**Understanding media bias: How credible are your sources?**

**In this article, we discuss the ins and outs of media bias, including how to recognise it, the different types of bias, and the main issues it causes for media consumers.**

By Rhiannon Wardle

As a society, we consume a lot of different media. To put this into perspective, the global consumer spends [over 7.5 hours a day with media](https://www.statista.com/topics/1536/media-use/) on average. We rely on it as a news source and as [cultural entertainment](https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/culture-in-digital-age), and we often assume that what we’re consuming is pretty reliable.

However, this assumption isn’t accurate, as media bias is rampant across all of the three main media channels: broadcasting, publishing, and most definitely the internet. For this reason, it’s smart to learn how to consume media with a more critical eye.

## What is bias?

Looking at the definition of bias more generally, it is the tendency to lean towards or against someone or something. The direction in which you lean can be influenced by factors such as your background, culture and personal experiences. Sometimes, bias is something you’re aware of, and this is known as explicit bias, but implicit or [unconscious bias](https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/supporting-learning-secondary/0/steps/58616) is something you don’t realise you have.

## What is the definition of media bias?

Media bias can affect the selection of events and stories that get published, the perspective from which they’re written, and the language chosen to tell them.

In most countries, media bias is thought to either lean to the left or right, meaning it either favours liberal or conservative politics. In some countries, media bias can go so far as to completely reflect the ideals of the governing body, for example, in North Korea. In cases such as this, media bias essentially becomes [propaganda](https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/propaganda).

Although a lot of media contains unconscious bias, where journalists may be met with practical limitations to neutrality such as lack of access to all the facts, media also regularly contains explicit bias. This is where media outlets deliberately try to paint a certain image of an event, group or individual to achieve their desired outcome. This outcome may be politically fuelled, or it could just be an attempt to make more money.

## What are the different types of media bias?

There are countless different types of media bias, but here we delve into more detail about the most common kinds.

1. **Spin.** This is a type of media bias where the journalist strays away from objective fact and instead puts a certain spin on a story that dramatizes it or places it out of context.
2. **Bias by omission.** If a media outlet chooses not to write certain stories, or they leave out relevant information or perspectives on purpose, this is bias by omission.
3. **Unsubstantiated claims.** This is when the journalist makes claims without [using data](https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/media-data) or evidence to prove their point; this can often be seen in article headlines.
4. **Sensationalism.** A tactic often used by tabloid journalists, sensationalism is when information is presented in a shocking or over-dramatic way to lure in readers. Also known as click-bait.
5. **Opinions presented as fact.** This is when journalists suggest that subjective statements are factual, or present their opinions, assumptions or beliefs as objective.
6. **Slant.** When journalists only tell part of a story and try to play up one particular angle, this is known as slant.
7. **Mind reading.** Sometimes, journalists will write assumptions about what members of the public or individuals are thinking, and these assumptions are often wrong.
8. **Flawed logic.** This is when journalists arrive at conclusions that are not justified by any of their previous points or any evidence, in an attempt to misrepresent the facts.
9. **Omission of source attribution.** Where a journalist sources their story is very important, so if they omit their sources, they might not be presenting reliable information.

### Echo chambers

If you’re in a cave and you shout out, all you’re going to hear is your own voice echoing back to you. This is essentially how virtual echo chambers work – when your online community is made up of like-minded people, you will generally keep hearing your own opinions being reflected back to you.

This is why it can be productive to have wide virtual networks. Following people with different views on social media and reading different news sources can allow you to get out of the echo chamber and be exposed to a broader range of perspectives.

The act of staying within our echo chambers is similar to the concept of confirmation bias, where we only watch or listen to media that confirms our views and opinions. While it might be more comfortable to consume media that demonstrates the same interests and worldview as yourself, it’s not very conducive to learning.

## How to recognise media bias

There are several ways you can recognise media bias. [FAIR](https://fair.org/take-action-now/media-activism-kit/how-to-detect-bias-in-news-media/), the national media watch group in the US, suggests that there are numerous questions you should ask yourself when consuming media in order to find biases. We’ve detailed some of the most important questions below:

* **Who are the sources?** In the article you’re reading, where is the journalist getting their sources from? Are all of the sources corporate and government-based, or are there any progressive, public interest, minority or female voices being referenced?
* **Is there a lack of diversity?** Looking at a particular media outlet, how diverse is their workforce compared to the communities they serve? Do they have producers, editors and managers of different races, genders and sexualities? To be fairly representative, they should have diverse people in leadership positions.
* **From whose point of view is the media reported?** Perspective is everything. Often, political coverage focuses on how certain issues affect politicians or corporations. In order to be fair, media outlets must present the point of view of those most affected by an issue.
* **Are there double standards?** Check for double standards by finding a parallel example by the same media company or citing similar stories that were covered in a different way. For example, are similar stories about men and women written in the same way?
* **Is there a total lack of context?** Stories without context can often paint a false picture of society or certain groups within it. For example, crime may be going up in a certain area because poverty is increasing, but this connection might not be explained.

## What are the main issues with media bias?

### It can lead to censorship

If a media outlet consistently chooses to emit stories that it doesn’t align with, this can be a form of censorship. As a result, consumers of that media outlet could be getting a distorted view of certain issues.

It can be politically motivated

Extreme forms can mutate into propaganda

If a media outlet is extremely biased in favour of the governing body, the news that they present may not only be inaccurate, but might brainwash consumers into blindly accepting government decisions.

If this extreme bias occurs in government materials or in the single primary media outlet delivering information, this could be considered propaganda.

### It can cause divisions in society

Because left-wing media and right-wing media discuss the same issues in different ways, people can become divided on what to do or feel about them. More generally, biased reporting can be an unfair representation of people or groups in society, which can lead to negative stereotypes and poor treatment.

## Is media bias ever okay?

A journalist might be biased one way or another, but if they’re sharing factual information with evidence from reliable sources to back it up, then they are painting a relatively trustworthy representation of an issue.

The most important thing, is for the journalist to be honest about their own biases and political leanings. After all, he says, “there can’t be such a thing as a neutral journalist”, but “if we show an awareness of our own political leanings, it actually makes us more trustworthy than if we’re in denial about them”. If the mediated public sphere is an open and inclusive space for change, then people should be able to share their opinions about contentious topics, even if they’re not neutral.

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7kaj84o1O0**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7kaj84o1O0)

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