

The McMaster Journal of Communication  
Vol 12 No 2  
2020

Editorial:  
Avoiding unconscious bias  
in media consumption

Rita Chen, MCM

McMaster University

Copyright ©  
2020 by the author.

The McMaster Journal of Communication is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press  
(bepress).

<http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/mjc>

# Editorial: Avoiding unconscious bias in media consumption

Rita Chen, MCM<sup>1</sup>  
McMaster University

## Abstract

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, Canadians are consuming more media than ever. While this development has allowed us to become more informed about the important issues surrounding us, it does mean we need to give critical thought to how we are perusing different media forms and content. This editorial shares three methods that communicators can consider employing to help avoid unconscious bias when consuming media. The editorial also introduces the five articles being featured in this issue, before closing with acknowledgement and thanks to all the people who made this publication possible.

*Keywords:* media, unconscious bias, strategy, communication tactics

---

<sup>1</sup> Alum of the Master of Communications Management program at McMaster University. E-mail: rchen0801@gmail.com

# Editorial: Avoiding unconscious bias in media consumption

Rita Chen, MCM  
McMaster University

## Editorial

**F**rom major news broadcasts to citizen journalism, mass communication has never been so prevalent in our society. Following the appearance of COVID-19 in Canada this past March, studies by Comscore and Mindshare have shown increases in media consumption in the country (Segal, 2020; Rody, 2020). The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in May 2020, following the death of George Floyd, has added to the growth. In addition to dominating news coverage in early June, posts using the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, surpassed mentions about major brands on social media (Levine Beckham, 2020).

What is striking about the Black Lives Matter movement is that it has spurred long-delayed conversations about systemic racism and privilege in society and shone a renewed light on unconscious bias. This unconscious bias permeates how we approach or view a situation or person, as well as how we interpret and understand the media we encounter every day. As communicators operating in a world where news sources and other media are readily available, preventing unconscious bias from entering into how we consume and interact with media is of great importance.

Becoming aware of one's unconscious bias is easier said than done. Not only do communicators need to determine whether a particular piece of media is legitimate or fake, we also need to be able to identify and understand the creator's bias before we can begin to assess our own. While there are already a number of articles online from universities and organizations, such as Colorado State University (2020), the New Jersey Institute of Technology (2020), and the State Library of Victoria (2020), that discuss how we can decipher bias in another person's writing, I have found that there is very little literature available online that provides guidance on techniques for addressing our own biases when relating to and interacting with media.

Rather, one finds a large number of articles about how one can address unconscious bias during the recruitment and hiring process. A quick perusal of these articles suggests that some of these strategies could be re-purposed to counter our own unconscious bias when reading and interacting with media. Specifically, three tactics emerged:

The first is to recognize that one does not know what one does not know. To try to avoid unconscious bias in both our consumption of media and subsequent communications, communicators should attempt to develop a deeper understanding of ourselves. Blackman (2018) suggests the use of Project Implicit's bias testing tool to achieve this task. Administered by American academics studying implicit bias, the test helps people identify their biases by measuring the speed by which they respond to a series of questions related to race, gender, age, and other related topics.

The second is to be cognizant of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias, which is the tendency to search for things or people that reinforce our existing beliefs, is one of the reasons why fake news can be so compelling to some people (Thompson Rivers University Library, 2019). By only looking at media which supports our narrative, communicators risk being uninformed, inaccurate, and/or unable to meet stakeholder expectations. The acknowledgement of only one reading of media or the validation of only one media point-of-view may also affect our ability to do proper environmental scanning. To limit bias, we need to challenge our own assumptions, seek a range of media sources, and consider situations from multiple perspectives (Mind Tools Content Team, n.d.).

The third is to avoid affinity bias, which is the habit of flocking to things that we feel connected to in some way (Reiners, 2019). This requires us to actively consider the places from which we source our media. Are we consciously or unconsciously choosing only sources by authors or outlets whom we can relate to? If so, we might try exposing ourselves to media created by people or sources with whom we might not necessarily agree. Research has consistently shown that our prejudices are reduced when we take the time to learn about a particular group or topic. Consuming new information increases our knowledge and trains our brains into forming new associations (Blackman, 2018).

Unconscious bias is difficult to control or change because it is so ingrained, through time and repetition, within our lives that it no longer becomes a conscious choice. However, there is a growing body of laboratory-based research that suggests implicit biases can be managed with the right strategies (Blackman, 2018). We can become more effective communicators by making an examination of our unconscious biases a part of our communication practice. By acknowledging our gaps and being intentional in our media consumption, we can limit unconscious bias in our work and spheres of influence. This will allow us to be more empathetic in our communications and help our practice contribute to making our country more inclusive of diversity, which would be a contribution to the public good (Flynn et al., 2008).

