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preface

Wine lists make for terrible reading.

Unless you really know wine, the information before you is mostly useless. You're confronted with multiple pages detailing the characteristics of whites and reds, chardonnays and cabernets, blushes and meritages. Perhaps some Beaujolais nouveau is thrown in just to make the choice more challenging.

In the end, you buy a brand you know or ask for advice. Even then, you're not sure you're buying the right wine for the duck you just requested. You just place your order and hope for the best.

The process of ordering wine is a perfect example of the importance information has in our lives and how utterly lost we can be when we cannot make sense of the data we're given. The facts are before us, but we have no clue about what action to take. We become hopelessly lost.

When we make a mistake with wine, the impact on our lives is minimal, but there are many times when the decisions we make have a profound effect on our future. Mistakes can be costly and irreversible.

If we're trying to decide how to invest our retirement funds, we find a professional who understands the options and can explain them to us. When we want to

build a house, we find an architect or contractor who guides us through the process. When we want to understand our government's actions or what's happening in our world, we turn to journalists.

Journalists are trained to gather and present information in ways that are useful to us. They seek out multiple viewpoints on an issue and identify their sources of information. While it's our responsibility as citizens to be informed, it's their responsibility to provide that information.

As citizens, we're supposed to use that information to decide who to elect to represent us on national, state and local levels. We're also supposed to communicate our opinions on the issues to those officials so that they can represent our wishes.

In theory, the process makes sense, but in practice, the businesses of politics and journalism have many flaws. While there is little we can do as individuals to make politics and journalism what we'd like them to be, we can make ourselves better news consumers.

Being better news consumers requires that we understand journalism's failings. Reporters and editors are subject to various pressures that come from their employers, news sources and their own feelings as human beings. Just the act of gathering facts, interviewing sources and writing a story alters the events

because of the choices that have to be made. Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson is said to have remarked that the only honest journalism he ever saw was from a security camera.

With an understanding of how bias enters the news, we can use the standards and ethics of journalism to capture the information we need. Armed with that information, we can fulfill our responsibilities as citizens.

Our purpose here is to help you understand the differences among journalism, propaganda, advertising and simple information and demonstrate why journalism provides the best options for news consumers.

Then we'll spend most of the book helping you understand where journalism fails and teaching you the skills that will help you bypass those issues. We don't need to fix the world – only build better tools for dealing with it.

For readers who want to continue to improve their skills, you can sign up on our web site, newsconsumer.org, for our free newsletter or follow our blog that identifies and discusses journalism's failures and how to overcome them.

An informed electorate is vital to a free society. As citizens it's our job to make sure we have the information we need to provide informed direction to our elected officials. Being a skilled news consumer is the best way to fulfill that responsibility.

Recognizing bias

Separating fact from how a story is told

It's 10 p.m. and you've settled into an easy chair to watch your favorite local television news anchor tell you what you need to know about the world in which you live. Odds are you're going to get a distorted view.

Reading the local newspaper the next morning isn't going to be any more helpful. Those stories are also filled with bias.

What's worse, there are lots of news stories you'll never see because editors won't consider publishing them. And these stories aren't about trivial matters. They could involve battles in which hundreds of people are killed or the rezoning of land near your home that will result in a significant increase in traffic on your street.

It's not that the people who work in the newsrooms of your local television stations or newspapers are incompetent or that there is a conspiracy to prevent you from learning about important events, it's simply that the process of keeping you informed is flawed.

Reporters and editors come to their jobs with the intent of giving you the information you need, but from that point on, things begin to go wrong.

There are limits on the time and space available, limits on the number of people available to research and prepare reports, the need to satisfy advertisers and the personal tastes of everyone from the owners of the television station or newspaper to the coffee shop Barista who serves the managing editor her morning latte.

Sources try to add their own bias to the news before a reporter gets the chance to even write a story.

