

A bright idea: bring biases out of the dark

HEATHER JOHNSON / JULY 18, 2002

- The mission of this unit is to identify the many levels of bias in the media, primarily in the news. The scope of bias can be carried throughout every type of media and this unit could definitely be used in conjunction with the prevalence of bias in movies and television. The example and look at bias present in the news could be used as a springboard for students to take notice of biases in other forms of media.
- After studying the biases present in the newspaper as an in-class project and ongoing unit, students can then steer toward the bias in the nightly news, and into television programs, movies, etc. The key to this unit is to have students seek out examples of bias on their own, for they are then able to “recognize” such biases in themselves and in the newspaper.

An exercise

Write the following on the chalkboard:

“Police said the suspect was described as a black man in his 20s...”

“Indian Found Murdered in New Town”

“Detectives are investigating the death of an Asian employee of a brokerage firm whose body was found by the company’s owner yesterday....”

Ask your students: What do these news stories have in common? When is race an appropriate element in a story? Are the racial identifications used in these stories relevant? Why or why not? What are the problems surrounding unwarranted use of racial identity in crime-related stories?

Bias through placement

Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance.

Unwarranted use of racial identity is hardly limited to crime stories. One way for reporters to check whether race or ethnicity is a proper identification factor in a story might be to ask whether the individual’s race would be relevant if he or she were white. Would the headlines above have identified these people as ‘white’?

Distribute “Crime has no culture or race” to students.

“Crime has no culture or race”

by Susan Riley

The Ottawa Citizen, January 12, 1993. Reprinted with permission.

If racism was always stark, violent and overt, it would be easy to recognize and easier to deal with. But unfortunately, racism can be mild and unremarkable, part of the daily texture of our lives. Over the holiday, for example, three men were stabbed in a late-night brawl in the Saigon Capital restaurant on Somerset Street. The restaurant is Vietnamese: those involved in the fracas were of Asian origin. Does this make it “Asian crime” as headlines in our newspaper and elsewhere suggested? Does the fact that some extortion was involved make the crime particularly Asian? And what Asians? Vietnamese? Chinese? Indonesian? Or was it merely crime? Is any attempt to define it further careless prejudice or is it a vital aspect of competent police work? Last fall, when Ottawa high school students were involved in a drunken encounter with Hull police, no one talked about “white crime.” To be fair, a story in the *Citizen* concluded that there is no crime wave within Ottawa’s Asian community. It also documented real concerns in Asian communities in Toronto and Vancouver, where thugs and drug-peddlers prey on their own kind and the larger society.

But this still isn’t Asian crime. It is crime within the Asian community. The distinction is critical. The *Citizen* story also quoted a Vietnamese-born lawyer, Nhung Thuy Hoang, who defends Asian-Canadians accused of various crimes. The most common charges according to her? Theft and wife assault. These don’t sound like Asian crimes: on the contrary, they are common to almost every culture. Imagine the uproar if we started referring to wife abuse as “male crime”.

For all that, the Asian community does pose a special challenge to police forces, not because Asians are more mendacious by nature, but because their language and culture is so foreign. In Vancouver and Toronto, police have had special Asian investigative units since the `70s. Newspapers occasionally feature lurid accounts of their struggles with “Asian youth gangs” that operate protection rackets, smuggle drugs and manage prostitutes. (Again the language is loaded. If a group of Asian boys wearing leather, chains and aggressive attitude shoves you off the sidewalk, is it an Asian youth gang or just a bunch of punks?) Ottawa, too, has an Asian unit, formed in 1987, the only squad devoted to one ethnic community. Its professed aim is to assist, rather than target, Asian-Canadians.

Nhung Thuy Hoang applauds this approach, noting that “a lot of police are not very familiar with our culture.” She recalls one client, a Vietnamese woman, who was charged when she burned dry leaves in a city park - a common practice in her native country. Other Vietnamese are charged with abandonment when they let their children wander at large, as they used to in refugee camps. Still others are mortified when their custom of showing children physical affection is interpreted by non-Asian neighbors as child abuse. There is, says the lawyer, no need for protection from youth gangs within Ottawa’s Asian community. But there is need for educated, sensitive policing.

