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OPINION VERSUS NEUTRAL REPORTING: THE CASE OF SELECTED HEADINGS OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES IN VARIOUS ONLINE NEWSPAPERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Article headings or titles in a newspaper are vital components of every newspaper because they among other things, market the newspaper or arouse interest. The decision to read a newspaper article is usually dependent upon how one engage and understand the title or the heading. However, the problem arises when the article's heading or title is written in such a manner that it is pro or against a certain subject matter. In other words, it is partisan or biased towards a certain group. It is sometimes not easy to detect bias because it is sometimes surreptitious. It is common that journalists should strive to report news in a fair, impartial and objective manner. However, it will be shown in this paper that some reporters have a challenge of reporting in a fair, non-partisan and objective manner. This study investigated if some articles headings in various newspapers contain elements of bias. Thus, this article reports on the findings of desktop study about bias in the headings of online newspaper articles. The data comes from various specifically selected article headings. Principles from Discourse Analysis and Sentiment Analysis were used to develop a conceptual framework and to provide a foundation for this study. Evidence of violation of English linguistic grammar rules with the purpose of creating bias was found. Overall, the study confirmed that indeed there is bias in some of the headings of these newspaper articles The findings reported in this study have implications for writing pedagogy for departments of Journalism and Media Studies in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION

Media outlets do not just report plain facts and one commonly noted bias in reporting is ideological (Jamieson and Campbell 2002). Yet whilst there has

been an upsurge in analytic interest in the media in the last decade, systematic analysis of the newspaper bias has been relatively neglected. Indeed, no previous research of this sort has ever been carried out in South Africa. To date, few studies of in newspaper reporting have included such kind of additional probing procedure to investigate and analyse bias in written media reports. Thus, this study seeks to traverse the ground around impartiality and objectivity but a particular focus on impartiality (i.e., Bias) with specific reference to the headings of online newspaper articles. This is so because online newspapers are part of social media platforms and this has been adopted by many media houses globally due to its ubiquity, easiness, and accessibility. However, it has been observed that internet is littered with fake and bias news and as a result of this it has been observed that media outlets do not just report plain facts (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2002:02). Sometimes they report in a biased and impartial manner or mis-inform readers using their language ‘capital’ as a lever of power and this has led to an increased attention to research regarding the constructs bias and objectivity in news reporting (c.f Weidmann,2016; Baum & Zhukov, 2015; Gentzkow , Shapiro, 2010). Press reports such as the one written by Maphanga (2019) titled “Corruption ‘isn’t a black thing, says Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng” bears testimony to this problem wherein Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng lamented the media for biased reporting by echoing the following:

“...that is the narrative I was fed...some of the things that we read about our people, some of the things that our analysts wish to feed us are designed to project some in a negative light and others always in a positive light. That is not how to build a nation.”

In lamenting this situation further, Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng in the same address maintained that

“... cohort of carefully selected analysts and you can tell in advance when this one appears, there is a particular narrative that is going to be championed”.

Furthermore, in the current State Capture Commission in South Africa (SA) or what is commonly known as the ‘Zondo Commission’, Deputy Chief Justice Zondo lamented the media in particular for bias reporting and pleaded with the media to report accurately and impartially (This was aired on Newsroom Afrika on the 08 October 2019) around 10h21). Furthermore, in affirmation to the lamentation expressed by Chief Justice above and Deputy Chief Justice, Mr Latakomo (2011) in his press report echoed the following:

“Newspaper readers are our employers, and anything that compromises our integrity as purveyors of news and information must be taken seriously”.

Recently it has been observed that the Sunday Times weekly newspaper in SA, ‘one of the country’s most trusted news brands, was recently forced to apologise for publication of several false scoops’ (Reuters Institute Digital News Report,2019:147). This institute argue that trust is being eroded by a

combination of unethical business practices, shoddy journalism, and escalating misinformation (Reuters Institute Digital News Report,2019:147).

According to the eighth annual Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, public concern about misinformation stands at 55% on average across 38 countries. This report states that 51% of South Africans do not trust the news and furthermore it is says that 70% of English-speaking South Africans who use the internet, say they struggle to separate fact from fiction online. The above scenario highlight the plight caused by bias in news reporting. Thus, the bane of this article is that the crisis of biased reporting in various online newspapers persist in SA despite the introduction of a number of intervention measures put in place such as Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) and South African National Editors Forum (SANEF). These are watchdog organisations. One of the focus areas of MMA is Media Trust and Credibility wherein issues of bias, fairness in reporting and so called ‘fake news’ is addressed. Westerstahl (1983:403) once posited that a number of professional associations of publishers and journalists have compiled special ‘canons for good journalism’.However it would seem these ‘canons’ are no longer adhered to by journalists.