Politicians fall into this category and so do business people, activists and others who seek to shape public opinion. Reporters are the pathway to news pages or television cameras and sources work hard to get access to those coveted resources and to spread their message to a large audience.

Then there are the readers and viewers who have their own biases. Some like stories about crime and politics that are filled with action and scandal and others prefer their news softer, with rounded edges to cushion the harsh realities of life. Stories about business and economics, entertainment, science or sports appeal to different groups.

Editors must cater to these interests if they want to draw the big crowds they need to satisfy advertisers who, ultimately, make it possible for the reporters and editors to be paid.

Reporters, editors, news sources and news consumers

all have biases, making the news we get far from the "just the facts" approach favored by Dragnet's Detective Joe Friday.

Which is not to suggest there is a vast media conspiracy designed to twist your thinking. While there are news organizations that present the news from distinct points of view, most news organizations follow a strict code of ethics intended to help their customers – news consumers – get fair and accurate reporting.

It's not intentional bias of the news that poses the greatest risk, it's the process of gathering and presenting the news that results in most of the bias we see. There's no way to prevent these biases from entering our news, but we can minimize their impact by changing the way we consume news products. By gaining a greater understanding of how the news reporting process works, we can learn how to filter out bias and listen for facts. We need to be better news consumers.

We are all news consumers. Even if we never turn on a television newscast or read a newspaper, media is so ubiquitous, our lives can't help but be influenced by news of current events. Whether that impact is positive or negative depends upon our skills as news consumers.

In many ways, it's not much different from buying a car, a house, a stereo or any other consumer item where individual products are differentiated by various features

and benefits. Smart consumers do research before venturing out to make these purchases so they will be informed about the products that best meet their needs and not fall prey to commission-minded salespeople.

News consumers must do the same thing. They must seek out sources of news that they trust and which provide the information they need on a regular basis. Each story then becomes a purchase. Savvy news consumers don't simply accept the story as is, even if they trust the source. They take the time to examine it and determine if it meets their standards.

The good news is that you already have many of these skills. It's just a matter of becoming more conscious about how you use them.

We already make choices about what we need to know, what we want to know and what is irrelevant to our lives. When we scan a newspaper, we don't read every story, we use our experience to guide to toward the information that's most important to us.

Someone with concerns about the environment may seek out stories about climate change, but skip over stories on other issues that do not interest them.

Our filters can be very effective, but journalists are professional communicators and they work hard at

getting past those barriers. They also have different views about what you *need* to know and what you think is irrelevant.

The televised picture of a firefighter carrying the draped body of a dead child out of a burning house will compel you to view the entire story where you'll learn not only about the death, but also how smoke detectors were missing or that firefighters were slow in responding to the call for help. If your filter had stopped simply with the news that a child died in a fire, you wouldn't have understood the complete story.

Reporters and editors know readers and viewers filter the news and they try to hold your attention using tools such as pictures, dramatic headlines, sound, light, color, motion and even silence to break through your filtering system. As marketer Dave Evans asks in his book, *Social Media Marketing*, "If I couldn't interrupt you, how would I reach you?"

Trained news consumers have filters that screen out faulty information, but aren't so restrictive that important information can't pass through.

Hearing about failed smoke detectors might remind us to change the batteries on our units at home. Reading further into a story about road construction might reveal that one of our favorite routes is about to be populated

with orange barrels. We might even learn from a story about corporate corruption that an old college roommate is about to get new long-term housing, courtesy of the state department of corrections.

In the following pages, we're going to help you build better filters. We'll teach you about the process of news gathering and reporting and where bias enters the system. We'll show you how to separate fact from context, understand how your opinions influence what you read and how to gather additional facts to help you better understand the news.

We'll also show you how to determine whether the context offered by the reporter helps you better understand the story or whether it distracts you from more important issues.

Here's an example of how this works. These are the facts:

- ABC Development wants to build a shopping center at the corner of 1st and Main streets for a new department store.
- The company is asking the city for help with financing and in acquiring the land.

