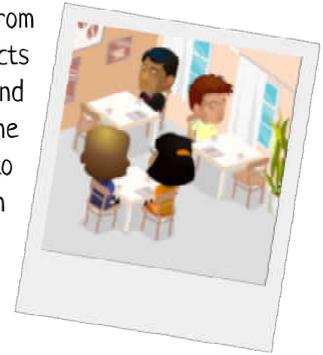


Men.



It's been two days since a bomb exploded in a U.S. city several states away from you, killing twenty-eight people and injuring 107 more. The two female suspects are still on the loose. Journalist Becca Jones is eating lunch at her desk and studying a photograph that was sent to her a few minutes ago by someone claiming the two bombing suspects are innocent. The "proof" is this photo supposedly showing the two women having coffee in another state when the bomb went off.



Even zoomed all the way in, Becca can't tell if it's them. The photo is too unclear. But wow—she would love to prove the two women didn't bomb that building. All this hype about "female" bombers, when everyone knows *men* are the ones with violent tendencies? September 11, Oklahoma City, the Unabomber... Men, men, men.

Like that guy last night who screamed at her from his car when she didn't quite make it across the crosswalk before the light turned green. Jerk.

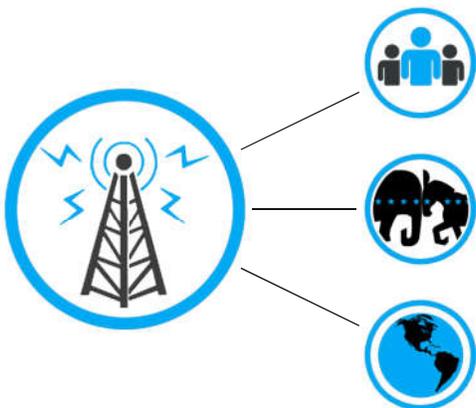
Prejudice, Partiality, and Preconceptions

Sounds like Becca has some preconceived notions about gender, hm? Favoring or supporting one thing over something else is often called **bias**, and we're all biased about lots of things. We can't help it. On a personal level, biases are connected to our core values and fears: Someone with a deep sense of patriotism may be biased against other cultures. Someone who fears the police may be biased against the official version of events after an incident. Bias often stems from personal experience. Maybe the patriotic person is a war veteran, and maybe the person who fears the police questions officers' motives because people in their neighborhood are often stopped for no clear reason. Maybe our journalist, Becca, had a violent father or boyfriend, or maybe she volunteers every weekend at a women's domestic violence shelter. People are usually aware of their biases that are based on personal experience.



Bias can also be passed down from one generation to the next as kids grow up watching how people talk and behave. This is where most **inherent bias** comes from—bias that's so ingrained you don't even realize it's there (unless you're on the receiving end). Inherent bias can be hard to notice, but it *can* be noticed.

You can be biased about pretty much anything. (Chocolate, strawberry, or vanilla?) Here are three common forms of bias that show up in the news:



Social bias is about favoring or disfavoring groups of people based on factors like race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, looks, disability, weight, age, etc.

Political bias is about supporting or opposing a political party or ideology, such as Democrat vs. Republican or conservative vs. liberal.

Cultural bias is a preference or intolerance for something based on your society's cultural standards—for example, a bias toward democracy or against raising horses for meat.

The Bias Boogeyman ~~man~~ *person*

Becca the journalist is obviously biased about men and violence. Now, she's working on a developing situation where two *women* are accused of violence, and she has questionable evidence that the women might be innocent. Is that a recipe for journalistic disaster?

People worry a lot about bias in the news, and they fear bias for a variety of reasons. One is the uneasy feeling that a news report might be manipulating them with hidden bias, or that maybe the news outlet's bias is skewing the truth in some way. Is the reporter telling the whole truth? Is something being left out or slanted in a way that distorts the truth? At the same time, many people *choose* bias by only following news sources that are biased toward their own point of view. Some do this to protect themselves from biased reporting because they think only news sources that share their point of view are trustworthy.

