



The Psychology of Processing Information

Duration: 45 min

Bias can have a significant influence on the way we respond to events, especially troubling ones. Recognising and limiting the power and inevitability of human bias is both an indispensable component of producing quality journalism and a critical skill for consumers and sharers of news and information.

Present the following video (or a similar one) by Behind the News

How to Spot Bias in the Media <https://youtu.be/vOVyK2iq4yU>

Discussion: Discuss with participants the following topics:

What does bias mean?

How do biases and stereotypes influence the way we interpret the world around us?

What is confirmation bias?

Why might a news report be biased?

What could the consequences be of biased reporting?

How can we address issues of bias in ourselves and others?

You may also present the following video by The World is One News

Gravitas: Western media's racist reportage on Ukrainian refugees <https://youtu.be/KBRwmTVVKQk>

How to detect bias in the news (adapted from Newskit: A Consumers Guide to News Media)

1. *Bias through selection and omission*

An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. This has a significant impact on what audiences think is important. Within any given story, some details can be ignored, and other included, to give readers a different opinion about the events reported. The biggest bias is always towards what journalists see as being “newsworthy” – but this question is always political, even if it isn’t seen that way.

2. *Bias through placement*

Readers judge first-page-stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. What section a story appears in matters too. Bias through placement can also happen when a story is placed near something else. Putting a news story next to an opinion article on the same topic, changes how we read it. How the story is organized is also significant (e.g. inverted pyramid style).

3. *Bias by headline*



Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Headlines can summarise as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can express approval or condemnation. Even when a story avoids significant bias, because headlines are shorter they often give a much simpler and more biased picture.

4. *Bias by photos, captions and camera angles*

The selected audiovisual material accompanying a news item are also potential sources of bias.

5. *Bias by word choice*

What words are used in a story has a major effect on how we read it, e.g., metaphors that provoke emotional reactions, passive voice, the selection of action verbs, the way a person or a group is described.

6. *Bias by source and quote*

Always consider where the news item “comes from”. In social media, “source hacking” manipulates trending topics or creates a fake controversy. You should always consider who is quoted. It’s important to look past a single story: most news outlets quote men more often than women overall, and white people more than non-white people.

7. *Bias through false balance*

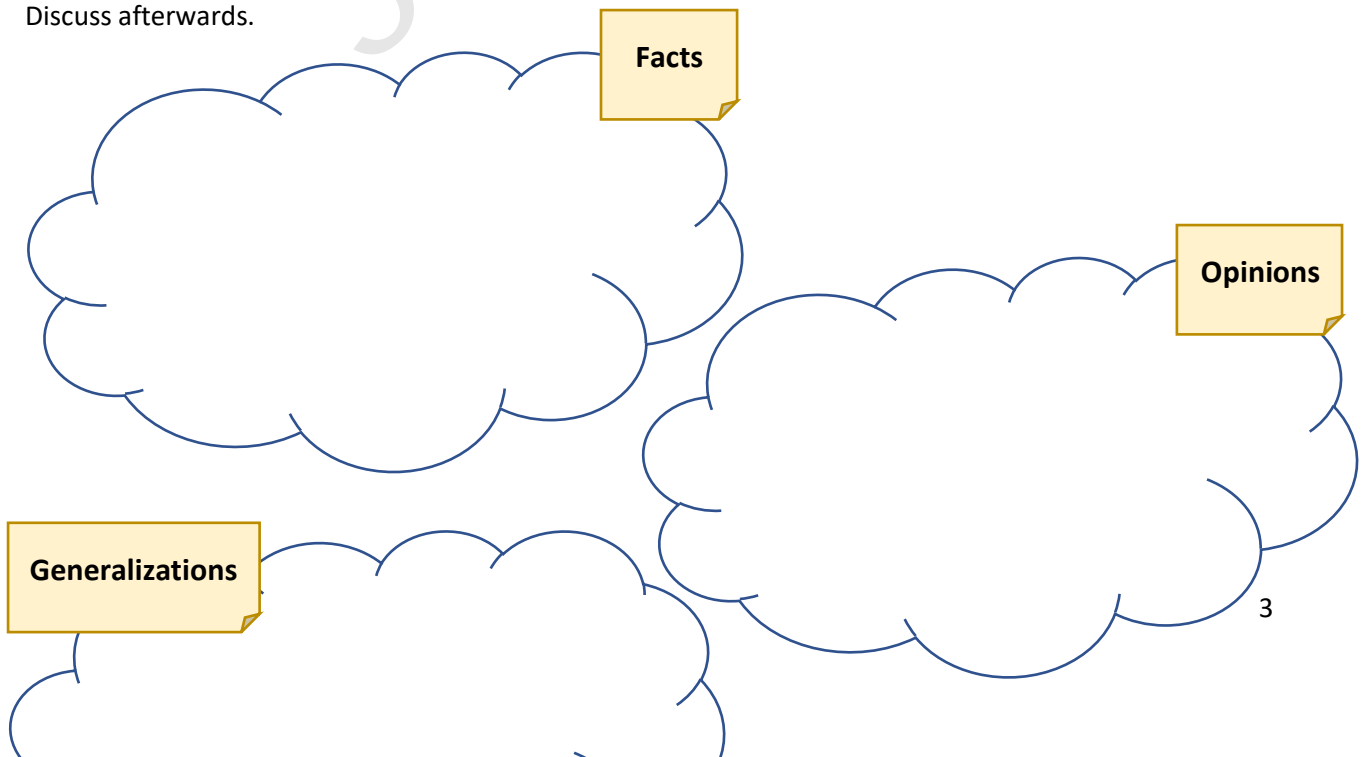
It’s important for news articles to give both sides of a story.

