

## Unearthing hidden media agendas and fake news

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Who is funding the news sources you rely on? Do they have a hidden agenda? Who holds their purse strings? How much of their content is AI-generated? How much is fake news?



Throughout history, news consumers have had to grapple with the task of discerning and evaluating the content they receive. The six centuries since the advent of the printing press have seen fluctuations in the relative influence of governments and independent journalism. More recently, the proliferation of media platforms has both increased media freedom and heightened potential for abuse.

### Interference by industry and government

Mainstream media – including television channels and national newspapers – are heavily funded by industry and generous donors expect to be treated favourably. In some instances, they impose narratives on the media groups they support and require promotion of their industries. When this occurs – and it does – the public receive a manipulated version of the facts.

Government intervention in the media is to be expected in matters of national interest – but it is doubtful that it is always justified. Following his takeover of X (Twitter) in October 2022, Elon Musk revealed a plethora of US government directives to the social media platform. The platform's suspected Liberal bias was revealed in emails which showed a conscious decision to limit the number of posts relating to the Hunter Biden laptop story in 2020. Although Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has stated that his platform is not a '*government mouthpiece*', it is clear that Facebook has close ties with the US government and that its views are seriously considered in decision-making.

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Government interference is a worldwide phenomenon. Canadian-born media magnate Conrad Black – whose empire included *Chicago Sun-Times*, Britain's *Daily Telegraph* and the *Jerusalem Post* – was widely reported to have been involved in unethical and illegal activity including directing political outcomes.

In 2015, the Australian Broadcasting House (ABC) reported that the government had paid people smugglers to turn back boats with asylum seekers. Although this was denied by the Australian government, the public was in uproar. The government then controversially attempted to pass legislation making it illegal for ABC to report on national security matters. The move was defeated and threw into question government attempts to control media.

In India, in its 2014 general election, local media outlets were criticised for their biased reporting, in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and against the opposing Congress party. Indian media has also been accused of spreading misinformation and propaganda.

In Hungary, media is predominantly controlled by the Fidesz party. Aligned oligarchs have purchased most of the country's independent media houses and the government frequently calls on them to silence outspoken critical speakers or journalists. As a result, Hungarian media is considered one of the most censored in the European Union (EU).

Indonesia's mainstream media is privately owned by several small but powerful conglomerates tied to the government. In 2019, Indonesian media was scolded for playing down the severity of the country's forest fires to protect industry logging companies.

### **Fake news, misinformation and deepfakes**

The rise in the number of media platforms presents opportunities – but these are matched by the dangers of misinformation, deepfakes and 'echo chamber' effects of fake news. Warnings of '*information apocalypse*' and '*the collapse of reality*' are no longer simply sensationalist. The impossibility of regulation and proliferation of politically weaponised AI-generated memes allow false narratives to divide and unsettle society. Reading, hearing and seeing are no longer believing.

## **Where to get your news today?**

Arising from a mistrust of mainstream media, independent journalism has really taken hold. Independent groups like The Grayzone, Consortium News, New Atlas, The Duran and Mahyar Tousi TV (the latter three of which are popular on YouTube) are focusing on fact checking and providing unbiased reporting on worldwide geopolitical events. Writers like Matt Taibbi, Baris Weiss and Glenn Greenwald became widely recognised for their collaboration with Musk's newly purchased X/Twitter and the reporting of the 'Twitter files' scandal. These visionaries have been championing new standards in journalism and, to date, they all offer views that are not driven by big private corporations or political agendas.

For geopolitical news, political readouts by the relevant countries are a useful source. For example, [www.japan.go.jp](http://www.japan.go.jp) for the Japan's official government site, or [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) for the UK.

## **How do I to treat and process news?**

Check the following for potential bias:

- The platform's financial and political affiliations.
- The language used, particularly condescending or emotionally charged language.
- Unbalanced reporting – e.g., a damning narrative looking to steer readers toward a particular political view.
- The overall narrative – in particular, who are all the stakeholders who might benefit from this message? Does the author clearly offer their own point of view?
- Omission of important facts.
- Engagement of consumers – some platforms encourage and facilitate knee-jerk reactions from consumers of their content.

## The quest for unbiased news – what might it look like?

Finding human, non-biased independent news is an impossible ideal. Here's why:

- Sources: A journalist undergoes a subjective process of choosing sources from which to cite. Typically, they will choose platforms that align with their own political views.
- Language choice and framing: How a journalist frames a point and the language tone will influence readers' perceptions. For example, light-hearted and favourable words for an action or individual they support, and a negative or even aggressive tone towards that which they oppose.
- Omitting data: A journalist might choose to omit information they believe could tarnish the reputation of a subject they are looking to support.
- Editorial bias: This is the clearest representation of political bias and is demonstrated when a journalist openly expresses their views in articles.

What would completely unbiased news look or sound like? Is it possible to convey a view that portrays all the details, allowing a reader access to unfiltered, unredacted truth in unemotional language?

Journalists are human beings and naturally have their own biases and opinions. It is almost impossible for them to remove these sentiments from their material. What's more, a lack of a personal viewpoint can also make content bland and dull. Journalists have to decide what to include and exclude, otherwise content will include irrelevant or inconsequential information.

The essentials of unbiased reporting are as follows:

- Both sides of a story – issues must be presented evenly and fairly to allow a reader to understand a situation fully.
- Neutral tones, avoiding emotionally charged and challenging language, remaining factual and objective.
- Clear sources so that readers can assess its validity and credibility.

- Transparent bias – a writer who voices an opinion ought to make their own bias clear allowing a reader to judge how this could be ‘steering’ the content.

*New York Times* journalist Bret Stephens recently wrote, ‘*We are not in the “truth” business, at least not the sort with a capital “T”. Our job is to collect and present relevant facts and good evidence. Beyond that, truth quickly becomes a matter of personal interpretation, and lived experience.*’

## **Summary**

There is no such thing as perfectly unbiased news. A balanced view must be found through a diligent assessment of several trusted sources. Debates and the resulting progress should not be about the winning of local proximity conversational battles, but toward finding the ‘truth’ about any given situation.

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