Though the benefits of fair, objective, neutral, factual and impartial news reporting has long been acknowledged (e.g. Weidmann, 2016; Baum & Zhukov, 2015; Soroka,2012; Abcarian, 2012), a widespread view persists that some news reports are still proliferated with elements of bias in one way or the other.

Accordingly, this article aims to highlight how bias is permeated in the headings of online newspaper articles by analysing the discourse of specifically selected online newspaper headings with the aim of showing why sometimes it is hard for the non-expert reader or someone who is not a trained linguist (lay readers) to detect bias. The researchers in this article chose the article headings or titles because they have a potential to influence ‘public opinion and also they have a potential to incite readers to action’ (c.f. Matsumoto et al., 2013).

The literature that has been consulted in this study about bias mostly focused on news content. What is different with this study is that it seeks to investigate bias not based on coverage reporting but solely based on the headlines or titles of online written newspaper articles. Thus, it is against this backdrop that this research study investigated if there are elements of bias in the selected online newspaper-articles. In an attempt to achieve this aim, the study formulated to two research objectives, namely:

- To ascertain if the selected identified online newspaper article-headings reflect bias
- To recommend intervention strategies to circumvent this bad practice of reporting in journalism.

To achieve the above research objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

- Are the selected identified online newspaper article-headings reflect bias?
- What intervention measures can be instituted to circumvent this bad practice of journalism reporting?

It was envisaged that the findings of this study could constitute a basis upon which further studies in relation to how newspaper article headings can be written, constructed or phrased in a manner that they would be perceived to be ‘neutral, fair, impartial and objective’. This can also help in providing pedagogical interventions with regards to writing and writing for journalism in institutions that offer media studies and journalism as courses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework shapes the outcomes and findings of a research study. It is the roadmap a researcher use in the expedition of finding patterns in answering research questions and findings solutions to research problems (McBurney, 2001).The study aimed to ascertain if the selected online newspaper articles reflect bias and thus adopted Martin and White (2005) appraisal theory. The researchers felt that the theory is very relevant because it is well within the crux of what the study investigate. The principles in this theory helped in shaping how to analyse the data to the core of what is investigated in this study. According to Tupala (2019) this framework defines each chunk of a text (e.g., noun phrase, verb phrase or clause) that implies one instance of appraisal as an appraisal group (i.e., the appraiser and the object of appraisal). There are three major aspects that are advocated by Martin and White (ibid) in this theory and they are:

Attitude

Attitude is understood to be an emotion the appraiser conveys in relation to the object (e.g. “The strategy of this political party will not work” or “It was a great speech by the president”). According to this theory, these kind of sentences, phrases or clauses are deemed to be conveying attitude. The newspaper headlines/titles in this investigation also articulates to the issue of attitudes and that is what makes this theory even more relevant. Attitudes describe how people feel about objects and events in the social world is (Willig,2015:145). It is important to mention that the researchers will spend a lot of time discussing this point as it is the pivot on which all else turns in the analysis of data in this study.

The second aspect that this theory deals with it is the issue of ‘graduation’ and it is discussed briefly below.

Graduation

According to this theory, graduation indicates the strength, degree or force of emotion. For example, words such as ‘love’ versus ‘adore’ indicates or conveys the degree of attitude.

Engagement

Engagement simply means when a writer engages in an argument and this can happen directly (monoglossic) or indirectly (Heteroglossic) (See, Garrido, 2017). Monoglossic refers to a situation wherein a writer expresses appraisal directly, for example, if a writer says ‘The Public Protector does not know what she is doing’. Heteroglossic refers to a situation wherein the writer expresses an appraisal by using other elements or sources to champion her/his point, for example ‘The Democratic Alliance has long proved that her work is not on par’. Other words that are commonly used when a writer engages in the subject or topic are adverbs such as ‘yet’ and ‘although’.

