Our Opinion

Recommendations for Publishing Opinion Journalism on Digital Platforms

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Executive Summary

To address the challenge of improving the assortment of opinion journalism that appears in news feeds, the NewsQ Initiative convened a panel of journalists, media scholars, and technologists to examine the current condition of platform news products. Through looking at examples of how products serve up opinion journalism, the panel worked to identify specific areas where ranking and recommendation could be improved, and to make recommendations for both platforms and publishers.¹

The following report outlines the panel’s findings and recommendations, and describes the panel’s process, explorations, and aspirations for next steps.

The report begins with a discussion of the purpose of opinion journalism, specifically its role in providing evidence-based reflections on the news and a diverse array of perspectives. With this in mind, the panel provides our analysis of the challenges facing publishers and aggregators when distributing opinion journalism online. With a view to the difficulties around the problem and our own limited perspectives, we provide recommendations for practical steps that both publishers and platforms can take to address them.

In particular, we call urgently for a clear distinction between news and opinion journalism in news aggregation products. Though we provide some suggestions for how to approach the challenge, providing this clarity industry-wide will require committed support from both publishers and technology platforms. Some of those changes require more resources or greater consensus than exists at the moment. It will also require more mutual discussion and exchange.

In framing our analysis and recommendations, we want to clearly state our recognition that long-term, big-picture, systemic changes are necessary to improve the quality and credibility of news online. We also recognize that, though publishers are a critical part of improving the quality of news online and overall, we are in some ways asking them to solve a problem they themselves did not create. At the same time, we believe that the urgency and scale of this problem require immediate, pragmatic action from both publishers and platforms, and that some steps can and should be taken as we work towards bigger changes.

Introduction

In journalism, the task of sorting news from opinion has long posed a challenge. There are many reasons why: what counts as “opinion” and what counts as settled fact changes over time. In

¹ NewsQ is a joint initiative of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and Hacks/Hackers. The NewsQ panel meetings and paper on opinion journalism were made possible through the facilitation of Kate Harloe.
parallel, the journalism industry itself changes over time, in response to a wide variety of forces, from cultural shifts to market pressures — and of course, norms around journalistic methods and practices then change, too.

To make matters more complicated: what gets defined as “news” and what gets defined as “opinion” is not simply a moving target, it is also a political question. All too often throughout history, ideas that are empirically sound but not yet widely accepted have been described as “opinions.” Journalism is one key public sphere where these debates are worked out: Where, for better or worse, readers and publishers help define the bounds of mainstream ideas — and in turn define, what, this year, the general public might consider to be fact versus a controversial “opinion.”

This challenge of separating news and opinion has only become more convoluted by the advent of the internet. As massive technology companies have established a monopoly over the information ecosystem and become de facto news publishers, any confusion that existed among journalists regarding principles, standards, definitions, and ethics has only travelled downstream to platforms. As more and more people access news through aggregators, this particular knot of problems — how to properly handle news and opinion journalistically and how to do it online — has become increasingly urgent.

**Terms and Purpose**

In order to ensure clarity of thought as a panel, we began our work by discussing definitions for journalism, opinion journalism, and the purpose of both. This helped us ensure not only that we were able to clearly understand one another, but also that we would be able to better explain our suggestions to others.

**What is Opinion in the Context of News and Journalism?**

For a grounding definition of journalism, we have adapted from *A Dictionary of Journalism*. *Journalism* can be understood as:

*A set of practices through which information is found out and communicated, often involving making public what would otherwise be private, and which typically is published or broadcast in a format such as a newspaper, magazine, bulletin, documentary, website, blog or social media.*

*Journalism entails discovering or uncovering fresh, topical, factual material and making it publicly available. It can also go beyond that to amplify, contextualize or comment on facts already made public. It can range from hard news, current affairs, and war reporting to soft news, color pieces, and features; it can be generalist or specialist, local or international, serious or popular.*
It can cover everything from investigative journalism in the public interest to writing a description of a sporting event, from reviewing a play to gallery reporting of politics.

Notwithstanding the breadth of the field, at the heart of most journalism is reporting, which relies on a mixture of observation, inquiry, verification and attribution in an attempt to produce as accurate a version of events as possible. At the same time, events are told as stories as a way of making them both entertaining and informative.²

Journalism can encompass a wide variety of forms of information, but it does have bounds that are possible to define.

Opinion journalism, however, goes a step further. It carries a point of view, but it should also be a thoughtful, fact-based reflection of the news. It does not ignore different perspectives, but it seeks to tell a particular side of a story, to argue its merits or point out its flaws.

Opinion journalism is a particularly challenging term to define because the word “opinion” has a variety of definitions. The classic Oxford dictionary defines “opinion” as “a view or judgment formed about something, not necessarily based on fact or knowledge.”³

This does not apply to “opinion journalism.” Opinion journalism is considered to be a part of journalism, and hence is expected to embody the vital news value of accuracy. This constrains opinion journalism, but also serves to distinguish it from uninformed opinion.

Opinion journalism should strive for a level of reporting and fact-gathering that prepares the journalist to defend the positions taken, particularly if suggesting a course of action. What distinguishes opinion is whether it takes a particular position and attempts to persuade readers of its value. Often, the writer also draws on personal and professional experience to form conclusions that add weight to a point of view. We note that opinion journalism can certainly include historical essays.

In their 2016 book The News Media, scholars C.W. Anderson, Leonard Downie, Jr., and Michael Schudson refer to the present as a “turbulent sea of too often untrustworthy digital information.”⁴ They write that even when news takes the form of analysis, commentary, or advocacy, it must embody the vital news values of accuracy, fairness, open-mindedness, and independence of power and ideology. Like good journalism, opinion journalism must be transparent about sources and

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methods whenever possible, and must maintain dedication to accountability and the public interest.

**What is the Purpose of Opinion Journalism? An Array of Evidence-based, Diverse Perspectives**

Opinion serves many of the same purposes as news. It informs, entertains, and challenges. But it also attempts to persuade readers to a certain position. It can critique leaders and entities in a way that news journalism cannot.

