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Explainer: Media Bias in Your News

June 25, 2020 By [Kevin LaTorre](#)

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We can't report the news and not acknowledge how the news business works. And so, we have a new series on the 21st-century news landscape, *Refresh the Press!* Today, it begins by discussing media bias. How does bias appear in your news, and why should you care?

What is Bias in Media?

Bias ([from Merriam-Webster](#)) means “an inclination of temperament or outlook,” also involving “a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment.” Media bias, then, means a personal judgment and outlook present in news. Walter Hussman, the publisher of the Arkansas Democrat Gazette and namesake of UNC-Chapel Hill’s [Hussman School of Journalism and Media](#), [states](#) the need for minimizing media bias: “Credibility is the greatest asset of any news medium, and impartiality is the greatest source of credibility.”

Media bias isn’t the same as “fake news,” which purposely includes falsehoods. It also isn’t the same as opinionated argumentation: that appears in opinion editorials, articles which argue for or against personal and political positions. Media bias can occur within otherwise legitimate reporting. How?

It involves limited presentations, skewed contexts, implied connotations, and more. Let’s dive deeper into how bias occurs how it harms your news and how you might learn to spot it.

Media Bias in the Words, Facts and Coverage You Read

Because news sites and organizations employ human beings, human bias occurs throughout the news process. We hold biases from our backgrounds and experiences, and our work will reflect that if we’re not careful. But unreported media bias, when passed off as objective-seeming news, masks the writer’s opinions as facts. Muddying this distinction will mislead the audience’s idea of what’s true and what’s speculation. Distinguishing between truth and speculation has gotten complicated for the contemporary news audience.

Some news content states their biases upfront: opinion editorials and sponsored articles.

Writers of opinion editorials (“op-eds”) draw from facts to argue their personal positions: their writing requires bias, which the reader can expect from the *Opinion* section of a news site. Bias is also obvious in “sponsored articles,” which are brand-specific advertisements published on a news site. The brand pays for access to the site’s platform. In turn, their advertisement reads like the site’s other news articles. But the sponsor (a company looking to improve its visibility with the site’s readers) usually identifies itself with the phrases “Brought to you by” or “Sponsored by.” Often this content alerts readers upfront, using tags just under its headline.

These biases, when identified, shouldn’t confuse audiences. You know they’re there, after all. But when biases go unstated, they can mislead readers.

Bias in Language

Biases in language exist at the word-by-word level, where they insert vague suggestions into a news story. That suggestive edge makes the bias tricky to spot: the implications could be true, even if you can’t say for certain that they are. It tends to lead you to a suggested conclusion which the article doesn’t support.

You can mostly spot biased language in verbs colored by connotations. Instead of a word like “said,” you might find “retorted,” “lashed out” or “slammed.” How a story depicts the relevant people and events might include subjective descriptions (“shocking,” “chaotic,” “explosive,” or “bloodbath”). Writers may choose these words because everyday speech uses them, but in otherwise-factual news, those words add connotations without supporting them. Charged words earn emotional reactions, where objective news has historically sought to work within verifiable facts. If you hear words like “spin” or “sensationalism” in a description of media bias, you’re likely hearing criticisms of the word-by-word biases.

Another example of biased language is an *ad hominem* attack (“mud-slinging”). Here, the story’s description of a person or event disparages that person or event’s reputation to discredit them. Think of our current political news stream – labels like “radical,” “far-right,” “socialist,” and “snowflake” come up constantly. These labels impugn people subjectively. And the words’ connotation can usually lead the audience to discredit them out of hand. If a news story reports on someone’s current statement or alleged action, then why would a story leverage their pasts to dismiss the present? Including background can help tell the larger story, but when it adds baggage through name-calling, the inclusion becomes biased mud-slinging.

Bias in Evidence

To zoom out, let's examine media bias in news stories' evidence. This bias often happens when stories allude to evidence which they never name. What if a story about an alleged robbery failed to use the words "alleged" or "allegations"? Of course, quotations from sources or witnesses may not use those terms. They're subjective witnesses, quoted directly in the story.

But the report's language should retain the caveats of "alleged" and "allegations" until the robbery is proved to have happened. The word "robbery" requires a police investigation and trial conviction first, to be fully sure. Excluding the chance of innocence before there is verifiable reason sides the news story with the "guilty" position. That's bias unless the story can include facts to back its language.

The same goes for omitted sources. You might spot vague subjects like "some," "critics," "unnamed sources," or "those close to" in a news article. If the article draws its main topics from people it won't name, it may reflect bias. Of course, sensitive topics can and should handle anonymous sources with care. But referring to an unidentified group which supposedly says something important is not the same care. That choice may just reflect the writers' immediate sphere, the one which contains their personal biases. The story will also include those biases unless specific sources or examples appear.

