

might a source's agenda play a role in how it presents the stories it reposts?

- **Who is this journalist (reporter, anchor, webmaster, etc.)?** Does he or she share the characteristics of the average American or of the media elite? How might that affect his or her perspective on the news? Has he or she been in politics? In what role? How might that affect how he or she sees current political events? Some of this information might be hard to find at first, but if a particular journalist appears to have a special agenda, it might be worth the extra research to find out.
 - **Is this news, or opinion?** Not every article or segment presented in the news media is actually news—the line between reporting and editorializing has become increasingly blurry. Take a moment to think about the nature of what you're watching or reading. Is the source a journalist, or a columnist or pundit? Is the source reporting facts, or presenting arguments?
 - **What's the quality of the reporting?** When news breaks, twenty-four-hour news organizations often emphasize speed over accuracy. Sources that take the time to investigate claims, confirm facts, and verify sources may not be the fastest to report the news, but they are often more accurate than those that react immediately. Watch out, too, for the poorly thought out retweet: even the most reputable news sources have succumbed to the temptation to repeat a fact without verifying it.
 - **What is the news of the day?** How do the news stories covered by your source (radio, TV, newspaper, magazine, or web) compare to the stories covered elsewhere? Why are these stories covered and not others? Who makes the decisions? How are the stories framed? Are positive or negative aspects emphasized? What standards do the journalists suggest you use to evaluate the story—that is, what standards do they seem to focus on?
 - **What issues are involved?** Can you get beyond the “horse race”? For instance, if reporters are focusing on the delivery of a politician's speech and his or her opponent's reactions to it, try reading the speech yourself (the *New York Times* will usually provide a transcript for major speeches). Similarly, when the media emphasize conflict, ask yourself what underlying issues are involved. Look for primary (original) sources whenever possible, ones that have not been processed by the media for you. If conflicts are presented as a choice between two sides, ask yourself if there are other sides that might be relevant.
 - **Who are the story's sources?** Are they “official” sources? Whose point of view do they represent? Are their remarks attributed to them, or are they speaking “on background” (anonymously)? Such sources frequently show up as “highly placed administration officials” or “sources close to the senator.” Why would people not want their names disclosed? How should that affect how we interpret what they say? Do you see the same sources appearing in many stories in different types of media? Have these sources been through the “revolving door”? Are they pundits? What audience are they addressing?
 - **Is someone putting spin on this story?** Is there visible news management? Is the main source the politician's press office? Is the story based on a leak? If so, can you guess the motivation of the leaker? What evidence supports your guess? What is the spin? That is, what do the politician's handlers want you to think about the issue or event?
 - **Who are the advertisers?** How might that affect the coverage of the news? What sorts of stories might be affected by the advertisers' presence? Are there potential stories that might hurt the advertiser?
 - **What are the media doing to get your attention?** Is the coverage of a news event detailed and thorough, or is it “lightened up” to make it faster and easier for you to process? If so, what are you missing? What is on the cover of the newspaper or magazine? What is the lead story on the network? How do the media's efforts to get your attention affect the news you get? Would you have read or listened to the story if the media had not worked at getting your attention?
 - **What values and beliefs do you bring to the news?** What are your biases? Are you liberal? Conservative? Do you think government is too big, or captured by special interests, always ineffective, or totally irrelevant to your life? Do you have any pet peeves or special interests that direct your attention? How do your current life experiences affect your political views or priorities? How do these values, beliefs, and ideas affect how you see the news, what you pay attention to, and what you skip? Think about all the articles or stories you tuned out, and ask yourself why you did so.
 - **Can you find a news source that you usually disagree with, that you think is biased or always wrong?** Read it now and again. It will help you keep your perspective and ensure that you get a mix of views that will keep you thinking critically. We are challenged not by ideas we agree with but by those that we find flawed. Stay an active media consumer.
1. Andrew Beaujon, “Survey: NPR's Listeners Best Informed, Fox News Viewers Worst Informed,” May 23, 2012, www.poynter.org/latest-news/mediawire/174826/survey-nprs-listeners-best-informed-fox-news-viewers-worst-informed/.
 2. Carlin Romano, “What? The Grisly Truth About Bare Facts,” in Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 78.