

◆◆ Chapter 19

Using Critical Thinking to Identify National Bias in the News

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Abstract

In this previously unpublished paper, Paul and Adamson present a model for teaching students how to identify national bias in the news. This model, they argue, can be extended to any form of bias in the news. They fit the task of detecting bias into a coherent theory which illuminates the logic or pattern of sociocentric thought. Possible student instructions and samples of strong and weak student work are included.

One of the most destructive forms of bias in the world today is national bias, the tendency to analyze and assess world events through a nationalistic mind set. Though many teachers recognize that much news coverage is biased in one way or another, few see clearly how to teach students to identify bias. The purpose of this article is to explain how students can become critical consumers of the news.

The ability to identify bias is an important dimension of critical thinking and, as other dimensions, requires practice. We need: 1) a reasonably clear theory why bias exists, how it affects our thinking, and the forms it takes; and 2) practice identifying it. We need, then, good theory and good practice. There are many forms and dimensions of bias, so it is useful to begin with one basic form. Other forms can be added as time goes on.

Teaching students to identify bias will be no easy task, for when we are biased it appears to us that we are not. We resist the notion that we might have a bias. Many students also feel reluctant to accept this. Teachers need to be aware of this tendency in themselves and their students, and their pedagogy must reflect this awareness.

◆ *The Importance of Recognizing Bias*

Bias exerts a subtle, but powerful, influence on our thinking. None of us is free of it. Some biases are personal, while others are socially shared. National

bias is a socially shared bias in which most citizens of a country hold a common view of themselves, their country, and the world. For example, most people in Iran believe in tenets of the Shiite Moslem religion, most people in the U.S.S.R. believe in communism, and most people in the U.S. believe in capitalism. These views are transmitted as biases to children by members of each society, most notably parents, peers, and the media. Piaget (1976) noticed this tendency and commented, "... everything suggests that, on discovering the values accepted in his immediate circle, the child felt bound to accept the circle's opinions of all other national groups". These acquired images of other countries are less favorable than one's image of one's own country, and sometimes are extremely negative. This tendency has very deep historical and psychological roots.

To quote Sam Keene (1986):

Sadly, the majority of tribes and nations create a sense of social solidarity and membership in part by systematically creating enemies. The corporate identity of most peoples depends upon dividing the world into a basic antagonism:

Us	versus	Them
Insider	versus	Outsiders
The tribe	versus	The enemy

Those who teach social studies struggle against this acquired bias, for they want their students not only to understand their own culture and society, but also to develop an understanding of cultures and societies different from their own. To simply impart facts about these cultures to students and hope that understanding will follow, is too optimistic. If Piaget and Keene are right, we have strong reason to suspect the adequacy of the simple transmission of facts and pleas for fairness as sufficient to foster in students a genuine understanding of, not to mention an appreciation for, other countries and cultures. The us/them dichotomy pervades our cultural, political, and social thought, is passed on and reinforced overtly and covertly, becomes deeply entrenched in our and the students' minds, and cannot be dislodged by simply learning facts. These views have become part of the students' individual and social identity. This struggle for fairness, then, is a battle to be waged against egocentricity and sociocentricity. Students have to fight against their own deep-seated views, by itself a very powerful influence, and against uncritically held mainstream cultural conceptions of the world. Facts, by themselves, cannot win this battle. Neither is general encouragement to be fair sufficient for the student to actually be fair. Students need to gain insight into the nature of bias, the ways it influences their thought, and the methods by which it is passed on and reinforced. Only then can the student critically and fairly appraise the facts about "them". When we have biases, especially deep-seated ones, we need to *think* our way out of them. Someone else's thinking will not do.

◆ *The Roots of National Bias*

All of our thinking depends on our beliefs about the world. Our beliefs form the basis of how we classify, interpret, and experience things. In this sense, to have a “bias” is inevitable, for we approach all situations with some expectations and a point of view. This “inevitable bias” is compatible with objectivity *if we recognize it* and acknowledge other possible ways to classify and interpret. Indeed we become objective only to the degree that we develop this openmindedness: “I see it this way for this reason, in the light of this evidence. How do you see it? What is your point of view?”

