Analyzing Cognitive Bias in Language: A Linguistic Perspective on Fox News and CNN

Jay Pang

Abstract:

This study examines cognitive bias in news language by analyzing the reporting styles of Fox News and CNN, particularly in their coverage of the United States Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action. Despite the journalistic principle of objectivity, both news outlets demonstrate media bias through various linguistic and rhetorical techniques. By comparing articles from these two networks, this study identifies four key areas of bias: title framing, selective opinions, statistical representation, and quotation choices. The study highlights how Fox News tends to employ more aggressive language targeting Democrats, whereas CNN presents viewpoints that align with its left-leaning audience while maintaining a more professional tone. Furthermore, the study discusses instances where both outlets have produced relatively unbiased reports, demonstrating that neutrality in media is achievable. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of critical media literacy in discerning bias and forming well-informed opinions.

Keywords: Media bias, cognitive bias, linguistic analysis, Fox News, CNN, affirmative action, political polarization, journalism, news framing, statistical manipulation.

The principle of news reporting is commonly regarded as being updated, objective, and unbiased. Yet, in the current society, the biased viewpoints of news reports appear everywhere. Following the announcement of the United States Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action, for example, both Fox News and CNN began posting articles detailing the event. However, viewers of the two news outlets are not receiving the same information. Both Fox News and CNN have one thing in common, they are diverging further and further into their own media biases. "After Trump came into office, [Fox News and CNN] responded to events in the news by leaning away from each other and more strongly toward their respective ideologies," says Yphtach Lelkes from the University of Pennsylvania (Reissman, 2022). It is well known amongst Americans that Fox News is generally a right-leaning news channel with CNN leaning toward the left; both sites often produce articles with media bias that often support their narratives or attack

opposing ones. But just how significant is this bias? And how can a reader identify whether the information they are given is partial or not? Through comparing the works of Fox News and CNN, a few significant factors in media bias become apparent.

One major source of bias can be found by means of title setting. For example, following the announcement of the Supreme Court ruling, Fox News published "Supreme Court affirmative action decision reveals Democrat Hypocrisy" by Liz Peek. The use of the term "Hypocrisy," a negative and confrontational word, to indicate that the Democrats are the opponent. CNN published its own article, "The gutting of affirmative action is a 'clear and present danger to equal education', critics say" by Nicquel Ellis, which presents a more neutral tone as it is describing the opinions of others. Article titles are important in that they capture the attention of viewers, and news outlets such as Fox News often use argumentative and exaggerated titles to hook their target viewers. The Fox News article mentioned above contains more bias as their goals are to bring down the opposing side, rather than to neutrally inform.

Another type of bias is shown through the use of certain opinions. Ben Carson(2023) in his Fox News article "Good Riddance to Affirmative Action" argues that "this state-sanctioned discrimination threw merit out the window, and instead made race a chief priority for admissions — all at the expense of White and Asian Americans because of the color of their skin" The statement about white and Asian Americans is an opinion because it is largely a generalisation of the two group and he later does not provide any evidence to support this claim. CNN's article "Opinion: The Supreme Court Rewrites American society once again" shows the works of several contributors, including Summer Tan, who explains her experiences with Affirmative Action. Tan(2023) states, "The Supreme Court has jeopardized the intellectual and academic diversity that my peers, professors and I value: The very same diversity that has made this nation great." Though it would seem that this article is unbiasedly showing the beliefs of others, it only includes the opinions of those who, like Tan, are against the Supreme Court ruling, thus showing a certain amount of bias regarding the issue. It makes sense that only those who are aligned with CNN's values would include their works and beliefs. Most news outlets attempt to keep informational coverage neutral in contrast to opinion articles, but since most journalists and reporters lean towards a particular political side, coverage of certain issues may still contain bias (Leonhardt, 2019).

A third means of bias is demonstrated through the means of statistic and data selection. Although information such as polls and studies themselves may be unbiased, the in-

clusion and exclusion of certain statistics can change the message that readers receive. In the Fox News article "New poll reveals where Americans stand on SCOTUS affirmative action, student loan, religious freedom decisions," Aubrie Spady(2023) explains a study that showed a majority percentage of Americans in favor of the Supreme Court ruling. Meanwhile, Nicquel Ellis(2023) in her CNN article explains statistics that show how the African American acceptance rate dropped in areas without Affirmative Action. The news outlets use data from two different areas of study to describe whether the Supreme Court decisions were good. By carefully picking their evidence, the news companies can fool their audiences into believing their claims.