What she is talking about, of course, is the other side of racism: a respectful recognition of difference. Only when we - the police and society at large - achieve that will “Asian crime” disappear.

In her article, Susan Riley makes the distinction between “Asian crime” and “crime within the Asian community.” What is the difference between these two terms? Why are we so quick to label crime with terms like “Asian crime,” “Black crime,” “Youth crime,” etc.? What role does culture play in our perceptions of race and crime?

Distribute “Crime not black and white” to students.

“Crime not black and white”

by Randall Denley, *The Ottawa Citizen*

Thursday, July 28, 1994. Reprinted with permission.

Sometimes to see an issue right way up, you need to stand it on its head. Imagine a story that read like this: Ottawa police are swamped in their attempts to stem a wave of crime that ranges from fraud, to dealing drugs, to murder. “There’s one common thread in all of this,” says Ottawa Police Chief Brian Ford. “In each case, the criminals are white.” While statistics on crime are not recorded by race, Ottawa police estimate that fully 90 per cent of crimes committed locally are by whites. Police are calling for the hiring of more white officers, to help them better understand the customs of the white criminals. Ford, who is white, is frank about the racial element in the crime spree. “Some of these families have been in Canada for generations. The scary part is, the criminals look just like you or me.” Police sources say that white criminals often wear sports gear or even business suits, but there is no distinctive dress code that could alert potential victims to the presence of a white criminal. Spokesmen for local whites were shocked by the numbers, but defensive. Jacquelin Holzman is a member of Ottawa City Council, an all white group that is believed to exert considerable influence within the white community. She goes by the street name The Mayor. “Certainly the white people I know are the exception here,” Holzman said. “Land developers, lobbyists, people like that. All fine citizens. We sometimes forget about them when the media write another story about white crime.” The figures on white crime are “stunning, spectacular, stupendous” said Counsellor Richard Cannings. Cannings, who is white, is proposing a series of one-way streets and road closings to keep white criminals out of his ward. Some criminologists question whether race is the dominating factor in determining criminal activity, pointing to poverty and lack of jobs. “If government could find a way to put white people to work, many wouldn’t need to turn to crime,” says Prof. John Smith. Spokesmen for Canada’s native peoples were relieved that the white crime problem has finally been brought out into the open. “We want genealogical testing done on these people so they can be deported to their homelands. Let England and Ireland deal with their own problems,” said one.

Sounds silly when you put it that way doesn’t it? Almost as silly as having to seriously discuss the notion that because some blacks are criminals, all blacks are no good. We have read in the last few days about Jamaican posses, the latest ethnic crime threat. Now Jamaican-Canadians have to defend themselves again. Like when Ben Johnson, the famous Canadian runner became a Jamaican again after he used steroids. Like when Clinton Gayle, accused of murdering a Toronto police officer, became a Jamaican although he has lived in this country since he was eight. One has to feel sorry for Jamaican-Canadians coping with the exaggerated publicity and no doubt fearing the white crime wave too.

Assignment

Over the next month, students are to collect newspaper and magazine stories relating to crime. As these articles are brought to class, students will analyze and sort them under the following categories:

No racial identification

Relevant racial identification

Unnecessary racial identification

Where racial identification occurs, they will also take note of: Tools and techniques used in reporting the story
The tone of the story
The overall effect on the reader
At the end of the month, students will tally and post their total figures.

Taking Charge

Students can send their results to the magazines and newspapers they surveyed. For articles that contained unnecessary racial identification, students may wish to contact the editor responsible, to request an explanation of the newspaper or magazine's rationale for making this distinction.