Opinion journalism also serves as a way to explicitly help readers access diverse perspectives and viewpoints, with factual grounding.

There is consensus that professionals with expertise and experience (e.g. law, management, sports, medicine, technology) and scholars (social sciences, social sciences, applied sciences) are qualified to write opinions in the press. There is also consensus that those with journalistic expertise (reporters with long experience in covering a topic) are qualified. To offer a broader array of perspectives, many news outlets run opinion pieces from community figures, civic leaders, and those with valuable or interesting lived experiences. Even here, opinion writers for news outlets must cite verified facts, evidence, and or research even as they persuade, argue, and offer conclusions.

Finally, in elevating standards for opinion journalism, it is important to keep in mind that opinion pieces often are intentionally provocative, even to the point of discomfort. The writer may seek to jar readers in an effort to shake up their thinking. We must maintain a space for opinion content some may find provocative or even offensive while drawing a firm line against pieces that are devoid of facts or deliberately distort facts, and which seek only to demean or dehumanize.

**The Importance of Expertise and Lived Experiences**

In addition to those who have domain credentials or professional expertise in a certain topic, others write opinion journalism based on lived experiences. A good example of a “lived experience” opinion piece is this article, published in USA Today in June 2020: *Prison Experience Helps Me Lead My Company through Uncertainty of COVID-19.*

In it, the CEO of a youth development organization, who was incarcerated for 16 years, writes that his experiences in prison were the best training for how to lead in the time of COVID-19.

Lived experiences are important for opinion journalism because the author usually brings understated and hitherto ignored facts to light in offering a rebuttal to privileged point of view that may be in wider circulation. A recent example of this is a Twitter thread that Jamila

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Hammami, an organizer and social worker, wrote in response to a tweet from Paul Krugman. Krugman claimed that “overall, Americans took 9/11 pretty calmly. Notably, there wasn’t a mass outbreak of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence, which could all too easily have happened. And while [George] W.[.] Bush was a terrible president, to his credit he tried to calm prejudice, not feed it.”

In a tweet, Hammami offered factual evidence of Islamophobia to refute his claim: “I told him he erased decades of oppression and violence in one tweet that will be cited......for decades to come. I said it was whitewashing history. I pointed to the Muslim registry, NYPD Muslim surveillance programs, the FBI surveillance programs, +. I also said that citing the FBI hate crime statistics was essentially unethical.” Even though this appeared on social media, Hammami’s response would easily fit a “lived experience” opinion journalism piece.

Finally, the role of opinion journalism is to encourage people to engage and participate in commentary and discussion. In an ideal world, the opinion pages are not just for self-appointed community leaders, they are a venue for the voices of anyone in the community — a way to broaden inclusion and community engagement.

The Role of Opinion Journalism in Public Controversies

Part of the complexity in modern democratic life is disagreements, disputes, and controversies. What constitutes controversy? The question is significant because once a journalist has determined that an issue is controversial, the principle of fairness in reporting requires citing multiple viewpoints, rooted in facts and evidence, about said controversy. The determination of a topic as controversial is a conscious gatekeeping decision in newsrooms that has ethical implications.

Are all controversies legitimate in journalism? Clearly not. Flat-earthers have had a field day on social media, but no journalism outlet would allow an opinion arguing that the earth is flat. Currently, because social media allows a much broader window of claims and opinions (not necessarily a bad thing, because plenty of marginalized voices have gained from this too), it is easier, relatively, to create controversy and popularity for non-factual narratives on social media than through journalistic channels.

One systematic way to think about controversy was offered by the journalism historian Daniel Hallin. “It is useful to imagine the journalist’s world as divided into three regions, each of which is governed by different journalistic standards,” wrote Hallin in his 1986 book The Uncensored War.
about coverage of Vietnam. He introduced the three regions as concentric circles or spheres: the sphere of consensus, the sphere of legitimate controversy, and the sphere of deviance. Hallin offered this model to explain why and when journalists tended to present opposing views or adopt a more disinterested or “objective” approach to a topic. Today, journalism reformers see objectivity itself as an outdated and much abused norm, one that has been deployed at times to exclude marginalized communities from the news.

Figure 1: Hallin’s spheres (Sphere of Consensus, Sphere of Legitimate Controversy, Sphere of Deviance). Image from Hallin’s 1986 book The Uncensored War.

Hallin’s idea to conceptualize boundaries between legitimate controversies and plain deviance is a useful concept to clarify the role of opinion journalism, particularly in the era of social media. This model shows that journalists and journalistic opinion writers do decide (implicitly or explicitly) on whether a disagreement belongs to legitimate controversy or not. If not, then the presentation of perspectives that frame the debate as controversial will inadvertently validate it. This is not good journalism. Such perspectives will inevitably not be based on facts or empirically observed reality.

For example, take climate change. While the scientific consensus is a settled matter, airing anti-science perspectives (which fit the sphere of deviance) through reportage or opinion journalism helps make a non-controversy into a controversy. Interest groups can gain from creating controversy by nudging newsrooms to unethically open up to anti-truth perspectives. Twenty-five years after his book was published, talking to NPR on this very question in 2011, Hallin said:

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9 Ibid., 117.
At what point would we decide that global warming is not really a legitimate subject of controversy anymore? Because the truth is within scientific communities it’s not. Within the political public sphere there’s still a big controversy about it. And that is somewhat troubling, that gap. You know, in many cases I think it’s going to be the right decision for a journalist to say, we’re aware that the science says that there’s not a controversy here and we are going to refuse to treat this part of it as though it were controversial. I think that’s a responsible decision. I think it’s politically risky as well.\(^\text{10}\)

Politically risky or not, the journalist is obligated to the facts.

At the same time, the determination of what is a legitimate controversy can easily be abused to exclude the views of marginalized people. We acknowledge that journalists are inherently uncomfortable with this power, which can have unintended consequences. But on the other hand, the default cannot be “both-sidesing,” or representing positions on provably false statements; this is the easy way out. There is a genuine problem with journalists being accused of bias and system-rigging simply for refusing to be drawn into pseudo-controversies over outlandish, easily disproved ideas. That notion is being severely tested in this political climate. It is a waste of resources and a distraction that journalists can ill afford.

