

News Literacy Recitation 7: Balance, Fairness & Bias

Organization

Test #1 will take most of the time in this recitation.

But, for News Literacy Feed users, who may have a different schedule, we include in-class activities.

This is a lot to cover in one recitation, so opportunities for in-class activities are limited (if not precluded). Do not try to do all of this. Decide ahead of time what you want to spend your time covering.

RECAP the “Balance, Fairness and Bias” Lecture

Balance: Equality between the totals of the two (or more) sides of the account. Balance is a technical quantitative measure

Fairness: Impartiality and honesty. Free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism. Being “fair to the evidence.”

Balance and fairness are concerned with individual stories, and may be either consistent or inconsistent with one another. They are consistent when the issues in question are still legitimately up in the air. They are distinct when there is a preponderance of evidence or a strong consensus amongst reliable experts. (A teaser discussion of expertise and expert authority may be warranted here that can be followed up when we address source reliability).

Review flags for imbalanced and unfair reporting, including quality of sources, uneven prominence of exposition of one side over another, loaded language, leading headlines, tone/genstures (especially for TV news). Also address some more subtle ways that stories can be unfair/unbalanced, like who gets the first/last word. Does the reporter seem to be pushing one side over another and is that fair to the evidence? Call back to the “straight news”/opinion distinction.

Bias: unfairness in reporting or presentation, either by omission or commission. Mistakes are not the same as bias. **Story? Reporter? Outlet? Media?**

Ask:

- **What can be biased?**
- **Reporters**
- **The Media**
- **The News Media**

Unlike balance/fairness, bias is about *people* or *organizations*, and their tendency to view issues through a tinted lens. It may be intentional or unintentional. Psychological speculation about biases is a dangerous game to play and it risks slipping into cynicism and conspiracy theoretical analyses. (see supplement below on conspiracy theories and pseudoscience) Therefore we are looking for *evidence of intent* (e.g. the Fox News memo re: reporting climate science <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201012150004>) to skew reporting or *broad and persistent patterns* of slanted, unbalanced, and unfair reporting.

Emphasize that everyone has biases. This is a good place to discuss the project implicit assignment. Rehearse “own bias,” and psychological phenomena that leave us susceptible to bias like “confirmation bias,” “cognitive dissonance,” and the “sleeping effect.” (check supplement below and background materials for supplemental materials)

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on this stuff)

This seems to imply that all reporters have their biases as well, which offers grim portent for the prospect of an unbiased news media. While this is certainly true, it seems possible to combat one's own bias with some concerted effort, provided that one is aware of said biases. Discuss how we might do this. Address the importance of honest and charitable consideration of positions that we disagree with. Also emphasize that individual reporters may be biased while an organization or the media at large may structure itself in such a way as to try to correct/wash-out those biases.

“Vaccine Wars”

Frontline's piece on the putative link between vaccination (specifically the MMR schedule) and autism is an interesting one to analyze in terms of fairness and balance. It can be assigned for viewing outside of class, or you may opt to watch a segment in class (15:00-38:00 gives the major thrust of the story). The story gives equal time to both sides, but not equal weight, and the position that there is no link between vaccination and autism seems to be clearly better supported by the evidence and experts. Yet, skeptics remain unswayed, and there are significant portions of the comments section on the video's webpage that call this a “hit piece.” Is this story balanced? Not really. Is it fair? It seems so (perhaps even *too* fair), but it's hard to say if Frontline neglected to present more reputable evidence/sources for the proponents of a link, or if such evidence/sources were absent because they don't exist.

If it's problematically unbalanced or unfair, then it seems we have three options for why: it could be an isolated incident of bad reporting, it could be an intentional attempt to deceive because of some sort of ideological agenda, or it could be an unintentional product of some unknown bias. The latter two are indicative of what we have called “bias.” How could we demonstrate the existence of such bias? Where would we have to look and what would we be looking for?

Who watches the media? Media watchdogs:

Media matters (mediamatters.org)

Media research center (mrc.org)

Fairness and Accuracy in Media (fair.org)

The Spring Break Story (See Background Material Emailed to you):

In the context of bias and fairness, discuss both the press release and the story, which students were supposed to bring to class. Ask for students' reactions to the study and the stories written on it. Does the information seem reliable? Why or why not?

Why did the news media get it wrong?

We want to believe it; fits into disposition...cognitive dissonance. The story surrounding the spring break story illustrates the pitfalls of *confirmation bias*. We tend to believe stories that fit our preconceived notions of what is true.

Internet polling is self-selected. Surveys must be random to be valid.

AMA seems like a good source

The AMA posting note was late to announce the margin of error was too small.

Only 27 % of the 644 surveyed *were actually on spring break*. Invalid sample.

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“A Charge of Bias”

Discussion of John Stewart’s March 3 critique of Fox reporter Megyn Kelly’s 2-hour report on health care on “America Live” which airs during the hours that Fox has defined as its News Hours: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. (Link: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-march-3-2010/anchor-management>)

What can you conclude from this “report” on The Daily Show?

What information do you need in order to make a judgment?

Was this a case of unfairness, imbalance, or bias?

What observations can you make about Fox’s decisions about tone, weight and proportionality?

What observations can you make about the Daily Show’s decisions about tone, weight and proportionality?

Can you suggest what would have made the Fox report stronger?

What linguistic cues did you note?

Were there hot-button words in play?

Does Jon Stewart’s generally liberal stance change the impact of his criticism?

How does this change your view of what the Daily Show does?(Is it entertainment, news or something else?)

Conspiracy theories and pseudoscience:

The tendency to easily accuse a news source of bias, or even make a broad accusation of widespread bias in the media, is frequently a product of a cynicism regarding the ideological agendas of those behind the news. Hence, such accusations share a lot with conspiracy-theoretical thinking.

Without going so far as to say that conspiracies never actually happen, such thinking is susceptible to some notable irrational pitfalls in how the conspiracy theorist deals with evidence. To follow Karl Popper

(http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/popper_falsification.html)

in his distinction of scientific vs pseudoscientific theories, we may say that the conspiracy theory is pseudoscientific in the way it accommodates seemingly contrary evidence, thus making it unfalsifiable in principle. This goes beyond confirmation bias, which merely points out that confirming evidence is granted special emphasis while disconfirming evidence is conveniently ignored. We see that the conspiracy theorist does not merely ignore contrary evidence, they take such evidence as further confirmation of the conspiracy to cover up the “truth.”

If bias is the sort of thing that we wish to assess according to evidence, then we must have an honest standard for evidence of bias. This means treating an hypothesis of bias as something that is falsifiable in principle, and if we run a “test” for bias and don’t find evidence of that bias, we should be prepared to conclude that there is no bias. If a failure to find evidence of bias means nothing, and only evidence in favor of bias is admitted, then our considerations of bias in the media are pseudoscientific. We want to do better than that.