

News media bias

People across the political spectrum often feel that “the media” is biased against their beliefs and values. But what counts as bias in news? And why do so few people feel that news coverage is slanted in their favor?

Here are **six tips** to help you think clearly about this nuanced and important topic:

1 Differentiate news from opinion

The standards of quality journalism call for news reports — also called “straight news” or “hard news” — to be as free of bias as possible. But **opinion columns, editorials and op-eds are not produced to be impartial** — they’re supposed to express an opinion.



The Wall Street Journal news division strives to avoid bias, but its opinion section is well known for its conservative views.

2 Think about bias as a spectrum

Nothing humans produce can be entirely free of potential bias, so it’s more helpful to think about bias in news as a spectrum (**more or less biased**) rather than a binary (biased and unbiased).



4 Recognize your own biases

Our own preconceptions can cause us to **misperceive** elements of news coverage, make assumptions about the motivations of journalists, or diligently search for ways to criticize and dismiss coverage as “biased” if it challenges our ideas and beliefs. Though it may seem that bias in news is blatant and deliberate, the reality is that it’s much more often unintentional and open to debate.



5 Be wary of media bias charts and ratings

Bias charts and rating systems seem to provide an easy way to assess bias in news, but **they often contain startling shortcomings**.

Some popular media bias visualizations are based on small samples of coverage that include opinion pieces alongside news reporting. They also mislead by comparing credible news organizations to sources that routinely push disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories. This falsely implies that journalists, hyperpartisans and conspiracy theorists are all part of the same community of practice. They’re not.



Different types of bias ... can take different forms in coverage

TYPES



“Big story” bias: Journalists’ judgment is clouded by their perceptions of an event or development as a major, important story.



Corporate bias: Business interests of a news outlet — including advertisers and its parent company — influence coverage.



Demographic bias: Race, gender, ethnicity or other factors — such as culture or economic class — distort news coverage.



Neutrality bias: A journalist or news outlet tries so hard to avoid appearing biased that the coverage misrepresents the facts.



Partisan bias: Journalists’ own political views affect news coverage.

FORMS



Absence of fairness and balance: The failure to present all relevant viewpoints on an event or issue in an accurate and impartial way.



Framing: How a news report is approached and organized.



Sourcing: The voices and perspectives deemed relevant and important enough to be included in a news story.



Story selection: What a news organization decides is newsworthy enough to cover or feature.



Tone: The words and phrases used to describe the person, issue or event being covered.

6 Think about bias in terms of types and forms

Break through the hyperbole and political rhetoric around the issue of bias by testing your initial perceptions. What **type** of bias do you think you’re seeing? And what **form** do you see it taking in coverage?

Public feedback makes journalism better

If your initial perception of bias in news coverage holds up under scrutiny, say something! Share your thoughts with the reporter on social media or write a letter to the editor.



Think you’ve spotted an example of biased news?

Double-check your initial perceptions by asking: What would “unbiased” news about this subject look like? » If your perceptions of bias are accurate, you should have concrete ideas for how a news report could be made more impartial.

