

Informed Citizens: Teaching Least Biased Sources in an Age of Misinformation

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Abstract: Most students are getting political information from social media. Digital literacy and teaching students the proper role of information and false information is becoming increasingly important. This paper examines the use of fact checking and triangulation of least biased sources in helping students properly understand information in the 21st Century. Taking data from Ad Fontes (2020), Forbes (2017), Gallup/Knight Survey (2018), All Sides Media (2024), and Toward Data Science (2020), a "Least Biased Sources" model allows students to triangulate information and determine true and false news stories. A pilot study is used to show the impact of student learning and assess the impact of least biased sources on the ability to determine real from fake news.

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Introduction: An Informed Public?

In modern America, watching, reading, or even checking up on the news has taken a backseat to reality T.V. shows and other entertainment. As formal education has increased throughout the United States, political understanding has decreased throughout the populace (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991). Pew Research did a study prior the 2016 presidential election breaking down where people get information for the election. 24 percent felt Cable TV news was the “most helpful” followed by social media (14 percent), local TV (14 percent), and news website/app (13 percent). On the other hand, 18 – 29-year-olds are more supportive of social media (35 percent) as their primary news source (<http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/04/the-2016-presidential-campaign-a-news-event-thats-hard-to-miss/>). This went up to 46 percent for the 2024 election (Shearer et al, 2024).

A 2020 Gallup report also sheds light on another problem with information in our society – views on media bias. A majority (67 percent) are concerned about news bias, more likely among Republicans than Democrats, and 83 percent blame the media for political divisions (Knight Foundation 2020). Huang, et al (2024) outline the studies over time examining media bias and its’ effects based on “event selection, tone, framing, and word choice (Hamborg et al. 2019; Puglisi and Snyder Jr, 2015b).” Research demonstrates, perceived or otherwise, media bias exists and has an impact on information.

The challenge of teaching politics has become more pronounced with how students consume political information and the lack of understanding when it comes to sources. This paper attempts to explore a way by which educators can both present information to students and help them overcome both media bias and their own biases in confronting news sources. Measuring media bias through various sources and combining the rankings into one source will

allow students to find “least biased news” and address their own biases in the process, addressing reliable news in the process. Further, using triangulation, students can learn to validate information quickly and understand the need for avoiding confirmation bias.

The Challenges of Bias

Information bias is nothing new, globally and in the United States; Weaver (2024) outlines an extensive history of media bias. In exploring media bias, Genzkow et al (2015) examined the multiple ways in which, consciously or unconsciously, media can present biased information to the public. Some of the bias is how the information is selected to present a story and, as a result, may even omit some information in the process (Downs, 1957). “Given the vast number of events happening in the world at any given moment, even the most powerful media must be selective in what they choose to report instead of covering all available facts in detail (Huang et al 2024: 1).” Bias can also be impacted by tone, framing, and word choice (Hamborg et al. 2019; Puglisi and Snyder Jr, 2015b).

Further complicating the issue of media bias is the expanded sources of information. Along with deepening political divisions, partisan news outlets have recently proliferated (Iyenger et al 2019; Prior 2013) leading to an increase in the spread of misinformation (Jamieson and Albarracín 2020; Osmundsen et al 2021). First, cable news expanded the market in the 1990s, allowing people can be self-selective with cable news, indicating that many are just reinforcing their ideological preferences; “we estimate that cable news can increase polarization and explain about two-thirds of the increase among the public in the US, and that this increase depends on both a persuasive effect of cable news and the existence of tastes for like-minded news” (Martin and Yurukoglu 2014, 40). Today, social media has become a primary focus of

information; just over half of U.S. adults (54%) say they at least sometimes get news from social media, up slightly compared with the last few years (Shearer et al 2024).

Social media has caused additional issues with sharing of biased content. Biased news sources created more negative emotional responses, especially in biased sources, which led to increased rates of shared content on social media (Knutson et al 2024). “Negativity amplifies news dissemination on social media to a greater extent when accounting for the re-sharing of user posts containing article links” (Watson et al 2024: abstract). Additionally, social media produced the most anxiety for all age levels after the 2016 election resulting in many “unfriending” and further isolating information sources (Selyukh 2016). Not only is social media producing more sharing of biased news but it is leading to loss of social interactions, along with higher levels of emotional issues.

Overall, most media bias studies focus on the media as the source of the bias. However, research has also focused on the psychological and economic selection of news as a preference based on the consumer; people select news on their own enjoyment of the information (Lord et al. 1979; Nickerson 1998; Rabin and Schrag 1999; Tirole 2002). In this situation, self-selection of biased news is part of the problem, leading to a situation of confirmation bias or echo chamber where the information reflects consumer preferences. Given the levels of both produced and induced bias, it has become increasingly important to address bias both in media and in personal reflection of information.