### The Opinion Panel: Our Process and Work

How should news ranking and recommendation systems work? One answer has been news quality: higher quality news should rise to the top. In turn, this raises the question: how do we define quality? To address this question with regards to opinion journalism, NewsQ hosted a review panel of journalists, scholars, and technologists on the topic.

Supported by a NewsQ facilitator, the panel examined specific case studies of news ranking and recommendation systems to develop guidance or principles regarding quality journalism online. They aimed towards principles that could be interpretable by both machines and journalists. Members of the inaugural Opinion Panel included:

- David Agraz, Software Engineer at Google;
- Leona Allen Ford, Deputy Publisher of the Dallas Morning News;
- Jon Allsop, Columnist at the Columbia Journalism Review;
- Patricia Lopez, Editorial Writer at the Star Tribune;

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- Rochelle Riley, former Columnist at the Detroit Free Press;
- Rebecca Traister, Senior Writer at New York Magazine; and,
- Subramaniam (Subbu) Vincent, Director of Journalism and Media Ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.

The panel convened six times over the course of five months from June to October 2020.

When convening, the panel reviewed specific results from news feeds across major platform news products by Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple, and Microsoft. When collecting the results, NewsQ researchers focused on avoiding personalization of the result streams by anonymizing the searches as much as possible; in addition to multiple computers and browsers being used for capture, location was masked when needed by Virtual Private Networks when looking at news feeds.

Because the goal of the analysis was to provide an initial qualitative review, the dataset provides an illustrative rather than systematically sampled view of possible results. Panelists were granted access to the results from several different news products, gathered across certain dates that spanned a four-month period from February to June 2020.

The results of each sample news feed were captured first in an image screenshot, and then translated into a database containing the top five articles from each news feed sample. Panelists could discover contextual information about each of these articles, including:

- our date of collection in the feed;
- the date the article was published;
- the ranking order of the article within the feed’s list (position 1 for top-most story);
- the publishing outlet;
- the article headline;
- the article URL;
- the categorical label(s) applied to a story visible in the platform news product (e.g. “opinion,” “news,” “developing”), and;
- the categorical label(s) visibly applied to the original article (e.g. “news,” “opinion,” “world,” “politics”).

As the panelists convened, they worked through specific examples from the database and focused upon the application of journalistic principles to news algorithms. For example, the panel looked at whether they thought the ranked order of results reflected a definition of news quality. The panel also analyzed visual elements of the news feed, publisher source, article coverage, and diversity at both the publisher and article level.

It was from this analysis that the panel considered the current limitations of news algorithms.
The Opinion Problem

Our analysis of platform news products was informed through a larger view of the “opinion problem” in social media. Today, opinion journalism mixes and collides with other forms of opinion on social media platforms, such as: unproven claims, rhetoric, hyper-partisanship, misleading or non-factual statements, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, and outright lying. Opinion journalism competes with all those forms of opinion, and readers are given few tools for distinguishing between the two.

In addition to confusing readers, this jumble undermines the purpose of opinion journalism and makes it less effective within democratic public life. The careful work of thinking through legitimate controversy has also been significantly affected through online news distribution.

The need to clearly distinguish opinion journalism as a reported, researched piece by those with expertise or lived experience has increased. A better attempt at providing clear distinctions between — or labeling — the difference between what is journalism and what is not, as well as what is opinion journalism and what is news reporting, seems to us the major work ahead when it comes to the role of opinion journalism in online news ranking and recommendation systems.

Figure 2: A list of articles recommended by Apple News on March 5, 2020. The final article, by NBC News, is marked as opinion in the headline.
The Principle Behind the Separation

The idea of separation between news and opinion was not always part of journalism in democracies. Referring to American press history, assistant professor of communication and journalism Kevin Lerner wrote that the transition to separation happened during the 19th century for American journalism, as newspapers grew their audience. Separating news from opinion allowed newspaper owners to exert influence on public opinion in editorial pages but still emphasize their independence from faction.

Lerner noted that through most of the twentieth century, newspapers reassured their readers and their reporters that there was a “wall” between the news and opinion sides of their operations. “Publishers relied,” according to Lerner, “on this idea of separation to insist that their news reporting was fair and independent, and they believed that readers understood that separation.”

However, in practice, separation of opinion and news reporting is not as clean as it sounds. In recent decades, reporters have increasingly questioned the ethic of separating news and opinion, saying it forced them to set aside their own judgment of situations, events, and people. The reporter Wesley Lowery recently shared his own opinion that “neutral ‘objective journalism’ is constructed atop a pyramid of subjective decision-making: which stories to cover, how intensely to cover those stories, which sources to seek out and include, which pieces of information are highlighted and which are downplayed.” In a similar vein, journalism professor Matthew Pressman opened his book, On Press, The Liberal Values That Shaped the News, by arguing that “covering the news involves countless decisions.” “Which stories matter most,” he asked. “Who should be interviewed? What questions should be asked? How should a situation be described? What should the headline say?”

Values, both regressive and progressive, drive reporting decisions every day. Values also drive opinions. Even when not explicitly stated, opinions shape straight news articles day in and day out.

Further complicating matters is the fact that social media, which offers a personal branding opportunity to journalists around “authenticity,” has contributed to a blurring of the lines between news and opinion. This has contributed to the confusion readers have long felt over what is news and what is opinion.

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11 Kevin Lerner, “Journalists know news and opinion are separate, but readers often can’t tell the difference,” Nieman Lab, June 22, 2020, https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/06/journalists-know-news-and-opinion-are-separate-but-readers-often-cant-tell-the-difference/.  
Why Not Just Mix Opinion and News?

