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Level: Grades 10-12

About the Author

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Lesson Plan

Bias

Overview

This lesson introduces students to the concept of bias or slant, in newspapers and in television newscasts. Students begin by comparing three newspaper articles about the same news event – each reported from a different perspective. They then explore the role the gatekeeper, or editor, in determining the slant of a story and analyze the titles of newspaper stories for slant or bias. Once students have looked at newspapers, they will use viewing logs to analyse television newscasts from two different television stations. These newscasts will be analysed based on language usage, story selection and story order.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- recognize how a single event could generate more than one news story
- identify a point of view or bias, based on the language used
- experience and understand the role of subjectivity and perception in the media
- understand the role of the "gatekeeper"
- critically analyse or deconstruct two newscasts for potential bias through comparison, focusing on language, story selection and story order

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy class handout articles:

- "Sir Sam steps down!"
- "Hughes fired from cabinet"
- "Humphrey discounts allegations"
- News Judgement
- Following copyright guidelines, tape news broadcasts for *The National* on CBC at 10 p.m. and the *CTV National News* on CTV at 11 p.m. (Or, check out *Cable in the Classroom* at www.cablededucation.ca for copyright-cleared news programming.)

The Lesson

Activity One

- Divide your class into groups of three or four.
- Using the *Sir Sam Hughes* story in this lesson, hand out "Sir Sam steps down!" to one side of the class and "Hughes fired from cabinet" to the other side.
- Have students read their particular article and jot down a list of words that would describe Hughes, based on the information in front of them.
- Ask for descriptive words from one side of the room only. *A fairly uniform picture of Hughes will emerge. It will, however, be totally different from the picture which the students on the other side have formed.*

This class exercise illustrates how bias or slant operates, by presenting only one side of a story.

Activity Two

Hand out "**Humphrey discounts allegations**" and ask students to complete the assignment. This exercise allows you to introduce the following terms:

- **placement** – where news stories are located in the paper, by section and page
- **gatekeeper** – the person (editor, news producer etc.) who decides which news to print or broadcast and which stories to hold back

In this exercise, each student is playing the role of the gatekeeper. Once students have completed their assignments, discuss their answers as a class. It's important to note that blatant bias may be hard to find and that each network has only so much time to present a picture of the world, so gatekeepers must make decisions that affect how we view current events. Sometimes what we perceive as bias may be far from intentional on the part of the news network or newspaper.

- Distribute the student handout News Judgement and discuss these points with students.

Activity Three

The concepts of bias and gatekeeping can be explored by comparing how different newspapers treat similar stories. For example here are three headlines that appeared dealing with the same news item:

Globe and Mail: "**Senate votes 80-1 to give up \$6000**"

Toronto Star: "**Repentant senators hand back \$6000 hike**"

Toronto Sun: "**SENATE WAKES UP**"

Ask your students how each title affects their perceptions of the issue.

In class, ask students to compare the two pre-recorded newscasts, analysing them for language usage, story selection and story order. *The National*, on CBC at 10 p.m. (a 15-minute newscast) and the *CTV National News*, on CTV at 11 p.m. (a half-hour newscast with commercial breaks) lend themselves well to comparison.

- Divide the class into groups of four.
- For both newscasts, ask students to list each story and note whether there was:
 - a live anchor-reporter interview
 - a taped report from a reporter
 - videotape footage with a commentary read by the anchor
 - straight news copy read by the anchor without accompanying visuals
- Also ask students to note the running time for each item, as well as any interesting use of language or other elements which catch their attention.

Their charts/logs might look something like this:

Number	Running Time	Story Time	Story	Anchor Reporter	Video
1 _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2 _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Note: Screening the newscasts, filling in the charts and calculating the story lengths may require two periods. You may want to play them both on day one and repeat them on day two.

Have students compare similar stories on both newscasts and answer the following questions:

- Where did the story appear in each newscast?
- How much time was it given?
- Was there video, or just straight copy?
- Was a reporter sent to cover the story?
- Was it a CBC/CTV reporter, or one from another news organization?
- Is one network missing a "big" story? Why?

Students can compare top stories or "light" final newscast items; the flow of national and international stories; or the ratio of "hard" news or political news to "soft" news or human interest stories.

Have each group put together a package consisting of a CBC log, a CTV log, and a conclusion.

The conclusion can address questions such as those suggested above.

In their conclusion, students might also try to determine which newscast appears to be more objective, more free of bias:

On what do they base their conclusions?

If they had been the gatekeepers, what choices would they have made?

Note: You may find that giving the class a dry run, perhaps with one of the short hourly Newsworld newscasts, will focus the students and produce a better end product.

Log 1	10 marks
Log 2	10 marks
Conclusion	20 marks
Total	40 marks

Student Handout #1

Sir Sam Steps Down!

Toronto Times
November 1916

SIR SAM STEPS DOWN!

Sad news was announced in Ottawa today. Sir Sam Hughes is no longer the minister of Militia. The prime minister, bending to howls of criticism from Quebec, has dismissed this able, competent minister. Hughes has done more for the war effort than any other Canadian. He has recruited thousands of volunteers and raised thousands of dollars.

