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"Fair and Balanced": What News Audiences in Four Countries Mean When They Say They Prefer Impartial News

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ABSTRACT

Impartial news, or news without a partisan slant or overt point-of-view, is overwhelmingly preferred by news audiences worldwide, yet what such preferences mean remains poorly understood. In this study, we examine what people mean when they say they prefer impartial news. We draw on qualitative interviews and focus groups with 132 individuals in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US, conducted in early 2021. Our results show while the idea of impartial news is widely embraced in abstract, ranging from notions of reporting "just the facts" to more nuanced views about how feasible impartiality is to achieve, there is no shared understanding of impartiality in practice. People's perceptions of impartiality are rooted in two intertwined folk theories: the notion that news production and editorial decisions are guided largely by (a) partisan political agendas or (b) commercial considerations, determining what stories were chosen, ignored, or crafted in order to deceive and manipulate. There is some country variation around the importance of these folk theories, but their recurrence suggests that demonstrating impartiality to audiences requires convincing them not only that news content is balanced but also that editorial decisions were not driven by ulterior motives.

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What do people mean when they say they prefer impartial news? That is the question we focus on in this article. While prior research has shown that audiences worldwide often say they prefer news that is delivered without an overt point-of-view (Newman, Fletcher, and Schulz 2021), frequently invoking concerns about bias as one of the main reasons for distrusting news (Nelson and Lewis 2021; Newman and Fletcher 2017), people have different views from one another (and from journalists) about what impartial news looks like in practice (Obermaier, Steindl, and Fawzi 2021). In other words, it is questionable whether audiences conceive impartiality in the same way that news organizations and journalism scholars (see Hanitzsch, Ramaprasad, and Arroyave 2019; Tsfati, Meyers, and

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Peri 2006). This potential difference in expectations around impartiality could have important implications for how well journalists are able to attract and engage with audiences (Nelson 2021).

The present study draws on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 132 individuals in Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States, conducted in early 2021 to assess in an audience-centric manner how people conceptualize impartial journalism. Specifically, we consider how ideas concerning how the functioning of the media guide people's attitudes toward news content. We use a qualitative, inductive approach to demonstrate the utility of examining how people often base perceptions of media performance not only on their experiences encountering and using news but also on "folk theories" (Nielsen 2016), or commonly embraced cultural narratives about news, which shape views about what they desire in impartial journalism. Our main contribution is to demonstrate that where people perceived that news organizations had violated expectations of impartiality, it was often less due to specific critiques concerning the content of news itself and more rooted in more general beliefs held about the covert or overt agendas underlying how news organizations and journalists made editorial decisions about what they covered and how stories were framed. These included two intertwined folk theories: the notion that journalistic decisions are guided by (a) partisan political agendas, and/or (b) commercial considerations that many interviewees and focus group participants assumed determined how journalists performed their jobs. The relative importance of these factors varied to some extent from country to country and sometimes from individual to individual, but these difficult-to-falsify and subjective folk theories about the intentions of journalists and organizations meant that while the idea of impartial news was widely embraced in theory, in practice demonstrating impartiality to audiences may require more than ensuring that the content of news itself is free of apparent bias (e.g., is factually accurate, includes a range of different points of view, does not omit relevant information, etc.). It also means convincing audiences that the editorial decision-making underpinning the production of news is not driven by ulterior motives—a no less challenging proposition. We argue that for news organizations to more effectively attract and engage with audiences, it requires paying closer attention to public belief about their motivations, which rightly or wrongly shape the way audiences evaluate their content.

Audience's Perceptions of Impartiality and Why It Matters

Impartiality in journalism (and its corollary, objectivity) is a much-debated topic among both scholars and practitioners. While the notion of regarding different ideas, opinions, interests, or individuals with detachment (Sambrook 2012) or ridding content of opinion or bias of any kind is a crucial part of journalism's discourse about itself—a way of legitimizing news work and coping with uncertainty (Boudana 2016; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Schudson 2001; Tuchman 1972)—it is also frequently questioned. For some, the enactment of impartiality is no more than a ritual that leads news organizations to privilege the perspectives of elite voices while reinforcing the status-quo (Kilgo and Harlow 2019). Others underscore impartiality's many limitations when stories require building trust with vulnerable communities, such as during war or disasters (Usher 2009).