The difficulty in separating the reporting person from process does not negate the need to distinguish between news and opinion. Rather, we recognize the need for a richer definition of “news” that understands we all have unavoidable preconceptions and unconscious biases. Including evidence-based lived experiences is a crucial part of this effort. A definition of “news” that acknowledges these preconceptions is still distinct from “opinion journalism,” whose goal is to argue and persuade. Importantly, this is not the same as advocating for more opinionated news or journalism. To the contrary, understanding that all humans, the journalist included, have preconceptions is a precondition for a better-grounded, factual journalism.

Furthermore, separation is appreciated by readers, a 2018 report from the American Press Institute found. Psychologically, separation appears to be preferred in the text of the news we read because of the feeling of autonomy and the need to minimize surprise. Reader autonomy means that when we read news reportage, or straight news reporting, we primarily want the facts so we may come to our own understanding. When we want an opinion on the news, we may seek it through opinion journalism. But when our expectation is straight reporting, discovering a writer’s opinion, overtly inserted into news work, both surprises us and feels like a threat to our autonomy.

This is one of the reasons that print newspapers and video news broadcasts have made the distinction between news reporting and opinion journalism. Through section headers and other forms of labeling, news publishers contextualize the difference so that readers and viewers at least understand that outlet’s perspective on what type of article they are consuming.

The answer, then, to the challenge of separating news from opinion journalism is not mixing it all together, collapsing the categories, and discarding traditional reportorial tools (e.g., verification, corroboration, skepticism, fairness) in favor of straight argumentation across the board. In the view of the panel, part of the answer lies in shifting and clarifying the definitions for “news” and “opinion journalism” — with publishers and platforms clearly labeling both.

Observations: Current Practice in Platforms’ Handling of Opinion Journalism

In order to understand what could be improved specifically, we began by examining how opinion journalism currently shows up on news aggregators, or platform products that distribute recommendations for reading based upon stories from many different news and journalism outlets. Based on our understanding of the function of opinion journalism, we framed both the

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challenges and opportunity around two main types of differentiation in the “news” experience that platforms could offer to readers:

- Differentiating journalistic news outlets from other information sources
- Labeling opinion journalism clearly in a feed

Overall, we found that plenty of articles that could otherwise be labeled Opinion on the feeds are not. Below, we outline some of our observations about the dataset.

**Facebook**

We examined the Facebook News tab section available for mobile devices. Facebook has become a major aggregator of news while stating publicly that it does not want the editorial responsibilities of a media outlet. Currently, it appears that if outlets create their own Opinion labels to distinguish their persuasive content, Facebook will carry them. For instance, the New York Times, Washington Post, and the Star Tribune all label opinion pieces, which do appear labeled on Facebook. But for publishers who don’t apply opinion labels at all, or do not consistently do so, it isn’t so clear. Readers who just skim the feed often don’t know until they click (if they do) whether they are reading news or opinion. Furthermore, if the publisher is not labeling, the reader will not know even after she has opened the article.

For the examples reviewed, there was no systematic labeling of content by type. When looking at a list of articles in the feed, a reader would not be able to see text or labels from the original article; a reader sees only the publication and the headline. There appears to be, generally, no effort made to package or contextualize original headlines, even though some were confusing when excerpted for Facebook’s feed. There is no byline (author name). Under the mobile News tab, Facebook publishes no designation of news versus opinion.

Examples of unlabeled opinion journalism include a sarcastic New York Post editorial lede that was presented exactly like the content above and below it, with no indication for readers that they were reading sarcasm. Panelists also noted a Vox article, titled “America’s reopening is dangerous. Canada has a better idea.” The story showed no byline in the feed and was full of opinion, but was not labeled as opinion or commentary in the feed. While the New York Post article was labeled as opinion on the Post’s site, the Vox article was not.

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Figure 3: Screenshot of Vox article in Facebook news feed, on June 2, 2020. This is an example of a story that contained opinion but was not labeled as opinion by platform or publisher.

Figure 4: Screenshot of New York Post article on April 13, 2020 that contains opinion and sarcasm, and was labeled as opinion by the publisher. It was not labeled as opinion in Facebook news feed.

Overall, there seemed to be no clear sense of prioritization or ordering in the feed.

Google News

We noted that Google News shows articles that are labeled as “opinion” under Full Coverage listings on ongoing developments (see Figure 5 for an example). Typically, these are articles that various publishers have themselves labeled. In other words, the articles that are labeled "opinion" on the feed usually seem to be articles that the publishers themselves have originally labeled as opinion.

See an example from November 12, 2020, in which three opinion tags in the Google news feed are all taken from the publishers themselves. In all three examples highlighted below — from The
Wall Street Journal\(^7\) to The Washington Post\(^8\) to The Philadelphia Inquirer\(^9\) — the opinion articles were originally labeled as opinion on the original sites.

Figure 5: Screenshot of Google News feed from November 12, 2020. In it, readers see a top headline, “Senate Republicans Back Push for President-Elect Biden To Get Intelligence Briefings,” with relevant, related stories listed by bullet points beneath. Readers can click on “View Full Coverage” link at the bottom of the section to see more.


In the screenshots of Google News feeds that we reviewed, we also saw opinion articles in the news feed without a label. In those cases, often, the publisher did not label it, and Google’s system did not know whether the piece was opinion journalism or not. So, expectedly, there are cases of mixing unlabeled opinion articles in various Google News feeds.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Google News Politics feed from June 24, 2020. Pictured above, readers see that the first headline is an opinionated article from FiveThirtyEight, titled “What Path Is the Trump Presidency On Now?” The article was not labeled as “opinion” on the FiveThirtyEight website and in the Google News Feed (we have added a note in red text to indicate this).

In addition, when a reader clicks on Google’s View Full Coverage, she is taken to a page with a greater number of stories and more in-depth coverage on a given topic. On that page, there can be a dedicated opinion section, but sometimes not. The opinion category itself is not consistently present in all “Full Coverage” listings. It seems to appear only when enough articles are present in that category to warrant an opinion section. In these cases, the opinion label is also publisher-driven.