Conversely, the illegitimately biased person regularly equates his or her point of view with *the Truth*, and so is unlikely to grant any significant truth to other systems of belief, to other perspectives. Such a person is not openminded. To move students toward objectivity we need to help them become explicitly conscious of the beliefs they implicitly hold, so that they can become skilled in recognizing when and how those beliefs shape their experience. They need to recognize, for example, that when the members of a nation are raised to implicitly believe that the motives of their leaders are “pure” while the motives of the leaders of “enemy” countries are “evil”, then, though both countries might do the same thing, say, intervene in the affairs of another country, the events will be experienced differently. Objective persons see that the events can be distinguished only to the degree that these assumptions they are making about themselves and others are truly justifiable. They can see, in other words, how news items about the intervention in *our* newspapers present interpretations of events based upon *our* assumptions and beliefs, while *their* newspapers present interpretations of events based upon *their* assumptions and beliefs. We (and they) do not recognize, and even resist recognizing, that we (and they) have a picture of the world, a picture quite different from other possible pictures. Each picture may have merit but all highlight some facts at the expense of others and no picture includes, or could include, *all* of reality.

If to “have a bias” (a partial view) is inevitable, to recognize it is essential. Consider this analogy. In bowling, the word ‘bias’ refers to a weight that is sometimes built into the bowling ball causing it to curve toward the weighted direction. If one uses a weighted ball, and is aware that the ball is weighted, one will bowl differently. When beginning bowlers use weighted balls they usually attribute the curve to themselves. Similarly, to fail to recognize that we have a bias increases the likelihood of our seeing other beliefs and points of view as “defective”, rather than seeing the partiality in our own perspective. To be aware of our bias allows us to “bowl with a biased ball”, as it were, to appreciate other points of view and learn how they structure the world.

Few of us continually recognize that we see the world from some point of view. We often see our own picture of the world as the simple truth; not merely as the *best* of possible views, but as the *only* view. Those who agree with us and hold to their views strongly and unflinchingly we see as committed and

dedicated, not as opinionated and dogmatic. As a case in point, consider Oliver North and the Iran-Contra scandal. Many U.S. citizens did not review the issue in any depth, but saw North's patriotic confidence in his actions as sufficient justification of them. What North said agreed perfectly with their bias, namely, that what the United States does, and what is done in the name of patriotism, is the right thing to do, even if "questionable".

Often we do not even know exactly what we believe or why we believe it. Many things just seem true to us even if we can think of no reasons to support them. We often do not consider that there may be elements of truth in other beliefs. We need to learn, then, how to fairly and accurately assess beliefs, both our own and others'. To quote Israel Scheffler (1973), the knower "must typically earn the right to confidence in his belief by acquiring the capacity to make a reasonable case for the belief in question". This task of making a reasonable case is fatally hampered if we do not recognize how our point of view and beliefs influence our thinking.

◆ *Egocentricity: The Theory*

'Egocentricity' is the tendency to view everything in relation to one's self, viewing the world only from one's own perspective. Since we want to bolster our self-respect and protect our self-image, we often make ourselves the standard by which we judge others. Here is a familiar example. If a driver carelessly pulls in front of me, cutting me off, I see this person as a reckless driver, and I will probably be irritated or even angry. However, if I do the same, I tend to think of myself not as "cutting another person off" but only as "pulling in close". I generally have an excuse for myself. I will not see myself, as I would see another, as careless or stupid.

This egocentric tendency manifests itself in a variety of ways. We tend to think that the beliefs and values we hold are better than the beliefs and values of others. ("My beliefs are accurate and true; *you* are deceived.") We also tend to believe that our attitudes are more appropriate than another's ("I have good reason to be angry; *you* just have a bad temper."), and that our actions are more reasonable and moral than the actions of another ("I plan; *you* plot."). And it is psychologically understandable that we would think this way, for if we thought that another's beliefs, attitudes, or actions were in some way better than our own, we would be faced with a problem: Why do I believe or act as I do?