Biases in media may be shown through the use of quotations from selected people. For example, Fox News's article "Left's favorite 'woke' initiative under serious threat after court's controversial ruling" quotes Will Hild, Gene Hamilton, and Clarence Thomas, all of whom are proponents of the Supreme Court ruling. The CNN article "Supreme Court guts affirmative action in college admissions" quotes conservatives such as Mike Pence, Donald Trump, and, once again, Clarence Thomas, as well as liberals, namely Sanya Sotomayer and Ketanji Brown Jackson. The article introduces the beliefs of those supporting the ruling and follows up with quotes from opponents, showing both sides of the situation. Though the CNN article has much more elaboration on those against the ruling, the reader gets a less biased view of the situation through its multiple perspectives compared to that of the Fox News article, which only reflects the opinions of those in support of the Supreme Court decision.

Interestingly, there are a few cases in which both outlets created news media that is mostly free of bias. Fox News posted an article and CNN a video about the effects of removing Affirmative Action in California before the Supreme Court ruling. The news coverages, "Supreme Court affirmative action case: How California Sees its Impact" from Fox News and "Video California's Experience after ending affirmative action in college admissions" from CNN include almost none of the implications mentioned above. In this case, both outlets acknowledged how the removal of Affirmative Action caused a significant drop in the acceptance rate of Black and Hispanic Americans, with statistics to support it. "At UCLA, freshman Black enrollment dropped from 7.1% in 1995 to 3.4% in 1998. Latino students dropped from 21% to 10% over the same period"(Jeunesse, 2023). "At places like Berkeley and UCLA, the Black student enrollment among incoming freshman dropped dramatically… by more than half at those schools"(2023). Both the article and video were concerned with explaining information and statistics rath-

er than opinions, and the information given is very similar, like two sides of the same coin. Unbiased news simply informs readers and viewers of the current events and the statistics behind them.

Through analyzing their coverage of the Supreme Court's ruling, it is clear that media bias exists in many forms throughout Fox News and CNN articles. Fox News generally includes more aggressive statements that are mostly directed against the Democrats, which may resonate well with their audiences. This way, Fox News can more easily persuade its viewers and readers into believing its arguments. CNN uses a more professional approach and rarely displays any direct arguments against the Republicans and instead reports on subjects that support the outlet's claims. Though CNN articles usually include statistics, data, and opinions from a wide range of perspectives, there are often biases in which CNN focuses extensively on one side of a narrative. Another bias that may appear in CNN and many other news outlets is bothsideism, where, to appear neutral, an article gives a less accurate statement about a particular issue to appeal to both sides (Leonhardt, 2023). This goes to show that bias, though appearing differently, exists throughout all media, and it is important for the reader or viewer to carefully consider the information that they are given.

References

Cable News Network. (2023a, June 30). *Opinion: The Supreme Court rewrites American Society once again*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/30/opinions/affirmative-action-roundup-students-parents-educators-opinions/index.html

Cable News Network. (2023, June 30). *Video: California's experience after ending affirmative action in college admissions*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2023/06/30/affirmative-action-california-universities-lah-pkg-ac360-vpx.cnn

Carson, Ben. (2023, July 3). *Good riddance to affirmative action*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/good-riddance-affirmative-action

Ellis, N. T. (2023, June 29). *The gutting of affirmative action is a "clear and present danger" to equal education, critics say*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/29/us/affirmative-action-impact-reaj/index.html

Herlihy, B. (2023, July 23). *Left's favorite "woke" initiative under serious threat after court's controversial ruling*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/dei-programs-could-crumble-under-weight-scotus-ruling-experts

Jeunesse, W. L. (2023, June 29). *Supreme Court Affirmative Action Case: How California sees its impact*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/supreme-court-affirmative-action-case-how-california-sees-its-impact

Leonhardt, D. (2019, January 31). *The six forms of media bias*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/opinion/media-bias-howard-schultz.html

Peek, L. (2023, July 5). *Supreme Court Affirmative Action Decision reveals Democrat hypocrisy*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/supreme-court-affirmative-action-decision-reveals-democrat-hypocrisy

Reissman, H. (2022, August 1). *Cable news networks have grown more polarized, study finds*. Anneberg School for Communication University of Pennsylvania. https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/cable-news-networks-have-grown-more-polarized-study-finds

Spady, A. (2023, July 3). *New poll reveals where Americans stand on Scotus affirmative action, student loan, Religious Freedom Decisions*. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/new-poll-where-americans-stand-scotus-affirmative-action-student-loan-religious-freedom-decisions

Vogue, A. de, Cole, D., & Sneed, T. (2023, June 29). *Supreme Court Guts Affirmative Action in college admissions | CNN politics*. CNN.