![Figure 7: When readers click "View Full Coverage" of a particular story or section in Google News, they are taken to a "Full Coverage" page. Sometimes, these “Full Coverage” pages have a dedicated section for Opinion; see the above screenshot, taken on November 16, 2020, of the Full Coverage section: “Senate Republicans back briefings for President-Elect Biden.” In other cases, the Full Coverage of an issue does not have an Opinion section at all (see Figure 8).](image-url)
Figure 8: When readers click "View Full Coverage" of a particular story or section, they are taken to a "Full Coverage" page. Sometimes, these "Full Coverage" pages have a dedicated section for Opinion (see Figure 7). In other cases, the Full Coverage of an issue does not have an Opinion section at all, like in the above screenshot, taken on November 16, 2020, of the "COVID cases continue to rise in the US" Full Coverage page.

Apple News

On Apple News, the problem was inconsistent and inadequate labeling of opinion journalism. If you were only reading Apple News, you would often have trouble determining whether something was opinion journalism, and beyond that, you might be confused about the differences between “opinion” and “analysis.” This is a significant problem because Apple News aggregates a huge variety of material from major print magazines, newspapers, and smaller online outlets.

Like the other platforms, Apple appears to take labels from the original news outlet. This can lead to inconsistencies in a number of ways. One way in which this leads to confusion for the reader is if the publisher itself fails to label the article as opinion to begin with, Apple News will simply perpetuate this lack of labeling, but present it in the larger context of some articles that are labeled.
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Consider the presentation of this Mashable story, headlined “Trump’s ‘census’ ads certainly seem like they violate Facebook’s rules.” The story began with the sentence: “Facebook failed us again.” The story, though clearly opinion journalism, was not labeled “opinion” on Apple News, or on the original publication. It was the second-highest recommended politics story on March 5, at the time the screenshot was taken below (see Figure 9).

![Screenshot of an unlabeled opinion article in Apple News feed. March 5, 2020.](image_url)

Panelists noted a number of other, similar examples of unlabeled opinion journalism stories. Another story that appeared in the Apple News politics feed was headlined: “Warren’s Exit Makes Democratic Primary a Total Sausage Fest.” Though clearly an opinion piece, the story was not labeled as such on Apple or by the publisher. A third example included a VICE opinion article...

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Panelists also noted other problematic practices with Apple News’s handling of opinion. For example, panelists noted a Huffington Post story about Melania Trump’s views on masks, which appeared as the second highest story on Apple News and consisted of nothing more than a collection of tweets, many of which were opinions, from various users. The story is an example of outsourcing opinion, or effectively publishing an opinion article without labeling it as such. Panelists also noticed a Huffington Post story about a clip from Last Week Tonight, a late-night talk and comedy show. Neither of these stories from the Huffington Post were labeled as opinion originally.

The central issue with all of the examples mentioned above is that publishers themselves produce a variety of unlabeled opinionated-content genres (like curated tweets, satire). Platforms cannot second guess these labels (or lack of labels) on their own, nor do we recommend that platforms take on the responsibility of labeling the content entirely themselves. However, when presented alongside articles that are labeled, the inconsistency can present a challenge for readers. This interplay between publishers and platforms in fact further complicates the effort to offer a separation between news and opinion as part of the product experience.

**Common Issues**

Overall, when we look at the different news feeds from Facebook, Google or Apple and consider our current mode of fast-reading, skimming and clicking through feeds, the “news” discovery experience appears to be context-distorting instead of context-adding. This contradicts the very purpose opinion journalism authors are usually expected to serve: adding point-of-view based context to the news.

Publishers are “upstream” of aggregators and platforms, which means that any lack of consistency and consensus among journalists over labels, their range, and their meanings simply percolates “downstream” to platforms that distribute their stories through news feeds to audiences. Journalism is dumped into content buckets that are being sifted and ranked algorithmically. But without human-consensus and principles-based consistent labeling of articles, Artificial Intelligence (AI), which requires training data, is itself not equipped to do this work at scale. Nor can AI, for that matter, consistently catch outlier opinion pieces on a feed. As a result, plenty of articles that could otherwise be labeled as opinion on the feeds are not.

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Recommendations

Before we outline our recommendations to news aggregators and news publishers, we want to clarify how we approached our task in addition to explaining the values with which we undertook this process.

Focus on labeling opinion journalism

Our panel decided to focus on the challenge of labeling opinion journalism within a feed. The work of labeling stories more thoughtfully ought to be an attractive prospect for news outlets, aggregators, and platforms. By doing a better job of description and labeling, those producing journalism and those using journalism to draw traffic would be doing themselves a favor because they make the nature of the product more specific. This kind of process could shore up credibility and thus better protect the profession from the kind of attack it has come under in recent years.

Specificity regarding platform technology

In implementing differentiation with a public interest goal, news aggregators (e.g., Google News, SmartNews) and social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) are not the same. How they allow news sources and articles, including opinions, to show up on their platforms involves design choices that product and engineering teams make. We have considered this as we formed our suggestions.

One of the goals of this paper is to make recommendations to platforms on handling opinion journalism in their news products. But in interdisciplinary work regarding journalism and platforms, a constant refrain is that principles or sorting criteria involving human judgment of news may not be translatable at scale for algorithms. Based on our discussions with platform technologists, we understand that algorithms are far more coarse-grained compared to human editorial judgment. Also, we must note here that it is not necessarily desirable for AI systems to be policing complex definitional boundaries.

We asked ourselves whether we must come up with translatable principles ourselves or merely state our recommendations at the higher “human” level. We concluded, after conversations with platform representatives, that we will not take on the burden of translation at this stage. This is because we have learned that journalists and human raters are already playing a curative and quality control role for some news products. In addition, we’re given to understand that principles that are reliably humanly reproducible by lay people with a reasonable amount of training is still useful for platform technology. We also learned that a human rating based upon these recommendations has the potential of driving high quality labeling data for machine learning systems in use at the platforms. Human labeling may help with model heuristics and correlations platforms may seek to build on opinion journalism and quality.
Clarity for readers

In addition, we, as a panel, aspire to an open clarity for our readers. We need to help readers come to journalism online clearer than they have been about the methods and standards used to sort and rank it, about the professional backgrounds and perspectives of the writers producing it.

