

How to Detect Bias in News Media

by *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*

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The first step in detecting media bias is documenting what you see and read. Following are some questions to ask yourself about newspaper, TV, and radio news.

Who Are the Sources? Are They Diverse?

Be aware of the political perspective of the sources used in a story. Media over-rely on “official” (government, corporate, and establishment think tank) sources. For instance, FAIR found that in forty months of *Nightline* programming, of its U.S. guests, 92 percent were White and 89 percent were male. A similar survey of PBS’s *News Hour* found its guest list was 90 percent White and 87 percent male. Progressive and public interest voices were grossly underrepresented in both examples.

To portray issues fairly and accurately, media must broaden their spectrum of sources. Otherwise, they serve merely as megaphones for those in power.

From Whose Point of View Is the News Reported?

Political coverage often focuses on how issues affect politicians or corporate executives rather than those directly affected by the issue. For example, many stories on parental notification of abortion emphasized the “tough choice” confronting male politicians, but stories often failed to quote women under eighteen—the very people with the most at stake in the debate. Economics coverage usually looks at how events impact stockholders rather than workers or consumers.

Are There Double Standards?

Do media hold some people to one standard while using a different standard for other groups? Youths of color who commit crimes are portrayed as “predators,” whereas adult criminals who commit white-collar crimes are often portrayed as having been tragically led astray. Think tanks partly funded by unions are often identified as “labor-backed” while think tanks heavily funded by business interests are usually not identified as “corporate-backed.”

Do Stereotypes Skew Coverage?

Does coverage of the drug crisis focus almost exclusively on African-Americans, despite the fact that the vast majority of drug users are White? Does coverage of women on welfare focus overwhelmingly on African-American women, despite the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are not Black? Are lesbians portrayed as “man-hating” and gay men portrayed as “sexual predators” (even though a child is 100 times more likely to be molested by a family member than by an unrelated gay adult—*Denver Post*, 9/28/92)?

Is the Language Loaded?

When media adopt loaded terminology, they help shape public opinion. For instance, media often use the right-wing buzzword “racial preference” to refer to affirmative action programs. Polls show that this decision makes a huge difference in how the issue is perceived: A 1992 Louis Harris poll, for example, found that 70 percent of the people surveyed said they favored “affirmative action” while only 46 percent favored “racial preference programs.”

Is There a Lack of Context in the Coverage?

Coverage of so-called “reverse discrimination” usually fails to focus on any of the institutional factors that give power to prejudice—such as larger issues of economic inequality and institutional racism. Coverage of hate speech against gays and lesbians often fails to mention increases in gay-bashing and how the two might be related.

Are Stories on Important Issues Featured Prominently?

Look at where stories appear. Newspaper articles on the most widely read pages (the front pages and the editorial pages) and lead stories on television and radio will have the greatest influence on public opinion.

Adapted with permission from FAIR’s Media Activism Kit. For the complete kit or more information contact FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) at 212-633-6700, fair@fair.org, www.fair.org.