

Online Learning Module 1: Media Power and Influence

The purpose of this learning module is to examine and highlight potential partiality (bias) and commonly adopted approaches used by media to influence an audience via the use of a real-world media example.

Media

Mainstream media plays a significant role in a democratic society where deliberation and debate are strongly held norms. Political parties use mainstream media to reach large numbers of people on public policies and politics. Media influences health and public perceptions of health and healthcare. Media coverage may also challenge or reinforce existing perceptions about health and healthcare. Limited public policy has been developed to address adverse effects of mainstream media on health such as regulating media content and limiting media in particular spheres such as some judicial proceedings.

While some mainstream media is independent and publicly funded, most have a corporate model and are reliant on commercial sales and advertising to survive. This increases the tendency of mainstream media to distort and obscure boundaries between objective journalism, advertising, other profit-making and/or preferential political party favoured undertakings.

All mainstream media is constructed. Media bias reflects partiality of mainstream media journalists and news outlets in the selection of news stories and/or what/how they are covered. Bias limits media neutrality i.e. ability of journalists to report all available or relevant facts or not preferentially select facts that provide an inclusive and balanced understanding of the issue. Media bias types include:

- Coverage or visibility bias i.e. important aspects/actors are missing.
- Presenting bias i.e. media coverage is slanted towards or against particular actors or issues.
- Conciseness bias i.e. tendency to report views that can be summed up neatly, leaving out complexities that are more difficult to explain.
- Mainstream bias i.e. tendency to report what everyone else is reporting, avoiding more controversial or divisive stories that may offend customers.
- Sensationalism bias i.e. in favor of the exceptional events (e.g. a volcano eruption in a remote area) over more ordinary car or pedestrian accident.
- False balance bias i.e. when an issue is epitomised as even sided, despite disproportionate evidence and/or focus for one side.
- Speculative content bias i.e. stories do not focus on what has occurred, but on what might occur.
- Ventriloquism bias i.e. experts/witnesses quoted in a way that intentionally voices author's opinion.
- Emotionalism/Sensationalism: Emotional language adding unnecessary drama/shock to gain attention.
- Witness/expert bias e.g. witnesses/experts have a conflict of interest (would benefit) in the matter.
- False timeliness bias e.g. using narrow evidence/advice out of context.

Readings

Entman, R. M. (2007). Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power. *Journal of communication*, 57(1), 163-173.

How the media falls short in reporting epidemics. The Conversation, August 14, 2018
<https://theconversation.com/how-the-media-falls-short-in-reporting-epidemics-101216>

Why the media are to blame for racialising Melbourne's 'African gang' problem. The Conversation, August 1, 2018
<https://theconversation.com/why-the-media-are-to-blame-for-racialising-melbournes-african-gangproblem-100761>

Example Media Investigation

Summary: In this learning module we will investigate an Australian mainstream media article published in 2015.

Media investigation question: Is mainstream media biased?

Method: Content analysis of the tactics used by mainstream media.

Process: The mainstream media article shown below was copied and pasted as text to allow a visual representation of some of the areas that should be investigated in a media content analysis. To supplement this, a series of questions is provided to guide an evidence based media content analysis and an understanding of the common approaches mainstream media uses to influence audiences.



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Abbott government considers axing the Australian census to save money

February 19, 2015 - 12:34PM 132 reading now Comments 296 ☒ Vote Read later

 Peter Martin
Economics Editor, The Age
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<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/abbott-government-considers-axing-the-australian-census-to-save-money-20150218-13ieik.html>

Student Activity:

You may be surprised at how a quick read/scan of a media article can make it look very reasonable. Before reading the media issue identification table for this article (found below), quickly read or scan this article and score it out of 10 (1 being the worst and 10 being the best) for:

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. How reasonably written it is | MY SCORE = |
| 2. How balanced across different standpoints it is | MY SCORE = |
| 3. How persuasive it is | MY SCORE = |
| 4. How fair it is | MY SCORE = |

While it is part of human nature to have particular perspectives, preferences, prejudices, understandings, and partialities, media bias can become invisible to us. It can manipulate and blind even the most rationale of us. It can place some important information and perspectives in the shadows and prevent us from getting a full understanding of an issue, which is needed to make sound decisions. This is why it is important to understand and identify any media for how it is constructed, what it is telling us and the approaches it is using to persuade us on a daily basis.

Media Article	Embedded Media Bias Examples
Title: Abbott government considers axing the Australian census to save money	Axing = Emotive language bias
Author: Peter Martin, Economics Editor, The Age	Researcher bias
The Abbott government is considering abandoning the Australian census and replacing it with a smaller sample survey in the upcoming budget.	Considering = speculative content bias 'Abandoning' = Emotive language bias
An Australian institution since 1911, the census surveys every household in the nation once every five years on the second Tuesday in August. The census offers a snapshot of where Australians come from, where they live, what type of families they have and how they work. The most recent census, in 2011, marked 100 years of data collection, providing a century's worth of information about where Australians came from, where they lived, what type of families they had and how they worked.	'Australian institution' since 1911 = Emotive language bias Priming = early standpoint how they want the reader to interpret the article
Preparations for the next, Australia's first paperless census, have been underway for seven years.	Unsubstantiated Claim. Preparations have been underway for seven years = lack of broader context, Implies government has wasted expert time.