How to Detect Bias in the News

At one time or other we all complain about "bias in the news." The fact is, despite the journalistic ideal of "objectivity," every news story is influenced by the attitudes and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors. Not all bias is deliberate. But you can become a more aware news reader or viewer by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow bias to "creep in" to the news:

Bias through selection and omission. An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. If, during a speech, a few people boo, the reaction can be described as "remarks greeted by jeers" or they can be ignored as "a handful of dissidents." Bias through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can the form of bias be observed.

Bias through placement. Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance. Bias by headline Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. Headlines are the most-read part of a paper. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists. They can express approval or condemnation.

Bias by photos, captions and camera angles. Some pictures flatter a person, others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, the choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. The captions newspapers run below photos are also potential sources of bias.

Bias through use of names and titles. News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places, and events. A person can be called an “ex-con” or be referred to as someone who “served time twenty years ago for a minor offense.” Whether a person is described as a “terrorist” or a “freedom fighter” is a clear indication of editorial bias.

Bias through statistics and crowd counts. To make a disaster seem more spectacular (and therefore worthy of reading about), numbers can be inflated. “A hundred injured in aircrash” can be the same as “only minor injuries in air crash,” reflecting the opinion of the person doing the counting.

Bias by source control. To detect bias, always consider where the news item “comes from.” Is the information supplied by a reporter, an eyewitness, police or fire officials, executives, or elected or appointed government officials? Each may have a particular bias that is introduced into the story. Companies and public relations directors supply news outlets with puffpieces through news releases, photos or videos. Often news outlets depend on pseudo-events (demonstrations, sit-ins, ribbon cuttings, speeches and ceremonies) that take place mainly to gain news coverage.

Word choice and tone. Showing the same kind of bias that appears in headlines, the use of positive or negative words or words with a particular connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer.

Overview

This lesson introduces students to the concept of bias or slant, in newspapers and in television newscasts. Students begin by comparing three newspaper articles about the same news event - each reported from a different perspective. They then explore the role the gatekeeper, or editor, in determining the slant of a story and analyze the titles of newspaper stories for slant or bias. Once students have looked at newspapers, they will use viewing logs to analyze television newscasts from two different television stations. These newscasts will be analyzed based on language usage, story selection and story order.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

recognize how a single event could generate more than one news story

identify a point of view or bias, based on the language used experience and understand the role of subjectivity and perception in the media

understand the role of the “gatekeeper”

critically analyze or deconstruct two newscasts for potential bias through comparison, focusing on language, story selection and story order

Activity One

placement - where news stories are located in the paper, by section and page gatekeeper - the person (editor, news producer etc.) who decides which news to print or broadcast and which stories to hold back

The concepts of bias and gatekeeping can be explored by comparing how different newspapers treat similar stories. For example here are three headlines that appeared dealing with the same news item:

Pioneer Press: “Senate votes 80-1 to give up \$6000”

Star Tribune: “Repentant senators hand back \$6000 hike”

Rochester Post Bulletin: “SENATE WAKES UP” Ask your students how each title affects their perceptions of the issue.

Have students page through both the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press*. Students are to look for patterns in article placement, headlines, pictures, interviews, locally-written articles and Associated Press articles. Students are to choose one story that is in both the *Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune* and compare and contrast the way that two articles are written. Ask questions in order to determine the slant:

- Where is the article placed in the newspaper?
- Are the articles found in the same parts of the newspaper? Front page?
- Is there a picture accompanying the article?
- Is the ethnicity of the person in the article mentioned? When? In crime articles or in praising articles?
- Have students act as “Investigators” as they look for any peculiar patterns or slants that could be brought to the class’s awareness!!