In addition to the above discussed tenets of Appraisal theory, theoretical orientations from Discourse Analysis (DA) theory were also applied. Willig (2015:146) posits that ‘what people say tell us something about what they are doing with their words (disclaiming, excusing, justifying, persuading, pleading etc) rather than about the cognitive structures these words represent’. According to Johnstone (2002:04) discourse analysis deals with things such as why a particular text is the way it is, why is it not the other way, why use of a particular word and not the other word and lastly why the words are arranged in a particular order. In addition, Mavunga and Kaguda (2016:176) agree with Johnstone when they assert that discourse analysis can be utilised to answer a variety of questions related to language questions such as:

- What meaning is created by the arrangement of words in a particular way?
- How are hearers likely to interpret what they hear?
- How do speakers use their utterances to perform certain functions?
- What is the influence of language on human relations?

Borrowing from both the orientations of Appraisal and Discourse Analysis theories, the researchers were thus able to zoom into various headings or titles of online newspaper articles in various online newspapers with the aim of gaining insights and in-depth understanding of how these article headings were crafted and to some extent for what purpose.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalists, online users, and researchers are well aware of the proliferation of false information, and thus topics such as credibility and fact-checking are becoming increasingly important (Baly, Karadzov, Alexandrov, Glass and Nakov, 2018:02). The way that the media presents an issue, or frames it, can ‘define and give meaning to issues (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001:185). In other words, the way in which an idea is expressed or ‘framed’ in the media has the potential to influence people’s thought and these thoughts can at times be a consequence of bias in reporting. Newspapers forms part an environment in which newspaper-readers find themselves. Therefore, when people who read newspapers, they engage with the environment in which they find themselves and so doing they can be exposed. Bias can happen in many different ways such as bias when it comes to media coverage or bias as expressed in content. Consequently, if the construct bias expressed in an article is salient to the naïve

reader, the 'actual' reality can then be easily blurred. It has to be understood that in media, journalists do this for various reasons. Sometimes they do this unwittingly and at times deliberately to pursue, sensationalise or 'champion' a certain narrative which is of their liking. Thus, the construct bias in the field of media studies has been challenged by significant debates taking place globally around its nature and how it is perceived. It is a highly contested construct in journalism. In the below section various scholarly perspectives on bias in the media will be discussed.

Bias in media as a multidimensional construct

The large number of online news sources on the web as well as the explosive growth of social media sites of various kinds indicates that there is a large amount of opinionated texts (Khoo, Nourbakhsh & Na, 2012:858). Like with bias in newspaper reporting, sentiment analysis can be expressed in a more delicate way (c.f. Khoo, Nourbakhsh & Na, 2012:859). Researchers who focus on bias in newspaper reporting are mainly concerned about the polarity of these newspaper articles, i.e. whether they convey an objective and impartial or biased attitude towards the subject of discussion. Thus, the conceptions of bias in newspaper reporting are often simplistic or ad hoc

To establish how media effects are cued by language, two well-studied language phenomena were chosen to be reviewed in this study. The first phenomenon is valence framing and the second one is simply 'bias'. Valence framing is defined as depicting an issue in clearly positive or negative terms, and has been studied in written information as an important factor in changing news readers' attitudes (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). Political messages are framed when speakers select specific words to make particular issue aspects more salient (Pang and Lee, 2008). Valence framing is a form of framing in which a stance is expressed explicitly with descriptions in either exclusively positive, or exclusively negative terms (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). Accordingly, the media can shape both as it reflects prominent issues in the public sphere as well as helping to influence individual opinion (c.f. Hamborg, F., Donnay, K. & Gipp, 2019).

Accordingly, the construct bias is very controversial on many fronts because of its elusive nature. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002:02) identifies two types of media bias. The first type is referred to as ideological and the second as spin. They posit that the ideological bias has 'to do with the news outlet's desire to affect reader opinions in a particular direction as a consequence of the preferences of either editors or reporters'. Hofstetter (1976:15) posits that bias is often conceptualized as "a manifestation of conscious purpose or the unwitting consequence of ideological position or party attachment". Hackett (1984:233) agrees with Hofstetter (1976) when he says that the most important form of political or ideological bias in the media is witting or unwitting favoritism towards one major candidate, party, political position or interest group over another. Ideology is viewed by some researchers as an interpellation and others as naturalization (c.f., Hackett, 1984). Hackett (1984:239) maintain that printed press with its history of partisanship and its lack of subjection to fairness regulations might be expected to exhibit greater political bias in reporting.

Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002:02) refer to the second kind of bias as ‘spin’ which reflects the outlet's attempt to simply create a memorable story. They argue that the act of simplification leads to bias since some information is necessarily discarded. Mullainathan and Shleifer’s (2002:05) other supposition is that of manipulation of information which they argue can take a variety of forms. They maintain that in some countries, newspapers just make up facts to corroborate their stories. To support this view, Mullainathan and Shleifer’s (2002:06) Journalists sometimes use colorful but misleading language and images that support the story to sometimes cater for what is commonly referred to as ‘narrative imperative’. In bias, some nuances are being championed by journalists covertly. This is a carefully engineered bias. Thus, it is imperative that bias in news reports be decoded as it has the potential to anaesthetize peoples’ capacity to discern reality from fallacy or propaganda. Matsumoto *et al* (2013) cannot agree more with the above assertion when they posit that in specific societal circumstances, emotional expressions of contempt and disgust may lead to political aggression. For example, former President of SA Jacob Zuma also complained during his testimony at the State Capture Commission that the media in SA is biased. (This was aired on the 15 July 2019) around 12h15.

Lastly, the other form of bias is called Statement bias. Statement bias, also called presentation bias, is concerned with how articles choose to report on concepts (Drukman and Parkin, 2005:04).

Lastly, the problem of not reporting accurately can create a lot of problems even for journalist themselves. For example, recently Refilwe Moloto interviewed the Senior Research Fellow at Africa Asia Dialogues and Former Bureau Chief of Al Jazeera Southern Africa, Thembisa Fakude on the Committee to Protect Journalists 2021 report. And Fakude indicated that China is top of the list of countries that imprison journalists for the issues around incorrect/wrong reporting of the News.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research methodology encapsulates what is commonly referred to in research circles as ‘research design’. A research design is an action plan for getting from here to there (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson:2010). In other words, the crafting of the research design should be compatible with the aim of the research project. In accordance with the aim of this study (i.e to investigate bias in the headings or titles of the selected online newspaper articles), several research methodology aspects were embarked upon. This was pure desk-based research project.

Sample, sampling method and procedure

A sample of 57 online titles or headings from various selected online newspapers and SA news sites were analysed for the construct bias. The sample articles were sourced from the following online newspapers: Daily Sun, Citizen, Times, Business Day, City Press, Witness, Daily News, Cape Times, Post, Sowetan, Mail and Guardian, Independent on Saturday, Mercury, Star, Cape

Argus, Dispatch, Alberton Record, Sunday World, Soccer Laduma, Daily Voice, Berea Mail, South Coast Sun, Independent online, Eyewitness News, eNCA, Maverick, SABC News, South Africa Today, Daily Maverick and SA News. In other words, twenty-two (22) online newspapers and six (6) South African news sites were utilised for data collection. ‘Opinion’ articles were excluded. All these newspapers use English language to report their news. The researchers were mindful that the study should not be skewed to towards one or two newspapers or news sites. The headlines or titles of the articles in the selected online newspapers were then analysed for the construct bias. With that in mind, phrases in an article heading or title that contain an instance of bias (usually words, terms, clauses, or even the word order/sequence) were selected and analysed. The researchers were satisfied that the sample in this study is significant enough to allow the results to be generalised to the Online Newspapers selected in this study. According to Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson (2010:16) the larger the sample the more representative it is going to be. Fifty-seven (57) article titles or headings were selected using convenience-sampling method and this was thought to be significant or large enough for generalisation purposes. According to De Vos (2005:17) a convenience sample is the use of readily accessible persons in a study. Thus, in this study, the online newspapers were readily available and accessible to the researcher from the internet-connected computer in his office.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The researcher applied the principles espoused in Martin and White’s (2005) framework and those advocated by Discourse Analysis theorists to develop a conceptual framework to analyse the sample in this study. This was motivated by the words of scholars such as Seliger and Shohamy (1989) who argued that a combination of methods yields a composite picture of a particular phenomenon. Thus, in addition to the principles borrowed from Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal theory and principles from Discourse Analysis theory were also applied in analysing the data from the sample. According to Philips and Jorgensen (2002:21) the role of discourse analyst is to ‘work with what has been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequence of different discursive representations of reality’. The researchers found this statement to be vital in guiding the analysis of the data in this study. After selecting the relevant articles, the researcher followed the three elements (i.e. Attitude, Graduation and Engagement) identified by Martin and White (2005) in their framework. This strategy was then enhanced by the application of orientations from Discourse Analysis theory wherein the analysis was guided by questions such as the ones below:

- What meaning is created by the arrangement of words in a particular way?
- How are hearers likely to interpret what they hear?
- How do speakers use their utterances to perform certain functions?
- What is the influence of language on human relations?