Fact-based opinion journalism is non-negotiable

We will reiterate our view that the label “opinion journalism” should be associated with factual, rigorously defendable work. It should not be used as a fig leaf for dishonest chaff that platforms and publishers feel pressured to include in the name of “balance”; nor should it be used to sterilize facts that make us uncomfortable. Opinion journalism must be subject to fact checking, and should respect fact above all else. If an opinion author makes new claims without offering evidence, or that run counter to empirical evidence (as found by fact-checkers), those claims may be left out. If the author’s persuasion or argument rests on those false claims, the entire piece may be rejected from the platform or publisher.

It is critical that we frame our recommendations with this core view. That opinion journalism is fact-based is not a recommendation, it is non-negotiable.

There is an interlocking, interdependent information ecosystem

Finally, we recognize that news publishers and news aggregators are part of a system of information that is not just interlocking, but interdependent. We have therefore outlined recommendations to each part of that system: both publishers and platforms. The panel believes that the two should work together to clean up the ecosystem.

We make these recommendations to both parties with the full understanding that the balance of power is, in many ways, unequal. News aggregators and platforms have accumulated huge amounts of influence and hold a monopoly over our information economy. At the same time, they style themselves as not being news publishers, which makes them dependent on the content news organizations produce. If antitrust regulation were in place, we would be examining a different system and situation. As journalists, we can aggressively report on these companies, but we cannot change this structure of power overnight. However, it is within our power to make recommendations for how to make this system work the greatest good in the meantime, as we work towards the types of “game changing” shifts we would like to see in the future.

More attention is needed overall

Above all, we want to emphasize that what is needed is more attention to this particular issue, and more journalists, technologists, and academics working on it. We want to emphasize that we understand the limitations and strain the industry is undergoing. We recognize that asking more will further test resources for some. Yet we believe strongly that efforts to improve credibility and transparency, to help readers better determine what is worthy of trust will pay dividends beyond measure. Some of these issues require more attention and discussion. We hope this paper will serve as a basis for journalists, technologists, and academics to undertake that work.
Common Principles for Publishers and Aggregators/Platforms

There are principles we think should be held in common by both publishers and platform news products.

We view our first recommendation as the most critical, and the key focus of this paper. Arriving at an ideal labeling taxonomy beneath that top-level separation will, of course, take time; work from International Press Telecommunications Council and The Trust Project for example all show how hard it can be, especially because it requires consensus building among journalists and news organizations. Within our own panel, there was disagreement about how a finely-tuned, detailed labeling system might work (we expand on this below in the Appendix).

However, after reviewing some possibilities, there was strong consensus that both publishers and platforms should separate and label news and opinion articles at a minimum. This is the primary and key aim of our recommendations: to separate “news” from “opinion” in the broadest sense.

1. Make a clear distinction between news and opinion

We prefer a simple top-level dual-labeling system of News and Opinion. A richer multi-level hierarchy of sub-labels can live underneath. This could be pragmatic and still aspirational, to guide readers through multiple categories.

2. Impose publisher-platform consistency

The human user must see consistent labeling through the news supply chain both on publishers as well as aggregators and social/media platform products (news feeds, social media).

3. Expand bylines

Independent of a labeling system that connects publishers and aggregators/platforms, another approach to sharpening a reader’s experience of journalism — and especially opinion journalism — would be to add an expanded byline that described the writer’s position, expertise, experience or perspective:

Example 1: “Pat Smith has been covering Missoula prisons for 30 years”; journalists writing opinions tend to like this type of description.

Example 2: “Rebecca Traister covers politics from a feminist perspective”; this might work for expert commentary, even though it would be seen to be limiting for journalists.

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Expanded bylines, or taglines, would help readers approach a piece, including pieces that are labeled news and pieces labeled opinion, with fuller context. They must also be available on platforms where opinion headlines are discovered, sourced from the publishers’ pages. Some news outlets already do such extended taglines. It might be worthwhile to see if any research has been done on whether readers think they add to the credibility of a piece.

**Recommendations for Publishers**

Here are principles and suggestions for the information ecosystem that is within the power of publishers to enact.

1. **It is incumbent on journalists and publishers to do the labeling work for readers**

   We felt that in principle, the news publishers should be responsible for labeling, and could create more specificity via metadata to help platforms.

2. **There must be consensus on labeling News versus Opinion**

   News publishers need to come to an implementable agreement on a high-level classification and labeling of all articles published as one of the following two categories, with a definition of two terms, for example:

   - “News” or “Straight news”
   - “Opinion” for everything else

3. **Provide clarity on definitions**

   News publishers must decide on a smaller subset of categories, and hence labels, that could underlie each category. These could be “feature,” “column,” “reported news,” “reported feature,” “analysis,” “perspective,” “historical essay.” Each term agreed upon must either fit under the News or Opinion labels. It must be defined and explained.

4. **Provide transparency and discoverability of labels and their meanings**

   Regardless of whether a news publisher decides to use only the two overarching labels or multiple sub-labels, there must be an easily accessible or discoverable page on the website listing and stating the consensus definitions in plain text.

5. **Adopt a case-by-case approach for labeling of Analysis articles**

   We recommend a case-by-case labeling approach for Analysis in the newsroom. In general, if the analysis article aims to persuade the reader, it should be labeled as Opinion. If it does not aim to persuade or explicitly make an argument, it should be flagged as News.

6. **Designate responsibility for labeling**

   Publishers should designate clearly who will label an article in the digital workflow of the organization. It may be the editor overseeing the topic, beat, desk, or the author, or both. But it
has to be someone specific who, when called upon, can offer a written, one-paragraph justification using the definition for the label.

7. Offer accountability, justifications for labeling decisions

News publishers must consider creating or supporting a tool where justifications for why an article was labeled one way or another is offered in writing and left open for comments, with a mechanism for registration of complaints or queries.