Assessment for this assignment: Students will be graded on their insight, that is if they are able to complete the assignment and show reflections that illustrate a conscientious effort of comparing and contrasting, they will be awarded 50 points for the investigation portion of the assignment. An additional 10 points will be granted for a two minute report back to the class of their discovery and 10 points for the writing portion of the assignment: minimum of two pages and accurate grammar. Possible points overall: 70

(Side note: Last week I passed a crime scene near a friend’s house. The next two days I looked for the story in the newspaper to see if anyone had any knowledge of this incident - a shooting in the middle of the street in a “safe” neighborhood right by Uptown) but I was unable to find any mention of the incident, except for about three sentences in the *Star Tribune*. My translation to this occurrence: the crime was not newsworthy according to the newspaper, however I know of many friends and coworkers who would be interested in reading an article about a random shooting in an area that is seemingly safe.)

Activity Two

In class, ask students to compare the two pre-recorded newscasts, analyzing them for language usage, story selection and story order. WCCO News at 10 p.m. and KTSP News at 10 p.m. lend themselves well to comparison. Divide the class into groups of four. For both newscasts, ask students to list each story and note whether there was:

a live anchor-reporter interview

a taped report from a reporter videotape

footage with a commentary read by the anchor

straight news copy read by the anchor without accompanying visuals

Also ask students to note the running time for each item, as well as any interesting use of language or other elements which catch their attention.

Their charts/logs might look something like this:

Number	Running Time	Story Time	Story Anchor	Reporter	Video 1	2
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Note: Screening the newscasts, filling in the charts and calculating the story lengths may require two periods. You may want to play them both on day one and repeat them on day two. Have students compare similar stories on both newscasts and answer the following questions: Where did the story appear in each newscast? How much time was it given? Was there video, or just straight copy? Was a reporter sent to cover the story? Was it a WCCO/KSTP reporter, or one from another news organization? Is one network missing a “big” story? Why?

Students can compare top stories or “light” final newscast items; the flow of national and international stories; or the ratio of “hard” news or political news to “soft” news or human interest stories. Have each group put together a package consisting of a WCCO log, a KSTP log, and a conclusion. The conclusion can address questions such as those suggested above. In their conclusion, students might also try to determine which newscast appears to be more objective, more free of bias: On what do they base their conclusions? If they had been the gatekeepers, what choices would they have made?

Note: You may find that giving the class a dry run, perhaps with one of the short hourly Worldnews with Peter Jennings newscasts, will focus the students and produce a better end product.

Evaluation Log 1 10 marks Log 2 10 marks Conclusion 20 marks Total 40 marks

Activity two was created by Roger Bird (but changed by Heather Johnson) as part of a Media Education course taught by John Pungente at the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, 1992.

Activity Three

Hold an open forum discussion with students about current stories in the news. For example, the Elizabeth Smart case: why is this story so widespread in the media? A white, affluent family’s daughter is abducted which is clearly tragic: but perhaps discuss why this case is so high-profile compared to the thousands of kidnapping cases that happen in a year. Would the same coverage occur if the family was of a different race? Or of a lower economic status? Discuss topics such as these. Ask the students to bring their own ideas to discuss to class. Invite the class period to be student-led rather than teacher-centered. As the teacher you could springboard ideas for the students to discuss, but focus on the students taking charge of the discussion with the intent of staying centralized around the idea of biases in the news.

Assessment: Part of the daily participation activity, to be noted who in fact participated and who chose not to participate.

Activity Four

Have students develop a montage of articles from various media resources. It perhaps is best for them to choose a higher profile case that they will be able to find information on in many different areas, such as

the internet, news magazines, newspapers, television newscasts, television magazine newscasts (Inside Edition, etc.) and the radio. Students are to make a montage of “articles” with the emphasis on the different slants found in the different medias. What topics are covered in the opinion section of the newspaper?

Awareness is the Key to this lesson and as students are given the tools on how to investigate (above, “How to detect bias in the News”) and they then have the freedom to become the examiner. I anticipate students will embrace this assignment because they are researching the slant in the media that we, the public, are supposed to not “notice” but here the students are detecting it and “EXPOSING” such “secrets”...

Could be a required assignment of perhaps an extra credit activity.