Now here are four ledes – a reporter's term for the first paragraphs of a story – to illustrate different ways this story can be told.

1. Local shoppers could soon enjoy a new Nordstroms department store if the city approves a plan being proposed by ABC Development.
2. Property owners within a block of 1st and Main streets could see their taxes increase if the city approves a plan by ABC Development to build a new department store. The plan calls for the city to use the new tax money from those living near the store to fund improvements in streets and other services to support the project.
3. Three generations of Livingstons have sold cars from their lot at the corner of 1st and Main, but that could come to an end if the city decides to seize their land to make room for a new department store.
4. The city is being asked to provide land and infrastructure improvements in the area of 1st and Main to help ABC Development build a new department store. To make it possible, the city would have to seize the land of some current owners and raise the taxes of other property owners, but officials say the extra revenue generated by the development would more than pay for taxpayers' investment.

While it may seem that these ledes tell different stories, they are all describing the same facts we outlined earlier. The difference comes from which facts the editors and reporters decided to emphasize and how you feel about those facts. Let's look at the ledes individually.

In lede #1, the story emphasized the value of a Nordstroms department store. The story might appeal to

avid shoppers, a group the newspaper wants to attract for its advertisers.

Lede #2 focuses the reader on the tax implications of the project. In some communities, tax issues are very important to readers while in others, readers would quickly go looking for more interesting reading. Reporters and editors often take their cues about how to prepare their stories from reader feedback and if readers are concerned about how tax money is being spent, that will be reflected in the news.

The third lede turns attention away from the project entirely and focuses it on a family auto dealership. This type of lede is often seen in television news because it creates a more visual story. Approaching the story from this angle gives the reporter the opportunity to shoot meaningful video of the property in question and interview family members about how the proposed development would impact them. It makes the story more about people than property and taxes and that makes for better television.

The final lede is straightforward and to the point. It lays out the facts before readers without coloring. It's also the most boring of the ledes and the least likely to leave readers wanting to read more.

Each of these stories accurately related the facts, yet each of them seemed to tell a different tale. Should we be

excited that a Nordstroms is coming to town or concerned that our taxes will go up? Is the fact that a local family business could be displaced more important than bringing new business and tax revenue to the city?

Your answers to these questions will depend upon your personal values, but by reading several different ledes you gained a much different perspective on the basic facts than if you had read just one of them.

> The ledes above are fictional and are intended to illustrate how the same facts can be told as different stories. To prove the point, we'll look to Alabama's gulf coast on Aug. 4, 2009, for a story about a new convention center published in the *Mobile Press-Register*:
>
> In a unanimous vote, the City Council tonight approved the basic terms of a multimillion-dollar tax abatement package that developer K.C. Chiang said will enable him and his partners to build a 500-room Gulf-front hotel and convention center.
>
> Better than a handshake, but far from a guarantee, the 12-page letter of intent spells out the tax concessions that Orange Beach is willing to offer, as well as what it expects of the developers in return. City leaders said Tuesday's vote essentially allows Chiang to tell his lenders that Orange Beach is "serious" about doing business and green-lights lawyers for both sides to start drafting a voluminous development agreement between the parties.

The story was straightforward, but now read how television station WKRG reported the story:

> Business could be better at the Dippin' Dots ice cream shop in Orange Beach.
>
> "We're still trying to recover from Hurricane Ivan," says owner Carmie Carr.
>
> Carr says a new luxury resort that could be built across the street would be a gold mine of economic activity.
>
> "That's really exciting because that could increase sales year-round for us here. Most of us either go to skeleton hours and totally shut down in the winter months, but if we have a convention center that's bringing in business, that's great for us."
>
> A local developer wants to build a nine-acre, four-state hotel and convention center near Gulf State Park. The 170 million dollar beachfront complex would have a bowling alley, dinner theatre, two hotels and a state-of-the-art conference center. City leaders say the Winfield would rival the Beau Rivage as the Gulf Coast's premier properties and would create more than a thousand new jobs.