The researchers also draw from Inferential Analysis (c.f Kasanga,1996:05) to understand and analyse some of the newspaper headlines sampled in this study. A qualitative analysis seeks to find “all” instances of media bias, including

subtle instances that require human interpretation of the text (Vaismoradi, Turunen, Bondas, 2013:13).

The table below indicates an example of the actual sample of headings/titles of online newspaper analysed in this study.

TABLE 4.1 Online newspaper articles

1. Hanekom off the hook	11. These are the questions Zondo wants Zuma to answer
2. Moyane denied opportunity to grill Gordhan	12. ‘Last week, Malema was let off the hook by the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), which dismissed complaints of hate speech lodged against the red berets' leader’
3. ANC granted one last chance	13. Zuma delays corruption trial with appeal
4. Hanekom hauls Zuma to court over spy allegations	14. ‘State capture ‘fall guy’ denies wrong doing over Gupta landing at Waterkloof’
5. Matjila throws ANC under the bus	15. Judge Motata cleared of impeachable conduct
6. Malema to SAPS: Shoot Ace Magashule because he is the real criminal	16. Julius Malema off hook for now on fraud rap
7. ‘Defiant Malema refuses to give statement to Hawks ’	17. EFF’s programme of action in 2022 signals a year of living even more dangerously
8. Jacob Zuma to get preview of nuke-deal questions	18. The harsh lesson that is Limpopo
9. Song will tear us apart, again-just the way Malema and Afriforum want	19. Zuma man's fake degree
10. Populism for the win	20. Defiant Malema Proud of BA

Given the difficulty of using a whole sample of over 50 article headings for analysis purposes, which would have made the article longer than the required length, a decision was made to use only selected articles headlines (i.e from the ones selected in TABLE 4.1) for the discussion purposes and to also give the reader inside on how data was analysed in this study. The results are discussed below.

Presentation of Previous findings

This is a compressed account of the findings. It is important that in order to understand the bias in a specific title/heading context sometimes is necessary. Thus, in some analysis of certain headings/titles, context will be provided briefly.

Attitudes describe how people feel about objects and events in the social world (Willig, 2015:145). The journalist in the newspaper title ‘State capture ‘fall

guy' denies wrong doing over Gupta landing at Waterkloof' is expressing attitude and this is bias reporting. The use of the word 'fall guy' in inverted commas denotes the standpoint of the journalists regarding the issue. The implied meaning here is that the guy who is being reported about is being used hence the term 'fall guy'. There is no evidence to suggest that the guy is being used as a 'scapegoat'. The best the journalist could have done was to wait for the court of law to pronounce on the matter before using such a label or term (i.e fall guy).

The second example of bias that has to do with attitude is reflected in the title 'Last week, Malema was let off the hook by the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), which dismissed complaints of hate speech lodged against the red berets' leader'. The writer here implies that the 'red berets' leader' should have been found guilty. This is a clear case of an opinionated text. Why the reporter cannot just report what the judgement of the court indicated and not show his/her desire about what should have happened. This is a clear case of bias and attitude. This is also clearly visible in the title 'Hanekom off the hook'. This implies that the standpoint of the journalist is that Mr Hanekom should have been found guilty. A clear case of opinionated text.

Let us use the example of the heading 'Moyane denied the opportunity to grill Gordhan'. The word 'grill' is a metaphorical (i.e. the questioning process is compared to grilling). The journalist insinuates that it would have been an 'intense' type of questioning and this is concluded without any evidence to that effect. How the journalist then uses the word grill when the action has not yet happened? In other words, we have not yet observed if the questioning indeed amounted to grilling. This is a clear question of the question 'How are hearers likely to interpret what they hear' as suggested by proponents of Discourse Analysis.