Are they right? Should we all be afraid—*very* afraid—of bias? That's one approach, but you're probably better off learning how to identify bias so you don't *have* to fear it. Unlike "fake news," recognizing bias is not about identifying information that isn't true. Your mad bias-detecting skills are about understanding how news providers can influence the way you think about information that *is* true. Being able to recognize and analyze bias helps you determine whether facts are being skewed. That gives you the upper hand.



Biased... Yet Objective?

Bias is part of being human. And guess where the news comes from? Humans. Journalists, producers, news directors... all human.* It would be unreasonable to expect journalists to be completely objective because nobody can push aside 100% of their personal views. But that's actually okay because journalists are expected to use *methods* that are objective. Methods based on journalism standards give journalists accepted procedures to follow that help minimize the effect of bias on their reporting.

The table below lists four tools journalists use to help their reporting stay objective along with the bias-detecting skills you'll need in order to recognize when these tools have been used.



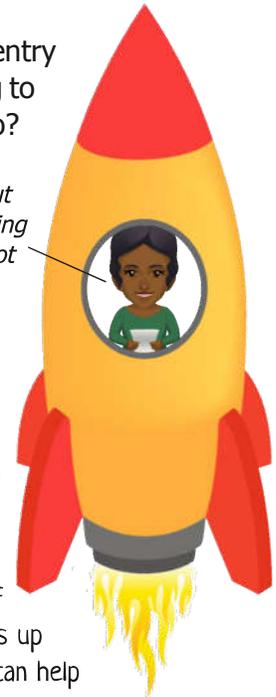
JOURNALIST'S TOOL	YOUR SKILL
VERIFICATION	DETERMINE HOW THE INFORMATION IN THE STORY WAS VERIFIED.
FAIRNESS	IDENTIFY WHERE THE STORY ADDRESSES MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES.
AWARENESS	LOOK FOR STEREOTYPES OR ASSUMPTIONS THE REPORTER MIGHT NOT HAVE CAUGHT.
FRAMING	NOTICE HOW A STORY IS FRAMED AND COMPARE THE FRAME WITH OTHER VIEWPOINTS.
WORD CHOICE	SPOT WORDS AND PHRASES THAT PROVOKE EMOTION OR PASS JUDGMENT.

Verify, Verify, Verify

Imagine a scientist saying, “I don’t know if this new material will really survive re-entry into the atmosphere, but it would look awesome on the side of a rocket, so I’m going to trust my calculations and skip the testing.” Would you go to space in that rocket? No? Even people who agree the material looks amazing wouldn’t trust its safety without testing. The process of testing is an objective method that’s unrelated to anyone’s personal opinion.

Now, imagine Becca saying, “I don’t know if this blurry photo really shows the two suspects having coffee in another state when the bomb went off, but women just don’t *do* things like bomb buildings, so I’m going to trust the photo.” Would *you* trust the photo? Would you trust it if you agreed that women don’t usually bomb buildings? Hopefully not, because the photo hasn’t been verified. In journalism, verification is the “testing” that proves something is true. And when something is true, it’s true regardless of how you feel about it.

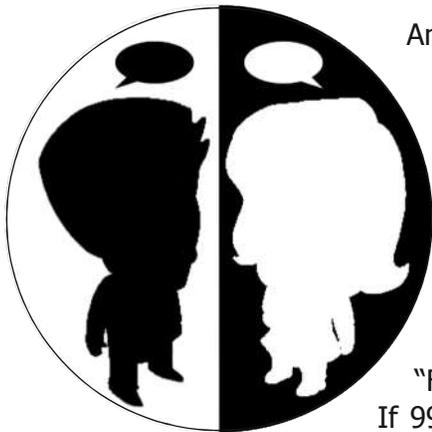
Questions about this rocket’s testing process have not been verified.



In one corner of the photo, through the coffee shop window, there’s a delivery truck with a phone number on the side. The number is legible, and Becca does a quick check of the area code. It matches the city where the photo was supposedly taken. Becca picks up the phone and calls a digital photography specialist she often works with to see if he can help find any more clues about exactly where the photo was taken.

Becca may be super annoyed by all the hype around the women suspects, and she may be totally convinced that the real bombers are men. But as a journalist, she’s not going to believe the claim about the photo until she’s proven exactly what it shows. If she learns something worth reporting, her story will include the markers of verification and transparency you learned to identify in Lesson 1.