Addressing Media Bias

Educating students on media bias can become complicated due to the very nature of self-biased views and selection of information as mentioned above that leads to someone seeing information as unbiased due to their own ideological preferences (Feldman 2011). The challenge

of addressing this situation is overcoming cognitive dissonance, a situation in which new information conflicts with old information, creating discomfort in the individual in attempting to reconcile the new information, possibly due to socialization factors (Festinger 1957).

In a classroom setting, students can be made self-aware of their own biases through various ideological quizzes and measures to 1) allow them to know where their own biases are in relationship to materials and 2) learn to address their own biases in relationship to information they are consuming. Once students have a baseline of their ideology, students can learn to fact check information. After learning about their political ideologies, fact checking must be covered before pairing into groups.

“Fact-checking is done with at least three possible goals in mind, each with distinct audiences associated:

1. For the broader public, to improve understanding of candidates and issues by countering “misinformation.”
2. For other journalists, to help shift the culture away from he said/she said coverage towards greater fact-checking.
3. For politicians, political pundits, or (more recently) news networks, to hold them accountable and deter erroneous statements.” (Born 2015).

By focusing on the need to fact check, this allows students to see the importance of both validity and reliability. Validity has to do with the accuracy of information and the consistent use of this information in research (Winter 2000). Valid positions are “well grounded,” “logical,” and/or “justifiably correct” (Linehan 1997, 355). In classic terms, valid statements are built on premises that lead to a sound or valid conclusion. Most positions draw from two premises to support a conclusion. The first premise sets up the parameters of the position. For example, one could start with a premise such as “a bird has wings.” The statement has to do with whether something within the premise applies to the next premise. The next premise might be “a robin is a bird.” Based on these two statements, one can draw the conclusion “a robin has wings.” This process is often utilized to debate issues and conclude on a solution or idea. Research allows people to

provide more context to these positions and make them valid; research provides factual elements that can be tested, retested, and determined to be true.

Validity is built on reliability. Reliability is the trustworthiness and accuracy of something based on consistency and the ability to verify information (Leung 2015). Teaching students that academic journal articles and most news articles contain reliable information is a start but requires another important practice to make information reliable. Triangulation is a method used to increase credibility and validity of research findings (Cohen Manion Morrison 2000). Credibility refers to trustworthiness and how believable a study is; validity is concerned with the extent to which a study accurately reflects or evaluates the concept or ideas being investigated (Golafshani 2003) Triangulation, by combining theories, methods or observers in a research study, can help ensure that fundamental biases arising from the use of a single method or a single observer are overcome.

After students learn their own ideology and a discussion of validity, reliability, and triangulation has been addressed in the classroom and readings, students can then be paired into groups and learn to evaluate sources. Peer interactions will help both the perceived and actual bias, allowing them to learn how to see bias and recognize where their own biases may exist. This first part of the information model is important because students will often reject the next part or dismiss it if they have not already recognized their own biases or addressed how biased information is happening around them.

The “Least Biased Sources” model was something the author came up with while researching ways to allow students to find the “best” sources of information, something students ask but would challenge later based on perceived bias. It is important to first address personal biases, along with validity, reliability, and triangulation, so students are able to see how these

“least biased sources” can better address our understanding of politics. Further, it was important not to look at just a single model since each model uses different methodology that aims at limiting bias in information. Some issues exist with the current model that will be addressed in the Conclusion.

The first iteration of “Least Biased Sources” was developed in 2021. After 2020 and the issues surrounding both 2020 election information and COVID-19, it became increasingly important to not only make students aware of their own biases (as mentioned above) but also find better sources of information to examine politics and have discussions on current issues. Five groups of “least biased news” services were gathered with a “top 10” from each gathered together for comparison and can be seen in Table 1. Each chart used different methodology so it is important to compare their methods and see how they attempt to overcome media bias. Due to some of the issues found with these, along with dated information, an updated chart needed to be added.

