Hidden Biases and Fake News:
Finding a Balance between Critical Thinking and Cynicism

Elizaveta Friesem

The term "biases" often comes up in classroom discussions about fake news. We warn our students: some sources of information are less trustworthy than others because their creators are biased—in other words, prejudiced, subjective, guided by unreasoned opinions. We divide media texts into those that deserve our students' attention because they present facts and truth, and those that should be dismissed.

This binary view seems reasonable, especially in the post-election United States, which has become the world of "us" and "them." The country's political polarization is on the rise, and the term "biases" is often used to explain why the "other side" is wrong, or how its actions are damaging for democracy. It is not surprising that the same kind of language and reasoning is used in media literacy classrooms.

As part of our efforts to battle fake news, we sometimes also encourage our students to acknowledge their own confirmation bias—the tendency to look for sources and opinions that align with their preconceived notions.[1] This complicates the picture: the problem is not only that some biased individuals and groups pour fake news into the infosphere, but also that we ourselves cannot (or do not want to) always distinguish between the truth and deceptions. This perspective blurs the line between "us" and "them" but does not eliminate it.

To address the complexity of fake news, media literacy should help students reflect on a variety of hidden biases. Scholars argue that all people are biased in one way or another; confirmation bias is just one of many cognitive biases we have. Other hidden biases include choice-supportive bias, placebo effect, sunk-cost fallacy, zero-risk bias, selective perception, ostrich effect, and many more.[2] Over the last two decades, so-called implicit biases have attracted much attention. This term is used to describe our subconscious attitudes about different social groups: what/whom we like and dislike, what we expect from people, and what kind of behavior we deem normal or unacceptable.[3] Some scholars argue that the existence of implicit bias might explain why such significant problems as racism and sexism still linger in the Unites States, although the connection between this kind of bias and individual behavior is still not entirely clear.

It is likely that we all have hidden biases that influence our perceptions and behavior in different—albeit subtle—ways. This leads to a question: How are we to frame our conversation about fake news if, apparently, we are all biased in one way or another? Dividing media texts into biased and unbiased ones might be misleading, as well as accusing some "other" people of having biases or not keeping their biases in check. Using inquiry-based instructional strategies to look for facts and contrast them with deceptions and lies also becomes more difficult: it is not always clear who is to decide what a fact is, to choose how facts get legitimized, and to define the meaning of accuracy itself. This shift of perspective may help us to deal with the current political polarization, but at what cost? An obvious challenge of bringing up the pervasiveness of hidden cognitive biases lies in the risk of making students cynical: if everyone is biased, there is no universal truth, and no point in becoming critical thinkers.

Why is grappling with this challenge important and how can it be done in the classroom?

Hidden Biases: What We Know and Why It Matters

One of the most discussed scientific tools that claim to reveal hidden biases is the Implicit Association Test created by Harvard cognitive psychology scholars.[4] They produced a number of tests: about race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, age, religion, and other social characteristics. If you are taking a basic race test, your screen will show you words belonging to two different categories—pleasant things (e.g., love, rainbow, happiness) and unpleasant things (e.g., death, injury, vomit)—mixed with black and white faces. As the words and pictures appear in the center of the screen at random one by one, you will first need to click the "e" key when you see a pleasant word or a white face and the "i" key when

you see an unpleasant word or a black face. You must click as fast as you can; the test measures the number of correct answers as well as the time it takes you to decide. Then the task changes: you will need to click the "e" key when you see an unpleasant word or a white face and the "i" key when you see a pleasant word or a black face.

The test creators argue that when we are asked to associate things that in our mind are usually linked, we do it with ease, while if we need to switch the association it takes us longer to make a connection. Implicit Association Test challenges our brain to reveal subconscious associations between such controversial pairings as skin color and danger, gender and profession, or sexuality and normalcy. The test has been taken by millions of people worldwide. It has been recently argued that you need to take it several times to discover your true implicit bias. Some also point out that the correlation between biases revealed by the test and our behavior is not always clear. However, cumulative results suggest that a large proportion of the population has implicit biases, and even if the correlation with behavior is not entirely clear, it probably does exist.

Implicit biases are just one kind of cognitive bias that we may have. Apart from the previously mentioned confirmation bias, our perceptions and actions are also shaped by the sunk-cost fallacy (the more time or emotions we invest into something the more we want to keep investing), bandwagon effect (if a lot of people act or think in a certain way, we tend to act or think the same), halo effect (we will have more trust in somebody whom we find attractive), anchoring bias (the first piece of information we hear tends to have more influence on us), etc. The list of common cognitive biases is long and overwhelming. Chances are you are affected by some of them, if not others.

