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Information Bias

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Information Bias

By Sarah Zion

Summary

In this day and age with everything so readily available, it is easy to find information about an event in one place. However, that one place may not have the best information, or it may be biased towards one political party. Therefore, to learn more about something and have the correct facts, individuals should watch where they get the information from. To be a well-informed person, one should read from a variety of sources, as long as they are reputable and have good evidence. This claim is going to be supported with articles about the gun control debate after the Parkland shooting and examples of what makes a source reputable like (1) information about the authors, (2) interviews from a variety of people, (3) actual experts, and (4) fair evidence.



I tried becoming a well-informed reader of the media by looking at the Parkland shooting in Florida. I chose four articles from one political perspective, that either brought facts, opinion, or a combination of both about gun control after the most recent school shooting. From these articles, I learned that on February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz went into Parkland High School and shot and killed 17 people and injured 16 more. The shooting lasted a total of six minutes and the shooter was able to get away at first by blending in with fleeing students. He was arrested not too long after, and he confessed. After the shooting, many of the survivors called for more gun control and started the hashtag #never-again. Their strong call for gun control has sparked debate around the nation as many are claiming different reasons for why school shootings happen.

The articles themselves came from four different areas on a media bias chart, created by

a lawyer from the website <http://www.allgeneralizationsarefalse.com/>. The chart was created to help readers find trustworthy sources and which sources to stay away from. The chart showed popular news outlets that showed a neutral political bias, skewed liberal/conservative, hyper-partisan liberal/conservative, and most extreme liberal/conservative. Besides grouping them by political bias, they were grouped together in rectangles based on how they interpret the news. The green rectangle was for actual news, yellow for a fair interpretation of the news, orange for an unfair representation of the news, and red for nonsense damaging to the public. Before choosing the articles, I chose one political perspective, conservative. From there I chose one article from each of the rectangles and from each political perspective. The most neutral, or green,

article was from the Wall Street Journal, and was titled, “How the Florida Shooting Turned into a Gun-Control Movement.” The main aim of this article was to inform the public about the event and the aftermath, and not to show opinion or to persuade. The slightly skewed conservative, or yellow, article was from The Washington Times, and was titled, “Gun-industry insiders: Dick’s, Walmart moves open sales of popular AR-15 to other stores.” The main aim of this article was to inform but also slightly persuade, by using the word “popular” and only giving interviews from one side of the political spectrum. The slightly more skewed conservative, or orange, article was from The Federalist and was titled, “Is the Second Amendment Worth Dying For?” The main aim of this article was to give an opinion and get people thinking. The hyper-partisan conservative, or red, article was from Fox News and was titled, “Fixing ‘broken boys’- not stripping gun rights- would stop mass shootings, experts say.” The main aim of this article was to influence to join their side and to bash the other’s argument with their experts.

One element that makes a source reputable is having easy access to information about the authors and people that helped write it. Sometimes, you can find it easily with one Google search, but sometimes it’s harder. Good, reliable sources should have that information, so you can know who is writing the article. You could see their previous work and compare it to what you are reading, and you can get an insight into where they get their bias from. For example, the article from The Federalist had information about the author, John Daniel Davidson, showing where he was from, previous jobs, and other articles he has written. If you can find information about the author, it helps make the piece more reliable and gives an insight to how it was

written the way it was.

Unreliable and bad sources give little to no information about the author. For example, the author of The Washington Times article had almost no information. There was nothing on the article itself or on the website. When I looked him up, the only information it showed was his LinkedIn account, which I couldn’t look at without getting an account myself. The article becomes unreliable, because I don’t know where the author is getting the bias from or what they have previously done. If I had just read this article and no others about this topic, I wouldn’t really learn anything useful. Only by looking at others with more information about authors was I able to understand almost everything about the topic.

