

MEDIA BIAS



What Is It and Why Does It Matter?

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Media Bias and the Trial of Kyle Rittenhouse	
Chapter One	8
News, Opinion, and Bias: How Do They Differ?	
Chapter Two	21
How Does Bias Affect News Consumers?	
Chapter Three	32
Bias in the New Media	
Chapter Four	43
Changing People's Perceptions About the Media	
Source Notes	54
For Further Research	57
Recognizing Bias	59
Index	61
Picture Credits	64

CHAPTER ONE

News, Opinion, and Bias: How Do They Differ?

The press has been a part of American culture dating back to colonial days. In 1729 Benjamin Franklin and partner Hugh Meredith purchased the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a newspaper published in Philadelphia. Under the ownership of Franklin and Meredith, the *Gazette* did more than just report the local news. In the ensuing decades, Franklin and Meredith used the newspaper to advocate for revolution against the British. In 1754 the *Gazette* published a cartoon of a snake chopped into eight slices—each slice representing one of the eight colonies then in existence. The caption for the cartoon said, “Join, or Die.” The sketch became a symbol of the campaign to win independence from Great Britain. It took more than two decades, but due in no small part to the advocacy of the *Gazette*, the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776.

One of the signers was Franklin, who was still serving as publisher of the *Gazette*. In other words, Franklin was hardly the model of a neutral media executive who saw his or her responsibility as providing a fair and unbiased version of the news to readers. Rather, Franklin favored revolution, and he used his newspaper to mold the thinking of his fellow colonists.

Franklin would not be the last member of the American media to offer a biased view of the news to read-

ers. Today media bias is a common element in the information culture. It can be found in the print media—newspapers and magazines—as well as on TV, radio, and internet-based news platforms. While biased media reporting is widespread, there are also many examples of news media making every effort to present fair and accurate reporting. The work of gathering and reporting the news starts with the reporters who are dispatched to cover the news.

Objective Reporting

The backbone of any legitimate news outlet—whether in print, over the radio and TV airwaves, or through an internet portal—is the reporter. It is the responsibility of reporters to gather facts about the stories they plan to write. Typically, they do this by conducting interviews with people involved in the story and, often, by reviewing relevant documents. Once they have gathered the necessary facts and finished with the interviews, they write a straight and unbiased version of the event. For example, a reporter dispatched to the scene of a bank robbery would typically interview witnesses, executives of the bank, and police officers, and then relate the facts of the story to readers, listeners, or viewers. Likewise, a reporter assigned to cover a political campaign would be expected to attend speeches by the candidates, interview potential voters, and talk to independent political analysts such as pollsters in order to craft stories about the campaign.

Essentially, there is no difference between writing stories about bank robberies and political campaigns. The stories are based on the facts gathered by reporters. Those facts are related to readers, listeners, and viewers in a manner that provides useful information as well as makes the story intriguing. A well-told story engages news consumers and makes them want to know more.

Reporters strive to be objective in how they report and write their stories, meaning they must provide all sides of the story. In

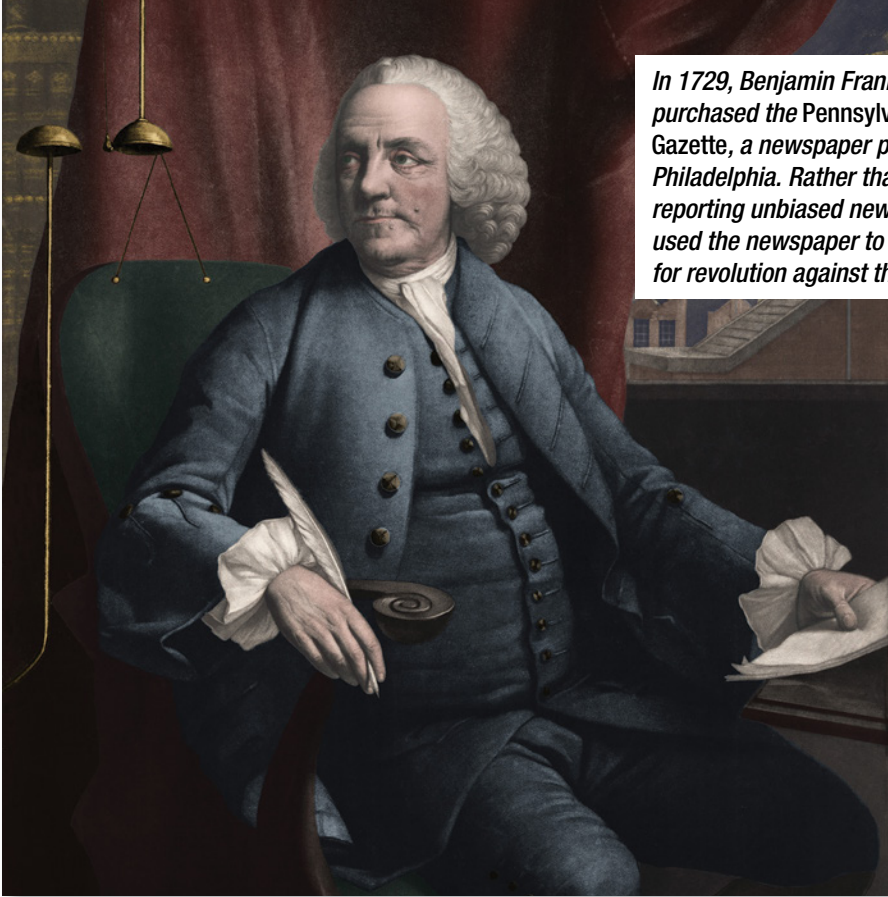
other words, if a political leader takes a position on an issue, it is the responsibility of the reporter to find a spokesperson with an opposite view—thereby giving both sides to the story.