In addition, in the heading 'Hanekom hauls Zuma to court over spy allegations' it is noted that the term 'haul' has been used. The issue in contention here is that the term 'hauls' suggests that Zuma is refusing to go to court about the issue and as readers we know that there was no evidence to suggest that Zuma was actually refusing. The journalist insinuates without any basis in fact that Mr Zuma is actually refusing to come to court, which is not true. This is a clear element of bias in that kind of a newspaper headline. The question is why the choice of such a lexis (i.e haul). This is clearly an indication of un-objective reporting on the part of the journalist. In the headings analysed above, clearly the reader is fed the authors' interpretation instead of the fact. This point is further illustrated in the below title/heading.

'Defiant Malema refuses to give statement to Hawks'

It is in the public domain that Mr Malema was given an option by the Hawks whether he wants to remain silent as it is his constitutional right or give a statement. It is in the public domain that Mr Malema chose the option of remaining silent. However, the newspaper topic/title of the article reports it in such a way as if Mr Malema was defiant and refused to give a statement. This constitutes a clear element of bias reporting. Would it have been wrong if the

journalist decided to use the word Mr Malema opted or took the decision to remain silent...’? Again one is still subjected to titles such as ‘Defiant Malema Proud of BA’. If the concern was to report about Mr Malema obtaining his BA degree, what is the point of mentioning the word ‘Defiant’?

The title ‘Jacob Zuma to get preview of nuke-deal questions’ from one of the newspapers was lambasted by the Deputy Chief Justice Zondo as not being true. He posited that the State Capture Commission has not given Mr Zuma any questions however what the Commission has done was to give Mr Zuma a ‘document containing areas of interests’ and not the actual questions. He (Deputy Chief Justice Zondo) indicated that the article ‘certainly gives the impression that the Commission has changed its decision on the question of whether Mr Zuma should be furnished questions before he appears before the Commission’. The journalists in the article state it categorically clear that the ‘the Zondo Commission on the state capture has agreed to his demands to see questions in advance...’. However, Deputy Chief Justice Zondo refuted this and even promised to make the document sent to Mr Zuma public. It is clear that the journalist who wrote this heading of the article reported in a biased manner perhaps because he/she wanted to champion a certain agenda or narrative.

It has also been observed that issue of using idioms, proverbs or sayings in the analysed headlines/topics in this study reflected an element of bias. For example, in the heading ‘Matjila throws ANC under the bus’ there is an element of bias in sense that it maybe that Mr Matjila is telling the truth (his version is not tested in a court of law). If indeed it is found that he is telling the truth, is he still throwing ANC under the bus? The insinuation in the saying ‘throwing someone under the bus’ is that one is using someone as a scapegoat.

The journalist who reported the story in an article titled ‘KZN top mayors Zandile Gumede, Themba Njilo sacked’ is not be truthful and this amount to bias. In the content of the article, the journalist quote a specific person (source) with the following words:

‘The ANC in the province confirmed that the two mayors, Zandile Gumede and Themba Njilo, had been “redeployed” following the special provincial executive committee meeting which ended yesterday’.

The journalist is wrong to use the title ‘sacked’ whereas in the same article a credible quotation from someone interviewed by the same journalist talks a different story to ‘sacking’. The journalist seems to want to champion the narrative of ‘sacking’ rather than ‘redeployed’.

The other important element of bias is reflected in the title ‘Zuma delays corruption trial with appeal’. The lexis ‘delay’ in this title is intended to cloud the mind of the reader with the narrative that Mr Zuma is delaying the process while the truth is that he is simply exercising his constitutional right. In addition, when one critically analyse the title ‘EFF’s programme of action in 2022 signals a year of living even more dangerously’ one can easily see that this is a clear opinionated text.

Furthermore, the title ‘Song will tear us apart, again-just the way Malema and Afriforum want’ is very biased because there is no evidence led in court where Mr Malema or Afriforum indicated their desire to ‘have it that way’ (i.e. ‘just the way Malema and Afroforum want’). The journalist is biased against Mr Malema and Afroforum because that is not what transpired but it is his own interpretation. The above example is similarly to the one where the title ‘Zuma man's fake degree’ is used. It is not true that Mr Fraser’s degree is fake because the institution confirmed it and secondly why bring in the name of Mr Zuma in the picture? Perhaps to persist the negativity levelled against Mr Zuma by some media houses.