This tendency toward egocentric thinking provides the basis for the creation of a dichotomous view of the world and the people in it: "We are number one!" To be unaware of this tendency allows us to propagate and preserve this illusion. We then dichotomize: We are good, they are bad or evil. Our friends are seen by us as good, but not as good as we are. Our view of our enemies, however, is typically antagonistic and hostile. Of course, we are not denying that sometimes we have solid evidence and good reasons to believe that one

country is better than another in some specific way. For example, we may have statistics to demonstrate that infant mortality is lower in one country than another, or that one commits fewer human rights violations. The point is that given our eagerness to believe we are best, our minds often use evidence only after the fact, to justify what we are committed to believing in advance.

◆ *Sociocentricity and National Bias: The Theory*

A perfect parallel exists between egocentricity and sociocentricity: the “I” of the individual becomes the “We” of the group, since judgments are made from the perspective of the group rather than the individual. Since sociocentricity is a direct extension of egocentricity, the reader will notice here a repetition of those tendencies of egocentricity. The same basic principles apply to the one as to the other, and very little needs to be changed. We see the beliefs, values, attitudes, and actions of our group as better than those of other groups. The groups or countries that we consider friends we view positively, while groups and countries we think of as unfriendly, as rivals, or as enemies, we view negatively. Consider this thought from Jerome Frank (1982):

Behind the arms race and wars lies a trait humans share with all social animals: fear and distrust of members of groups other than their own. When two human groups compete for the same goal, this distrust rapidly escalates into the mutual “image of the enemy”.

Taking the notion of group or sociocentric bias we can apply these tendencies to a much larger group, our nation. There is, again, a perfect parallel between egocentricity and national bias (sociocentrism). We easily extend our “group think” from that of local groups to the nation as a whole. Consider the point as made by Jerome Frank (1982), focusing on how national bias influences our choice of words:

Enemy-images mirror each other — that is, each side attributes the same virtues to itself and the same vices to the enemy. “We” are trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable, and humanitarian, “they” are treacherous, warlike, and cruel. In surveys of Americans conducted in 1942, the first five adjectives chosen to characterize both Germans and Japanese (enemies) included warlike, treacherous, and cruel, none of which appeared among the first five describing the Russians (allies); in 1966 all three had disappeared from American characterizations of the Germans and Japanese (allies), but now the Russians (no longer allies, but more rivals than enemies) were warlike and treacherous. In 1966 the Mainland Chinese, predictably, were seen as warlike, treacherous, and sly. After President Nixon’s visit to China, these adjectives disappeared from our characterizations of the Chinese, whom we now see as hardworking, intelligent, artistic, progressive, and practical.

The tendency to think egocentrically and sociocentrically, then, influences the judgments we form regarding “us” and “them”, as we tend to assess the people and groups we like by different standards than those we dislike. Some predictable results follow:

- A. Since we are more eager to praise those people and groups we like, we tend to notice the good things about ourselves more than we do the good things about them. We often fail to see in those people and groups we dislike the positive qualities we clearly see and readily praise in ourselves. In short, we tend to play down or ignore the good things about those we dislike, as we play up or emphasize the good things about us and those we like.
- B. Since we are more eager to criticize those people and groups we dislike, we often fail to see in ourselves the negative qualities we see and readily criticize in those we dislike. In short, we tend to play up or emphasize negative qualities of those we dislike, while we tend to play down or ignore the negative qualities in ourselves.
- C. Since we tend to have more positive images of ourselves and the people and groups we like, we often project into people and groups we like more noble intentions and purer motives.

It may be helpful to illustrate how these tendencies actually become articulated in the media. If we or those we like engage in some activity of a questionable or negative nature, we try to justify the activity by an appeal to motive or intent. ("We meant well.") A clear example from the *San Francisco Chronicle* (1988) illustrates this:

For the United States the war in Vietnam was humbling, draining public hubris and setting the precedent for a deficit economy. Vietnam, with Soviet support, taught America that purity of motive does not always prevail.

While most people now consider Vietnam a tragic mistake, many believe that our motives were "pure". On the other hand, if those we dislike engage in some apparently commendable action, we tend to question their motives, often dismissing the activity as scheming or treacherous. Consider, for example, how we view the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. For another example, consider a recent edition of "Global Affairs" (1988); in it an almost direct analogy is drawn between the Hitler of 1938 Germany and the Gorbachev of 1988 USSR:

Despite the half century anniversary of the fatal consequences deriving from the acceptance by the Western Allies of Adolph Hitler's promises ... that he had no further political ambitions in Europe, the vision of the West is once again obscured by a smiling, apparently reasonable, and seemingly sincere authoritarian leader.