Just as in our fictional examples above, the television station went with a version of the facts that worked better for its medium. Stories about people play better on television and also gives the camera something interesting to look at.

Now that you understand how this works, let's do the

exercise again. Our next examples are taken from May 30, 2009, and the story is about the San Francisco 49ers and a deal they were hoping to close with the city of Santa Clara for a new stadium.

The stories are filled with numbers and that can intimidate many news consumers. As you read through them, don't initially concern yourself with the figures. They are important, but after you've read the stories, we'll show you their significance and you can go back and review the stories for yourself.

The first lede comes from the *San Jose Mercury News*, a newspaper located in Santa Clara's backyard:

> Capping 18 months of closed-door negotiations, the 49ers and Santa Clara unveiled a proposed stadium deal Friday that would require $114 million in public money – almost 50 percent less than the two sides had earlier considered to bring the storied NFL franchise to the South Bay.
>
> Under the proposed financial plan, the public contribution would come from a combination of redevelopment money, a new tax on area hotels and municipal utility funds to finance 12 percent of the $937 million cost for a new 68,500-seat stadium near Great America and the Santa Clara Convention Center. The stadium is now slated to open in 2014, two years later than initially planned.

The *Mercury News* focused its reporting on the

taxpayer and financing aspects of the agreement, leaving the other details for later in the story. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, which serves the city that would be losing the team, wrote a similar lede, but with a very important difference:

> Santa Clara residents are now facing a much sweeter offer to build a 68,500-seat stadium for the San Francisco 49ers in the South Bay city than the team had suggested almost two years ago.
>
> The parameters of a complex deal hashed out between the city and team, released late Friday, call for Santa Clara to contribute $79 million toward the $937 million project, a major reduction from the $222 million in public contributions the team had sought in 2007.
>
> There would be no new taxes or money taken from the city's general fund. Instead, the bulk of the city's contribution would come from $42 million in redevelopment funds, which can be spent only on specific types of projects.

Both stories focused on taxpayers, but while the *Mercury News* says the public cost will be $114 million, the *Chronicle* puts the figure at $79 million. Why the $35 million difference?

Deep in the *Mercury News* story, we learn the city puts the figure at $79 million and that it considers money that comes from taxes on hotel rooms to be a private

contribution. The *Mercury News* saw it differently and lumped the two figures together, but never explained why it chose to do that. Very likely the editors believed that because hotel tax money is not given voluntarily, that it should be included as part of the public's expense. The *Chronicle* reported the figures as presented by public officials and the team.

Neither report is wrong, but alert news consumers would see the difference and learn something about how the city is spinning the story and how each newspaper reacts to that spin. The *Mercury News* opted to redefine the public portion of the money, but in doing so, it inserted bias into the story. The *Chronicle* simply reported what it was told, without interpretation, leaving it to the reader to sort out the nuances. That decision also reflects bias.

This example illustrates the value of having multiple sources of news available to us, each with its own style and viewpoint. Some may see it as the job of editors and reporters to look past the spin sources attempt to put on the news. Others want to hear the unvarnished words of news sources and decide for themselves what value to place on them. But the more we limit the number of sources from which we get our news, the less likely we are to recognize these important differences.

Lastly, we look at the press release put out by the 49ers themselves to see how they describe the deal:

The San Francisco 49ers announced that the team has reached an agreement with the City of Santa Clara on a term sheet for a new $937 million state-of-the-art stadium that will create thousands of new jobs and generate hundreds of millions of dollars in new economic impact for the City and the region. Financing the stadium will also trigger $141 million in new funding to the Santa Clara Unified School District. The stadium will be publicly owned by a Stadium Authority, and the City of Santa Clara will retain ownership of the land used for the stadium project. The agreement must be approved by the Santa Clara City Council and a vote of the citizens of Santa Clara before the project can move forward.