8. *Bias through statistics*

Many news stories include statistics where can be bias in which statistics are included and how these statistics are interpreted.

Activity 1: F.O.G. Analysis

Provide participants with some news reports, they can work individually or in teams. Ask them to clear the F.O.G.: identify and record in the clouds the **Facts**, **Opinions** and **Generalisations** in their reports. Discuss afterwards.





Identifying the Actors (adapted from the Media and Information Disorder Master Class)

Duration: 60 min

In trying to understand any example of information disorder, it is useful to consider it in **three elements**:



Figure 1: Questions to ask about each element of an example of information disorder (Claire Wardle, First Draft, 2017).

- I. **Agent:** Who were the ‘agents’ that created, produced and distributed the example, and what was their motivation?

Agents are involved in all three phases of the information chain – creation, production and distribution – and have various motivations. Importantly, the characteristics of agents can vary from phase to phase. We suggest **seven questions** to ask about an agent:

1. *What type of actor are they?* Agents can be official, like intelligence services, political parties, and news organizations. They can also be unofficial, like groups of citizens that have become evangelized about.
2. *How organized are they?* Agents can work individually, in longstanding, tightly-organized organizations (e.g., PR firms or lobbying groups) or in impromptu groups organized around common interests.
3. *What are their motivations?* There are four potential motivating factors: political, financial, social and psychological



4. *Which audiences to they intend to reach?* Different agents might have different audiences in mind. These audiences can vary from an organization's internal mailing lists or consumers, to social groups based on socioeconomic characteristics, to an entire society.
5. *Is the agent using automated technology?*
6. *Do they intend to mislead?* The agent may or may not intend to deliberately mislead the target audience.
7. *Do they intend to harm?* The agent may or may not intend deliberately to cause harm.

Motivations: Four potential motivating factors for creating dis-information

Financial: Profiting from information disorder through advertising. Some of those who produce or distribute dis-information may do so merely for financial gain, as in the case of PR firms and fabricated news outlets.

Political: Discrediting a political candidate in an election and other attempts to influence public opinion. East StratCom Task Force explains that "the dis-information campaign is a non-military measure for achieving political goals.

Social: Connecting with a certain group online or off.

Psychological: Seeking prestige or reinforcement.

II. **Message:** What type of message was it? What format did it take? What were the characteristics?

Messages can be communicated by agents in person (via gossip, speeches, etc.), in text (newspaper articles or pamphlets), or in audio/visual material (images, videos, motion-graphics, edited audio-clip, memes, etc.).

While much of the current discussion about 'fake news' has focused on fabricated text articles, mis- and dis-information often appears in visual formats. This is important, as technologies for automatically analyzing text are significantly different from those for analyzing still and moving imagery. We suggest **five questions** to ask about a message:

1. *How durable is the message?* Some messages are designed to stay relevant and impactful for the long term (throughout an entire war or in perpetuity). Others are designed for the short term (during an election) or just one moment, as in the case of an individual message during a breaking news event.
2. *How accurate is the message?* The accuracy of a message is also important to examine. As discussed earlier, mal-information is truthful information used to harm (either by moving private information into the public arena or using people's affiliations, like their religion, against them). For inaccurate information, there is a scale of accuracy from false connection (a click-bait headline that is mismatched with its article's content) to 100% fabricated information.