To be cautious in accepting Gorbachev's proposals is one thing, to dismiss it at the outset as Hitlerian scheming is quite another. It is easy to see the importance of an awareness of these tendencies. If unrecognized and unchecked, bias easily and quickly becomes prejudice. Only when we become sensitized to how we habitually sanitize our own behavior and negatively portray that of our "enemies", can we begin to evaluate beliefs and actions more fairly and reasonably. Only then can we see the truth in the views of others and the falsehood in our own. Only then can we see the parallels in all human behavior, the general consistency in most group rationalizations and judgments. Only then can we say that we have "earned the right to confidence in our beliefs".

◆ *Language: The Importance of Precision*

Many words have evaluative connotations, and when used voice our approval or censure of the subject under discussion. Rarely, however, are related words perfectly synonymous, for all words have nuances not duplicated by other words. Consider the following list of related words:

<i>Column A:</i>	<i>Column B:</i>
self-assured	arrogant
dedicated	obstinate
quiet	dull
sympathetic	indulgent
educated	indoctrinated
informed	propagandized
defenders	attackers
clever	sneaky
planners	plotters

The words in column A are related to the corresponding words in column B, but have different meanings and implications, and hence require different evidence to justify them. We use the words in column A when we approve of the subject under discussion; we use the words in column B when we disapprove. In describing ourselves or our friends we tend to use the words in column A, but in describing those we dislike, we tend to use the words in column B. “We are dedicated, they are fanatic.” “We intervene to aid other countries, but they invade.” “We protect our interests, but they commit acts of aggression.” “We support freedom fighters, they support terrorists.”

Notice that each of the examples above could have been described as an example of “sloppy” language or of misuse of terms. This is an important recognition: all biased uses of language are to that extent *incorrect* uses of language. We often use language imprecisely, allowing for the strengthening of our images of ourselves and them. To help students detect bias in language use, we must teach them how to identify misuses of words. To notice their biased language, students must learn that each word has a specific range of meaning somewhat different from every other word choice. Students must become sensitized into their use of language, they must control it as reflective, rational agents.

◆ *United States’ National Bias*

One must first become aware of our biases before one can look for and recognize instances of it. We must, therefore, have a clear idea what mainstream United States viewpoints are, for they form the basis for our biases.

How do citizens of the U.S. see themselves and the world? Citizens of the U.S. see themselves as citizens of the greatest country in the world. They see themselves as supporting neither the extreme right or left, but as being in the well-balanced middle. They see their country as peace-loving, just,

democratic and free, honest in international dealings, and abhorring terrorism. They see the United States as fundamentally right, at least on all important issues, even if the world disagrees.

It is easy to see how these attitudes influence the way we view our country and our country's actions. If we are peace-loving, it is inconceivable that we would be the aggressor in any conflict. If we intervene in the affairs of another country, it is therefore only to help them toward a more democratic government. We are there to help, even if they do not appreciate our help at the time. We are criticized only because we are misunderstood, or lied about. Even if the world is against our actions or decisions (for example, in denying Arafat a visa or invading Panama) it is because they do not understand or are unfairly set against us. With these as examples, we can move onto some classroom assignments and actual student work.

◆ *Classroom Assignments*

The long assignment given below is probably too much to give students without some prior in-class activities designed to foster their practical insight into national bias. You may decide to present these points to students in smaller chunks, passing them out only after group discussion. Here are some examples of what could be done initially:

1. Bring samples of articles displaying national bias into class. Read each aloud and ask the class to comment on how, if at all, the article reflects national bias.

2. Ask students to imagine how an article might have been written in a Soviet newspaper. Have students work in groups to rewrite it accordingly. How would the wording be different? What about the size of the article or its placement in the paper? Articles could even be selected from a Soviet paper, such as *Pravda*, without telling students its source. Most would probably immediately recognize its bias. They could then be asked *why and how* it is biased. After being told the article's source, students could be asked to suggest how it would have been written differently had it appeared in our press. Students will thus have a clear example of how much easier it is to spot another's bias than one's own.