### **Articles in this Issue**

Given how many forms of media there are now, it is only fitting that the articles in this issue reflect this diversity. Revolving around the theme of media communications, this issue features two articles that examine traditional and digital media, two articles that discuss the impacts of social media, and a review of Cathy O'Neil's book on the power of algorithms, *Weapons of Math Destruction*.

Claire Ryan, MCM, APR's case study examines the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI)'s use of agenda-setting in media relations leading up to the 2014 provincial election in Saint John, New Brunswick. Using a robust combination of quantitative and qualitative research, she details how the BCAPI was able to leverage the media and the relationships of its members to influence political candidates to include poverty education in their party platforms.

By studying the discourses of news outlets and their representation of the 2012-2013 Idle No More movement and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) groups, Michael Way's Undergraduate Student Research Award paper addresses a number of the same issues at the heart of the current Black Lives Matter movement. His study reveals several flaws in media representation of FNMI peoples, including uneven coverage, demonization of protests, and a narrow understanding of FNMI-related topics.

Antonio Rino's paper on the impact and amplification of negative social media on organizations serves as a reminder of the risks and opportunities associated with using the medium. By outlining strategies which an organization can employ to manage their social media presence in the face of negativity, his article provides guidelines and insights which can be applied by organizations and people alike.

With the dramatic increase in social media usage this past decade, it is safe to say that the medium has permeated many aspects of our lives. However, have the lines between professional and personal use become blurred? Josie Cassano Rizzuti, MCM, APR explores this question through her examination of social media usage by employees at a global manufacturer; and her findings are, without a doubt, relevant to us all.

Through her summary and review of O'Neil's book, Pauline Berry, MCM brings to light the frightening ability of algorithms to spark division, perpetuate biases and inequality, and influence perceptions. As communicators operating in an increasingly data-driven society, this book review serves to emphasize our responsibility in understanding and addressing the current systems of algorithm creation and interpretation.

### **Acknowledgements**

True to the adage, "it takes a village," this issue would not have been possible without the support of several people. Heartfelt thanks to our editorial board members, Josie Cassano Rizzuti, MCM, APR (member), Maxim Naylor (member), and Dr. Alex Sévigny, APR (faculty editor). This journal would not have been possible without the time they took out of their busy

schedules to double-blind peer review the articles in this issue. An additional note of appreciation goes to the Journal's faculty editor, Dr. Sévigny, for his guidance and encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Terence Flynn, APR, FCPRS and Kim Maunder for their assistance in promoting the Journal to a broader audience. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Gabriela Mircea, digital repository librarian at McMaster University, for helping me associate ORCID's and DOI numbers to the articles in the Journal.

Rita Chen, MCM  
Editor-in-Chief, McMaster Journal of Communication

## References

- Blackman, A. (2018, July 14). What is unconscious bias? +Top strategies to help avoid it. *Envato Tuts+*. <https://business.tutsplus.com/tutorials/what-is-unconscious-bias--cms-31455>
- Colorado State University. (2020, August 20). What are the author's biases? *Writing@CSU*. <https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=226&guideid=15>
- Flynn, T., Gregory, F., & Valin, J. (2008). *Who we are: CPRS public relations definition*. Canadian Public Relations Society. <https://www.cprs.ca/About/Who-We-Are>
- Kaisler, L.K., & O'Connor, D. (2020, March 20). How to evaluate information sources: Identify bias. *New Jersey Institute of Technology*. <https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=226&guideid=15>
- Levine Beckham, B. (2020, July 2). #BlackLivesMatter saw tremendous growth on social media. Now what? *Mashable*. <https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=226&guideid=15>
- Mind Tools Content Team. (n.d.). Avoiding psychological bias in decision making. *Mind Tools*. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/avoiding-psychological-bias.htm>
- Reiners, B. (2019, August 12). 12 unconscious bias examples and how to avoid them in the workplace. *Built In*. <https://builtin.com/diversity-inclusion/unconscious-bias-examples>
- Rody, B. (2020, March 27). How media consumption is shaping Canadians' mindsets. *Media in Canada*. <https://mediaincanada.com/2020/03/27/how-media-consumption-is-shaping-canadians-mindsets/>
- Segal, B. (2020, April 14). Understanding media consumption during the coronavirus pandemic in Canada. *Comscore*. <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/Understanding-Media-Consumption-During-the-Coronavirus-Pandemic-in-Canada>
- State Library of Victoria. (2020, August 20). Identify bias. *Ergo*. <http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/learn-skills/research-skills/select-resources/identify-bias>
- Thompson Rivers University Library. (2019, August 19). Fake news. *TRU Libraries*. <https://libguides.tru.ca/fakenews/characteristics>