The financial framework limits the City's investment to $79 million (approximately 8 percent of the cost), with no new taxes, no cost to Santa Clara residents and no money from its general fund. The City's investment includes $42 million from redevelopment financing and $20 million from Santa Clara's municipal utility company to move an aging power substation located near the stadium site. The remaining $17 million of the City's investment is for construction of a parking garage near the stadium site.

An additional $35 million investment in the stadium will come from a fee charged to overnight guests at hotels near the stadium site. The fee will need to be approved by a vote of the hotels, and the hotels have indicated strong support for the plan. The remaining $825 million cost of the $937 million facility will be covered by the 49ers, the NFL and Stadium Authority project revenues such as naming rights.

The 49ers, quite appropriately, insert their bias into the story by touting the jobs that will be created by the stadium and focuses on how new tax revenues will benefit the city and schools.

Experienced news sources, like the 49ers, know that how a story is told impacts how people *feel* about the news and about them.

Our feelings affect our judgement and by manipulating those, news sources hope to convince us to see certain issues from their point of view. If we share the point of view, we might not necessarily become their ally, but we aren't likely to oppose them, either.

News organizations are aware of the power of shared feelings, too, and know that if they successfully tap into shared emotions when telling a story, they can attract a more loyal audience. If readers or viewers are concerned about taxes, it's likely the editors will be as well. If viewers are worried about crime, editors may prey on those fears by highlighting crime stories as a way of scaring the audience into watching a newscast.

People tend to align themselves with those who share their opinions. Many television commentators have been highly successful at drawing audiences who share their points of view.

With the growth of so-called new media, such as

blogging, bias becomes more pronounced. Bloggers, almost by definition, bring opinion to their writing. That's not a problem as long as we know the writer's motives. But when traditional media outlets try to tap into our feelings, we're less likely to notice the intrusion.

What we need are more sophisticated filters; filters strong enough to screen out a constant bombardment of information, but flexible enough to expose us to new ideas.

There's no reason we shouldn't feel concerned about a family business being displaced for a department store or be excited about a new stadium, but we should also be able to separate those *feelings* from the basic facts in order to understand the true nature of the news.

We also need to ask ourselves why this story is important to us. You may not object to the city helping to finance a new department store, but you may not be willing to pay more taxes to do it. You may not want to see a family business disturbed, but if a new shopping center helps revitalize a neighborhood in decline, you may be willing to accept those consequences.

The goal of news consumerism is to help you think more critically by identifying the facts in what you read, see and hear, separate those facts from the context in which they are presented and ask yourself how this news is relevant to your life.

Those same skills help you develop insight into decisions made by editors and helps you gauge how much you can trust individual reporters or news organizations. As we'll see later in the book, trust is a vital element between news providers and news consumers.

Creating such a filter takes a bit of practice, but once you've learned how, you'll find that it comes quite naturally. You'll also discover that you can browse more information and manage it more easily because you can readily discard the parts of stories that are irrelevant to you.

We'll teach you those skills in the second part of this book, but first we need to look at the media in more detail so you know where process bias enters the news and how that affects what you read, see and hear.

We begin with a look at the press and how it sees its role in society, then we'll look at how reporters and editors go about their jobs and how bias enters their work. We'll examine news sources, the people who intentionally try to influence the news you see and read, then we'll ask you to sit down and take a critical look at how you perceive the news and what biases you have.

Once you know where bias enters the news, we'll help you look past those distractions and focus on the core issues. Armed with those skills, you can confidently seek out news and information from a variety of sources

without worrying about the motives of news providers.

Skilled news consumers can pluck factual information from any news story and know what information they should be skeptical about. You'll be less susceptible to those who want to distract them from important issues and better able to decide the merits of an issue based on their own priorities and values.

These skills empower news consumers to better evaluate news stories and news providers and give them more control over the quality of the information they seek.