3. Break the class into small groups of two or three students. Students could be asked to explain to the rest of the group what it means to talk about a national bias. As one student is explaining, the others could ask questions. Those asking the questions could be encouraged to argue the case for the objectivity of national news reporting. Roles could then be reversed.

4. Have students to bring newspapers to class and seek out examples of bias. They could work on this in groups. As articles are suggested by members of the group, the others could question why it was selected.

POSSIBLE STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

1. Be cautious as you attempt to identify instances of national bias. Ask yourself: "To what extent is the article written with a sociocentric bias, slanting the news to reinforce a U.S. point of view?" Ignore other biases. Remember, you are not identifying regional, professional, religious, or any other bias but national.

2. Keep in mind that before you can identify our national bias in news stories, you must have a clear picture of how "Americans", as against, say, Soviets, see ourselves and the world. It is helpful to have a clear picture of how the Soviets see the world (as a point of contrast). A good way to test yourself is to take a story and imagine how that story might be written for *Isvestia* or *Pravda*.

2A. Be certain you are looking for the mainstream American point of view. Do not confuse this with your own point of view, or with that of some other group within the U.S. In any country there will always be some who dissent from the mainstream view, but this is not what we want.

3. Be sure you know what is meant by 'national bias'. Keep in mind that some of our biases may be shared by other countries. For example, the idea that our country is peaceful is part of our national bias, but many other countries may also see themselves as peaceful. Some biases are unique to the U.S., for example, belief in the superiority of the two-party system. Both the unique biases and the shared biases are part of our country's mainstream bias. Do not look only for biases peculiar to the U.S.

4. Make specific predictions about how some given story about "us" or "them" will be written before you actually read the story. Do this in order to look for specific bias. See the examples below, and try to think of others yourself.

4A. Remember, most countries like to see themselves as peaceful and unaggressive. We are no exception. If this is so, how might our newspapers describe the deployment and use of U.S. troops in another country? As an invasion? As an act of aggression? How would you predict our newspapers would describe the deployment and use of Soviet troops in another country? Are they there by the invitation of that country's legitimate government? Then reverse the positions. How are Soviet newspapers likely to describe the deployment and use of our troops in another country?

4B. Try to predict how the Soviets might write about, say, Israel. What words do you think they might choose to describe some of Israel's recent activities? The following article appeared on the front page of *Pravda*, April 2, 1988:

Occupied Territories: Despite the *draconian repressive* measures of the occupational authorities, Palestinians took to the streets in the past 24 hours to express protest against the *terror unleashed on them by the aggressors*. A

UN spokesman stated that on Wednesday, Land Day, the Israeli *aggressors* killed eight people and wounded 250 in carrying out *punitive actions* against the Palestinians.

Notice the italicized words. What do they tell you about a mainstream Soviet viewpoint? How would you predict the Soviets might write about the Palestinians? How might *we* describe some of their actions?

5. Remember to pay attention to story placement. Is it on the front page, inside the paper? If a story does not support the mainstream U.S. point of view, where would we expect to find it? Will it be given much space or little space? Other than trivial “fillers” used by the press to fill space, what sorts of articles can we predict will be buried within the paper?

6. Look for key information within the article. What occurs at the beginning of the article? What at the end? For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* once ran a front page story reporting on some Palestinian “terrorist” attacks on Israeli villages. At the end of the last paragraph, which was continued on the back page, it briefly mentioned that the Palestinians said they had done this in response to Israeli “terrorist” attacks made against them. Its placement toward the end suggests to those few who had read this far that the Palestinian allegations of Israeli terrorist attacks on Palestinians were insignificant, or even wrong.

7. What is the headline of the story? Imagine other possible headlines.

8. Pay attention to word choice, especially note charged words. Who gets the positive words? Who gets the negative words?