Canada entered the war with only 3000 in the armed forces. By the end of 1915, thanks to Sir Sam's tireless energy and inspired leadership, more than 200,000 of our noble sons have taken their places on the battlefield.

Without Sir Sam's efforts, how will Canada maintain its contribution to the war cause? Many English Canadians are angered by the reluctance of French Canadians to volunteer for overseas service. English Canadians are willing to defend the British Empire. The Empire that has done so much for Canada.

Sir Sam Hughes, through the force of his personality, has persuaded reluctant industrialists to invest heavily in the production of much needed war materials. We should be thankful that, through the contracts negotiated by the minister, tons of vital munitions are making their way to our soldiers at the front.

HUGHES FIRED FROM CABINET

Montreal Matin

November 1916

HUGHES FIRED FROM CABINET

At long last, Prime Minister Borden has done the honourable thing! He has thrown Sir Sam Hughes, his incompetent minister of Militia, out of the Cabinet. Now, Hughes will be unable to do any more damage to Canadian unity. Hughes, more than any other person, has divided and torn this country apart with his policies.

Hughes has managed to antagonize everyone in Quebec. Those French Canadians who have volunteered for the English war have been insulted. The recruitment posters, training and instruction manuals are in English only. More importantly, promotions have only been given to the English-speaking officers. How can Hughes and other Canadians expect French Canadians to join in the war effort when they are treated so poorly?

As Minister of Militia, Hughes has disgraced the nation by rewarding his friends and cronies with munitions contracts. These shady deals have allowed his friends to make millions at the taxpayer's expense.

Why should we spill one more drop of precious French-Canadian blood in Europe. Canada only wants Quebec in Confederation when we are willing to sacrifice for the British Empire. Britain started this war. Let Britain finish it!

Humphrey Discounts Allegations

You are a newspaper editor who supports the opposition to Conservative M.P. Humphrey Humphrey.

Vocabulary Choices:

HUMPHREY DISCOUNTS ALLEGATIONS
or
"DRUG TALK ALL LIES," SNARLS HUMPHREY

OTTAWA (UBI) Conservative M.P./warhorse and liquor baron/distillery executive Humphrey Humphrey denounced/denied today that reports/allegations implicating/involving him in undercover/subversive drug/dope retailing/peddling were true/had any basis in fact. Addressing a dinner/blowout for colleagues/hangers-on at a swank/exclusive Ottawa restaurant, Humphrey angrily denied/calmly refuted swarms of rumours/numerous reports that he and a gang/group of cronies/acquaintances had sneaked/smuggled into the national's capital/Ottawa lethal doses/dangerous amounts of diluted/adulterated ambrosia under cover of dark/at night.

"Such talk is all lies," snarled/said Humphrey, hunched over/seated with a tumbler of booze/an after-dinner cocktail.

Rumour-mongers/sources around Parliament Hill suggest/hint tonight Humphrey's alleged crime/scrape is the subject of Cabinet investigation/talk. Meantime, Bay Street analysts/mandarins note/point to the fact that Humphrey stock has plummeted/fallen in the last two days/suddenly in the face of/as a result of a wave of panic/selling.

Source: Jim Henderson, *Mediascan* (Toronto:pub, 1976), pp.40-41

Assignment

- You have been given the article on Humphrey by one of your reporters.
- You have the option of choosing from the vocabulary provided.
- What choices in the vocabulary would you make?
- How would you have the story placed in your paper?
- Select the most appropriate headline.
- Explain the reasons for each of your responses. (Remember that you oppose Humphrey.)
- Once you have done this, imagine that you are now supportive of Mr. Humphrey.
 - What do you choose to do now?
 - What does this exercise tell us about media values?

Source: *Indirections*, December 1989, p.76.

News Judgement

Trying to define what constitutes news is a delicate business. Some of the key factors include:

Impact: Is the only factory in town closing down? That has a bigger impact than two people being laid off, so it's bigger news. A disaster is big news because of its impact, leaving people hurt and homeless.

Conflict: A demonstration for animal rights in which people peacefully march and chant slogans is not a major news story. But if a confrontation develops between the protesters and a fur coat merchant, and someone gets hurt, it becomes a major story because the level of conflict has increased.

Prominence: Are celebrities or politicians involved in a story? If so, it's a bigger story. A failed marriage in the Royal Family is a big headline around the world, but the same problems, if they happened to your next-door neighbour, wouldn't even make the local paper.

Proximity: If your newspaper is in Timmins, Ontario, and a homeless person freezes to death on Timmins' main street one winter night, that's big news. But if your newspaper is in Whitehorse, Yukon, you are not as interested in a death in Timmins, because it isn't close to your readers.

Freshness: News has a short shelf life. If a development happened an hour before the paper's deadline, it's bigger news than if it's 24 hours old.

Novelty: There's a saying that "if a dog bites a man it isn't news, but if a man bites a dog, that's news." Human interest: Related to novelty. Stories about the 96-year-old who swims in the ocean every morning, winter and summer, or about the family with 20 foster children and how they cope, are of interest to readers. These factors are all a part of news judgement.

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