From a philosophical perspective, an impartial choice is one in which individuals make decisions free from the influence of any particular consideration (Jollimore 2021). This abstract principle is central for many (but not all) journalistic cultures around the world (Hanitzsch et al. 2019), although in practice it is most typically applied with respect to political forces (Boudana 2016). While some argue it is distinct from concepts such as balance, objectivity, fairness, and neutrality (Ojala 2021), others draw on these concepts in their own definitions of impartiality, or use the terms interchangeably.[1] The literature about journalism and media studies contains extensive examinations of impartiality and objectivity from a news production perspective (Raeijmaekers and Maeseele 2017; Schudson 2001; Tuchman 1972); but far less work has been devoted to exploring this concept in terms of how members of the public think about it.

Audiences appear to interpret impartiality in ambiguous ways. Surveys find that most people in most countries say they prefer to get impartial news (Newman, Fletcher, and Schulz 2021), but they vary systematically. Younger audiences are more likely to reject impartiality, even dismissing it as an important characteristic of news (Swart and Broersma 2022), while older and more conservative audiences, as least in the US, tend to place greater value on the role of journalism as a "detached" observer (Vos, Eichholz, and Karalieva 2019). Partisanship can also contribute to a rejection of impartiality in news (Ojala 2021). Previous studies have shown that audiences sometimes draw on different notions about the role of journalism in society, with some placing less emphasis on news giving voice to the less powerful (American Press Institute 2021) while others believe there are instances in which it makes no sense for news organizations to remain "neutral" (Robertson 2021).

A common audience critique of impartiality is that news organizations and journalists are primarily motivated by their own self-interest (Soontjens and van Erkel), and/or political or commercial agendas (Newman and Fletcher 2017; Obermaier, Steindl, and Fawzi 2021). These perceptions have been linked to lower levels of trust in news, although such negative perceptions exist even among trusting audiences (Ojala 2021). Some note that journalists lack the autonomy to work independently of organizational constraints, but others see journalists as "bullies" who exploit news for personal gain (Palmer 2019). While some say they prefer outlets specifically because of their independence from external interference (Russmann and Hess 2020), even common journalistic practices—like adding context to stories—can be regarded as undue interference (Wilner, Valle, and Masullo 2021). In this sense, it is unlikely that news content itself that appears balanced and neutral on the surface will be enough to reassure audiences when they have preexisting ideas about journalists' and news organizations' underlying motives and intentions.

How Folk Theories of Journalism Impact Perceptions of Impartiality

Prior research has often underscored gaps between what journalists and audiences believe is important when it comes to news. Professionals often raise concerns about structural or ethical factors affecting the practice of journalism while audiences are more likely to focus on political and economic factors (Obermaier, Steindl, and Fawzi 2021). Audiences are also more likely to mention the importance of always remaining neutral (Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri 2006). Other studies show that audience preferences for accurate and independent reporting are associated with higher levels of trust, but

these qualities are subjectively perceived and not consistent indicators of quality (for a review, see Fawzi et al. 2021).

In order to make sense of the world around them, people often rely on preconceived notions about how others operate that help them make decisions about how to act. These "folk theories," as Nielsen (2016, 846) refers to them, extending a concept from science and technology studies, are "popular beliefs about what journalism is, what it does, and what it ought to do that people use to make sense of news in their everyday life." Folk theories are not inherently inferior to (or superior to) other forms of abstract thinking, but two features differentiate them from scientific theories. First, they are not subject to the same procedures of evaluation and contention institutionalized among scientists, and second, they tend more towards enabling action than towards the accumulation of knowledge (Nielsen 2016). The "folk" element here is not about who holds the theory —scientists can hold folk theories too—but about the social life of these theories. Folk theories do not need to be coherent, comprehensive, or verifiably true, which makes them different from scientific theories, but people may still use them as the basis for their actions even in the face of contradictory evidence.

Folk theories do not prejudge whether or not people's perceptions are accurate, since what is important about them is they guide our behaviors, shape how we perceive our options, and inform decisions we make (Toff and Nielsen 2018). This applies both to analytic elements of folk theories (how things operate and why) and normative elements (how they ought to be). People might go through similar experiences such as being the subject of a news story and reach different conclusions about journalistic professionalism depending on their interactions and previous background (Palmer 2019) or personal identities (Nelson and Lewis 2021). In the same way people use folk theories to engage with news and evaluate reported information (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2020), people rely on these theories when making assessments about various journalistic practices—in this case, impartiality.

Folk theories of journalism matter because they capture how audiences think about and evaluate journalists and news organizations (Toff and Nielsen 2018), which may or may not be tied to their actual performance. In other words, people's relationships with journalists and news organizations are informed by their past experiences using news but also what they and those around them think about how news works (Waisbord 2006).