9. Remember the general logic of nationally biased communications:

A. They play up what is positive about us and our allies or friends.

B. They play down what is negative about us and our allies or friends.

C. They play up what is negative about our enemies, their allies and friends.

D. They play down what is positive about our enemies, their allies and friends.

10. Finally, note exceptions to this rule: When might you expect to see our news play up some positive news about “them”? If the Soviet Union is making some changes that we consider positive, for example, toward free enterprise, this may become front page news. (“They finally have to admit that free enterprise is the best economic system.”) Conversely, when might you expect to see our news play up some negative news about this country? What negative news about this country can be criticized by the media, and what cannot?

11. Here is a way to try out your skills. Go through the newspaper page by page, identifying stories, editorials, advertisements, etc., that may be biased. Examine them one by one to determine whether they are biased, and if they are, whether you need to make a number of points about them, or just one. If you are making just one point, you may be able to group it with others. For example, you might group together a set of articles which are “buried” (that is, where negative information about “us” or positive information about “them” is being played down by placement).

12. When you do have a number of points to make, underline passages in the article and number them. Write your points clearly and give your reasons for them. Do this on a separate attached page, or at least make sure the reader can understand what you are saying.

13. When you have all your evidence assembled, write an introduction that explains to the reader what you have done and why. Write it so as to help the reader figure out exactly what you are presenting. Assume that the reader has never heard of national bias in the news.

◆ *Examples of Student Work*

As would be expected, student work will demonstrate a wide range of understanding, from superficial and impressionistic, to deep and insightful. What follows are examples of actual student work on the identification of national bias. Some of the examples betray a superficial understanding, others deep and insightful understanding. In reading both good and bad examples of work, the teacher will see the kinds of misunderstanding to anticipate, as well as the kind of work to have as a goal.

EXAMPLES OF WEAK WORK

Some students have trouble going beyond an impressionistic understanding of national bias. In the examples that follow, the students' commentaries reflect basic misunderstandings. One tendency is to go to extremes, as in the following: "If bias tends to influence us to look at the bad things about them and the good things about us, then *any* bad news about them is biased and *any* good news about us is biased."

This first example illustrates how some students see any bad news as biased. Of course, the fact that it contains negative news is not enough to suggest bias. The article quite fairly points out that the United States also has a serious drug and AIDS problem which the student, eager to see bias, failed to acknowledge.

Quote From Article (Source not cited) The headline reads: "Heroin problem in Italy growing at alarming rate" Quotes from the article: "Overdose deaths skyrocket ... spread of AIDS among addicts ... two-thirds of those with AIDS are intravenous drug users Italians have cause for worry."

Student Commentary "This article is plainly biased. The huge heading of Italy's drug problem says it all. Throughout the article the press is stating fact for fact how terrible Italy's drug and AIDS problem is."

This second article shows how positive news about the U.S. is seen by the student as being biased. The article, however, was not obviously biased.

Quote From Article (Source not cited) Headline: "Even War-Torn Nations Aid Armenia, Rare Soviet Acceptance of Help." First paragraph: "From Los Angeles and New York, from Argentina and Cuba, from Britain, Scandinavia, Israel and Japan, people around the world sent food, medical supplies, and rescue equipment to victims of the earthquake in Soviet Armenia."

Student Commentary. “This front page article, with a huge heading, flashes “good deed” in front of the American readers eyes. Of course, it is a good thing for war-torn nations to aid Armenia, but as you read on in the article you notice that it is making the U.S. first on the list of contributors.”

This next example shows a student making unsupported allegations. The student was probably having difficulty in finding articles with bias, and so had to “make” one with a bias. This commentary probably gives us more insight into the student’s own bias than into any actual bias the article may contain.

Quote From Article (Source not cited.) The headline reads: “Abortion most cited issue”. The article reads: “Despite all the T.V. ads and speeches on prison furloughs and the Pledge of Allegiance, few voters cited these as key issues. The No. 1 issue: abortion, cited by nearly a third of voters interviewed by ABC News. And those who cited abortion went for Bush. The issues that dominated the campaigns were cited less frequently, about 10 percent each on furloughs and the Pledge. One in four voters mentioned the drug problem and split nearly evenly between the candidates.”

