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Anti-Polarization Checklist

Too often, journalism amplifies extreme views and ignores more nuanced ones. It reinforces the idea that people are split into political camps. It oversimplifies or stereotypes groups of people and gives the impression that people who agree on one thing likely all agree on completely separate issues.

In addition, news consumers make assumptions about journalists' own values through the way stories are framed, sourced and written. In some cases, journalists are communicating where they're coming from purposefully and transparently. But in others, their views and assumptions are creeping in without intention. And coverage that feels accurate and consistent with how they see the world actually communicates a political agenda to some news consumers.

This checklist is designed to inject a pause button in the story editing process, so questions can be asked about what is being communicated in the story's framing, sourcing and language. It addresses this big-picture question: **Who would feel seen and understood by your story, and who would feel misrepresented or ignored?**

The goal of the checklist is NOT to make all content palatable to all people, or to remove the journalist's authority or judgment. Rather, it is designed to make room in the editing process for journalists to be intentional about:

- examining how their story might be perceived by people with different values and experiences
- identifying what they are communicating to their audience intentionally or unintentionally about how they see an issue
- considering including enhanced transparency about their goals and process

Links:

- [Read more about how to use this resource here](#), and [read how it's backed by research](#).
- [Read how newsrooms have put the checklist to use](#).
- [Take our Pledge for Less Polarizing Journalism here](#).
- [Find a version in Spanish here](#).

Have feedback? Reach our team at info@trustingnews.org.

Examine your sourcing: Ideology, agenda, selection

- ☐ Consider where your sources fall along a range of views on the subject matter being discussed. Are you comfortable with where they lean? Would the story benefit from less ideological views?
- ☐ Have you considered the agenda of any of your sources and accounted for that — in your reporting or in what you acknowledge in the story about the source?

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- ☐ Can you explain to your audience why you are choosing these sources? What gives them credibility or expertise? How did you find them? Can you explain whether you talked to other people who weren't included and what role they played?

Examine your word choice: Adjectives, verbs, and tone

- ☐ [Examine your adjectives](#) describing: groups, actions, points of view. Are they necessary?
- ☐ Check your adverbs and verbs. They can imply that we know the actor's intent and communicate what we think about their actions.
- ☐ Are there words used to describe issues or positions that reflect the preferences of one group? If so, is that intentional? Would another word choice be more hearable across groups?
- ☐ Can you explain why you made a word choice, within the story or in an editor's note or sidebar?
- ☐ Examine your tone. Is there playful or snarky language that makes light of an issue, or could potentially be perceived as biased? Could the descriptions be "sterilized"?

Examine your story and headline framing: Labels, purpose, and perspective

- ☐ Would your reason for doing the story — the questions you're trying to answer — be clear to people with a variety of views? Would it be helpful or appropriate to explain the story's purpose in an editor's note, side box or another spot?
- ☐ How do you anticipate the story framing and headline would feel to people with different world views and opinions on the topic being discussed? If you think one group would have concerns, are you comfortable with that? Or could you reframe it so it feels more accurate and respectful?
- ☐ What kind of labels are used for people or ideas? Can you identify any oversimplification or overgeneralization? Do they describe one group of people or their beliefs? Can you say, for example, "three local Democrats say ..." vs "local Democrats say"?
- ☐ Are you playing upon pre-existing prejudices? Using a frame of war or battle? Adopting weaponized wedge language or issues?
- ☐ Does this story need to connect to national themes? Does your community's news require a comparison to other, similar stories around the country? Or does adding that connection or comparison bring a more polarizing, contentious lens to the story?
- ☐ Does the headline imply that there is an opinion or point of view being shared? If so, should there be an "opinion" or "analysis" label added?
- ☐ Is the headline likely to prompt outrage or confirmation bias? If so, are you sure it's appropriate? Could you instead prompt curiosity?
- ☐ Are you perpetuating or repeating a disinformation narrative? Could you be more clear about injecting facts and context?

One more tip: As you consider each story, think about the role it plays in your coverage overall. If it dives deep into a specific perspective — one that is balanced out by other coverage — don't assume your audience will find that other coverage. Link out to it and articulate how it fits in.