Ad Fontes Media currently uses 60 content analysts, with three separate raters of information based on their self-identified political leanings, comparing their scores to produce an overall rating. The data from Table 1 was taken in 2020 when they only used nine analysts. All Sides Media allows user input, allowing both experts and average Americans to rate media. Their editorial review board, consisting of six to nine people, again, self identifying their political ideology to balance out the panel, meet and discuss ratings to come to a consensus on a bias rating. Forbes was the least scientific, having the author self rate media based on their expert analysis as an Associate Professor of Journalism. Gallup/Knight Survey in 2018 was a random sample of 1,440 Americans, through web survey. Toward Data Science used content analysis through a “Python” system. YouGov.com, added recently, used 2006 citizens that chose

Table 1
Least Biased Source Listings (Most recent year online – March 2021)

Ad Fontes (2020)

1. Associate Press (AP)
2. Reuters
3. Bloomberg
4. CSPAN
5. National Public Radio (NPR)
6. ABC/NBC/CBS/PBS
7. Politico
8. BBC
9. Christian Science Monitor
10. The Hill

All Sides Media (2020)

1. AP
2. Axios
3. British Broadcasting Company (BBC)
4. The Christian Science Monitor
5. Independent Journal Review
6. Market Watch
7. Newsweek
8. NPR
9. Reuters
10. RealClear Politics

Forbes (2017)

1. New York Times
2. The Wall Street Journal
3. The Washington Post
4. BBC
5. The Economist
6. The New Yorker
7. AP/Reuters
8. Foreign Affairs
9. The Atlantic
10. Politico

Toward Data Science (2020)

1. AP
2. Reuters
3. Weather.com
4. ABC
5. The Advocate
6. Bloomberg
7. NPR
8. Wall Street Journal
9. The Hill
10. Financial Times

Gallup/Knight Survey (2018)

1. PBS News
2. AP
3. NPR
4. Wall Street Journal
5. USA Today
6. CBS News
7. ABC News

to take the online survey and was weighted based on demographics and partisanship. Media Bias Detector from Penn State uses a language model to determine political leanings of the top 10 online newspapers and is updated frequently. This was added to address parity with the other sources since Toward Data Science has not been updated recently.

As one can see, the initial chart in Table 1 had many things in common so a single chart aspect was developed by giving a score to each ranked news source to come up with the “least biased” news sources. Based on the weighted scores from these five sources, the final list was (in order): 1) Associated Press (AP), 2) Reuters, 3) National Public Radio (NPR), 4) Wall Street Journal, 5) British Broadcasting Company (BBC), and 6) American Broadcasting Company (ABC). Using this list of sources, students were then tasked with in-class activities to learn triangulation of information after the discussions on personal ideological bias, validity, and reliability.

In Fall 2021, the author used a pre-test, post-test to examine student acceptance of information and determine if exposure to “least biased sources” decreased bad information from social media sources. This was done with university support but did not go through Institutional Review Board (IRB) due to the exploratory nature of the study and the concern that data was only collected from one instructor. Data was gathered from the core course POL 101: Responsible Citizenship, a general education course required for almost all students. As a result, 5 sections of 36 students (N=180) were given a pre-test and post-test with the data used to determine if this method was useful for teaching how to address information.

The results of the pre-test/post-test comparison were encouraging. Students did move from social media/friends to “least biased news sources.” At the start of each semester, around 78 percent of students were using social media and friends as primary news sources. This

reduced to 28 percent of students identifying social media or friends as their primary source of information with most students (65 percent) citing least biased sources as their main source of information, even correctly identifying triangulation as a method of overcoming bias (82 percent). Interestingly, some students were fully aware of triangulation as a method of overcoming bias but seemed to choose not to utilize it.

Recently, the author decided to revisit the rankings to see how they have changed. Due to both outdated/not updated rankings, along with methodological concerns, the Forbes method was dropped and You.Gov.com survey was used to replace it. Additionally, Media Bias Detector from Penn State was used to allow for content analysis as an additional unbiased measure. Table 2 contains the 2024/2025 rankings based on when the information was most recently gathered as of January 25, 2025. As with the previous tables, some media sources were present in more tables and a determination of being in at least two tables was used as a threshold to determine which sources to evaluate. The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) was the only source to appear in all tables. The list of “Least Biased Sources” in order were: 1) BBC, 2) PBS/NPR, 3) AP News, 4) WSJ, 5) News Nation, 6) Reuters, 7) Christian Science Monitor, and 8) ABC.