How do these revelations matter for media literacy classrooms where the issue of fake news is discussed? Fake news debates display considerable variety and complexity; however, they often boil down to distinguishing facts from deceptions and finding out who is responsible for falsifications. If we acknowledge that we are all plagued with biases that we are not aware of, the task of finding one objective truth and sticking to it suddenly becomes complicated. In addition, calling the "other" side out for being biased may be seen as hypocrisy. If we want to be honest with our students, we need to acknowledge this unsettling complexity. But how can we do it without compromising our goal of helping them become critical thinkers, lifetime learners, and engaged participants in the modern democracy?

Critical Thinking and Cynicism

When we bring the revelations about hidden cognitive biases into the classroom, this information may produce adverse reactions. Some students may become angry with us for forcing them out of their comfort zone. By choosing to be honest about our own biases we run the risk of undermining our authority. And by suggesting that both sides of any debate are to a certain degree biased, we can make students confused, frustrated, and cynical.

Let's say, we want to discuss climate change. In a media literacy classroom focusing on fake news, we will ask our class to compile and compare different sources of information about this issue in the hope that students will distinguish dubious from trustworthy ones. Some scholars do say that global warming is a hoax, but who are they and who stands behind them? As media literacy educators, we will point out that, according to scientific consensus, climate change is real, while dissenting voices come from those funded by major oil and coal companies.

But if we are brutally honest, we will also have to admit that we ourselves are not environmental scientists, and it is unlikely that we are intimately familiar with scientific methods applied by scholars to whose consensus we are referring. Moreover, it is unlikely that we have perused all or even a half of all the studies on climate change. When we make our claims about it, we have to rely on certain experts whom we choose to believe. Our biases play a role in this choice. To make the matter even more complicated, we may need to admit that scientific consensus per se is not always trustworthy. There was a time (not so long ago!) when most scholars believed that homosexuality was a disease,[5] or that black people were intellectually inferior to white people.[6] As much as we want science to be objective, it reflects scholars' biases. This is why scientific paradigms regularly change in dramatic ways (for more discussion about this phenomenon see, for example, a famous book about scientific revolutions by Thomas Kuhn, first published in 1962).[7]

As we are preparing for our classes about fake news, we can decide to omit this complexity and focus on the good old "us" vs. "them" and facts vs. truth dichotomies. This decision will make our lives easier. Alternatively, we can discuss how knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is constructed, and potentially see our students falling into the rabbit hole of doubt and cynicism (Danah Boyd described this danger well in her 2018 South by Southwest speech).[8] If we do choose the thornier way, how do we make sure that the conversation remains productive, that we do help our students to become better learners, citizens, and human beings?

Escaping the Rabbit Hole

There are several strategies for letting the complexity into our media literacy classrooms but not letting it undermine our students' learning experience. They include: (1) focusing on power imbalances, (2) exploring economic interests, (3) determining intentions, (4) having students reflect on their biases, and (5) engaging in empathy-based dialogue that leads to social action.

1. *Focusing on power imbalances:* Even though everybody is biased, it matters whose words and actions can affect

more people. Exploring *media conglomeration* is a good way to look at power imbalances. If I create a biased media message, I may cause some damage. But if a biased message is created by a media company that can reach millions, the consequences will be much more serious. It is also crucial to help students discover controversies surrounding the use of *algorithms*. Although algorithms are supposed to be neutral, they reflect biases of those who created them.[9] Algorithms are powerful because they determine what information we are exposed to, and because their workings are seldom transparent. As a result, they can reinforce power imbalances between different social groups and individuals in stealthy hidden ways.

2. *Exploring economic interests:* Our students should learn to "follow the money." When exploring controversial topics, students should find out who funds different sides of an argument. This is particularly critical for topics such as climate change, where the scientists who comprise the academic consensus stating that the global warming is real typically have no conflict of interest, while the people who make it their job to publically argue that climate change is not human-made are often funded by corporate interests vested in maintaining the energy status-quo.