8. Address inconsistency in fact-checking and the vetting of opinion pieces

For lack of resources, if certain publishers are following lower (or different) levels of vetting for externally sourced opinion pieces (as compared to staff authored), fact checking becomes inconsistently applied. Consistent rules should be determined ideally in a convening of publishers on labeling opinion journalism.

9. Eliminate the opinion “backdoor”

A backdoor is an alternative way to publish a piece that the news team would have blocked on grounds of false or evidence-less claims or “opinionated characterizations.” Publishers should not slap the Opinion label on news pieces that contain unvarnished rendering of facts just because the rendering makes some news consumers uncomfortable. For example, an article accurately describing a tweet by a political leader as “racist” doesn't automatically make it an opinion piece for a news organization.

10. Commit to a minimum education or literacy effort on publisher websites

The public should know how journalism works, especially if sub-labels such as “analysis,” “historical essay,” and the like are included on the publisher’s website. The aspirational goal would be to get to industry-wide agreement on how outlets themselves label content. That could include familiarizing readers with some basic industry terms but also the vocabulary as defined by the publisher, such as “feature,” “column,” or “analysis.”

Recommendations for News Aggregators/Platforms

These are principles and suggestions for the information ecosystem that is within the power of platforms to enact.

1. Consensus with publishers on labeling News vs Opinion/Other

Work with news publishers nationally and internationally to build consensus for a dual label system first. Provide easy access to explanations/definitions for these two labels on your products (such as feeds, publisher lists).
2. Recommend the use of already published metadata standards with a view to the News/Opinion division

For instance, schema.org defined metadata to signal the type of journalistic work, as part of a standardization collaboration with The Trust Project. Opinion and News already have separate metadata labels/tags. However, additional thought may have to be paid to the implementation of these standards in order to support the top-level distinction between News and Opinion.

(Disclosure: Subbu Vincent, co-author of this paper was involved in an earlier version of the Trust Project work with schema.org.)

3. Commit to a minimum education or literacy effort about labels on aggregator and platform/social media feed surfaces

Anchor this around helping the public know how journalism works, and to be consistent with publishers.

4. We recommend that algorithmic news feeds not be aggressively personalized

Let people see the same stories from the same factual universe ranked on a given feed. While personalization is a key service of news products, so too is supporting the function of opinion journalism for society, or providing an array of evidence-based, diverse perspectives that share peoples’ experience/lived experience, expertise and insights. Human curation may be applied on top of this baseline, using principles in this document, to flag items on the feed for elevation or demotion, for manual review.

5. Consider a separate top-level Opinion tab on all news feed listings

All headlines, full coverage of one development, local news around one city, news under a topic such as “politics”, “science”, “health.” If opinions as a clickable category are discoverable in every feed or listing or top-level page people discover news on, it makes it easier for people to predictably seek opinion, which becomes a way to offer more public education about labels, and sub-labels on product surfaces.

Issues Eluding Consensus

There were a number of potential recommendations and ideas that our panel touched on in conversation but did not reach consensus on, sometimes for lack of time. We outline these ideas below, both to share the panel’s thinking, as well as to provide ideas for how to build upon our earlier recommendations.

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The Challenge of Labeling Beyond the Top (News Versus Opinion) Level

A significant amount of our time was spent discussing how labeling should work beneath the primary or top-level separation of news versus opinion. The panel’s opinions varied widely on this issue.

Some preferred a simpler labeling system that clearly distinguishes news from opinion or commentary. Others came down in favor of a more finely-tuned labeling system intended to signal to the reader whether they were reading analysis, commentary, or a more contextual perspective piece, for example.

The primary trade-off between a dual-label system — News and Opinion — versus a more detailed and nuanced system is one of simplicity versus complexity. Too many labels can be confusing and require education for payoff. Furthermore, people do not understand many of the terms journalists use to describe their work, their pages, and their methods. The Media Insight Project’s 2018 report, “Americans and the News Media: What they do — and don’t — understand about each other” showed that people are strikingly unfamiliar with the terms that many journalists use, including, for example, the difference between “editorial” and “news story,” “attribution,” “op-ed,” “native advertising,” and “sponsored content.”

There was disagreement among panelists on whether “Analysis” articles cleanly fit under the top-level News or Opinion labels. “Analysis” can be used as a label on a certain type of news story, and it can also be used as a label on a certain type of opinion journalism. Some panelists felt that analysis is best defined as a mode of thinking, not a genre, and therefore can be found in two different types of genres (news and opinion). Others disagreed. This is why, in our recommendations, we advocated for a case-by-case approach (see “Case-by-case approach for labeling of Analysis articles” on page 23 of this document).

We provide an example of how a more complex labeling or taxonomy structure could work in the Appendix.

How to Use Metadata

In our discussions, several ideas arose regarding the use of publisher metadata to help platforms better identify, categorize, and rank articles.

Several panelists felt it would be helpful for publishers to indicate their internally preferred ranking of articles (published every hour, for example) via metadata for the platforms. A publisher might flag, via metadata, that a particular article is notably important — the first article to appear on the equivalent of page A1 in a newspaper, for instance. Publishers already rank articles on their own websites daily, so why not have metadata that reflects this?

26 The Media Insight Project, “Americans and the News Media.”
Some potential challenges for this idea include: The Content Management Systems (CMSs) of the publishers will have to accommodate this addition of metadata. This is product work, and some publishers don’t have a team to alter the CMS. Practical issues abound. Metadata standardization and adoption is difficult. Getting publishers to comply across newsrooms would be a big ask.

Another, related idea that arose from the panel’s discussions involved the potential for platforms to officially crawl publisher opinion landing pages to learn their judgment in the ranking of opinion articles. If publisher opinion landing pages are statements of importance in themselves, one platform representative says such judgment can be learned and then applied to their own feed. In our discussion, we were not clear how different publisher feeds/pages are themselves managed and if indeed there is a consistent pattern across different categories of publishers.