Tell All Sides



Another way journalists avoid bias is by telling all sides of a story. The various opinions and experiences around an issue are what make up the *whole* story, so journalists seek out people who represent different views. Fair, balanced reporting is a standard of journalism. But when is a story fair and balanced? The bombing victims are getting tons of news coverage, so does fair reporting mean the bombers should get an equal amount of air time? Your gut is probably telling you “no,” and that’s correct. The news isn’t expected to be a platform for wrongdoers.

“Fair and balanced” doesn’t always mean equal in other situations, too. If 99 members of the U.S. Senate vote for a bill and one member votes against it, “fair and balanced” doesn’t mean news reports should spend the same amount of time covering that one member’s objections as it spends covering the reasons everyone else approved. Mentioning the Senator’s objection would probably be enough (and even that might not be considered necessary).

Be on the lookout for fair and balanced reporting by watching or listening for different perspectives in a story. Do they even offer different perspectives? If not, can you figure out why? If they do tell more than one side, *how* do they tell it? Sometimes, you can spot bias because the person quoted or interviewed for one side of an issue is presented as irrational or put in a negative light. Also, think about what perspectives might be missing even when more than one side has been presented.



Assumption Awareness

In the process of putting a story together, a journalist will make all kinds of decisions—which experts to interview, which parts of the interviews to quote in the story, what examples to use that people can relate to, how to word the information... Almost every line of a news story involves a decision, and each decision is an opportunity for bias to sneak in. To deal with this, journalists always need to be questioning their own assumptions. That's how they can catch hidden biases in their own perspectives that might end up woven into the story. This kind of self-awareness helps journalists cleanse their stories of bias they may not have noticed at first.

You should question their assumptions, too. Learning to identify assumptions is a complex skill, but a simple way to start is just by asking the question: What is this assuming about ____? You can insert anything into that blank space—a person, attitude, political party, branch of government, way of life, or even the intended audience for the news piece. ("What is this story assuming about *me*?") An assumption won't always be there, but if it is, you won't notice if you don't ask.

How You Frame It

When people admire a piece of artwork hanging on the wall, they focus on what's inside the frame. Most people don't notice the frame at all. News stories also have a frame that most people don't notice. Obviously, it's not a physical frame (unless it's that photo of you winning the science fair your grandmother clipped from the local paper). A news story's frame is the angle the journalist takes in telling the story.



There's almost always more than one way to look at an issue or event—more than one possible aspect to focus on. If you were doing a report on polar bears, for example, there are a lot of different angles you could take: threats to the bears' natural habitat, places where the bears are thriving, the well-being of polar bears in zoos, or ways polar bears adapt to their environment, to name a few. In the news, a journalist frames a story by deciding what to emphasize, usually right at the beginning. Compare these two examples:

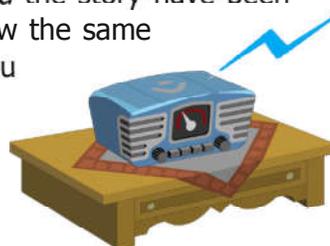


With the two bombing suspects still on the loose tonight, panic is rising as investigators turn the city upside down in their hunt for the two dangerous women.

Investigators are leaving no stone unturned tonight in their systematic search for two women suspected of setting off Tuesday's bomb.

Biased Framing?

Framing isn't the same as bias. Framing can just be about a story's structure and focus—the decision to take a fear-based or neutral approach to the story, for example. But if a news story *is* biased, it will usually be framed from that biased perspective. To see through the frame, first identify it. What's the angle or emphasis? Then, watch for other viewpoints or aspects of the issue in the rest of the story. How else *could* the story have been framed? If you're not sure, check to see how the same story is being told by other news providers. You can piece different frames together to get a more complete and unbiased picture of the issues.



Another strikeout tonight as the weary city ends Day 3 of law enforcement's fruitless search for the two bombing suspects, prompting social media rants from citizens frustrated with a massive police presence that may have let the bombers slip through its fingers.