3. *Determining intentions:* Media messages are produced with very different intentions. When gender and racial stereotypes are reinforced through media representations, it is not necessarily because media producers want gender and racial inequalities to persist, but often because of certain dominant ideologies that persist due to hidden biases shared by many people. At the same time, it would be naïve to deny the existence of intentional malicious propaganda. There are people who create fake news on purpose, often because they benefit from mis-

information financially. However, this is not the same as someone creating or spreading a biased media message because this person lacks awareness of their biases. Have your students use *key questions of media literacy education* to investigate, among other things, the purpose (overt as well as hidden) of every message.[10]

4. *Having students reflect on their biases:* Remind your students that biased messages are produced and

> **It turns out that we may have common values even with our strongest opponents, but we won't find that out unless we are ready to humbly admit our own biases and cultivate empathic understanding of the "other" side.**

spread by people, not necessarily because of malicious intents, economic interests, or a desire to keep one's power. We all participate in circulation of information that contributes to the existence of dominant ideologies and power imbalances that these ideologies support. Have your class discuss their own biases and the way those may influence media texts students themselves produce (for more guidance, use lesson plans created by Media Education Lab: "*Understanding Implicit Bias: The Power of Reflection*"[11] and "*Who, Me? Biased?: Understanding Implicit Bias*" by PBS/POV[12]). Studies show that training students to recognize their own biases is an important strategy in teaching them to be better discerners of misinformation that is spread through mediated communication.[13] In addition, by exploring the pervasiveness of biases we can help

students cultivate empathy towards people who hold different opinions.

5. *Helping students engage in an empathy-based dialogue that leads to social action:* Social change is a long and complicated process. One can be skeptical about it, saying that sexual harassment exposed by the #metoo movement persists despite all the hard work done by feminists, or that mass incarceration of black people makes us question successes of the social rights movement. Help your students to understand that things are getting slowly better because people fight for important causes together. And in order to engage in a collaborative effort aimed to produce social change, we need to be able to find allies by having a dialogue with people even if we do not entirely agree with them. It turns out that we may have common values even with our strongest opponents, but we won't find that out unless we are ready to humbly admit our own biases and cultivate empathic understanding of the "other" side.[14]

Becoming Ethical Communicators

While being unbiased is a self-defeating impossibility, recognizing our own biases is an important part of critical thinking. At the same time, admitting to being biased is not an excuse for complacency. Facts may be selective and knowledge may be socially constructed, but when somebody is hurt by maliciously twisted information, their discomfort is real. The same is true for the damage produced by media messages created or spread by somebody who lacks awareness of their own biases. That is why exploring our own biases—and helping students do the same—is essential. We may choose to start the fake news classroom by dividing sources into more and less trustworthy ones, but this should be a beginning of a much more sophisticated discussion about human communication in the modern world.

If we admit our own biases and encourage students to do the same, we may have to grapple with the existence of multiple truths and deal with frustration that this revelation will likely cause. To deal with this challenge, we can help our students learn that there is a whole continuum of options between not trusting anybody and blindly trusting a handful of selected experts. Critical thinking that our students are developing should include open-mindedness and intellectual humility[15] as well as optimism about being able to make the world a better place by remaining curious lifelong learners and ethical communicators who know how to listen to each other.[16] 🌐

Notes

1. Alan C. Miller, "Confronting Confirmation Bias: Giving Truth a Fighting Chance in the Information Age," *Social Education* 78, no. 5 (2014): 235–240.

2. Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational, Revised and Expanded Edition: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

3. Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York, N.Y.: Delacorte Press, 2013).

4. You can take the test for free at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit.

5. In the 1960s, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders still described homosexuality as "paraphilia," and then as "sexual orientation disturbance."

6. Scientific racism—a belief that racism can be justified by scientific evidence—is now considered pseudoscience. These ideas were accepted by the scientific community for a long period of time, but have been rejected as obsolete by most scholars since the middle of the twentieth century.

7. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

8. See https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2.

9. Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms" in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, eds. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014), 167-194. See www.tarletongillespie.org/essays/Gillespie%20-%20The%20Relevance%20of%20Algorithms.pdf.

10. See https://mediaeducationlab.com/what-media-literacy-0 and www.projectlooksharp.org/Resources%202/keyquestions.pdf.

11. See https://mediaeducationlab.com/understanding-implicit-bias-power-reflection.

12. See https://cptv.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ilpov18-soc-il-ilbias/who-me-biased-understanding-implicit-bias/#.Wyf_-1VKjlX

13. Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, "Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation," in *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2017), 3–34.

14. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York, N.Y.: The New Press, 2016).

15. Cynthia L. Scheibe and Faith Rogow, *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2012).

16. Chris Sperry, "The Epistemological Equation: Integrating Media Analysis into the Core Curriculum," *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 1, no. 2 (2010), 89–98.

ELIZAVETA FRIESEM *is a scholar and practitioner of media literacy and anti-bias education. She explores strategies of teaching about intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and physical ability in and through the media.*