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Why is Media Bias an Issue?

By Bernie Day

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Most of us have grown up in a society where we felt fortunate to live in a democracy where free speech was one of our basic rights. We also believed that "news" was delivered to us in a factual manner – with both sides of any story equally represented. In theory, it is supposed to work this way. But, when news articles are measured for bias utilizing an objective process, one discovers that there is an agenda underlying much of the news Americans are subjected to and programmed by, each day. In defense of the news media there is a rational behind the changing face of news content. Given that the average American wants to be entertained and the time and attention available to commit to news stories, the press has shaped its focus to deliver content in an entertaining and "byte-driven" format. As a result, news stories are designed to ignite an emotive response to GRAB attention. Often, this attempt is misleading. The use of words to imply suspicion, controversy and/or fear, elevate public interest. This is seen as good media presentation because it gets viewers to pay attention. The benefit of increasing mass media distribution is, of course, an increase in advertising revenue. Therefore, the rational behind a changed format of news content has been shaped by the public-at-large, through a demonstrated increase in its interest to consume sensational news.

It is probably understood by most that the news media is doing just this and may dismiss media bias claims as a result. But with a closer look, one can see that media bias reaches far deeper, effecting the psyche of the reading/viewing public – because it's so subtle. The sensational depiction of events is overt and thereby acceptable by most of society. But the covert misrepresentation of facts, either by omission or slanted, are not perceived. It is as if the facts are cloaked. Therefore the Media Research Center of Alaska has committed itself to uncovering these subtle, covert, misrepresentations so that a reader is well-informed about the REAL story.

To begin the discussion then, of less obvious media bias, we need to understand that there are always two sides to every story. As a result, both sides need to be given equal representation and equal weight so that the reader can decide for himself/herself what the meaning of the news is. Even though the Media Code of Ethics clearly outlines this as a core value, it is not always adhered to. Additionally, reporters have a difficult time NOT selecting their stories, words and sources independent of their personal views and/or the views of their newsroom where their paycheck is earned.

Some examples of covert media bias that the average news consumer would digest without a thought are:

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** Words – the selection of words to describe one side, compared to the other can slant a reader's/viewer's perception. (An example would be, describing one side of the abortion issue as Pro-Choice versus Anti-Abortion. To give both words the same weight, and not imply some "ethical assessment" by the journalist, one would need to describe each as Pro-Abortion and Anti-Abortion, or Pro-Choice and Pro-Life. As you can evaluate for yourself, if a reporter uses the "Pro-Choice versus Anti-Abortion terms, he/she has automatically assigned a positive label to those who favor the right to choose abortion, while he/she has assigned a negative label to those who want to preserve the right to life). Therefore, words to describe any person, event, or entity can quickly shape the mind of the reader/viewer in a very subtle way.

** Sources – the selection of "sources," for stories by reporters, should be representative of both sides. However, even if this is accomplished, the "quality" of the source may be higher on one side than the other, or only one source is quoted on one side and several on the other. This can lead to a slanted

story that can imply meaning that is unbalanced.

** What is newsworthy – is often controlled by the newsroom. Topics are accepted and others overlooked given the agenda of the powers that be and based upon what topics fit into the "news of the day." This is important to realize because the big picture is being missed by the public at large by not seeing all angles within their communities, political campaigns, business realms, and/or just about every aspect of people's lives. Beyond ignoring news, the media may even go so far as to ridicule some ideas while promoting others.

** Political agendas – it would be naive of us to believe that an endorsement of a political candidate by any news media wouldn't affect its news coverage. The same can be said when considering the individual views of reporters. Therefore, it is prudent for each reader to examine the political views of the media and the reporters he/she is reading/viewing. It is very easy for the media and its reporters to fall into the trap of becoming an advocate for a political figure or any subject of self-interest, rather than remaining an impartial observer reporting facts. If the reader/viewer does not know this, he/she can be swayed into believing that the best candidate or the self-interests of the media are the whole truth.

** Power and privilege – often those in power or in positions of privilege are cast in a more positive light than the average person. This can mislead the reader/viewer. An example of painting someone one way or another would be citing behaviors of one that are positive, like a candidate kissing babies, while in the same article, an opposing candidate is shown or described as being exhausted by his/her campaign schedule. This type of coverage is a subtle way to improve the standings of one candidate over another in a "seemingly innocent way."

