

## **Media Analysis Guidelines**

*(Adapted, with thanks, from Fairness in Accuracy and Reporting)*

### **HOW TO DETECT BIAS IN NEWS MEDIA**

Media have tremendous power in setting cultural guidelines and in shaping political discourse. It is essential that news media —along with other institutions— are challenged to be fair and accurate. The first step in challenging biased news coverage is documenting bias. Here are some steps to go through when analyzing newspaper, TV and radio news.

#### **1. SOURCES**

Whose voices are heard in the mainstream media? Be aware of the political perspectives of the sources used. How many are women, people of marginalized communities or activists? This is a great way to quantitatively analyze news, both over periods of time to demonstrate trends and within individual stories or programs. You will often find that sources skew to one side or leave out important perspectives. For example, does a foreign correspondent repeatedly quote a source who is well known in the country, but does not necessarily represent popular opinion? To portray issues fairly and accurately, media must broaden their spectrum of sources. Otherwise, they serve merely as megaphones for those in power.

*Action:* Count the number of business and government sources versus the number of community and public interest voices. Count the number of elite voices versus the number of voices of disenfranchised people, or their advocates. Demand that the media expand their rolodexes; better yet, give them lists of progressive and public interest experts in the community.

#### **2. STEREOTYPES**

Does coverage of indigenous communities portray helpless people, despite the great influence some indigenous social movements have on their governments? Are Latin American adversaries to the U.S. government portrayed as enemies of the American people and corrupt dictators, despite having been elected to power democratically? Are immigrants depicted as criminals, poor or a burden despite the fact that a majority are law-abiding and make strong contributions to the U.S. economy and society?

*Action:* Educate journalists about misconception involved in stereotypes, and demand that they represent stereotyped groups fairly and accurately.

#### **3. LOADED LANGUAGE**

Language frames public opinion and elicits certain reaction. By using phrases like “cult of celebrity” and “firebrand socialist leader” the media demonizes foreign leaders, often those with poor or no diplomatic relations with the United States.

Action: Demonstrate how the language chosen gives people an inaccurate impression of the issue, program or community described.

#### **4. LACK OF CONTEXT**

When news reports leave out certain important details the public can be left with a skewed understanding of what is going on. Coverage of foreign animosity towards the U.S. government often fails to explain the history of U.S. military interventions abroad that have taken down democratically elected leaders and installed brutal dictatorships.

*Action:* Provide the context. Communicate to the journalist, or write a letter to the editor that includes the relevant information.

#### **5. DOUBLE STANDARD**

Do media hold some people to one standard while using a different standard for other groups? Are some people's claims scrutinized more closely than others? News reports presented Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' proposal to end term limits as a dictatorial power-grab, but failed to mention that many other countries, France for example, do not have term limits.

*Action:* Expose the double standard by citing similar stories that were covered differently. Count the number of newspaper articles or television segments devoted to one story versus the number devoted to a similar story to show the disparity.

#### **6. PROMINENCE**

Where and how often stories appear greatly affects their impact on public opinion. Which subjects make the front page or the top of the newscast? Which subjects get buried, or drop off the media radar after one report? Some subjects, like exploitation and pollution by U.S. multinationals, rarely make the front page. Stories that make U.S. officials or allies look bad also tend to get buried — like the involvement of Luis Posada Carriles, a former CIA operative, in a series of 1997 bombings of Cuban tourism destinations, and the U.S. government's decline to extradite him to Venezuela to face charges for a 1973 mid-air explosion of a commercial airliner.

*Action:* Let the media know how important you feel an issue is and demand that important stories get prominent coverage. When you see a critical story on page A29, or not covered at all, call the paper and object.

#### **7. FALSE BALANCE:**

In an effort to appear "even-handed," media sometimes distorts facts or give undue weight to certain claims. Bolivian forces opposed to the work of the Constitutional Assembly, for example, are often given equal footing with those who support rewriting the constitution, one of the major issue on which President Evo Morales campaigned and won, with 54 % of the popular vote.

*Action:* Document the distortions, and tell the media that "balance" isn't the same as "objectivity."