

False Balance Statement

Drafted by Patricia Elliott, approved by the Ethics Advisory Committee. Submitted by the CAJ Ethics Advisory Committee and approved and endorsed by the Board of Directors, March 2024.

Journalism is an evidence-based endeavour. The work we present to the public upholds professional standards of verification, freedom from influence, and vetting by peers before publication. We uphold the same ethical standards for our sources, whether human or written. We do not open a floodgate on all voices and information put before us, without subjecting them to critical review to determine they meet basic standards of veracity.

There are often calls from the public, politicians and interest groups to present different 'sides' to a controversial topic and, indeed, gathering multiple perspectives is part of our daily work. However, our professional ethics also call on us to ensure that our careful review of sources remains intact and engaged at all times. To do otherwise is a disservice to the public because it may introduce false balance into the public domain.

False balance is defined as presenting two opposing views as equally supported by evidence and expertise when one is not. This is particularly problematic when it comes to reporting scientific and health information, "artificially creating a false balance of perspectives even in cases where the science is conclusive."¹

An example would be to present comments about climate change by a self-published geologist whose research is funded by an oil company on par with comments by a university-based climatologist with a record of peer reviewed publications. While this is a hypothetical example, recent history is rife with real-world examples, with real-world implications. For example, University of Alberta researchers found evidence that false balance in the media contributed to transplant recipients being reluctant to take Covid-19 vaccinations, in the wake of reportage that gave a near-equal platform to non-expert voices saying the vaccine was unproven and potentially harmful.²

As journalists, we therefore apply tests to mitigate against false balance. For example, if we are reporting on a study, we check where it has been published and by whom, and the credentials of the author. We also check to see if the findings have been refuted or discounted, and by whom.

An example of failure to do so occurred when a document, cited in the media as a "new study out of Johns Hopkins University," was widely reported, no doubt driven by the novelty of its

¹ CCA (Council of Canadian Academies). (2023). Fault Lines. Ottawa (ON): Expert Panel on the Socioeconomic Impacts of Science and Health Misinformation, CCA. p.22

² Zenome & Caulfield (2022). Newspaper coverage of Covid-19 vaccination for organ transplant. *Jama Network Open*, 5(12) doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.48800

conclusion that lockdowns did not prevent the spread of Covid-19, and by a sense that it presented a balance to other studies. Alert science journalists were quick to note that although JHU is widely recognized for medical research, the authors were not medical scientists, but rather economists. Further, the work was self-published online as a “working paper,” or pre-print, and did not represent original research, but was a selective review of other papers, many similarly non-peer reviewed.³ Experts pointed out that important medical research data was excluded, and that in some cases the conclusions of papers reviewed were misrepresented.⁴ An accredited medical fact-checking organization, Health Feedback, noted that of the three authors, just one had a connection to JHU, and two had a history of advocating against lockdowns, with one author publicly equating vaccine pass requirements with “cracking the Fascist whip.”⁵ Although news outlets began issuing retractions and clarifications of their news reports, the damage to public confidence in science-based health measures was already done.⁶

In light of such incidents, whether booking interviews or talk show guests, journalists are alert to the problem of false balance and take steps against it by asking tough questions about their sources and the theories they present. When scientific works are considered, their format and publishing status are precisely noted, along with authors’ credentials and any potential conflicts. When a theory is untested by peer review or discredited by scientific consensus, there is no requirement to present it as an equivalent “other side” in the name of balance. This in fact creates imbalance, by providing an unearned level of credence to information that may only serve to misinform the public and inflame controversy where none should otherwise exist.

³ K. Fiore, Director of Enterprise and Investigative Reporting (2022) What you need to know about that ‘Johns Hopkins study.’ MedPage Today, Feb. 7. See also: Science Media Centre (2022).expert reaction to a preprint looking at the impact of lockdowns, as posted on the Johns Hopkins Krieger School of Arts and Sciences website

⁴ Teo, F., ed., (2022, Feb. 22). Claims that a “Johns Hopkins study” showed lockdowns are ineffective at reducing COVID-19 mortality are based on a working paper with questionable methods. *Health Feedback*.

⁵ Hanke, S. (2021, Dec. 8). “Italy is cracking the Fascist whip even harder.” Twitter post.

⁶ Sedeghi, M. (2022). Fact Check: Working paper isn’t proof that Covid-19 restrictions don’t work, experts say. USA Today, Feb. 18.