Media bias is pervasive as suggested in the points above. When one adds the overt practice of sensationalizing news, the reader/viewer has a huge task set before him/her, whether or not he/she knows it. This is of great concern because if most the people most the time, believe everything they read or view, they will ultimately become the servants of those who write/publish, by voting (or not voting) for candidates or issues from the same biased perspective. Thus an inquiry by all is required if we are to make independent decisions that effect people's lives.

The Media Research Center of Alaska is led by Bernie Day, Executive Director and Ombudsman, under the direction of the Board of Trustees. Visit the website: <http://mediaresearchak.org>

Becoming Excellent: Outsmarting Racism

Why is Media Bias an Issue?

By Maya Talisman Frost

Thinkers know better than to be racist. It's generally understood that racists are, well, not thinkers. It's not that racists are necessarily stupid—it's that they are ignorant.

We like to think that racists are choosing to hang on to their bias because they don't know any better. Those of us who are educated—or who think—can overcome any bias through information and intention. Right?

Tell that to our brains.

A recent study done at Dartmouth College presents some interesting ideas about racism and the brain. According to the widely published results of this research, racism can actually cause stupidity. Even professors from esteemed universities like Stanford are quoted as saying such things as "Racism really does make people stupid."

Well, that makes for an interesting sound bite, but it's a bit misleading. Here's what happened: white test subjects with a bias against black faces performed poorly on a cognitive skills test after being interviewed by an African American person. The more biased the subjects were (based on their scores on the Harvard implicit association test), the worse they did.

What's fascinating about this study is that it is the first to show through magnetic resonance imaging that there is a particular area of the brain associated with efforts to say or do the right thing. This "executive control" portion of the brain showed increased activity during both the implicit association test and the interview. Those who had scores indicating a greater bias showed the most activity in their brains in this area as they struggled to refrain from making racist choices or offensive remarks. As this poor little section of the brain was overloaded, subjects were temporarily unable to perform thinking tasks.

So, really, the compelling notion here isn't simply that racism makes you stupid. It's that the presence of someone about whom we feel a bias affects our ability to think. If you live in a fairly homogenous community, your bias—and the "executive control" part of your brain— isn't really tested. However, if on a daily basis you interact with people toward whom you have a racial bias, your thinking becomes impaired, at least temporarily.

What does this mean long term? Are racist individuals in integrated communities "dumbed down" because their overtaxed brains can't cope? Is there a cumulative effect? A whole lot more research needs to be done to learn more about this.

No intelligent person wants to acknowledge that they may have a bias in terms of race. We know in our minds that it is unfair, unwarranted, and detrimental to have a negative view of someone on the basis of race. We also know it's politically incorrect. We like to think we're smart enough to outwit any insidious form of racism that may be lurking in the back of our brains.

Well, our brains don't know that. These tests measure what's going on in our brains, not what we want

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to have going on. The results can be quite shocking.

The good news is that there's a part of our brains that is trying to behave properly! This study was done with educated, intelligent, fairly progressive white students at Dartmouth College. Though it isn't mentioned in the report, it's likely that these students didn't consider themselves racist. What happens if the same study is conducted with those who readily admit their prejudice?

If we know better, and we want to avoid being racist, how do we go about doing so? We assume that more contact with individuals of other races will help us overcome our prejudices, but that sometimes backfires. Integrated communities are rarely racism-free. Contact doesn't eliminate racism—greater understanding and positive relationships do.

Think about your brain and your own bias regarding race. The first step is to be honest: virtually every single person on the planet has a racial bias of some kind. The next step is to take a test to find out for yourself where you stand.

And then? What next?

We learn racism. We know enough about the brain and how it works to recognize that whatever we learn we can also unlearn.

Absorb everything you can about other ethnicities and cultures. Read, travel, see movies, listen to music, try new foods—do everything possible to develop a voracious curiosity and robust enthusiasm for people of all races. Stimulate your brain in an effort to render that "executive control" area irrelevant.

Train your mind while building relationships with individuals of other races. Outsmart your brain's racism by becoming colorblind.

Thinkers know better than to be racist. The challenge is to free our brains of lingering doubts. Immerse yourself in the richness of the world. It'll make you smarter—and more excellent—in every way.

Maya Talisman Frost is a mind masseuse. Her work has inspired thinkers in over 70 countries around the world. She serves up a satisfying blend of clarity, comfort and comic relief in her free weekly ezine, the Friday Mind Massage. To subscribe, visit

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