Asked directly whether the 2016 census would go ahead as planned, a spokeswoman for the parliamentary secretary to the treasurer Kelly O'Dwyer read from a prepared statement. It said: "The government and the Bureau of Statistics are consulting with a wide range of stakeholders about the best methods to deliver high quality, accurate and timely information on the social and economic condition of Australian households." Asked whether that was an answer to the question: "Will the census go ahead next year?" the spokeswoman replied that it was.	Ventriloquism bias i.e. experts/witnesses quoted in a way that intentionally voices author's opinion. Implies the government and ABS were simply giving a political response and were not willing to provide details, and thus were not being honest.
Abandoning the census at this late stage would waste years of preparation but would save hundreds of millions of dollars. The 2011 census cost \$440 million. The 2016 census was shaping up to be even more expensive because of the information technology requirements of moving to primarily electronic lodgement. Over time the change would save money as fewer collection agents and data entry staff were needed. In an interview with Fairfax Media last week, the new head of the ABS David Kalisch said he needed several hundred million dollars to refresh the Bureau's aging technology systems.	'Over time the change would save money as fewer collection agents and data entry staff were needed' = speculative content bias. False balance bias i.e. disproportionate evidence and/or focus for one side. Implied messaging that the government's sole focus is on the economic savings.
Britain's Conservative government announced plans to axe its census five years ago, arguing that it was outdated and that better information could be obtained in cheaper ways. After a parliamentary inquiry it reneged and agreed to allow the next census to go ahead in 2021. Britain conducts its censuses only once every 10 years. Canada cancelled its compulsory census in 2010 and moved to a shorter voluntary survey. Statisticians testing the new data have described it as "garbage". New Zealand is considering replacing its census, using so-called administrative data from organisations such as the tax office to determine its population. It is also considering conducting the census only every 10 years instead of the present five.	'Axe' = emotive language bias Unfair comparison due to inadequate context regarding the British, Canadian, NZ government actions. Conciseness bias i.e. tendency to report views that can be summed up neatly, leaving out complexities that are more difficult to explain. 'Garbage' = emotive language bias 'New Zealand is considering' = speculative content bias
Australia's Bureau of Statistics is required by law to conduct the census every five years, so any change would require legislation.	Coverage or visibility bias i.e. important aspects are missing such as the commonly undertaken amendment to an existing law.
Documents released under the Archives Act show both the Fraser and Keating governments considered axing the census to save money.	Further implied messaging that the government's sole focus is on the economic savings. False balance bias i.e. disproportionate evidence and/or focus for one side. Conciseness bias i.e. tendency to report views that can be summed up neatly, leaving out complexities that are more difficult to explain.

A spokesman for the ABS said planning for the 2016 census was on schedule. He later phoned back and said all inquiries should instead be directed to the parliamentary secretary's office.	Further implies the government and ABS were simply giving a political response and were not willing to provide details, and thus were not being honest. False balance bias i.e. disproportionate evidence and/or focus for one side.
Australian National University demographer Peter McDonald said the census would be almost impossible to replace. "It does what sample surveys cannot," he said. "It can track what is happening to comparatively small groups of people, such those born in particular countries. That can't be picked up by smaller surveys." The biggest loss would be regional population information, he said. "There is simply no other way of knowing how many people are in each town or suburb. Planners would be working without guidance. Over time it would be harder to know the size of the Australian population."	Witness/expert bias e.g. witness/ expert has a conflict of interest -would benefit in arguing for one side in the matter i.e. a demographer needs the data collected by the census for their research. False equivalencies in spokespersons or inappropriate spokespersons for the given situation.
Ahead of the 2011 census the head of the population census program Paul Lowe argued that it was important for Australians to fill in their forms. "It will shed some light on your community. Census information is used to allocate funding for critical infrastructure and services such as roads, schools, parks and hospitals." he said.	False timeliness bias e.g. using narrow evidence/advice out of context.

Questions to ask when assessing media content

N.B. For assignment , students are required to identify, through reliable literature and examples from the article (to demonstrate responses), why at least some of the aspects raised in the questions below are important i.e. Why and how the media uses specific approaches, and how effective the research has found them to be in influencing audiences.

Students should be guided by the document titled: *Descriptive versus Analytic Assignment Writing* as they plan and write assignment .

Is the reader primed i.e. where they are given an early standpoint they want the reader to use to interpret the article? Why is this important?

Is the author a recognised expert in the field? What field is he an expert in? Is he qualified to comment on the topic or issue? Why is this important?

What ideas or values are being "sold" in the message? Why is this important?

What political ideas are communicated in the message? Why is this important?

From whose point of view is the news reported? Why is this important?

What type of person is the reader invited to identify with? Why is this important?

Does the author present alternate points of view? If so, are those views presented objectively? Which other viewpoints are missing? Why is this important?

Are the learnings from the media article balanced across the full range of perspectives or skewed in a particular direction? Why is this important?

What ideas or perspectives are left out? How would you find what's missing? Why is this important?

Are aspects worded with the intent to oversimplify or over generalise? Why is this important?

Is the authors presenting a limited view of the topic? How? Why is this important?

How is the text constructed? Are there any metaphors (i.e. symbolic representations of something else)? Why is this important?

Is emotive language used? How might the public react to this emotive language? Why is this important?

How balanced and objective is the portrayal of the issue? Why is this important?

Do argument appeal more to the emotions than to logic? Why is this important?

How balanced and objective are the arguments put forward? Why is this important?

Is there a lack of broader context? Why is this important?

Is the article convincing? Why is this important?

What is most memorable about the media? Why is this important?

What makes it seem "real?" Why is this important?

How might different people understand the message differently? Why is this important?

Student Activity:

Students can practise media content analysis using this article.

If students wish to, they may also use this mainstream media article for the relevant part of assignment 2.