2017 Women's March, Reuters holds their reputation as an unbiased news source. Their article is purely fact based with clearly distinct sections about protests in the US and protests around the world. There was no critique or defense of the protests or its backing ideals. Reuters' word choice is also very objective and has no connotations attached to it. Words such as "against" and

⁵ "The Women's March 2019 Women's Agenda," Scribd (Women's March), accessed October 29, 2019, https://www.scribd.com/document/397727839/The-Women-s-March-2019-Women-s-Agenda#from_embed.

“appropriated reference” when describing the protest. CNN’s article shows general support and sympathy towards the movement, as is expected with their generally liberal leanings. Most of the article was dedicated to describing Women’s Marches happening all over the world, including places like Antarctica and Mexico. By them focusing on the worldwide scope of this issue, they make it seem like the entire world is protesting against Trump. Their word choice is also sympathetic towards the cause. Words like “solidarity” and “global event” were used to describe the protest and its sister protests. Fox on the other hand used words that hold generally negative connotations. Words like “mock,” “brandished,” and “decried” were all used to describe the women participating in the march. These words make women seem like they’re threatening Trump and making fun of him. Not only does Fox not mention the fact that there were other protests around the world (which is a bias of omission), they focus on the problems the protests caused DC. For example, they said how since there were so many people on the DC metro, most government workers couldn’t get to work. However, they forgot to mention that many government employees don’t work on the weekend and the DC metro has had service problems for much longer than the Women’s March has been going on⁶.

When it comes to political movements, powerful images of people in the movement have the potential to influence people to join. So obviously if you were a news outlet and were against a movement, you wouldn’t want to include images that would empower the movement. As would be expected by their conservative leanings, Fox News did not include any images of the

⁶ Luke Mullins and Michael J. Gaynor, “The Infuriating History of How Metro Got So Bad: Washingtonian (DC),” Washingtonian, March 21, 2016, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2015/12/09/why-does-metro-suck-dangerous-accidents-escalator-outages/>.

protests in their article. On the flip side, CNN's article was mostly pictures. There are at least one, sometimes more, pictures from each protest in the different countries they covered. They also included tweets from people protesting in different countries (including Antarctica) that also had pictures. The images CNN included in their article were mostly of the signs people brought or of powerful moments in the protests, which shines the movement in a positive light. Lastly, Reuters had a couple of pictures included in their article, but they were of the celebrities that were in attendance of the DC Women's March, including the likes of Madonna and Scarlett Johansson. These images don't really idealize or put down the protest, but instead show its popularity and that it has the support of numerous celebrities.

Conservatives and liberals often don't see and support opposite sides of a story and the 2017 Women's March was no different. In their coverage of the march, Fox News implies the March is against typical conservative ideas, anti-Trump, and costs the taxpayer money because of damage to public transportation due to high congestion. CNN, a liberal leaning station, made their article about how there were sister protests all over the world and had pictures from all of them, making it seem like global issue instead of just being contained in the USA. Reuters stays true to its reputation and did not pick a side. Their story was all facts and a couple pictures of celebrities in attendance. By textually analyzing different news source's articles on the same event, it becomes obvious that not all news sources report equally. Many news stories are influenced by bias of different forms. This development of bias in news is still a fairly recent development and is difficult for older people to understand that because they grew up in a time when news was promised to be fact. Because of this bias, the line between fact and opinion has become increasingly blurred.

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