

# Evaluating Media Bias and Reliability

By Jim McGalliard

## ***1. Introduction***

As I have mentioned before, the controversy over a Montgomery County zoning amendment that would allow the installation of additional solar panels in the Agricultural Reserve was a good example of a social justice issue where I found it difficult to discern what the wisest course would be. Although I am retired and spend time each week studying these issues, many of them are complex enough that I hesitate to form an opinion about them without trying to learn more.

The solar panel issue was particularly difficult for me, given that two sources that I often rely on, the Sierra Club and the Unitarian Universalists, had taken opposite positions. What was I to do? I didn't have (or make) enough time to become expert in the various technical, economic, and miscellaneous issues that were relevant to the solar panel question.

I've been looking for additional sources of information of potential use in helping me decide about some of the complex political and social justice issues that are in our collective consciousness right now.

Back in the 60s, I was fond of Phil Ochs, whose songs touched on many social and political issues. I remember his song, "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," which mentioned two politically-oriented magazines, The Nation and The New Republic. I remember that I had been reading the New Republic during that period but became aware of a problem with some of their reporting. It turned out that many articles by a particular reporter had been fabrications. So I stopped reading it. I think it's good to look into the quality of one's media outlets, which can change over time.

Here are some of the sources that I've come across that I may use when trying to evaluate various media. The sources listed below are my own personal choices, provided as examples, not recommendations of the Social Justice Team. I would suggest that readers consider developing their own lists of preferred sources.

## ***2. Fact Checkers***

There exist organizations that check the facts as reported by news media and make their results available to the public.

### 2.1 [Makeuseof.com](https://www.makeuseof.com)

A MS Bing search of "fact checker organizations" yielded the following organizations characterized as "The 8 Best Fact-Checking Sites for Finding Unbiased Truth." Of course, the bias of the organization that compiled this list should itself be considered. The following address includes links to the 8 sites it characterizes as the best.

- <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/true-5-factchecking-websites>
  1. Media Bias/FactCheck (MBFC News)
  2. Snopes
  3. PolitiFact
  4. FactCheck.org
  5. TruthOrFiction.com
  6. Lead Stories

7. Hoax Slayer
8. FullFact.org

## 2.2 Washington Post Fact Checker

- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/>

## 2.3 Politifact

- [www.politifact.com](http://www.politifact.com)

According to Wikipedia, PolitiFact.com is an American nonprofit project operated by the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, with offices there and in Washington, D.C. It began in 2007 as a project of the *Tampa Bay Times* (then the *St. Petersburg Times*), with reporters and editors from the newspaper and its affiliated news media partners reporting on the accuracy of statements made by elected officials, candidates, their staffs, lobbyists, interest groups and others involved in U.S. politics. Its journalists evaluate original statements and publish their findings on the PolitiFact.com website, where each statement receives a "Truth-O-Meter" rating. The ratings range from "True" for statements the journalists deem as accurate to "Pants on Fire" (from the taunt "Liar, liar, pants on fire") for claims the journalists deem as false or ludicrous.

## 2.4 FactCheck.org

- [www.factcheck.org](http://www.factcheck.org)

According to Wikipedia, FactCheck.org is a nonprofit website that describes itself as a "consumer advocate for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics". It is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, and is funded primarily by the Annenberg Foundation.

## **3. Citation Sites**

These sites are indexes of mostly academic and scholarly books and papers that identify where and how many times a particular book or paper has been cited by another author. Books and papers that are cited frequently are usually considered reputable.

### 3.1 Google Scholar

- [www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com)

According to Wikipedia, Google Scholar is a freely accessible web search engine that indexes the full text or metadata of scholarly literature across an array of publishing formats and disciplines. Released in beta in November 2004, the Google Scholar index includes most peer-reviewed online academic journals and books, conference papers, theses and dissertations, preprints, abstracts, technical reports, and other scholarly literature, including court opinions and patents. While Google does not publish the size of Google Scholar's database, scientometric researchers estimated it to contain roughly 389 million documents including articles, citations and patents making it the world's largest academic search engine in January 2018.