3. *Is the message legal?* The message might be illegal, as in the cases of recognized hate speech, intellectual property violations, privacy infringements or harassment. Of course, what messages are legal differs by jurisdiction.
4. *Is the message 'imposter content', i.e. posing as an official source?* The message may use official branding (e.g., logos) unofficially, or it may steal the name or image of an individual (e.g., a well-known journalist) in order to appear credible.
5. *What is the message's intended target?* The agent has an intended audience in mind (the audience they want to influence) but this is different to the target of the message (those who are being discredited). The target can be an individual (a candidate or a political or business leader), an organisation (a private firm or a government agency), a social group (a race, ethnicity, the elite, etc.) or an entire society.

The Appealing Message: Four Characteristics

1. It provokes an **emotional response**.
2. It has a **powerful visual component**.
3. It has a **strong narrative**.
4. It is **repeated**.

III. **Interpreter.** When the message was received by someone, how did they interpret the message? What action, if any, did they take?

1. An 'audience' is made up of many individuals, each of which interprets information according to his or her own socio-cultural status, political positions and personal experiences.
2. The types of information we consume, and the ways in which we make sense of them, are significantly impacted by our self-identity and the 'tribes' we associate with.
3. In a world where what we like, comment on and share is visible to our friends, family and colleagues, these 'social' and performative forces are more powerful than ever.
4. Evidence suggests that fact-checks do tend to nudge individuals' knowledge in the direction of the correct information, but it certainly doesn't replace the mis- or dis-information entirely.
5. What the 'interpreter' can do with a message highlights how the three elements of information disorder should be considered parts of a potential never-ending cycle.

In an era of social media, where everyone is a potential publisher, the interpreter can become the next 'agent,' deciding how to share and frame the message for their own networks. (Media and Information Disorder Master Class)

"Our minds have always been a battleground for various social forces, but the sheer number of agents and institutions vying for control of our thoughts and feelings today is so large that it is confusing and destabilizing for many." (WikiMedia, 2017)

Filippo Menczer's (X. Qiu et al., 2017) most recent research highlights the challenges of our brains to make decisions about credibility when the streams of information are overwhelming. In other words, normal



people are too distracted by a deluge of information to find the most accurate stories: “[t]here are a hundred more stories you’re not seeing that are much better than those five that you thought were good.”

Credibility of a message or a source

According to research, published in 2012-2013 and conducted before the heavy use of social media that we take for granted today, people used a set of key heuristics, or mental shortcuts, when evaluating the credibility of a source or message:

1. **Reputation:** Based on recognition and familiarity.
2. **Endorsement:** Whether others find it credible.
3. **Consistency:** Whether the message is echoed by multiple sites.
4. **Expectancy violation:** Whether a website looks and behaves in the expected manner.
5. **Self-confirmation:** Whether a message confirms one’s beliefs.
6. **Persuasive intent:** The intent of the source in creating the message.

Activity 2: Self-Evaluation Quiz

1. Give participants the following questions or others that would be built on this part of the module.
2. Ask them to answer according to what they have been taught in this part of the module.
3. Reflect on their answers.

a) What questions are used to ask about the agent of a news item?

Select one or more:

- Which audience is intended to reach? (Correct Answer)
- What kind of agent is it, i.e. a political party, a newsgroup, intelligence services? (Correct Answer)
- Has the agent experience in promoting news and information?
- Is the agent entertaining for the audience?
- What are the motivations of the agent? (Correct Answer)

b) What can you do to support the responsible use of social media?

Select one or more:

- Identify manipulation (Correct Answer)
- Avoid different perspectives
- Critically evaluate information (Correct Answer)
- Promote dialogue (Correct Answer)



- Encourage one-sided representations

c) What is the question one should ask about a message?

Select one:

- Does the message use music?
- How durable is the message? **(Correct Answer)**
- What is the intended target of the message?
- Is the message legal?
- Is the message repeated?

SYMBIOSIS



Propaganda Techniques

Duration: 50 min

Propaganda appears in a variety of forms and uses common techniques to successfully influence people.

The 4 Key Techniques (Source: [Media Education Lab](#))

Activating strong emotions

- Propaganda plays on human emotions to direct audiences toward the desired goal. In the deepest sense, **propaganda is a mind game**—the skillful propagandist exploits people’s fears and prejudices.
- Successful propagandists understand how to **psychologically tailor messages to people’s emotions** in order to create a sense of excitement and arousal that suppresses critical thinking.
- By activating emotions, **the recipient is emotionally moved by the message** of the propagandist. Labeling is another weapon of choice for the propagandist.
- What emotions are important for those who create propaganda? **Fear, pity, anger, arousal, compassion, hatred, resentment** - all these emotions can be intensified by using the right labels.

