

How to Evaluate the News

"Assertions without evidence are dismissed without evidence."

- Christopher Hitchens

When you choose what to click on, what to read, what to believe or not, you're making critical decisions about what matters and what you trust or don't understand. In this issue, Operation Wildfire provides quick, easy ways to evaluate the news. The American Press Institute provides six questions that will help you decide what media to trust.¹

1. Type: What kind of content is this?

The first step in knowing what you can believe begins with knowing who produced the content.

- If the story or graphic you're looking at came in a tweet or through a friend, always look at the name of the organization, not just the name of the author.
- If you don't know the organization, look it up online. Take the time to research the organization to learn how it's funded and who the leaders are. If it isn't clear, that's a problem.

Does the content have a political slant? If all stories point in one direction or tend to reinforce the views of one political party, that's a sign that the site has a political viewpoint. If, in our research, we find a story in the HuffPost or MSNBC, we'll check other sources to complete the research because we've occasionally found holes in the reporting. If we find information on Axios, which is noted for its middle-of-the-road reporting, we will still check other sources to confirm what we've found.

So, how do you know the political leanings of news organizations? We found that the AllSides Media Bias Chart™ easily identifies different perspectives and political leanings in the news so you can get the full picture and make up your own mind on the stories of the day. We found the Media Bias Chart at this link:

<https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>

2. Source: Who and what are the sources cited and why should you believe them?

As you read, listen or watch a piece of news content, note who is being cited. A major part of understanding sources is recognizing the level of knowledge that someone might have or how close it is to being first hand. Here are examples:

- *Sourceless News:* If the president speaks on television or in public, the account may cite no source at all. It was a public event for all to view, so it's not necessary to name a specific source.
- *Journalist as Witness:* In this case, the account may make it clear the author saw it but cite no other witnesses or sources. Do you remember the Portland, Oregon demonstrations in the summer of 2020? Some journalists reported that the majority of the protests in Portland were peaceful; others reported that the demonstrations involved rioting, heated confrontations with law enforcement, use of tear gas and other weapons, arson, looting, vandalism, and injuries. Even journalists may report the facts based on their own bias. Be skeptical!
- *Credentialed Experts:* The author or journalist may have obvious expertise or credentials so that they appear to be an authoritative and trusted news source. Who do you trust with economic analysis? Austan Goolsbee on the left or Larry Kudlow on the right? How did you feel about Dr. Anthony Fauci during the pandemic? How do you feel about him now? Credentialed experts have their political biases, too. Find more than one opinion and make up your own mind.
- *Proximity of Knowledge:* How well does the source know what they're talking about? If they are an official source such as a police spokesperson, they are likely a second- or third-hand witness, but they

¹ The American Press Institute, Tom Rosenstiel, October 22, 2013

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may be basing what they say on multiple first-hand witnesses. If it's not clear, be skeptical and check other sources.

- *Distance in Time:* Research shows that the more time passes, the more faulty the memory. Always ask yourself how far in the past did this event occur before it was recalled. The more you know about a source, the better you'll be able to evaluate the accuracy of the information.
- *Anonymous:* Journalists often use sources without naming them. If so, what background is offered about how the source would know what he or she is talking about and why you should believe them. Once you've identified the source, ask if they have a bias, are they a witness to facts or just describing their opinions?

3. Evidence: What's the evidence and how was it vetted?

Trust the material that offers more evidence, is more specific and more transparent about the proof being offered. If a report says "scientists agree," that's not specific. If it says they interviewed fifteen scientists and they all agreed, you have a better idea of how much authority there is within the report. But do you?

In October 2020, fifty former intelligence officials warned emails alleged to have been found on a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden showed signs of a Russian disinformation operation. Their signatures and stature would suggest that the material was correct. The *New York Post* reported on June 21, 2023 that James Clapper, former Director of National Intelligence, said "to this day, I still have not seen any official results, of a forensic analysis, of that laptop, as to whether or not in some way the Russians messed with it" – despite belated confirmation of the hard drive's authenticity by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and CBS News.

4. Interpretation: Is the main point of the piece proven by the evidence?

Most media content offers a main point of some kind built around an idea, trend or even some angle on a news event. The one exception might be breaking news. Ask yourself whether the main point makes sense, and whether the conclusions are supported by the evidence offered. Remember, the best news providers and publishers let us know when new information is available that contradicts or confirms what was previously thought. How often does that happen? Does the public believe journalists provide honest interpretations?

On February 15, 2023, *Fortune* reported that half of Americans in a recent survey, conducted by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, indicated they believe national news organizations intend to mislead, misinform or persuade the public to adopt a particular point of view through their reporting. Many of those surveyed also believe there is intent to deceive.

5. Completeness: Is something missing?

Most content should lead to more questions. Being a critical, questioning consumer is to ask yourself what you don't understand about a subject. If important information is missing, that's a problem. If something is explained so poorly that it isn't clear, that's a problem, too. However, if something is missing and the story explained why, that's a good thing. The point of good news content isn't just to tell you something. It should also be to create understanding and help you to react or take action.

6. Knowledge: Am I learning what I need every day?

Here are a few things to ask yourself to see if you're learning what you think you should:

- What are some things you hear people talking about that you wished you understood better?
- Could I explain this situation to someone?
- Look at the top stories on a website or a newspaper front page? Are you familiar with them? Do you believe that you should understand them?

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Above all, beware of the tendency to cherry-pick information. Each of us has a tendency to notice stories or facts that fit what we already believe (or want to believe). When you search for information, make it a point to look at alternative viewpoints. You don't need to agree with them, or tolerate misinformation from them – but it's healthy and balanced to have some variety in your information diet. If you read or listen to only one source, it's difficult to make an informed decision.

Check the Source and Confirm the Facts²

Rutgers University Libraries recommends using these sites to check stories and information to help verify and understand the type of information being shared. Remember, even these sources may be biased but the more information you have available, the better. As always, we encourage you to add to our lists.

- AP Fact Check – <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-fact-check>
- Fact Check.org – <https://www.factcheck.org/>
- Lead Stories – <https://leadstories.com/>
- Snopes – <https://www.snopes.com/>

Fact Checking Related to Politics and Elections

These websites fact check and provide information specific to politics, politicians and elections. They are especially important for finding facts and information for making informed decisions on voting.

- Vote Smart – <https://justfacts.votesmart.org/>
- PolitiFact – <https://www.politifact.com/>
- Open Secrets - <https://www.opensecrets.org/>

Where Operation Wildfire Joins the Fray

Upon exiting the Constitutional Convention Benjamin Franklin was approached by a group of citizens asking what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer was: "A republic, if you can keep it."³ The brevity of that response should not cause us to under-value its essential meaning: democratic republics like the United States are not merely founded upon the consent of the people; they are also dependent upon the informed involvement of the people for their continued good health.

From HuffPost to Axios to The Daily Caller and everything in between, Operation Wildfire issue papers are thoroughly researched and sourced to help you wade through the news reports, concerns and issues that matter without editorial bias.

According to feedback we've received, you can "count on Wildfire to deliver the facts" that will help you make a more informed decision when you go to the polls. Let's keep the wildfire growing – share our issue papers with your family, friends, neighbors and coworkers, and ask them to do the same.

² Rutgers University, University Libraries

³ National Constitution Center, "Perspectives on the Constitution: A Republic, If You Can Keep It"