Careful Choice of Words

When bias is present, there’s almost always a dead giveaway: the words that are being used. Consider these two ways of describing the same development:

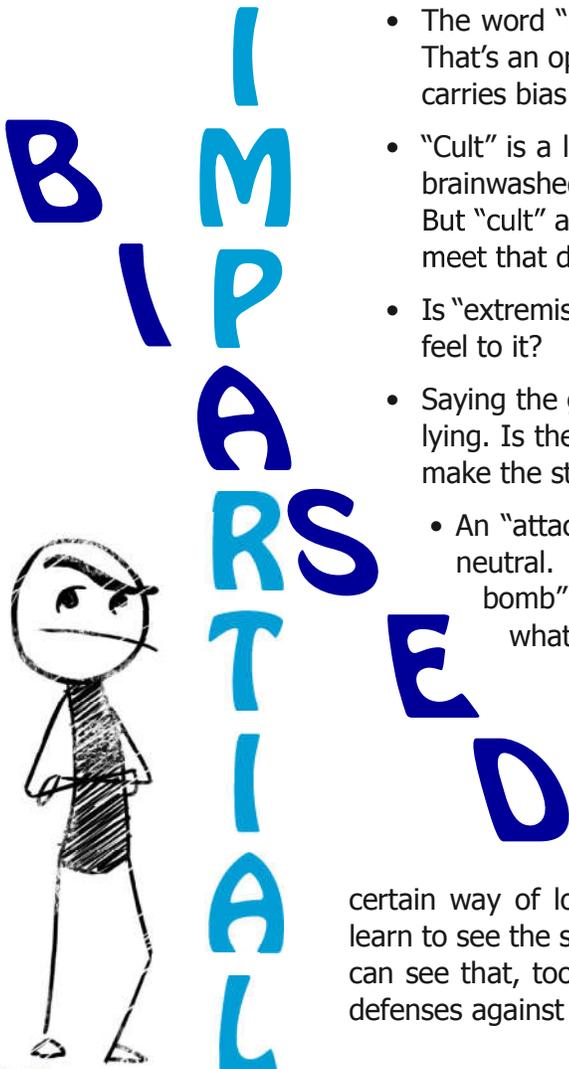
Late this afternoon, we tracked down a member of the same bizarre cult the two suspects belong to, who claimed she knew nothing about plans for an attack.

Late this afternoon, we spoke with aa member of the extremist group the two suspects belong to, who said she was not aware of plans to set off a bomb.



Notice anything? Which one seems more biased? Why? The individual words used in a news story can give it a whole extra layer of meaning. If you think these word choices happen by accident, think again—they’re *choices*, and news writers consider these choices very carefully. In the above example, the first description has several word choices that give it a meaning that is biased at best, misleading at worst:

- The phrase “tracked down” implies some kind of chase, as if the person being tracked has something to hide. Is that a fair and accurate portrayal of the person, or is that the news outlet’s bias against the group the bombers belong to? If it’s bias, does it matter? Does a fringe group deserve to be treated without bias?



- The word “bizarre” is basically the same as saying the group is weird. That’s an opinion. Dropping an opinion into a news story almost always carries bias along with it.
- “Cult” is a loaded word in our society that brings up mental images of brainwashed people engaging in unusual or even dangerous behavior. But “cult” also has an actual definition. Does the suspects’ group really meet that definition?
- Is “extremist group” more neutral than “bizarre cult”? Is there a different feel to it?
- Saying the group member “claimed” she knew nothing implies she was lying. Is there any evidence of that, or is the news outlet just trying to make the story more dramatic?
- An “attack” is a hostile act of aggression. “Set off a bomb” is more neutral. In this case, “attack” is probably accurate, but “set off a bomb” is less dramatic and tends to keep the attention more on what the person said rather than the bombers’ motives.

Pay Attention

Most of us would prefer to make up our own mind based on the facts. We don’t want to be manipulated. Without this kind of close observation, you might not even notice how a news story is steering you toward a certain way of looking at an issue or event. But by paying attention, you learn to see the slant that’s being put on the story. Or, if there’s no slant, you can see that, too. Learning to notice word choices is one of your strongest defenses against bias.