Simplifying information & ideas

- Propaganda **may use accurate and truthful information, or half-truths, opinions, lies and falsehoods.**
- Successful propaganda tells **simple stories that are familiar and trusted**, often using metaphors, imagery and repetition to make them seem natural or "true."
- Oversimplification is effective when **catchy and memorable short phrases** become a substitute for critical thinking.
- Oversimplifying information does not contribute to knowledge or understanding, but because people naturally seek to reduce complexity, this form of propaganda can be effective.

Responding to audience needs & values

- Effective propaganda conveys messages, themes, and language that **appeal directly, and many times exclusively, to specific and distinct groups within a population.**
- Propagandists may appeal to you as a member of a family, or your racial or ethnic identity, or even your hobbies, your favorite celebrities, your beliefs and values, or even your personal aspirations and hopes for the future.
- Sometimes, **universal values are activated**, as when our deepest human values—the need to love and be loved, to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of place—are activated by propaganda.
- By creating messages that appeal directly to the needs, hopes, and fears of specific groups, **propaganda becomes personal and relevant.**
- When messages are personally relevant, people pay attention and absorb key information and ideas.

Attacking opponents

- Propaganda can serve as a form of political and social warfare to **identify and vilify opponents.**



- It can call into question the legitimacy, credibility, accuracy, and even the character of one's opponents and their ideas.
- Because people are naturally attracted to conflict, a **propagandist can make strategic use of controversy to get attention.**
- Attacking opponents also **encourages "either-or" or "us-them" thinking** which suppresses the consideration of more complex information and ideas.
- Propaganda can also be used to discredit individuals, destroy their reputation, **exclude specific groups of people, incite hatred or cultivate indifference.**

More propaganda techniques to consider (Source: [The University of Vermont](#))

1. **NAME CALLING** or **STEREOTYPING**: Giving a person or an idea a bad label by using an easy to remember pejorative name. This is used to make us reject and condemn a person or idea without examining what the label really means. Examples: "Republican", "Tree-Hugger", "Nazi", "Environmentalist", "Special-Interest Group".
2. **VIRTUE WORDS** or **GLITTERING GENERALITY**: These words are used to dupe us into accepting and approving of things without examining the evidence carefully. Examples: "Natural", "Democratic", "Organic", "Scientific", "Ecological", "Sustainable".
3. **DEIFICATION**: This is when an idea is made to appear holy, sacred, or very special and therefore above all law. Any alternative or opposite points of view are thereby given the appearance of treason or blasphemy. Examples: "God-given right to...", "Mother Earth", "Gia".
4. **TRANSFER**: Transfer is when a symbol that carries respect, authority, sanction, and prestige is used along with an idea or argument to make it look more acceptable. Examples: American Flag, University Seal, Medical Association Symbol (or something that looks like it). This method is also called **GUILT-** or **VIRTUE-BY-ASSOCIATION.**
5. **TESTIMONIAL**: When some respected celebrity (or alternatively someone generally hated) claims that an idea or product is good (or bad). This technique is used to convince us without examining the facts more carefully.
6. **PLAIN FOLKS**: This is a way that a speaker convinces an audience that an idea is good because they are the same ideas of the vast majority of people like yourself. Examples: "This is the will of the People", "Most Americans...". Another example would be when the speaker tells a story about a family or people that are "just like you" to reinforce the speaker's point of view.
7. **BAND WAGON**: This common propaganda method is when the speaker tries to convince us to accept their point of view or else we will miss out on something really good. The Band-Wagon technique is often used in advertising. Examples: "This is the wave of the future", "Be the first on your block", "Act Now!". You might ask yourself "What if I was the only one on my block because no one else was interested (duped)?"
8. **ARTIFICIAL DICHOTOMY**: This is when someone tries to claim there are only two sides to an issue and that both sides must have equal presentation in order to be evaluated. This technique is used to dupe us into believing there is only one way to look at an issue, when in fact there may be many alternative viewpoints or "sides". Like most propaganda techniques it simplifies reality and



therefore distorts it, often to the advantage of the speaker. A classic example is the "intelligent design" versus "evolution" controversy.

