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The News Flip Exercise: Finding patriarchy, racism and other forms of bias in language

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The News Flip Exercise: Finding patriarchy, racism and other forms of bias in language

Overview

As recently as 2013, *The New York Times* started an obituary about an internationally acclaimed rocket scientist by remarking that she made a “mean beef stroganoff.” Gender bias in news is still prevalent, even as activists have worked for decades to combat misogynist treatment of female political candidates. As students study media during the 2016 election, it’s worthwhile to call their attention to the ways sexism, homophobia, racism and other forms of social bias creep into campaign coverage.

This exercise was inspired by a desire to help my journalism students, who are well-versed in the ideal of objectivity in news, see the ways that bias can quietly creep into coverage. My favorite teaching moments happen when students are able to discover knowledge rather than having it delivered in a lecture. This in-class exercise is a fun way to reveal how subtle uses of language and fact selection in news stories can perpetuate social biases against female political candidates. It works because it blinds the stories and reveals the words and phrases that are easy to overlook because heteronormative, white patriarchy is the norm that feels so normal. This exercise can be adapted to coverage about race, class, homophobia or other forms of social bias as needed and can be conducted within a 50-minute class period.

The exercise requires students to work as a team to type up, and thereby anonymize, real passages from news stories about female political candidates. The method of discovery comes from flipping the gender of the candidates in a story, revealing the way language that is hardly recognizable when it conforms to prevalent norms, but stands out dramatically when applied to the opposite gender. When passages from campaign stories are stripped down and blinded, students see this for themselves, sparking laughter, head slaps, and lively discussion.

The exercise requires some library research and material preparation, but once the packets are prepared, they can be copied and re-used. Students will need access to computers or their own laptops, and instructors need some type of projector system. Because the exercise involves a bit of guessing in the end (students vote on whether the displayed text is original or “flipped”), and because gender swapping is often funny, students enjoy the exercise and naturally discover how language bias works.

Rationale

Objectivity is one of the core tenets of journalism, yet scholars have found considerable ideological biases in mainstream news, which favors an elite perspective that advances white, heteronormative, patriarchal norms (Omi & Winant, 2014; Tuchman, Kaplan Daniels, & Benet, 1978). Many scholars have applied the concept of “framing” to studies of news texts as a way to identify the way a journalists’ use of words, phrases, facts, or even story selection can advance an ideological stance (Entman, 1993).

If journalists are expected to stick to the facts, how is it possible that they use frames that diminish women and minorities, even on the campaign trail? Newsroom diversity seems to be one factor. Newsrooms that are predominantly white and male tend to portray African Americans as uneducated and criminals (Jenkins, 2012). Diverse newsrooms have been found to make a difference. More women in a news organization leads to more female sourcing, and having more minority journalists on staff leads to more stories about underrepresented sections of a community (Armstrong, 2004).

All of this leads to coverage that treats female candidates differently, with the sorts of double standards that put women in a “can’t-win” double bind, whether they’re Democrats, like Hillary Clinton, or Republican, like Sarah Palin (Jamieson, 1995). Hillary Clinton, who is expected to be the first female candidate for a major political party in the U.S., has been a lightning rod for sexist coverage that has been subtle, blatant, and even obscene (Lawrence & Rose, 2010).

For students to be able to think critically about media, it is essential that they learn how journalists can use story-selection, facts, words, images and even page design to perpetuate ideologies that marginalize women and minorities. The challenge is that the diminishment of certain people often feels very normal because it is taken for granted. Materials and exercises designed to help students see this type of framing for themselves is especially valuable because it become impossible for them to unsee it once they leave the classroom.

Timeline

Prior to class

If you do not teach in a computer lab, it may be necessary to remind students to bring laptops to class for this exercise. I start reminding them a couple weeks in advance and put it on the syllabus, too.

Calculate how many clippings you’ll need based on your class size. Find clippings from the news archives available at your library. You might select clippings from a database, or scans from older newspapers. A wide historical range provides a stronger illustration. Each envelope should have its own unique clipping relevant to your subject (i.e., gender and election coverage, race and crime coverage, etc.).

Prepare the envelopes. It’s helpful to use large manila envelopes with the instructions glued to the outside and a unique clipping inside.

Decide whether students should email their passages to you or send them to a shared file. Be sure the classroom has a projection system that will allow you to select files secretly before displaying them to the screen (usually you can just use the system’s display on/off switch).

Lesson Plan (based on a 50-minute class)

Break class into pairs or trios, assign team names (e.g., Team A, Team B, etc.). (5 minutes)

Explain the procedure. Emphasize the importance of the file-name consistency and that students can copy and paste text from their first version into the second version of their passage, but that they need to be careful to flip the key genders and candidate names. Distribute envelopes. (5 minutes)

Each team opens their envelopes, reads instructions, reads the clipping, types and re-types their two versions. Instructor wanders to assist. (20 minutes)

Return to full class and ask a student to help with coin flipping. While the screen is dark, the coin flip decides which version from each team will be displayed on the screen. Once selected, the passage is revealed and the instructor reads it aloud. The students vote: Original? Or flipped? Discuss their guesses as a class and then reveal the genders in the original news stories. Students will often be able to guess correctly from cues such as descriptions of hairstyle, clothing, or sexist descriptors such as “tough cookie” or “bombshell.” (20 minutes)

Materials

Copy, cut, and glue the following instructions to the outside of each envelope:

Instructions to students

In this envelope is a news article about a politician. Read over the article together. Then choose a passage from the article to re-type—keep it around 200 words, no more.

You are in pairs so that one of you can dictate while the other person types.

Your pair will receive a team name. Write it down here: _____

1. The **FIRST TIME** you re-type your article, keep all the genders the same, but change the names. Male politicians get a new **MALE** name: Charles Anderson. If your article is about a female politician, change her name to Susan Weston. Change the names of any other recognizable people in this article, and keep their genders the same. Save this file as Version1_TeamA

2. **THEN** type your article a **SECOND TIME**. This time, *flip the gender* of the story subject(s). Remember to flip the pronouns, too: he, she, his, hers. Use the same names to flip the genders—male politicians become Susan Weston, female politicians become Charles Anderson. Do not worry about the names of other recognizable people; the changes you made in version one should remain—that is, new names, but do **NOT** flip their gender. Save this file as Version2_TeamA

3. E-mail or post both files to a shared folder designated by the instructor.

Do this by this time: _____

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See also: www.womensmediacenter.com

Biography

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Mary Angela Bock is an assistant professor in the University of Texas at Austin School of Journalism. She is a former journalist turned academic with an interest in the sociology of photographic practice, the rhetorical relationship between words and images, and digital media. She is particularly curious about matters of truth and authenticity in image production. Her previous career spanned more than 20 years in television news, with stints as a newspaper reporter, a radio journalist, and public relations writer. Most recently Bock co-authored *Visual Communication Theory and Research* with Shahira Fahmy and Wayne Wanta. Her 2012 book, *Video Journalism: Beyond the One Man Band* studied the relationship between solo multi-media practice and news narrative. Bock is an active member of the *National Press Photographers Association*, the *International Communication Association (ICA)*, the *National Communication Association* and the *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)*.