The differences in the rankings from 2021 to 2025 were interesting to note. First, AP News had been in all of the previous studies but was no longer present in All Sides as one of the top sources. Second, there was little effort done to differentiate NPR and PBS as separate news sources based on the readings of how people were ranking them as similar. Granted, they are both publicly funded but they also can present information differently in their own formats. Third, the increase in standing for BBC news was noticeable. As a foreign news source, the fact that Americans are recognizing it bodes well for the network but might also explain the appeal as an “outsider” looking into the American side. Finally, the change in availability should, in

Table 2
Most recent updates January 2025

Ad Fontes (2025)

1. USA Facts
2. National Public Radio (NPR) News
3. Wall Street Journal
4. News Nation
5. Reuters
6. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)
7. Scripps News
8. AP News
9. Christian Science Monitor
10. ABC News

All Sides Media (2025)

1. BBC News
2. Christian Science Monitor
3. CNBC
4. Forbes
5. The Hill
6. News Nation
7. Newsweek
8. Real Clear Politics
9. Reuters
10. Wall Street Journal

Toward Data Science (2020)

1. AP
2. Reuters
3. Weather.com
4. ABC
5. The Advocate
6. Bloomberg
7. NPR
8. Wall Street Journal
9. The Hill
10. Financial Times

You.Gov.Com Survey (2024)

1. BBC
2. PBS
3. Wall Street Journal
4. Forbes
5. ABC
6. Reuters
7. AP
8. CBS
9. Time Magazine
10. NBC

Media Bias Detector (2025)

1. Wall Street Journal
2. AP
3. USA Today
4. CNN
5. Washington Post
6. New York Times
7. The Guardian
8. Fox News
9. Huffington Post
10. Breitbart

theory, also impact ratings. All of the top rated sources have an app for download, making them all easy to access for students. The Wall Street Journal and Christian Science Monitor both require pay to view for some content and after an initial open period but both were highly rated.

Conclusion – Is a “least biased news” approach helpful?

Like any approach, there are some limitations that need to be noted and addressed with the research done so far regarding the “least biased news” approach. Within the department at the author’s institution, there was limited support for this approach. This made consistency and measuring an issue due to the limits our IRB places on departmental research requiring department support to do more with the data for research purposes. Although the author continues to check within sections, retaining the same rates of student success, the study is limited due to the internal restrictions placed on the information.

Other factors also need to be considered. First, do students retain this after leaving the course? The university places high value on the core courses as formative but the follow up studies show that retention of the information is not reinforced at upper levels. Given that within the department, there was little support for this approach, it is unsurprising that university wide support would also be limited. If not reinforced or supported, it is up to the individual student to see the added benefit and value of this approach. Based on the exit surveys and exams, students are not able to identify valid information or understand some of the concepts from the course. However, this could also be due to several other factors. Students with Advanced Placement credit for U.S. History or U.S. Government were allowed to use this for credit for POL 101: Responsible Citizenship even though the content is different. As noted above, instructor approaches could also be a factor in information retention. Finally, some of the measures done to determine student learning are both instructor and self-assessments that do not directly ask about

the learning. It has also been found that instructors do not fully understand the core components being measured so they mark the student in upper level courses as not having met this area.

Second, what factors play into moving away from social media for students? Again, if students are not using the “least biased news” approach after the course, are they going back to their old habits of social media? Do students only feel pressured to use it within the course due to graded measures and group work? The author can also note an increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) like ChatGPT being cited as a source of information for students. This creates other issues with validity and reliability of information. Recent research shows that some people feel AI is better at providing images for news (Park et al 2024) while a majority of the research shows concerns for how AI can negatively influence people and be misleading (Kertysova, 2018; Bontridder and Pouillet, 2021; Gallo et al. 2022; Battista 2024) along with biased; ChatGPT has been determined to be Democrat leaning (Motochi, Pinho Neto, and Rodriguez 2023).

It should be noted that the method of teaching might also lead students to learn the information and retain it long term. The author uses interactive teaching and application, along with group work, to help reinforce the concepts, something research shows are effective in learning (Flaherty 2023). Further, anecdotal evidence suggests that at least half of the students retain some, if not most, of the learning based on “least biased sources” through interactions with former students and faculty members noting this through their own course discussions. Given the nature of a core course and the variety of students, it can also be surmised that some are going to gravitate towards the information more than others. Finally, some of the core courses are skills and learning “for life” so that students apply this knowledge even after college. Without proper information regarding post graduation, along with the problems noted above regarding the exit survey/exam, students may actually be learning it in the author’s courses with

those not taking from the instructor, along with retention issues, can drown out the overall impact.

Faculty need to consider ways to keep students engaged and interested in news and information. Even without a robust data set to demonstrate the effectiveness of “least biased news” as a form of learning, consideration should be given to this approach as it helps students learn more about their own biased interactions with the world and helps them develop skills like triangulation that lead to validity and reliability. Even though we cannot completely remove bias from news, it is helpful for students to see that there are ways to effectively limit the amount of bias and gain a better understanding of the political world.

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