



## Comfort news rooted in bias

Finding comfort news is easy, even in places you might not expect to find it. When we are exposed to news that might be outside of our comfort zones, we tend to label it as “biased.” But what is “bias”? View Stony Brook University Dean Howard Schneider’s talk about [understanding audience bias as part of news literacy](#).

What’s audience bias? It’s the phenomenon that causes conservative audiences to say conservative news sources are the most objective and liberal audiences to say liberal sources are the most objective. Yet by any objective measure, middle-of-the-road news sources are the most fair. [Are the media extremes politically healthy?](#)

### Activities at three levels:

**Flashlight:** Comfort news is slanted, sometimes deliberately, other times not, to make it more attractive to an audience. For a class discussion, each student brings an example of comfort news from a national media outlet. Why do you think they qualify as comfort news? Looking at the [types of media bias](#), which form of bias made this story more “comfortable?”

**Spotlight:** For homework, ask students to take the [bias test developed by Harvard University researchers](#). Were they surprised by the results? Organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, in programs such as [Teaching Tolerance](#), try to fight stereotypes. How do journalists avoid shading the news based on their own unconscious biases? What happens if they don’t?

**Searchlight:** People say they want “neutral” war coverage. But what does that mean? In this war survey, [conservatives wanted more news about constructive work in Iraq and liberals wanted more anti-war news](#). If one side thinks the war news is too positive, and the other side says it is too negative, how is a “neutral” media outlet to react? Often experienced journalists feel that if two partisan groups attack them from opposite sides, they probably got the story right. But is that always true?

**Extra credit:** This [study shows a plurality of working journalists \(40%\) are liberal](#), with 33% middle of the road, 25% conservative and the rest not saying. On the other hand, the high-level executives running the companies that own most of

the mainstream media are a political mirror image of the staff. Do labor and management cancel each other out? Or do you think the media as a whole slants left or right? (Bear in mind, “experimenter’s bias.” in which liberal researchers tend to find conservative bias in the media, while conservative researchers tend to find liberal bias.)