**When Is Exclusion Necessary?**

A third set of ideas that the panel discussed involved exclusion: Are there news sources or authors that should be decisively excluded from news feeds altogether?

The issue of excluding sources, we felt, was outside the scope of opinion journalism recommendations alone. Of course, mega platforms and aggregators are facing political pressure if they exclude specific and well-known “news” sources of particular political persuasions. The panel discussed ideas regarding whether aggregators and platforms need to have a “journalistic organizations” filter (per country/geography), which would be organizations with a minimum code of ethics (such as withdrawing false claims in a prominent way, or making corrections prominently). However, we felt that the exclusion questions are more fundamental than the focus of opinion journalism.

Regarding the question of opinion writers whose claims fail fact-checks repeatedly: If select opinion journalists or invited commentator claims (or ratings of claims in their articles) are more often found to fail fact-checks (e.g., “pants on fire,” “false”), then should opinion articles from those authors be ranked lower than others whose claims do not fail as often? This is a matter for further study, though we reaffirm our understanding of opinion journalism as factually based.
Conclusion

We believe this paper provides the basis for immediate, pragmatic steps that will improve news feeds. We recognize, of course, that this is a beginning, not an end point in the attempt to bring more clarity and transparency to journalism online. We hope the points we raise can serve as a catalyst for broader discussions and ultimately, greater change.

The journalism industry has assumed more understanding of journalistic practices by readers than actually exists. We must help readers better navigate the stories they find online. To aid in that process, this panel recommends industry-wide standards that distinguish clearly between news and opinion and that are transparent about labeling. These standards should be applied by news sites and social media aggregators alike.

We believe that widespread adoption of News and Opinion top-level labels by the news industry and by news aggregators would be a game changer — a significant contribution to the greater type of change that is needed. As a means to get to this consensus on a dual-labeling system, we suggest that news publishers hold meetings and discussions at venues and associations such as the American Association of News Editors, Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers, Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc., and conferences such as the Online News Association, Excellence in Journalism Conference, and International Symposium for Online Journalism. We believe an initial round of meetings can be accomplished in a time bound fashion, such as one year.

A second game changer would be the inclusion of platforms in this consensus on a dual-labeling system, in accordance with the consistency principle outlined above. Through thoughtful coordination, we believe that such collaboration between industries and towards this end is possible.

Above all, we reiterate our aspiration that more journalists, technologists, and academics will turn their attention to the challenge not only of elevating quality news online, but of elevating and rewarding quality opinion journalism. Because opinion journalism presents challenges epistemologically on both the platform and the publisher side, we believe that tackling this issue will have significant implications for an improved ecosystem overall. While journalists, academics, and news consumers work towards the structural, systemic changes that are needed, these initial steps can have immediate and important effects.
Appendix: Suggestions for a More Nuanced News-Opinion Labeling System

A more complex kind of labeling/taxonomy structure would, with adequate opportunity for education/literacy training, better familiarize readers with descriptive terms sometimes used within journalism. In addition to better preparing readers to understand and contextualize the individual stories they will encounter via the platforms, this kind of labeling could help them better understand journalism itself and help break them of the old assumption that all "journalism" or even all "news" is supposed to be, somehow, objective, a notion many have long felt is wrong, meaningless and harmful.

![Diagram](image-url)

Figure 10: The Opinion Panel agrees that, at this top level, publishers and platforms should separate and label news and opinion. Note: We are not “defining” the sub-labels in this paper, since they are primarily drawn up here as an illustration of a range of terms publishers currently use. The point of this taxonomy-like diagram is to show that a news organization may map a given set of terms (sub-labels) to one or two root labels at the top, News or Opinion.

One way to approach the problem might be to label stories News or Opinion, and then have sub-labels that would provide further guidance for those who seek it. One way to reconcile these views into a single system is through a process of labeling and sub-labeling, i.e. the creation of a "taxonomy tree" (see Figure 10). Under the broad rubric of News, there might be sub-labels, including "Investigative Reporting" on long investigative stories, "Breaking News" for the urgent headlines and bare-bones reporting that those in journalism understand to be "breaking,"
Recommendations for Publishing Opinion Journalism on Digital Platforms

“Profile” to describe a lengthy reported feature on an individual who is otherwise in the news or key to understanding it, and perhaps "Explanatory Reporting" for pieces that break down and explain the news that readers are getting elsewhere. Having examined the kind of content being featured on some of the news platforms, we also suggest consideration of "Aggregation" as a new category. The reader should be flagged that they are reading content taken from another site.

Under the broad umbrella of Opinion, we might consider "Historical Analysis," to highlight the longform work being done by many contemporary journalists who look to the past to help explain the present, or "Reported Essay" for the kind of lengthy piece that works to make a point but does so through the use of extensive reporting. A piece like Ta-Nehisi Coates’s "The Case for Reparations" could bear both of these descriptive labels: "Historical Analysis" and "Reported Essay."

There was disagreement among panelists on whether “Analysis” articles cleanly fit under the top-level News or Opinion labels. “Analysis” can be used as a label on a certain type of news story, and it can also be used as a label on a certain type of opinion journalism. Some panelists felt that analysis is best defined as a mode of thinking, not a genre, and therefore can be found in two different types of genres (news and opinion). Others disagreed. This is why, in our recommendations, we advocated for a case-by-case approach. And while labeling taxonomies exist, publishers need to figure the more nuanced designations for themselves while reaching industry agreement on the basic News/Opinion division.

For this system to work, outlets and platforms would have to come to consensus on a consistent group of core labels or descriptors, though we understand that the very process of sorting journalism into different buckets presents challenges.

Furthermore, any effort at labeling for reader-clarity must be wary of the cure becoming worse than the disease. A potential challenge for this taxonomy tree approach includes how to account for differences in staff-written opinion journalism and externally solicited commentary. Externally solicited commentary may or may not be subject to the same vetting standards that a newsroom holds a staff writer to. In a dual-labeling system, both types of opinion pieces would simply be flagged as opinion at the top level and the reader may not identify the potential difference between the vetting standards.