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**Media Bias Through Verbal Messaging**

News media plays a key role in our lives by providing information that shapes our opinions, decisions and provides a means to record history. However, recent studies indicate that the public views the media as being increasingly biased. For instance, the results of a study conducted by Pew Research in the fall of 2011 reveal that 77% of those surveyed feel that the media tends to favor one side compared with only 53% in a similar survey conducted in 1985 (Farhi).  Understanding verbal messaging such as connotation and denotation is an excellent way to determine bias through the meaning of words.

Verbal messaging comes in the forms of connotation and denotation. Connotation is the emotional and imaginative association surrounding a word that can be either positive or negative.  Denotation on the other hand is the strict dictionary meaning of the word while connotative language utilizes snarl or purr words**.**  Snarl words are those used when describing something that a person is against or hates and purr words used to describe something that is favored or loved. According to Hayakawa (1990), the use of terms such as “leftist” and “right-wingers” when used as snarl words really infer that the speaker hates “liberals or conservatives.”  On the other hand, Hayakawa uses the example of the connotative purr word “our way of life” to illustrate how the word indicates that the speaker loves “our way of life.”  When a speaker uses facts in conjunction with snarl and purr words it can be valuable as a way to convince their audience to accept their emotional position (S.I. Hayakawa pg. 28).  In today’s media, there is an increased trend to use these types of words without the use of facts to substantiate their connotation, which leads to more media bias in reporting.  The use of this connotative language, in particular snarl and purr words, is a good predictor of the reporter’s bias.

Several factors can potentially contribute to why the media would choose to produce biased information.  The first is that the bias could reflect the worldview of the owner of the media outlet.  For example, Ted Turner the owner of CNN is a known liberal who supports environmental causes and has donated a lot of money to left leaning organizations.  On the other hand, Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox News and many newspapers is a known conservative who supports unregulated capitalism and corporate interests.  Could this be why these two cable networks differ so greatly in news reporting?  In addition, corporations that own and control media outlets are more concerned with market control and maximum profits rather than imposing their personal worldviews on the media outlets they control.  Finally, the most important factor may be that viewers have changed how they want the news delivered. For example, individuals may demand that news be entertaining or they may have a strong desire to hear only news that validates their political and social worldviews.  In other words, this provides incentive for news organizations to bias their stories through verbal messaging in order to gain market share with that particular segment of people.

An excellent way to identify media bias is through comparing and contrasting the use of connotative and denotative words by analyzing several accounts of the same news story. For example, Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. resigned from congress on November 21, 2012 and when we compare how The New York Times and Washington Times reported on the same event, we can clearly see a difference in the word choices they made. The Washington Times opens their story by describing why Jesse Jackson Jr. is resigning “After a long struggle with medical and legal*problems*, Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. resigned from congress” (Lengall). The choice of the word “*problems*” is a very open-ended connotation.  The reader could conclude by that word alone that Mr. Jackson is using his medical problems to shield himself from his legal problems. The Washington Times in its report did not factually report what his medical problems are, which leaves the reader to fill in the blanks. The word “*problem*” is also a “loaded word” that sets a negative tone for the entire article (Russell Pg. 21).  By contrast, The New York Times reported on the same story without the use of connotative language. When describing why Mr. Jackson resigned they used denotation in the following quote “Mr. Jackson, 47, has been treated for bipolar disorder, and cited ill health as his reason for leaving. He also acknowledged in a resignation letter a continuing federal criminal investigation into the possible misuse of campaign funds and said, for the first time publicly, that he was cooperating with investigators” (Davey). The New York Times reported factually the reasons why Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. is resigning. They are not leaving the reader to fill in the blanks rather they are citing the facts using “neutral words” that do not bias the reader (Russell Pg. 21).

Another example is on October 30, 2012 when Fox News’ Sean Hannity offered criticism of President Obama’s handling of Benghazi.  Hannity stated that Obama is “*digging himself* into a *deeper hole* when it comes to his administration’s *cover-up* of the Benghazi terrorist attack.”  The italicized words indicate Hannity’s use of snarl words when speaking of Obama and his administration.  Hannity continued with the following snarl words:  “*denying* it was a terrorist attack when we now know that our State Department and intelligence knew and were watching this in real-time? *So you’re offended*, Mr. President?  What about the *families* *of the four Americans who* *died in that attack*? Apparently, people that *were begging for help* and assistance and that assistance was *denied*” (Hannity).The only conclusion one can draw from Hannity’s statements is  he is inferring that  President Obama’s handling of Benghazi was criminal and  the audience should judge the President just as Hannity does.  There is nothing denotative in these statements and the use of snarl word connotation without supporting facts is exemplary of media bias.  On the same evening that Hannity made these statements, Super Storm Sandy was making landfall on the east coast.  All of the other cable and news networks at the time of Hannity’s show were reporting only on Sandy, as it was the most important news event of the day.  Therefore, there is not a comparable news report to compare to on that date.  The fact that Hannity chose to report on the alleged Benghazi cover-up rather than report the most important story of the day shows how far some media outlets will go to influence their audience.

In order to contrast with Hannity’s reporting on Benghazi I chose his chief competitor Rachel Maddow and a report she made on November 16, 2012 regarding President Obama and Benghazi.  The following are excerpts from her report highlighting the use of connotative language: “The *bizarre Republican rhetoric* surrounding the politics of the Benghazi attack reinforce a larger truth: President Obama hasn’t had a legitimate scandal yet, and it’s making his *detractors antsy*” (Maddow). The snarl word connotation used in this statement paint a negative image of Republicans by indicating that they are lying about a cover-up, while at the same time deflecting blame from President Obama. Ms. Maddow went on to explain: “Part of the underlying cause for the *apoplexy* on the right is that they’re certain President Obama is a radical criminal up to no good, which means there must be some kind of scandal somewhere.”  The use of the word “*apoplexy*” is strongly implying that the right either has neurological disorders or is just flat out crazy and in a rage for thinking President Obama is up to no good. Furthermore, Maddow’s report also utilizes purr words in describing President Obama by stating that he is “Scandal Free” which is implying that he is guilt free of the all the right’s accusations (Maddow).  The clear inference drawn from Rachel Maddow’s choice of words through biased connotation is that the right is guilty of false claims and that President Obama has never lied about the situation in Benghazi.  When comparing Maddow’s report to Sean Hannity’s, it becomes very clear that both utilize snarl words heavily in their reporting.

In conclusion, media bias has many causes and it has many methods of delivery.  The most common method of biased delivery is through connotative verbal messaging.  Using connotative words is unavoidable as everyone who communicates uses them whether they are conscious of it or not because everyone has an opinion.  Unfortunately, trying to remain neutral is a very difficult task if not impossible when opinions and emotion are involved.  Finally, since bias in word choices is inescapable, it is therefore up to the media consumer to check facts and utilize multiple sources to navigate through the bias and find the truth.

**Sources:**

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