

## A Question of Balance

A newspaper reporter you have met consults you about the following quandary: The reporter is writing an article about an environmental issue. Almost all the scientific evidence the reporter has found supports one point of view. However, the reporter's editor has told her to give equal attention to "both sides of the story" so it has "journalistic balance". What do you advise the reporter?

### Solutions

Most issues are more complex than "two sides of the story", and at a certain point overwhelming scientific evidence can diminish a "side" of an issue. The point is not to represent all views fairly, but rather to present the evidence to the reader fairly. Thus, writers and editors should not try to overcompensate for balance by overrepresenting minority or unsupported scientific viewpoints.

**Kate Travis**  
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Addressing dissenting theories is part of good science, and thus part of good science journalism. However, if the reporter wants to do a good job, she must strive to convince her editor that covering a scientific debate isn't like covering an election, in which all candidates deserve equal time. If almost all the available evidence supports one viewpoint, it might be reasonable to mention other viewpoints but not to give them equal attention. When she writes the story, she should describe the evidence that has led the scientific community to reach near-consensus and present any other explanation as a minority view, not as an equal contender.

She should also look into the credentials and funding of the scientists who embrace an alternative viewpoint. She should report to her readers if an alternative is supported only by industrial interests and be particularly wary of viewpoints embraced only by outsiders who have no credibility in the scientific discipline. Outsiders' opinions might be interesting, but they're not theories, and they rarely deserve coverage at all.

**Jessica Ancker**  
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I would advise the reporter that journalistic balance does not mean giving equal attention to different points of view, especially when there is little evidence to support some of the viewpoints. When reporting about science—which, of course, is an evidence-based discipline—quality and quantity of evidence should shape the story. One should also be aware of and note potential conflicts of interest, such as in sources of funding. I might advise the writer in this scenario to note that there are dissenters to the view supported by the preponderance of evidence. It depends on the case—I wouldn't, for example, advise someone writing about HIV to mention that there are people who still dispute, against overwhelming evidence, that HIV causes AIDS. And although it's one thing to acknowledge another point of view in a story and perhaps to quote a representative of that point of view, giving equal attention to both sides in the scenario you described would result in an unbalanced story and be a disservice to readers.

**Joan Stephenson**  
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The first definition of *balance* in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* is "an instrument for weighing"; the second is "a means of judging or deciding". These simple definitions offer the reporter a pathway out of her quandary: She could explain to her editor (tactfully, of course) that achieving "journalistic balance" in reporting science doesn't mean giving all viewpoints equal weight but rather exercising judgment and giving each piece of scientific evidence the weight it merits. A news reporter's job is to tell a good story—one based on facts. A scientist's job is to gather facts to test hypotheses about how the material world works. A story about science—whether about astrophysics, infectious diseases, or the environment—ought therefore to be grounded first in facts. My advice to the reporter would be to center her story on the

preponderance of the scientific evidence. When thousands of the world's experts on climate offer up thousands of pieces of evidence showing that the earth is warming because of such activities as the burning of fossil fuels, they are not stating an opinion akin to "I like ice cream"; they are using the scientific method to draw a conclusion supported by observations, measurements, and analyses. Scientific issues—the shape of the earth, for example—may indeed be controversial at first. Eventually, however, through a long-practiced process of discussion among scientists (also known as peer review) and between scientists and society, through the continued gathering and weighing of evidence, and through more discussion, science and society move on. Controversies make good stories, but when a controversy is resolved, news stories should no longer feature the controversy. When the preponderance of scientific evidence leads to widespread acceptance of a hypothesis—that the earth is a sphere—reporters who continue to report the story as though the issue is unresolved are in fact misleading their audiences. It isn't "journalistic balance" to ask the Flat Earth Society for commentary on

a story with photos of the earth from space. It is slavish adherence to conventions of he-said, she-said journalism and a failure to exercise journalistic judgment. In my opinion, it is an abdication of journalistic responsibility.

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## **New Question: A Question of Voice**

As an author's editor, you have been changing much of the passive voice in authors' scientific manuscripts to the active voice. An author objects, especially to instances in which doing so results in use of the first person, which he says does not sound objective. What do you say to the author? How do you decide when to change the passive voice to the active voice?

RITA M WASHKO *was a Science Editor intern when she compiled this column.*

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