

Note: Prepare handouts on essential topics by reliable, experienced professionals . . . like this one.

— *Frank Garred*

News: Beyond the Myth of Objectivity

[How to Analyze a News Story: Eight Guidelines for Reading Between the Lines.](#)

[By Jay Davis](#)

Objectivity, n. (Apparently,) The practice of presenting both sides of an issue.

Spend a week watching any of the network news reports and you are likely to conclude that all issues have only two sides and that middle-aged, white males have the only insight on them. From Sunday afternoon interview programs to ABC's Nightline, satisfying the U.S. media's standards of "objectivity" seems to require bringing opposing personalities together to debate issues of foreign and domestic policy. The ensuing dialogue, usually between Democrats and Republicans or some equivalent, suggests that all sides of the issue are covered.

This dualism is one way media interpret news in North America. It seems clear, however, that "presenting both sides" tends to undermine creative discussion of the many shades of belief that actually represent opinion on complex issues.

If all issues are presented in black-and-white, yes-and-no terms, if one is either pro-life or pro-choice, pro-intervention or anti-intervention, what happens to discussion of cases that fail to fit the neatly established dichotomy?

Another traditional definition of objectivity focuses on the idea of impartiality. In this view, objectivity means keeping one's own beliefs, opinions or feelings separate from the story. This definition is more textbook than honest, however. Most journalists would agree that true impartiality is impossible. Even the most evenhanded reporter is subject to personal bias.

Objectivity is stressed and stretched today by the growth of new media and the shrinkage of mass media markets. Its surviving forms carry the weight of tradition. The unwary viewer can be left with the impression that media dualism represents all the sides there are to current issues.

The limits of objectivity make the search for alternative viewpoints crucial. Still, there's no doubt that in the immediate future, most readers, viewers and listeners will depend on mainstream media for the basic facts that shape their opinions.

What to watch for, then, in media news? Look for creativity. Look for journalists and media that stretch to find unusual perspectives. Watch for the foreign

correspondent who takes the trouble to interview refugees when another power invades their country. Pay attention to the broadcaster who takes precious time to explore the history of the debate over rights, pointing out how today's opinions echo historical questions. Read the writer whose editorial on nuclear energy in Tennessee includes an interview with an elderly Appalachian trout fisherman who remembers what the fish were like before the power plant was built.

Journalists are well aware that any story will change with the number of people interviewed, but not enough of them follow this principle on all stories. Those who go the extra mile are worth watching for. A truly effective journalist shouldn't be satisfied with the views of the experts. Neither should media consumers.

How to Analyze a News Story: Eight Guidelines for Reading Between the Lines

1. Compare headlines and story content. Headlines are probably the most important aspect of news stories. Most people "shop" headlines to determine which articles to read. After reading an article, propose alternative headlines that emphasize different facts. How accurately does the actual headline encapsulate the article? Does the headline slant one's reading of the article?
2. Identify politically-charged labels, adjectives, and verbs. Word choices can help identify reporters' biases. Have your family or group read an article and list words that seem politically charged. For example: Are the Contras called "freedom fighters?" Are those who support abortion rights called "abortion activists" or "pro-choice activists?" What connotation does the word "activist" imply? Why?
3. Question the hidden agenda of suspicious sources. Sometimes reporters need to speak with sources "off the record." Often, however, sources use their anonymity to further their own agendas. When a reporter cites "top U.S. officials," "company informants," or other anonymous sources, whose position is left out? What ulterior motive might a source have?
4. Consider whether the placement of ideas and sources affects story impact. Try cutting apart a newspaper article and pasting it back together in a different order. Does the tenor of the article change when dissenting opinions become the lead? Whose position is stressed by the original arrangement of the story?
5. Look for non-white, non-male perspectives. North American media rely heavily on white, male officials for their news. How does the news change when seen from the perspective of women or other races? For a class or group project, have group members tally the sex and race of sources cited in a television, radio or print report. How many are white and male? How

- many are females or people of color?
6. Compare photographs and photo captions to the news stories connected with them. Manipulation of digital images is not the only way to change the meaning of a picture. As with headlines, readers "shop" a newspaper by scanning pictures and reading captions -- whether or not they read the associated articles. Are photographs and their captions faithful to the articles connected with them? How does a picture or caption influence the meaning of an article?
 7. Compare news stories to common sense. Be aware of obvious misstatements of facts that defy common sense. In the aftermath of the Exxon oil spill, one article stated that much of the oil spill "is gone, most by natural action." So where did it go? Did it evaporate -- or is it now mixed with billions of gallons of water?
 8. Be suspicious of polls and statistics. Polling data and statistics are notoriously deceptive. Ask "which perspective does this data seem to support?" Then try rearranging the same data so that it presents a different perspective.

Author:

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