### 3.2 CiteSeerX

- <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/index>

According to Wikipedia, CiteSeer<sup>x</sup> (originally called CiteSeer) is a public search engine and digital library for scientific and academic papers, primarily in the fields of computer and information science. CiteSeer is considered as a predecessor of academic search tools such as Google Scholar and Microsoft Academic Search. CiteSeer-like engines and archives usually only harvest documents from publicly available websites and do not crawl publisher websites. For this reason, authors whose documents are freely available are more likely to be represented in the index.

#### ***4. Political Orientation Rating Charts and Listings***

The resources in this section either provide ratings of specific media outlets with respect to their political orientation or advice to the reader on how to appraise the orientation or reliability of a source. Note, it appears that many college and university libraries have a lot of material about finding reliable information – as an aid to their students and faculty. The sites below are just examples. Some sources require subscription of access through a public or college library.

##### **4.1 AllSides Media Bias Ratings**

In the following table, “L” is for left-leaning, “R” is for right-leaning, and “C” is for centered.



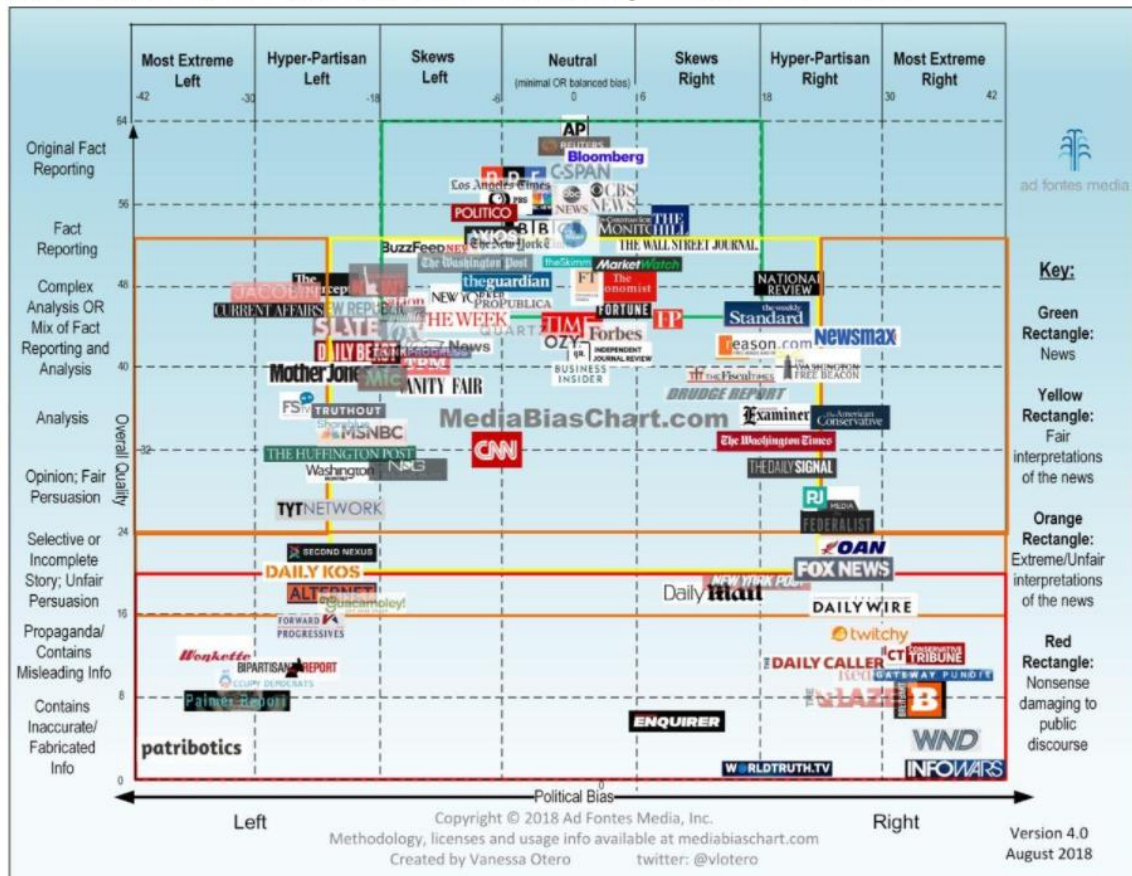
AllSides Media Bias Ratings are based on multi-partisan, scientific analysis. Visit AllSides.com to view hundreds of media bias ratings.