If people hold suspicions about the intentions of journalists and news organizations, they may scrutinize even neutral news content differently. Wilner and colleagues (2021) illustrate this point by showing how audiences and journalists value similar newsgathering techniques (eyewitness interviews and investigate work, for example), but audiences who perceive such practices as lacking often assume negative intentions. Therefore, communicating intentions constitutes a separate journalistic task beyond producing content according to accepted norms of impartiality. Understanding audience folk theories about the production of news—specifically perceptions about impartiality and how it is enacted—helps clarify the assumptions that guide evaluations of news. As we show below, in many cases these assessments are rooted in beliefs about the ulterior motives perceived as guiding news organizations' editorial decision-making (Nelson and Lewis 2021; Toff et al. 2021).

The present study is constructed around two main research questions. We first explore what people mean when they describe impartial news, departing from some of the more

abstract conceptions of the idea as offered by prior research, while doing so in an international comparative manner: *(RQ1) What do audiences in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US mean when they say they want impartial news?* Second, we explore the relationship between these expectations about impartiality and perceptions about how it is enacted in their countries. We focus on capturing the shared cultural narratives about news on display when audiences evaluate journalism: *(RQ2) What folk theories do audiences in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US hold concerning how news organizations in their countries perform as impartial sources of information?*

Methods

Our findings were arrived at inductively based on in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with 132 individuals in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US[2]. Working with YouGov, we recruited adults in the four countries, sampling people who were both more and less trusting of news in general according to a screener question adapted from Strömbäck, Tsfati, and Boomgaarden (2020), asking respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement: "Generally speaking, I can trust information from the news media in [applicable country]." Besides the question about trust, we also screened potential study participants by age, education, gender, partisanship, and forms of media use to have a relatively diverse sample in each country.

Eight 90-minute online focus groups ($N = 70$) were conducted between January 18–21, 2021, each administered by YouGov using a chat-based platform similar to a mobile messaging service. Two groups were convened in each country and segmented by levels of trust in news. The authors subsequently conducted one-on-one interviews virtually with 62 additional study participants between 25 January and 17 February 2021 (Table 1). All interactions took place online due to restrictions on face-to-face contact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both focus groups and interviews relied on similar semi-structured guides, although the latter were tailored to each individual's media habits.

Combining focus groups and interviews maximized the benefits of both strategies: from focus groups, we see how people express opinions about news when interacting with others in situations where their views can be challenged or endorsed. Interviews,

Table 1. Summary of participants in focus groups and interviews per country.

	Focus groups	In-depth interviews
Brazil		
More trusting	8	9
Less trusting	8	6
India		
More trusting	9	8
Less trusting	8	9
UK		
More trusting	11	8
Less trusting	9	7
US		
More trusting	11	8
Less trusting	6	7
Total overall	70	62

in turn, allow participants to explain their rationale about topics they were asked about in depth, detailing reasons for their attitudes and perceptions toward news. The focus groups also helped us to refine our interview guide, which covered experiences people had with news organizations and digital platforms, comparisons between brands, and attitudes toward journalism. The latter two were usually the points in the sessions when people expressed expectations about impartiality and assessed whether journalists typically met their expectations or not. In the summary of our findings, we include exemplar quotes from both sources of data, but in the supplemental material, we include additional demographic details about participants identified by pseudonyms, which types of sessions each participated in, along with a summary of the interview guide, and the methods we employed to analyze our transcripts.

Given that most prior journalism research on impartiality has focused on a select few Western journalistic contexts, this study uses a comparative design and looks beyond the Global North. The four countries we selected, which together account for a significant share of the world's population, vary substantially in their societal, political and media environments. The US and the UK are usually described as Hybrid or Liberal media systems (Humprecht, Castro Herrero, and Blassnig 2022) whereas Brazil shares commonalities with the Polarized Pluralist model (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002). India's varied media system is not classified. According to the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), the US and the UK have very high levels of health, education and income, with levels in Brazil "high" and "medium" in India. In terms of political systems, Brazil and the US are presidential countries, while India and the UK have a parliamentary regime. Brazil and India have multi-party systems, the UK has long seen dominance of Conservative and Labour Party, and the US is a two-party system—which has been associated with declining press trust in previous research (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Yet, despite these differences, in the last ten years all have seen populist-style leaders win elections and experienced major political changes. They also have varying levels of trust in news. In 2021, 54% of Brazilians, 38% in India, 36% of British citizens, and 29% of Americans said they trust news in their countries (Newman, Fletcher, and Schulz 2021). Data from 2022 found a trend of declining trust in Brazil, the UK and the US (Newman, Fletcher, and Robertson 2022).