Reporters are barred from injecting their personal feelings into stories. News stories are generally not written in the narrative technique known as the *first person*, meaning the reporter does not describe events using the pronouns *I* or *me*. In describing the scene of a bank robbery, for example, the reporter would not construct the story by saying, “A witness to the robbery told me. . . .” Every legitimate news organization employs reporters to craft these stories.

Editorials and Columns

Over the years, news outlets have not only offered news stories but also opinions: analyses of the news crafted into viewpoints on how the news affects readers, listeners, and viewers. Some news outlets are dedicated almost entirely to opinion and analysis. The *National Review* is a well-known and highly regarded magazine, published twice a month and read by some seventy-five thousand subscribers. The magazine backs conservative positions on issues ranging from diplomatic relations with other countries to tax issues that affect American citizens. In contrast, the *New Yorker* is a weekly magazine that reaches some 1.2 million readers. The magazine was founded in 1925 to cover the literary, theatrical, and dining culture of the New York City borough of Manhattan, but in modern times it has dived deeply into cultural and political stories and is well known for offering readers progressive interpretations of the stories it covers.

But neither the *New Yorker*, the *National Review*, or similar news outlets can be considered biased in how they present their stories. The writers of the stories provide analyses of the issues based on the facts they glean as they prepare their stories. Spokespersons for all sides of the issues examined in the publications are interviewed. Independent experts are often interviewed. Most impor-



In 1729, Benjamin Franklin purchased the Pennsylvania Gazette, a newspaper published in Philadelphia. Rather than simply reporting unbiased news, Franklin used the newspaper to advocate for revolution against the British.

tantly, readers of the *New Yorker* and the *National Review* are well aware of the magazine's reputations and positions on the issues.

When readers pick up their local newspapers or tune to their local radio or TV news broadcasts, it is not unusual for them to find opinions, analyses, and commentaries. For example, in newspapers, readers can find editorials. These are viewpoints expressed by the newspaper's editorial board. Typically, a newspaper's editorial board is composed of senior editors as well as staff members assigned specifically to the editorial page, where their duties include writing editorials and selecting letters to the editor to publish. Usually meeting daily, members of the editorial board may decide to take a position on a public issue, such as a proposed tax increase under consideration by local government leaders. Or the newspaper may endorse a certain candidate for election, encouraging readers to vote for that candidate. The editorials are clearly marked as such and not presented as news. Moreover, the editorial writers base

Going for Shock Value

Some news organizations rely on a form of reporting known as sensationalism to attract readers and viewers and, therefore, earn huge profits for their owners. News organizations that specialize in sensationalism report stories that readers find emotionally shocking. Moreover, though, these news organizations may sensationalize the stories on their own, adding shock value to their reporting. There may be a kernel of truth in the story, but the journalists who cover the stories play up the most shocking aspects of the stories in an effort to touch the emotions of readers.

Shortly after her 2018 marriage to Prince Harry—an heir to the British throne—the actress Meghan Markle often found herself the target of sensationalism. In 2020, for example, many news organizations reported that Markle had once had a love affair with the British actor Simon Rex. The newspapers sold a lot of copies to readers anxious to learn more about Markle’s private life—except that soon after the media aired those stories, Rex stepped forward and said they were untrue. Although he and Markle were friends, they were never lovers. Moreover, Rex said, numerous news outlets offered him cash for interviews in which he was told to falsely claim to have had an affair with Markle. Rex said he turned down all the offers, one of which was for \$70,000.

their opinions on factual information. In the case of the tax increase, for example, the editorial writers would assess the amount of money the tax is expected to raise and whether that money would be put to good use by the government. If the editorial writers conclude that the tax increase is warranted, they would use the space on the editorial page to advocate for the tax hike.

Newspapers also employ columnists—writers who use space in newspapers to provide their opinions on the news. Many of these columns can be found on the so-called op-ed pages—literally, the pages opposite the editorial pages. But columnists can be found elsewhere as well—on the local news page, giving opinions on events that impact local communities. Or on the sports page, providing commentary on how well the local teams may be competing. Or even on the entertainment page, urging readers to see certain movies—or to save their money and not spend it on movies the entertainment critics do not deem worthy of the

price of admission. Today most newspapers have internet platforms, and columnists can be found there as well. Internet-based news outlets that do not feature print versions also employ columnists. On radio and TV, commentators fill those roles, speaking their minds about current issues, assessing the performances of local teams, and providing reviews of newly released films.