Another element that makes a source reputable is having interviews from a variety of people with different political beliefs. If an article doesn’t include this variety of interviews, then, the readers would only see what one side believes, and would be influenced to start picking that side of the argument. For example, the article from The Washington Times only showed interviews from those that disagreed with the ban. There was one small sentence about why it is good from a local movement for gun safety. “We encourage other retailers to follow its lead...” (“Gun-Industry Insiders...” 2018). The local leader wants people to accept what Dick’s and Walmart are doing by banning the sale, but it doesn’t hold as much esteem as the other interviews because he is from a small, local movement and not a national company. This is followed by three interviews by those who don’t like the ban and is introduced in more detail. The quotes



are introduced by a paragraph and then the quote by itself. The one opposing interview was thrown onto the end of a paragraph and wasn't introduced. This persuades the audience to pay more attention to the interviews opposing the ban. That way they start to focus on how bad the ban is, and not what good it may or may not do. This makes a source unreliable because it's not allowing the reader to make up their own mind and, in a way, subtly pushing them to believe in what the author believes. If I had only read this article, and none of the others, I wouldn't have realized the good side of the ban and not just how it won't make a difference.

Another element that makes a source reputable, is having actual experts that relate to the topic. This may seem obvious, but some news outlets can only find random experts that may sometimes not pertain to the topic, just because they have the same beliefs. For example, in the article from Fox News it says right in the title that they have experts. Their experts turn out to be a psychologist at the University of Toronto and a computer science professor at Yale University. The psychologist is understandable because the main argument they are trying to make is that we need to fix mental health issues. However, they don't have him talk about the mind, they ask him what he would do about a fact they believe. "He suggests media ban the names of such killers and limit the coverage of them to help stem the contagion" ("Fixing 'broken boys'" 2018). Before asking the psychologist about this idea, they express their own belief in this opinion and only really added his name in front of their own words. They also have the psychologist talk about gender. The computer science professor is talking about how the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s dumbed down American schools. "Gelernter is blunt about his belief that the '60s revolution replaced rigorous scholarship in the American academy with dumbed-down curricula — hurting even Ivy League students" (Fixing 'broken boys'" 2018). Similar thing with the psychologist, they

express their own belief before this and put his name before their own opinion. This article is less reputable and not that good, because their experts are either not relevant to the argument or are not talking about anything relevant to the argument in the title.

The Wall Street Journal, on the other hand, had interviews from experts that study social media and youth political participation. "One of their greatest sources of power is their facility with social media," said Elizabeth Matto, a professor at Rutgers University who studies youth political participation"; "Regina Lawrence, a University of Oregon professor who studies media and politics. 'I don't know if we've ever seen anything like that before'" ("How the Florida School Shooting..." 2018). This article not only has experts that are relevant to the main idea of the article, they have the experts talk about what they are experts in. If you wanted to become a well-informed person, you couldn't do it by just reading the Fox News article. You would only get a very biased viewpoint that isn't backed up by actual evidence.

The last element that makes a source reputable is fair evidence. Using the article from Fox News again, they didn't have a lot of actual evidence that would show a fair argument. They had a lot of he said/she said and generalizations, and not actual quotes and evidence. "Some believe the roots of the mass-shooting phenomenon may lie in the 1960s Cultural Revolution"; "Many have blamed lax gun control laws and an inadequate mental health support system for why there is an uptick in mass shootings" ("Fixing 'broken boys'" 2018). The generalizations don't have any evidence backing them up and are added in to show the author's opinions and beliefs. *The Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, had graphs and charts showing data

from the Pew Research Center. The Pew Research Center only publishes data, like graphs and surveys. The graphs and data allow the reader to make up their own mind and inform them without making the decision for them. If I had only read the Fox News article, I wouldn't know the whole story about the debate surrounding gun control. I would only have their information and what they think is right, and not how the debate started and why it is staying around.

The difference between reading multiple sources and being a well-informed person, is how credible and reliable the sources are. If they aren't reliable, then they are less likely to inform you, and might try to persuade you. The persuasion can be useful, but generally readers should be given the facts and allowed to make their own decision. Without it, they are being misinformed and pulled into the biases of the author or news source. To be a credible source, an article should have information about the authors so you can see where the bias comes from, interviews from multiple people so you aren't being misled, experts that are relevant to what they are trying to prove and not just people that agree with what the news source believes, and fair evidence so that the readers can get the whole story and make their own decision. 

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