Each also have different traditions concerning the role of impartiality in their media systems. While impartiality is mandated for broadcasters in the UK, the country also has a long history of a highly partisan press. The US media landscape, by contrast, has a long tradition of nonpartisan newspapers and commercial broadcasters but with increasingly partisan cable news offerings and only minimal support for public service media (Brüggemann et al. 2014). In Brazil, news organizations typically separate news from opinion but have also taken sides during political events with traditional brands historically aligning themselves with the center-right (Marques, Mont'Alverne, and Mitozo 2019). There is less clarity about the role of impartiality in India's media system, which has been understudied relative to elsewhere, but some outlets' commitment to political mobilization (Neyazi 2018) and past scandals, like those involving "paid media" (Ashraf 2014), stand in tension with professed commitments to impartiality.

When it comes to audiences' perspectives, data from the 2021 Digital News Report (Newman, Fletcher, and Schulz 2021) shows most people in these countries express a preference for impartial news: 74% in Brazil, 61% in India, 76% in the UK, and 69% in the US

say they believe news outlets should reflect a range of different views and leave it up to people to decide what is best. But surveys alone can only get us so far. In this article, we build upon existing quantitative studies and use qualitative data to add a more detailed understanding of how audiences think about impartiality in journalism: their expectations, evaluations, and critiques of where they think news organizations and journalists fail to live up to their expectations and ideals.

Results

We focus on two sets of findings pertaining to each of our research questions. With respect to RQ1, we find that participants held a mix of ideas about what impartial news means in the abstract, ranging from black-and-white notions of reporting "just the facts" and "the truth" to more nuanced views about whether or not impartiality could ever be achieved at all, similar to some of the concerns raised by scholars and journalists. When examining how participants evaluated journalists' performance as impartial sources of information (RQ2), we next identify two deeply-held, widely expressed, and sometimes intertwined folk theories across all four countries: the notion that news production and editorial decisions are guided largely by (a) partisan political agendas or (b) commercial considerations, determining what stories were chosen, ignored, or crafted in order to deceive and manipulate. These twin folk theories shaped the way people evaluated news they encountered, often separately from specific critiques made about bias in the content of news itself. While these folk theories are not exhaustive of all the beliefs people expressed about journalists and media and are not meant to suggest that audiences are monolithic in their views, we highlight these folk theories because they were expressed widely and closely connected to perceived violations of impartiality.

Audience Demands for the Impartial "Truth"

Nearly all study participants defined impartiality in the abstract in ways similar to the academic literature as a neutral even-handedness, as not taking sides but focusing on accurate factual reporting. Many saw it as the best way for journalists to provide audiences with a full and comprehensive understanding, a crucial characteristic they associated with trustworthy journalism: "reporting the right facts," as Arshad, a less trusting interviewee in India, put it. He continued: "I don't think [news] should be opinionated; it should not be that you're trying to sway somebody." Similar arguments were raised by other participants. Vitor, a Brazilian man more trusting of news, equated impartiality with "giv[ing] information as it is" by providing the "real truth" or showing the world "in the way it really is."

Some, however, struggled to elaborate on what this "real truth" meant. As Vitor said when asked to explain: "Information is based on facts, correct? So I think it is important journalists in general provide what really happened, so there is no space for mistakes." Other interviewees likewise saw the value of impartiality as a means to getting just "the facts." Helen, an American woman less trusting of news, said she was not interested in the nuances of reporting: "I like extremely direct, the good, the bad, the ugly. I don't like the buts. I just like yes or no, which is very hard to find." In other words, when many people said they preferred impartial news, what they often meant was news that

accurately presented just the facts—the "truth"—not necessarily an exhaustive range of perspectives about those facts.

There were some disagreements among people about how black-and-white they viewed this task of uncovering "truth." Mário, a less trusting Brazilian man, said he thought journalists "must try to remain impartial at all costs and pass [along] the true information," but he was also sympathetic to the difficulties journalists might face in achieving such an ideal. Amy, an American woman from the less trusting group, said she felt that people tended to trust information not based on "the reliability of objective facts" but on whether the information is "relatable" and rings true to one's subjective experience. "I think we gravitate to the news sources that bolster our already set opinions."