9. **HOT POTATO:** This is an inflammatory (often untrue) statement or question used to throw an opponent off guard, or to embarrass them. Examples "Have you stopped beating your spouse", "When will you pay the taxes you owe?" The fact that it may be utterly untrue is irrelevant, because it still brings controversy to the opponent.
10. **STALLING or IGNORING THE QUESTION :** This technique is used to play for more time or to avoid answering a pointed question. Examples: "More research is needed...", "A fact-finding committee is working on this issue..." "I am calling for an investigation on this failure.." When asked about a tax increase possibility a senator replies: "I have always met the obligations I have to those I represent."
11. **LEAST-OF-EVILS** is used to justify an otherwise unpleasant or unpopular point of view. Example: "'War is hell but appeasement leads to worse disasters".
12. **SCAPEGOAT:** This often use with Guilt-by-association to deflect scrutiny away from the issues. It transfers blame to one person or group of people without investigating the complexities of the issue. Examples: "George W. Bush got us into Iraq", "President Reagan caused the national debt".
13. **CAUSE AND EFFECT MISMATCH:** This technique confuses the audience about what is really cause and effect. In fact the causes of most phenomena are complex, and it is misleading to say just one of the following: "Tuberculosis is caused by bacteria", "Tuberculosis is caused by un-regulated capitalism that creates poor working conditions", "Tuberculosis is caused by a lack of effective antibiotics".
14. **DISTORTION OF DATA or OUT OF CONTEXT or CARD STACKING or CHERRY PICKING:** This technique is used to convince the audience by using selected information and not presenting the complete story. Examples: "A study was done that showed eating peanut butter causes liver cancer" (the fact that later the study was later shown to be flawed or funded by the peanut butter haters and therefore suspect, is not revealed). A variation would be "Raising the speed limit to 65 mph resulted in many fewer traffic fatalities". Such statements need to be checked with how many people were driving before and after the change in speed limit. Fewer people may be driving after the speed limit change, even though the fatality rates (deaths per 100,000) may be higher, leading to the overall result of fewer fatalities.
15. **WEAK INFERENCE (or False Cause):** Weak inference is when a judgment is made with insufficient evidence, or that the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the evidence given. For example: Ducks and geese migrate south for the winter, therefore all waterfowl migrate south for the winter. Or, most rich folks vote republican, therefore most people who vote republican are rich.
16. **FAULTY ANALOGY:** This is when a comparison is carried to far. Example: "The economy is following the same path as right before the great depression, therefore we will experience a stock market crash soon!" **SLIPPERY SLOPE** would be an example of faulty analogy. Slippery slope makes the argument that a shift in one direction will continue to lead to extremes (ex. smoking pot will lead to heroine addiction). It is not necessarily so.



17. **MISUSE OF STATISTICS:** Some examples: Average results are reported, but not the amount of variation around the averages. A percent or fraction is presented, but not the sample size as in "9 out of 10 dentists recommend...". Absolute and proportional quantities are mixed as in "3,400 more robberies occurred in our town last year, whereas other cities had an increase of less than one percent". Graphs are used that, by chopping off part of the scale or using unusual units or no scale, distort the appearance of the result. Results are reported with misleading precision. For example, representing 13 out of 19 students as 68.42105 percent.
18. **FEAR:** "Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger."
-- Herman Goering at the Nuremberg trials (<http://www.snopes.com/quotes/goering.htm>)
19. **ad hominem ATTACK (also called Deflection):** You attack the messenger, instead of the argument or evidence that is presented.
20. **tu quoque ATTACK:** Pronounced too-kwo-kwee. This technique is when you respond to your opponent by accusing them of committing a logical fallacy or propaganda technique instead of addressing the claim of your opponent's argument and evidence. Ex. "You too are using fear as a propaganda technique"
21. **PREEMPTIVE FRAMING:** "Frame an issue before other people get a chance to" (George Lakoff - On the Media Jan 2017) Ex. "The only reason the hacking of the poorly defended DNC (Democratic National Committee) is discussed, is that the loss by the Dems was so big that they were totally embarrassed" -Donald Trump. When in fact the Dems did not lose big, nor was it their fault that they got hacked.
22. **DIVERSION:** When a major issue comes up that is embarrassing or threatening, so a diversion is created so attention is directed away from the issue.

Activity 3: Critically Analysing Propaganda

Participants work individually or in teams to fill out the worksheets. Upon completion, a discussion/reflection follows.

Use the template worksheet provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20150703-propaganda-4-4_Diagram_Worksheets.pdf

You might use these images or find other more contemporary ones to replace them.



Sources

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