



“Is this racist?” How editors can identify hidden bias in language

Editor’s note: Catching racist and discriminatory language requires more than an awareness of slurs and pejorative terminology. Racism on paper can take many subtle forms, including the lack of fair and equal media representation, prejudicial narratives, racializing words through juxtaposition, and the unintentional othering of people of color. ACES2017 featured a panel of experts discussing how editors can best identify—and combat—this “hidden bias” in language. We asked panelists Steve Bien-Aimé and Karen Yin to tell us more about this topic.

What exactly is hidden bias in language?



Steve: Hidden bias is equivalent to unconscious bias—people often shape their views and perceptions on what they know and feel comfortable with. In language, as in life, that means people view and express things that comport with their own worldviews.



Karen: I’ll add that hidden biases are unconscious. That means they don’t necessarily align with our declared beliefs and that they can be activated outside of our control and without our consent. Just like any of our other unconscious beliefs, they can infiltrate everything we do without us even realizing it.

Can you share an example of this that you’ve seen in your editing or reading?

Steve: Two examples come to mind: on the radio this morning, a talk show host asked whether taking out the trash is a man’s job, or should his girlfriend also take out the trash. This seems benign until we understand that the host was omitting the experiences of same-sex couples. Within the print realm, what is meant by “nude/natural/flesh-colored” for female clothing? Folks are various shades; thus, are we using that labeling for all shades of people or for certain folks?

What is one way that editors can best watch for this/guard against it?

Steve: Mistakes will always be made, but the tool that I use is trying to see whether the language I’m using includes as many people as possible, or am I ignoring/omitting groups of people?

Karen: Pay attention to what surprises you. It’s an opportunity for your worldview to expand.

Avoiding bias
isn’t **incidental**
to an editor’s job
but **central.**

Anything else you’d like ACES readers to know?

Steve: Hidden bias is not a conscious thing; however, mindfulness and inclusiveness can keep hidden bias to a minimum.

Karen: Avoiding hidden biases in language doesn’t mean our goal is to make all language bias-free. We need biased language to draw attention to and talk about different groups of people, like Black Lives Matter. Use biased language consciously. ●

Steve Bien-Aimé is an assistant professor at Louisiana State University, where he teaches journalism at the Manship School of Mass Communication. Karen Yin is the creator of AP vs. Chicago and the Conscious Style Guide, a reference site for inclusive, compassionate, and empowering language.

To learn more, [download the presentation on Hidden Bias in Language](#) and view other resources from the Conscious Style Guide.