

There's no such thing as unbiased reporting

Relying on elusive standards of journalistic 'objectivity' is misleading, and it is in our best interest to adopt more attainable ideals

By [The Varsity Editorial Board](#)

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A study conducted by prominent American journalists Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz in 1920 revealed some inconvenient truths about *The New York Times*' coverage of the then-recently concluded Russian Revolution: one of the most prominent news organizations in the western world had effectively bungled their coverage of a major historical event. Lippmann and Merz found that the *Times*' stories on the revolution were rarely based in fact, but rather shaped by the "hopes of the men who composed the news organization." Influenced by the outcomes they were banking on, the reporters' writing lacked the factual accuracy or balanced perspective necessary to deliver an informed report.

Essentially, Lippmann and Merz decried the *Times*' coverage as biased. And so, the authors of the study, and presumably much of the public who read it, lost trust in the so-called 'biased' tendencies of major media outlets. By way of solution, Lippmann argued that journalism should embrace more of a "scientific spirit" — believing that ultimate fairness, or 'objectivity,' could be achieved in journalism so long as the journalists made the study of evidence of verification to be the cornerstone of their work. Thus ensued the era of supposedly 'neutral' journalism, when well-trusted news anchors like Walter Cronkite and Chet Huntley would

deliver stories seemingly without bias and seemingly without lack of context.

The notion of bias in news writing has since become one of colloquial discussion, and it is now one of the most common criticisms of the media. Most often, the label is imparted to news that readers believe is lacking relevant context, or to media outlets whose political views the reader disagrees with. At its most extreme, it is plastered across outraged comment sections and blog posts on the deep web, rooted in a conspiratorial belief that news organizations have pre-determined political agendas and feed purposely slanted reports to the masses. Such polarization within the news world has resulted in publications whose self-imposed purpose is to provide contrast to what they see as an irreparably biased media landscape. Publications like Breitbart dedicate copious coverage to “Big Journalism,” aimed at debunking the “spin and narratives from the Democrat-media complex,” while outlets like *The Intercept* position themselves to be highly critical of the methods of mainstream channels like *CNN*. Even at the university level, publications like *The Toronto Beacon* claim to have been founded “as a reaction to the current state of journalism,” making specific reference to *The Varsity*’s coverage of a campus rally in 2016, among other incidents. None of these publications can be equivocated, but they do illustrate the extent to which people are frustrated with mainstream media coverage. At the same time, it is counterproductive to leave blanket accusations of bias at that — for eliminating all bias from reporting is an impossible task. Reports are created by authors and shaped by editors whose perspectives and personal experiences are inherently injected into the final product. Even when reporting from the scene of the story, journalists make a series of judgment calls based on what they consider to be newsworthy. These decisions may alter information in the story depending on who is tasked with telling it. In this vein, it should be acknowledged that the notion of ‘objectivity’ underlying the journalistic profession was developed and continues to operate within a context that privileges certain perspectives. It is no coincidence that Lippmann, Merz, Cronkite, and Huntley were all white men, a demographic that continues to hold a steadfast grip on the North

American media profession, despite the substantial progress being pursued in this area.

Paradoxically, being ‘unbiased,’ ‘objective,’ or ‘neutral’ are themselves ideals laden with normative content, inherently dependent on the standards journalists use to determine the importance of information and to communicate what they believe is the truth. A bigger problem is that the normative nature of bias is effectively masked by widely accepted, seemingly neutral codes of ethics and best practices that have permeated the journalism industry. Figures like Cronkite were not delivering an unbiased account of the news, but rather an account shaped by the collective decisions of the *CBS* news team. In the codes of ethics of countless publications — *The Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, and, yes, *The Varsity* — objectivity and impartiality are portrayed to be the ideal standard of a news report, despite that standard being ultimately unachievable.

The assumption that journalists need to annihilate all bias from their reporting imparts on them an insurmountable undertaking. This is certainly not intended to diminish the critical role journalism plays in our society; information-gathering and truth-telling are undoubtedly in the public interest. But pursuing best practices should entail a reconsideration of the language we use to describe the ideal state of the media, and in turn, shift our understanding of journalism away from amorphous or unattainable standards.

One solution that has been offered, [including by our former Editor-in-Chief last year](#), is to substitute ‘unbiased’ coverage with ‘balanced’ coverage. The idea of balance, in the journalistic context, is based on the deceptively simple notion that all figures and institutions relevant to a story be given a fair chance to play a part in telling it. This also entails all pieces of information being put in factual perspective, meaning that truths and mistruths should never be given equal footing. Sometimes this is straightforward; in most cases, it isn’t.

There are also certainly things we can do to address the biases that underlie all journalistic work. The importance of the journalistic process demands such efforts, guided not by an impossible lack of normative ideals, but ultimately by better ones. More importantly, we can make the process by which we determine those ideals public, and we can encourage readers to subject them to thorough scrutiny.

The Varsity's Code of Journalistic Ethics reads, "Fairness is a balanced and impartial presentation of all the relevant facts in a news report, and of all substantial opinions in a matter of controversy. Fairness demands that journalists place inaccurate or misleading public statements in factual perspective." As opposed to 'objectivity,' the goal thereby becomes to strive for balance, which is arguably more concrete. The procedures that underlie the operations of *The Varsity* and many other publications reflect that ideal. These include ensuring all figures implicated in a story are given the chance to comment, offering disclosures about potential conflicts of interest, and making source materials available upon request. At a fundamental level, it also includes pulling back the curtain on how the news is made. *The Varsity* has endeavoured to do this by [hosting a Reddit AMA earlier this year](#), by opening our office to the public, and by writing editorials like this one. When publications fall short of achieving their objectives, public editors step in. The role of [Sophie Borwein's column in *The Varsity*](#), for instance, is not only to critique the publication and respond to reader complaints, but also to offer a perspective that we cannot, in acknowledgment that the journalists who write the news are intrinsically tied to its making. We can also look to other outlets for guidance. Publications like *The Intercept* will [publish the documentation that an article is based on alongside the original stories](#). Meanwhile, the *Times* uses [The Reader Center](#) to justify its journalistic choices to its audiences, [a tool that has come in particularly useful](#) following the controversy surrounding its profile on a Nazi sympathizer from Ohio. These methods, and others like them, arguably reflect the idea that a newspaper should be in direct, democratic dialogue with its readership. Finally, recalling concerns about whitewashed, male-dominated newsrooms, promoting a diverse range of perspectives is integral to the pursuit of fair and balanced reporting. Striving for diversity also means being sensitive to the responsibility that journalists have to those persecuted, marginalized, and disaffected members of our society — to offer them a voice and to probe and critique the institutions that hold power against them. This responsibility is not characterized by neutrality, either; it is principled and normative, as it should be. In the 1920s, Lippmann and Merz rightfully exposed the blatant political slant underlying the methods of a major journalistic institution. In today's highly fraught media climate, with accusations of bias and

fake news flying left and right, our community finds itself at a similar pivotal moment, and the way forward remains unclear. Our shift in perspective toward media bias, however, should also prompt a shift in how readers respond to it, for that response will be integral in shaping what the profession eventually becomes.

The Varsity's editorial board is elected by the masthead at the beginning of each semester. For more information about the editorial policy, email editorial@thevarsity.ca.