The Most Common Error in Media Coverage of the Google Memo

Many headlines labeled the document "anti-diversity," misleading readers about its actual contents.

Mike Blake / Reuters

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This week, headlines across a diverse array of media outlets proclaimed that at least one Google employee was so antagonistic to women that he circulated a 10-page "anti-diversity screed."

That is how *Gizmodo* characterized the now infamous internal memo when publishing it Saturday. Similar language was used in headlines at Fox News, CNN, ABC News, the BBC, NBC News, Time, Slate, Engadget, The Huffington Post, PBS, Fast Company, and beyond (including a fleeting appearance in a headline here at *The Atlantic*).

But love or hate the memo, which makes a number of substantive claims, some of which I regard as wrongheaded (and which would've benefitted greatly from an editor with more emotional intelligence than the author to help him avoid alienating his audience, even if he was determined to raise all of the same arguments), the many characterizations of the memo as "anti-diversity" are inaccurate.

Using that shorthand is highly misleading.

As many who read past the headlines would later observe, its author, who was later fired, began, "I value diversity and inclusion, am not denying that sexism exists, and don't endorse using stereotypes. When addressing the gap in representation in the population, we need to look at population level differences in distributions. If we can't have an honest discussion about this, then we can never truly solve the problem."

The balance of his memo argues that he is not against pursuing greater gender diversity at Google; he says it is against the current means Google is using to pursue that end and the way the company conceives of tradeoffs between the good of diversity and other goods.

He wants to use different means to address "the problem," he insists, and doubts that the tradeoffs of getting to a staff of 50 percent men and 50 percent women would be worth it (a position implicitly shared by every company that doesn't have gender parity in its workforce). He may be incorrect, but even if the substance of every viewpoint that he expressed is wrongheaded and even if Google must make huge strides in its treatment of women, that won't make characterizing the memo as an anti-diversity screed any more accurate.

The author specifically objects to using what his memo calls discriminatory means to achieve greater gender diversity, then adds that he has concrete suggestions for changes at Google that would "increase women's representation in tech and without resorting to discrimination." In his telling, this could be achieved by making software engineering "more people-oriented with pair programming and more collaboration" and changes that would "allow those exhibiting cooperative behavior to thrive," as well as offering more opportunities for employees to work part time.

Whether one regards those suggestions as brilliant, rooted in pernicious gender stereotypes, or anywhere in between, they are clearly and explicitly suggestions to increase diversity in a manner the author regards as having a stronger chance of actually working than some of the tactics that he is critiquing.

Later, the author writes, "Philosophically, I don't think we should do arbitrary social engineering of tech just to make it appealing to equal portions of both men and women. For each of these changes, we need principled reasons for why it helps Google; that is, we should be optimizing for Google—with Google's diversity being a component of that." Someone who believes diversity is one component of many for "optimizing" a company is not anti-diversity, even if he places a lesser value on achieving gender parity in staff, vis-a-vis other goods, than those who argue that Google should make whatever tradeoffs are necessary to achieve equal gender representation.

Perhaps the author's approach would lead to less gender diversity at the company if it were adopted. To shorthand his position as "anti-diversity" before the fact is still misleading.

Journalists grasp this nuance on lots of other issues.

Donald Trump campaigned on the promise of more jobs for working-class Americans. In service of that end, he has proposed canceling free-trade agreements, building a wall to keep out immigrants, and eliminating lots of environmental regulations. Critics who avow that they favor more jobs for the

working class, but oppose achieving more jobs through those specific means, are not described as "anti-job," especially when they suggest specific alternatives for job-creation. Even if their alternatives would result in fewer jobs than the Trump administration's plans, that still wouldn't make a writeup of their proposal "an anti-job memo."

To object to a means of achieving x is not to be anti-x.

The failure to apply that same logic to the author of the memo is straightforwardly frustrating for those who agree with many of the views that the memo expressed. And it should also frustrate those who disagree with the author but care about social justice.

Every prominent instance of journalism that proceeds with less than normal rigor when the subject touches on social justice feeds a growing national impulse to dismiss everything published about these subjects—even important, rigorous, accurate articles. Large swathes of the public now believe the mainstream media is more concerned with stigmatizing wrong-think and being politically correct than being accurate. The political fallout from this shift has been ruinous to lots of social-justice causes—causes that would thrive in an environment in which the public accepted the facts.

Most journalists strive to do their jobs with rigor and accuracy, just as most chefs try to put out good food, but occasionally send out a plate that is undercooked or over-salted, being fallible humans working under deadline pressure. But their journalistic blind spots and confirmation biases that no human can completely escape are exacerbated by an aggressive cohort on social media that reacts angrily when journalists present themselves as proceeding with dispassionate rigor on stories related to social justice, as if simply interrogating the least charitable interpretations of something like the Google memo is objectionable. That is shortsighted even from the perspective of understandably angry social-justice activists. A reputation for rigor is indispensable if journalism is to persuade anyone of that which they do not already believe. Mischaracterizations rooted in group

think undermine otherwise factual articles. Social-media activists ought to stop heckling chefs who are trying to measure precisely.

To me, the Google memo is an outlier—I cannot remember the last time so many outlets and observers mischaracterized so many aspects of a text everyone possessed.

Casually perusing "anti-diversity" headlines without reading the memo might mislead readers into thinking a Google employee had assigned a negative value to gender diversity, when in fact he assigned a positive value to gender diversity, but objected to some ways it was being pursued and tradeoffs others would make to maximize it.

The distinction is not insignificant, especially as some news reports mentioned that some at Google agreed with the memo. Many people might prefer to have colleagues with the actual views of the memo's author, however objectionable or wrongheaded they find those views, rather than work alongside colleagues who believe that the presence of women at the company is a net negative, and want a future in which only men are recruited and employed there. Coverage that conflates those perspectives ill-serves even readers who would object to both views, but who do not see them as remotely equivalent. And it doesn't capture the contents of a memo which concludes, "I strongly believe in gender and racial diversity, and I think we should strive for more."

If anything good is to come of the broad public circulation of this story, news outlets must do a better job of accurately characterizing the memo's contents—I've seen numerous mischaracterizations that would lead readers to believe that women had been attacked or disparaged in ways that the text of the memo does not actually bear out.

And then news outlets should transition from stigmatizing the memo's claims, as if the entire audience has preemptively rejected all of them, to marshaling facts and arguments to adjudicate each of its many claims on the merits. Some may believe that even arguing about what the former Google employee wrote will "normalize"

his views. That instinct is wrong. In fact, adjudicating the memo's most dubious arguments on their merits is particularly important: coverage rooted in stigma will be no more effective in stopping the embrace of beliefs expressed by the author than it was at stopping Donald Trump from being elected president.

When journalistic institutions widely publicize material of this sort, only to abdicate the vital work of rigorously addressing its substance, they make its least plausible claims more likely to be normalized. They leave the project of assessing its merits and flaws to Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and other venues where the loudest voices tend to prevail, instead of offering their own careful reporting and expert analysis.

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