TABLE 5.1 Attitude as expressed in ‘Graduation’ and ‘Engagement’

Headline/Title Newspaper 1	Headline/Title Newspaper 2
1. Defender Pravin comes out guns blazing against Protector Busisiwe-and he is not firing blanks	1. Mkhwebane comes out guns blazing against her critics

According to Baum and Zhukov (2015:385) media organizations tend to report more heavily on dramatic events and those involving conflict or ‘badnews’. This assertion is proved to be true in the below analyses. The conflict between the SA Minister Mr Pravin Gordan and the SA Public Protector Advocate Busisiwe Mkhwebane is a case in point. One of the headings in one online newspaper read ‘Defender Pravin comes out guns blazing against Protector Busisiwe-and he is not firing blanks’ (TABLE5.1). Juxtapose the above heading with this one from the same newspaper article ‘Mkhwebane comes out guns blazing against her critics’. Clearly, the first heading about ‘Defender Pravin’ shows engagement and appraisal. The journalist is clearly showing his stands, appreciating, and acknowledging that he (Mr Gordan) is not firing blanks’ What comes out clear in that newspaper article headline is that the journalist is coming out very clear and showing his/her opinion (i.e. subjective and impartial)) about the matter.

DISCUSSION

According to Hackett (1984:232) the ideal of objectivity suggests that facts can be separated from opinion or value judgements, and that journalists can stand apart from the real-world events whose truth or meaning they transfer to the news audience by means of neutral language. However, what seems to emerge from the data analysed in this study, journalists either have a challenge of reporting neutrally or they deliberately phrase their article headings to champion a specific narrative about individuals or events. Hackett (ibid) posits that political partisanship on the part of owners, advertisers or editorial decision-makers is the major impediment to objective reporting. It has been observed that profit sometimes drives bias and works against facticity and according to Baum and Zhukov (2015:387) the nature of reporting bias depends on how media organizations navigate the political context in which they are based. Because the media plays and important role in constructing, influencing and propagating opinions it is important that journalists are encouraged to refrain from committing such gross mis-conduct. Their reports should not be poignant and tacit but factual and evidence-based.

Furthermore, it is evident from the data analysed in this study that the concept of news bias has two moments which are not entirely consistent. One is a lack of "balance" between competing viewpoints; the other is a tendentious, partisan "distortion" of "reality."

Unlike with private media houses, state-owned media houses have a special constitutional obligation to be impartial, equitable, and unbiased. Private media houses are governed by the prescripts of their various reporting guidelines. News reporting must be factual and impartial in order to provide a foundation for independent and rational decision making (Westerstahl,1983:407). The researchers in this study are of the views that it looks like bias has become mundane in news reporting including in online newspapers and this cannot be left unchallenged. Neutral presentation implies that the report not be composed in such a way that the reporter is shown to identify with or repudiate the subject of the report (Westerstahl,1983:420) but unfortunately in the online newspaper headlines analysed in this study, that seems to be the case. The other important element that came out of the analysis of data in this study is that pinion mining or what is commonly referred to as Sentiment analysis seems to be taking traction in SA online newspapers.

CONCLUSION

News coverage strongly influences public opinion. However, at times, the news coverage of media outlets is far from objective, a phenomenon called media bias. Media bias can potentially negatively affect the public, since biased news coverage may influence elections or public opinion on societal issues and this is very dangerous because of its potential to undermine democratic process and endeavours. The study has proven that there is a significant number of news article headings out there, which are phrased or framed in such a way that they report in a biased manner and this cannot be left to perpetuate. Thus study though a drop in the ocean, it is hoped it will trigger further researches in this area. In conclusion, news consumers are encouraged to read multiple newspapers to ascertain the truth and impartiality because it has been proven that reading of multiple newspapers articles covering the same story sometimes lead to the discovery of bias if any. If the consumers do not do this, the damage will be colossal in the future!

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- Journalists need to be made explicitly aware of the importance of respecting linguistic rules as contained in orthographies and other rule documents. Grammar rules and other linguistic rules are there for a purpose and users need to conform.
- There should be more interdisciplinary research on media bias, for example Language and Law disciplines.
- ‘Watchdogs’ such as MMA and SANEF need to ‘up their socks’ and perhaps bite more

- Lack of subjection to fairness (c.f. Hackett (1984:239) by the regulatory or professional bodies in SA is discouraging and that cannot be left to perpetuate. Professional bodies should be more vigilant in discouraging such practices
- Media houses/outlets should be encouraged to provide in-service training for their reporters/journalists
- Institutions that offer journalism/media studies should be encouraged to provide interdisciplinary curricular to such students
- Just like with any other profession, journalists should be trained on ethics

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