Student Commentary “The paper did not want the public to know that the issues the two candidates used against each other so viciously were not the issues that the people wanted to hear the answers to. The issue of abortion was not a commercial for Bush or Dukakis, but why is it the No. 1 danced around issue? Because the conservatives avoid the issue until the election is over in order to steal some of the votes of the liberals, then put their beliefs and views into action once elected.”

EXAMPLES OF STRONG WORK

The following excerpts illustrate work in which students demonstrate a basic understanding of bias in general, and national bias in particular. The student commentary is not perfect, and should not be taken by the reader as exemplary work. It serves only to illustrate a student’s first steps toward understanding and identifying national bias.

The following article is a fairly good example of a buried story, one placed in the background either because it puts us in a negative light or one of our enemies in a somewhat positive light.

Quote From Article (*Los Angeles Times*, 11-14-88 p. 12) Headline: “Grim Picture of Reagan’s Legacy to U.S. Defenses” First paragraph: “Today’s high technology weapons are so expensive that President Bush will not have enough money to operate them and still pay for all the new ones that President Reagan has ordered but not paid for, according to military budget analysts.”

Student Commentary “This story is buried because it contradicts the popular assumption that the U.S. defense industry has been strengthened through heavy financial support by the Reagan administration Because it identifies fallacies in administration and defense department assumptions, and verifies the assessment of failure from normally supportive sources, this information has been buried. Though it has national significance, it runs counter to the belief of many Americans that national defense has been strengthened by the Reagan administration.”

This next article illustrates how word choice influences our perception of the situation. In this example, our position is made to look better, and the “enemy” made to look worse.

Quote From Article (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 12-01-88 p. A25) Headline: “Envoy to U.N. Downplays Flap Over Arafat.” The first paragraph reads: “U.N. Ambassador Vernon Walters told a San Francisco audience yesterday that the Reagan administration is right in denying an entry visa to PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, and that the whole controversy will blow over in a couple of weeks.”

Student Commentary “This headline’s use of the word ‘flap’ implies that the controversy surrounding the U.S. denial of Arafat’s visa to speak before the U.N. is trivial. Other word choices could have been ‘outrage’ or ‘protest’.... Asserting that the U.S. ‘never signed an agreement allowing criminals into the country’ sidesteps the fact that the U.S. signed an agreement not to impede access to the U.N. forum for any representative of an issue before that body Shunting attention to other issues, also biased, he attacked the Vietnamese government with emotive words, characterizing it as an ‘abominable, tyrannical regime’. He follows with the assertion that the U.S. ‘forced’ the Soviets to realize their ‘failure’ as an imperialistic nation. Neither of these two last issues have any bearing on the story, but rather try to shore up a very weak position by diverting attention.”

◆ *From National Bias to Bias Detection in General*

Once we and our students understand how to identify national bias, we should be well on the way to recognizing how to identify other forms of bias: personal, professional, religious, regional, etc. In each case we need to recognize that we do have a point of view we favor and that this commitment to one way of seeing things affects the way we represent and experience particular events.

For example, consider a professional bias — that of the American Medical Association. To recognize that doctors who belong to the AMA have a bias is to realize that they have a particular way of viewing issues which affect the medical profession, a view which supports their interests regardless of the evidence. Identifying these biases will help us predict the stance taken by the AMA on major issues. For example, the approach of the AMA to health care is generally pharmacological and surgical. We would expect, then, that they would be opposed to such things as home birth, holistic medicine and chiropractics. Furthermore, given their financial interests, we can be confident that the official position of the AMA on socialized medicine will be negative, unless at some later date it becomes possible to make more money under a national health act than under a private system.

To sum up, people typically presuppose their points of view to be the truth. This uncritical closedmindedness perpetuates prejudice. Individuals are not inclined to examine and question their own biases, unless they develop criti-

cal insight into them. Neither are they inclined to consider whether another's point of view is more accurate or insightful than their own. We must help students discover that no single point of view contains all the truth, that no single perspective is without limitations and weaknesses, that confusing one's own point of view with reality inevitably produces biases and prejudices. These recognitions require extensive practice. Only when students grasp this explicitly, and systematically begin to critically assess their own biases can they begin to correct and improve how they look at the world. It is our responsibility as teachers to design activities and assignments that directly facilitate this end.

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