Version 3 | AllSides 2020

## 4.2 Otero's Media Bias Chart

In this chart, sources towards the left are left leaning, and the opposite for the right, as with the first chart. In addition, sources higher up in the chart are considered more factual and sources lower down in the chart are considered more imaginative.

### INTERACTIVE Media Bias Chart by Vanessa Otero



- Use this link to view this interactive chart: [Otero's Media Bias Chart 5.0 \(beta\)](#)

## 4.3 Pace University

- <https://libguides.pace.edu>
- <https://libguides.pace.edu/fakenews>

Pace University is a private university with its main campus in New York City and secondary campuses in Westchester County, New York (Wikipedia). Their library site gives advice about finding reliable information.

## 4.4 College of the Mainland

- <http://library.com.edu/>

College of the Mainland (COM) is a public community college in Texas City, Texas (Wikipedia).

- <https://libguides.com.edu/TipsControversialIssues>

The COM website states, “Controversial issues are topics that are divisive. Many of these topics have been divisive for a long time, such as abortion or capital punishment. Many people feel very strongly for or against these kinds of issues.” Part of the idea is that sharing both sides of a controversy can help determine the truth.

#### 4.5 Wikipedia List of Fake News Websites

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_fake\\_news\\_websites](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fake_news_websites)

#### 4.6 Facts on File: Issues and Controversies

- <https://www.lyrasis.org/content/pages/product-details.aspx?pid=9244E662-3001-E111-B2CE-00155D0A1702>

According to their own website, the Facts on File: Issues and Controversies section “explores controversial topics in a language and format that students appreciate, with the balance, accuracy and regular updating that are synonymous with Facts On File News Services. Probing public policy issues on which researchers can never have enough information, Issues and Controversies covers more than 70 controversial topics each year. Special online features include frequent updating, By the Numbers statistical overviews of major issues, newspaper editorials, primary documents, a directory of contact organizations, and curriculum/study aids.” This source requires a subscription, which may be available through a public or college library.

### **5. *Selected Organizations With Issue Positions***

The organizations in this section are ones to which I am partial and are provided as examples only. I would encourage readers to pick out sources that are aligned with their own opinions. The first two organizations’ pages include position statements on specific issues.

#### 5.1 Sierra Club

- <https://www.sierraclub.org/explore-issues>

Wikipedia says that the Sierra Club is an environmental organization with chapters in all 50 United States, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico. The club was founded on May 28, 1892, in San Francisco, California. Traditionally associated with the progressive movement, the club was one of the first large-scale environmental preservation organizations in the world, and currently engages in lobbying politicians to promote environmentalist policies.

#### 5.2 Unitarian Universalist Association and Churches

- [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org)
- <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/search>

According to Wikipedia, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) is a liberal religious association of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Modern Unitarian Universalists see themselves as a separate religion with its own beliefs and affinities. They define themselves as non-creedal, and draw wisdom from various religions and philosophies, including humanism, pantheism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and Earth-centered spirituality.

#### 5.3 League of Women Voters



- [www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org)

According to Wikipedia, The League of Women Voters (LWV) is a nonprofit organization in the United States that was formed to help women take a larger role in public affairs after they won the right to vote. It was founded in 1920 to support the new women suffrage rights and was a merger of National Council of Women Voters, founded by Emma Smith DeVoe, and National American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Carrie Chapman Catt, approximately six months before the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution gave women the right to vote. The League of Women Voters began as a "mighty political experiment" aimed to help newly enfranchised women exercise their responsibilities as voters.

## **6. *Newspapers, Magazines, Media and other Sites***

Keeping all of these sites in one place can help me remember where I might want to check something.

### 6.1 NPR

- [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)

### 6.2 MSNBC

- [www.msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com)

### 6.3 New Yorker

- [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)

### 6.4 The Nation

- [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com)

### 6.5 Mother Jones

- [www.motherjones.com](http://www.motherjones.com)

### 6.6 New York Times

- [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)