“A reporter—which I was for most of my career—gathers information from a variety of sources and presents it in as balanced and unbiased a manner as possible.”⁴

—Carrie Seidman, columnist for the
Daytona Beach News-Journal

Columnists and on-air commentators are expected to base their opinions on facts. They are expected to do the work of reporters—interviewing participants, examining documents, and tapping other sources. They are expected to construct their analyses and opinions based on factual and trustworthy information. In fact, most columnists spend at least a few years as reporters—proving their mettle as news gatherers—before they are given opportunities by their editors to write columns. Says Carrie Seidman, a columnist for the *Daytona Beach News-Journal* in Florida:

A reporter—which I was for most of my career—gathers information from a variety of sources and presents it in as balanced and unbiased a manner as possible, the goal being for the reader to end up with no idea of where that reporter's own feelings may lie.

A columnist abides by the same information gathering rules, but is not only free to express personal opinion, but encouraged and given great latitude to do so. . . .

Columns are, by nature, one-sided. Columnists are not required to be dispassionate, or even balanced. They are also given more leeway stylistically, by, for example, being allowed to use “I,” forgo formal titles and take whatever tone exemplifies their personality, be it sarcastic, humorous snarky, or outraged.⁴

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RECOGNIZING BIAS

The news media has a responsibility to be fair, accurate, and balanced in its reporting on topics large and small. Many members of the media strive to do just that. Others do not. For this reason, news consumers also need to be vigilant when reading, viewing, or listening to news reports. Here are some ways to determine whether news content is biased.

Does the story have a spin?

Spin is a term applied to news stories that are slanted to favor one side. (Public relations professionals employed by celebrities, corporations, and politicians are known as “spin doctors”—it is their job to get journalists to do stories that are favorable to their clients.) Watch for stories that contain language or draw conclusions that favor one side over another.

Who is quoted in the story?

Whether news or commentary, spokespersons for both sides of an issue should be quoted. Or an attempt to reach both sides should at least be noted. Stories based on a single source, without any attempt to seek out the other side, are likely to be biased.

How are adjectives and nouns used in the story?

News reports can leave different impressions simply by the choice of nouns and adjectives. A news report that describes participants in a protest as “lawless hooligans” will leave a different impression than one that describes the participants as “fervent protesters.”

Is the reporter qualified to report the news?

Check the credentials of the person reporting the news. Does the reporter have a journalism degree or any background in the techniques of objective news gathering? Does the reporter have any expertise in the subject area on which he or she is reporting? This is not always the case, but it can be another way to determine credibility.

INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- advertising, rates' basis, 16
- Agirdas, Cagdas, 15
- Agnew, Spiro, 43
- AllSides, 7, 58
- American Revolution, 8
- American Society of News Editors, 28
- Anti-Defamation League, 29–30

- Beck, Glenn, 46
- Bernstein, Carl, 50
- biases
 - basic facts about, 43
 - of bloggers
 - Dupree, 33–34, 37
 - Reaux, 35–37
 - due to lack of staff diversity, 27–28
 - intentional, 14–15
 - journalists' interpretation of events and, 14
 - Pennsylvania Gazette*, 8
 - personal, of news editors and producers, 25–26
 - profit as root of, 15, 16
 - on social media platforms, 40–42
 - sports' coverage of home team, 28
- Biden, Hunter, 36
- Biden, Joe
 - background, 44
 - Carlson's false claim about administration of, 15–16
 - Dupree's false claim about, 33–34
 - Jones's false claims about, 29
- Black protests, news stories about, 24
- Blake, Jacob, 4
- bloggers and blogs
 - biases of
 - Dupree, 33–34, 37
 - Reaux, 35–37
 - ease of establishing sites, 33, **34**
 - E-A-T standard and, 39
 - lack of news credentials of, 32, 33, 36, 40–41
 - monetization and, 38
- Bongino, Dan, 36
- Brechter, Henry A., 7

- Carlson, Tucker, 15–18, 30
- CBS News, 52–53
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 21, 23
- Chapo Trap House, 38–40
- Clinton, Hillary
 - National Enquirer* stories about, 19
 - 2016 primary and presidential election results, 40
 - stories planted by Russian agents, 47–48
- columns (newspaper), 12–13
- COVID-19, 21–23, **23**, 48

- Denver Post* (newspaper), 28
- Detroit Free Press* (newspaper), 28
- DiPento, Melissa, 47
- Dupree, Wayne, 33–34, 37, 38

- E-A-T standard, 39
- editorials in news media, 11–12
- Ellison, Keith, 15
- Emhoff, Doug, 33
- Equal Pay Day event, 33–34

- Facebook, 36, 40–41
- fact-checkers, bias of Fox news, 17
- facts
 - as basis of analyses, 10