<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/26/media-news-article-shift-discourse-language>

The Guardian’s February 26, 2022 article “Use of ‘sexist’ and ‘racist’ in the New York Times increased over 400% since 2012. Why?” tracked the media’s use of words linked to bias and discrimination of historically marginalized groups of people, including the terms such as systemic inequality, privilege, white supremacy, the patriarchy.

Interestingly, this article was posted as an opinion post. Throughout the article, the contributors for this story are clear when they make assumptions, and equally add the caveat that no “causation” was found. The article focuses on a dissemination of the trends that were tracked within the data. It seems a bit misleading to have this sorted as an opinion!

The authors did a great job taking a massive data set, with 27 million articles from 47 print media outlets over the period 50 years, and breaking the findings down into easy to digest takeaways for the reader.

The data revealed that a dramatic shift in the frequency of these terms beginning in the early 2010s. I was a bit cautious when the authors began to find a linkage to news-events that could have prompted this increased usage, first stating “For instance, given that the shifts became increasingly pronounced in 2012, one might assume they are straightforwardly a response to the killing of Trayvon Martin” before pointing out that this was hard to suggest given the rise in public discourse on sexism and homophobia as well.

The authors did lose me for a bit here. I believe the intersectionality of oppression makes it nearly impossible for public discussions to singularly discuss any one of these issues without the other. The authors did later suggest that media usage of these terms appear to drive public conversation, and while this would support their analysis for this section of the article, it fails to note how reporting of these issues require public participation prior to reporting. I think to some extent, it is an impossible endeavor to try to determine if the media is driving public perception, or vice versa. Diving into this conversation seems to just distract from the overall question of was there a singular or set of events that drove this increase?

Thankfully, in terms of that question, the authors do bring in a solid observation that “these movements occurred in the context of already-heightened concern and preoccupation with bias and discrimination among the literati,” and look at the “Great Awokening” beginning in 2012 in which there was a rapid shift in public beliefs on race, gender, and sexuality. However, they then return to tying this trend with the thoughts and beliefs of reporters. Their findings did suggest that these trends were found within the primary producers and consumers of media, but then failed to focus on the consumers aspect.

It feels like the authors have very interesting findings, but continually ignore key factors in how this discourse evolves among the public. Members of the media tend to be more educated and liberal when compared to the general public, but arguably, so do the members of the general public who engage in these conversations. To separate them out distinctly from other liberal, educated community members seems a bit of a stretch in an effort to drive a hypothesis that media is driving the public discourse, particularly as technology advancements have greatly broadened the reach of the average citizen’s thoughts.

As the article continues, the authors consistently link the frequency of these terms in media to public perception of these issues. While they caution that causation cannot be determined, it seems that the majority of the reporting on this matter attempts to defend how the media has informed public perception.

I would have liked to see them take a more holistic view of the matter and societal trends. Similarly to high-profile incidents of race-based incidents of discrimination and oppression, the age of social media skyrocketed. I think the absence of this factor was a major misstep in interpreting results. While they acknowledge discourse on these topics had existed within academic circles for many years prior, the increase in public conversation of these issues could arguably be attributed to the rise in popularity of blog sites, etc. Their data set was broad, but their analysis seemed overly narrow.

Finally, I appreciated the in-depth and complete set of graphs to demonstrate their findings and correlation between media mentions and public perception. However, I would have liked at least a few of these graphs to be stand-alone within the article, instead of shared among a dozen others in an embedded tweet. It made it difficult to quickly discern the information contained in the graphs.