These biases include speculation.

Tied up with unsupported evidence is "mind-reading," where a journalist assigns a motivation which the evidence doesn't necessarily prove. A politician attends a protest to support her reelection effort; a pastor plants a new church to boost his own church's donations. The news story would need clear supporting evidence to state those motivations. Otherwise, mentioning them is only speculation, which reflects bias. Interpreting events beyond the facts show the same bias.

All these flavors of biased use of evidence can create the impression of factual reporting where there's only unsupported opinion. As we've mentioned, the identified opinion does good in opinion editorials and sponsored articles. But within strict news pieces, disguised opinion can mislead audiences.

Bias in Coverage

Lastly, media bias can influence how a story appears in the context of its news site (or alongside other news sites covering the same topic). We often forget to ask what a news story leaves out. Is there an alternate viewpoint supported in the evidence? Has the story left it out? It's called bias by omission, and occasionally it can keep whole stories or story topics underground.

Why would a news organization omit stories? Usually, the omission can serve the organization's ideological biases. Political ideologies in newspapers often decide which stories they cover: a left-leaning paper might emphasize racial injustice stories while downplaying the scandals of liberal politicians; a right-leaning paper might focus on crime rates while ignoring the scandals of conservative politicians. If you look to a news source for the relevant happenings in the world, not seeing a word of coverage on an event or trend can suggest that those things don't matter to you. Their omission paves the way to insignificance.

Oddly, the physical placement of a story and its headline (in physical or online formats) has been named as media bias. Why? Because where you see (or don't see) a headline can also suggest insignificance.

It's a sort of front-page effect: we as readers assume that the story at the top of the page, bearing the largest letters, holds the most importance. In turn, headlines kept in side-bar columns or in smaller letters at the bottom of the page seem less important. Of course, the news sites don't communicate significance through headline size. But if one story appears where a reader won't find it as easily, that could reflect the organization's biased view of its importance.

Why Media Bias Matters to You

American's trust in news institutions has declined in the 21st century. Survey research points to media bias as a consistent culprit. The [Knight Foundation](#) partnered with Gallup back in 2018 to document Americans' decreasing trust in the media, and [their results](#) identify bias as one reason for that decrease.

The report, "Indicators of News Media Trust," documents decreased trust in media, and it also names media bias and slant as one explanation. According to surveys, 69% of American adults reported decreased trust in media (46% of liberals, 66% of moderates and 95% of conservatives). In their comments explaining that declining trust, most respondents mentioned either bias or inaccuracy. Here's how often their comments mentioned media bias:

42% of respondents named biased/slanted/unfair reporting.

23% named one-sided/incomplete/unbalanced reporting.

14% named politically-focused reporting.

10% named agenda-driven reporting.

In turn, 39% of respondents noted that, for news they find trustworthy, the news sites practice fair, unbiased reporting. To sum up: nearly half of the surveyed Americans point to media bias as a make-or-break element in their view of journalism.

Inversely, political polarization has increased.

You as the reader could've told us that, whatever your politics. Pew Research [explains](#) that distrust of news organizations happens differently between conservative and liberal audiences, leading to distinct news sources (and distinct biases) for each group. Each news source (whether Fox, CNN, MSNBC, or others) presents its suggestive news to those audiences, which may not notice the bias present there. Enter confirmation bias – ready acceptance of viewpoints you already agree with, paired with avoidance of what you don't. Media bias matters because its connotations can lead audiences deeper into polarized versions of the day's news.

What Can You Do? Gain More Awareness.

You might start by learning how to spot media bias. [Ad Fontes Media](#) has designed an interactive display that charts news sites' bias through their content (analyzing them rigorously and ranking their findings). [All Sides Media](#) displays similar findings through their own analysis. Each site notes their biases, but also tries to balance them with viewpoint diversity and near-neutrality. They have created a pair of tools for your own detective work as a news consumer.

Note: the word "detective" implies something (embedded bias) under the surface. It's up to you as a reader to dig it up and spot it in your news. Forgive our biased word choice, but it's true that news consumption today can involve some amateur sleuthing. How will you choose your news sources, as you pick up on their biases?

Remember that any news source likely has a subjective worldview. That includes [North Carolina News Daily](#), by the way (see "detective" above). That's why you ought to keep track of media bias on your own. Learn how you can become more literate in today's news landscape – your expertise depends on you.

We can help you with that, biases aside. Just stay tuned for the next installments of the *Refresh the Press* series. After all, it aims to serve you as a 21st-century news consumer.

[Bias in Media](#), [Media Bias](#), [NC Media](#), [Refresh the Press](#)

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Though he writes and edits media and health news for NCND, his background includes substance abuse articles, medical marketing advice and public relations campaigns for a variety of brands. You can follow Kevin at @KLaTorre_Writer.

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