IN BRIEF

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.

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).

3. Ask yourself: Compared with what?
   When you encounter allegations of bias — whether sweeping generalizations about “the mainstream media” or more measured claims about a specific news organization or piece of reporting — keep these questions in mind:
   - Biased compared with what?
   - Can I point to an example of information that is fairer, more accurate and more impartial?

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.

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.