Some were skeptical about whether impartiality could ever be achieved, but they disagreed on the extent this should be seen as a failing of journalists or journalism. Laura, a less trusting participant in the UK, said: "You'd have to be an incredible journalist to write completely without bias and I'm not sure I think that's possible." She assumed that "however factual they attempt to be, the writer has always decided which are the important facts they want to tell you." Others, like Maria, a more trusting news user in Brazil, explicitly rejected the notion that impartial news could be achieved at all. "They're all partial. I think everyone tries to make this partiality appear as little as possible, but I think that there's no totally impartial news company."

A small subset of study participants went so far as to question whether striving toward total neutrality was always preferable compared to other expectations they held about journalism. This view was often accompanied by some ambivalence and weighting the costs and benefits of veering away from dominant forms of impartial journalism. Gabrielle, for example, a woman from the less trusting group in the UK, said she wouldn't like to "feel bias coming from the writer" but that she respected journalists who on occasion might choose not to be impartial. For her, context made all the difference, and, in some circumstances, she wanted journalists to incorporate their own values into their reporting. She offered an example: coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement. She explained that "I would expect some kind of, not opinion forming, but some kind of inkling towards which way they're swaying. More so than, 'This is the facts,' yes." This is a reminder that much of the public, not just academics or professionals, can hold complex, complementary, and conditional theories that sometimes vary by case, circumstance, or context.

Those who held more nuanced views about how journalists might arrive at the "real truth" often underscored that for them, what mattered was reporting "the full story" from which audiences could draw their own conclusions. Most importantly, those conclusions need not be the same as those drawn by journalists. Maria, the Brazilian woman in the more trusting group who rejected the notion that impartiality was possible, said what she valued most was balance in presenting multiple sides so that audiences could evaluate arguments for themselves. She felt that "they need to bring complete news. Whenever someone says something, they have to show a counterpoint." Andrew (UK), likewise, said his view of an "independent news outlet" that was "worth listening to" was one that was criticized as "biased" from "both sides of the political spectrum."

In short, while most audiences in all four countries equated impartial journalism with neutral, accurate reporting that revealed the "real truth," we found differences in the

degree to which study participants believed journalists could achieve such an ideal. These differences do not necessarily vary according to how trusting people are in news, but to some extent reflected variation in the level of understanding and expectations people have about the subjective nature of truth. While some saw the inclusion of multiple perspectives in news coverage as essential to impartial journalism, others believed impartiality was better achieved by stripping out all opinions and providing "just the facts." After all, decisions about whose opinions to include and what context to provide were inevitably fraught with subjectivity and bias. In other words, what seems like considerable agreement on the surface about defining impartiality in the abstract could diverge quickly when respondents provided specific examples about where they believed news organizations deviated in practice from this idealized form of journalism.

Perceptions about the Political or Commercial Agendas that Underpin News Coverage

In this section, we examine two prevalent folk theories (RQ2) audiences in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US drew on when discussing where they thought journalists and news organizations fell short as impartial sources of information. Many focused on (a) the partisan political agendas they assumed guided editorial decision-making and/or (b) the commercial considerations that motivated how media, they presumed, sought to manipulate the public. These underlying ulterior motives were sometimes assumed to be hidden, the product of decisions made in shadowy back rooms by people who called the shots behind the curtain. In other cases, people believed these agendas were on full display in plain view.

We present these critiques here without seeking to validate whether or to what degree they are accurate. These folk theories of journalism may be rooted in specific encounters with media, elite cues, hostile media perceptions (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985), generalized lack of trust in institutions (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018), or actual shortcomings of news media that purport to be balanced and objective. We highlight and analyze these folk theories because when considered alongside attitudes about impartiality, it becomes clear that perceived violations of impartiality are only partly about what is and is not reported in the news and how those stories are framed. In most cases, what study participants focused on involved assessments about motives—ideas about the intention behind coverage that are not easily contradicted. As theories, they are close to unfalsifiable, and therefore where embraced, not easily changed.

Folk Theory 1: News Organizations and Journalists Lack Impartiality Because They Seek to Advance Their Own Political Agendas

The belief that news organizations generally made editorial decisions for political reasons rather than a commitment to presenting objective facts was widespread across all four countries and often intertwined with people's critiques about what they saw as violations of impartiality. Even if in certain cases interviewees held more positive perceptions of brands they used, many expressed a generalized skepticism about the news organizations' primary agendas, which meant they often believed they fell short of impartiality.

This folk theory was often (but not exclusively) expressed by participants who exhibited a strong partisan or ideological identity. Some who said they preferred "objective"

news, for example, said they typically relied on outlets that others might consider to be overtly partisan, insisting that such sources did a better job of capturing what supposedly neutral sources tended to overlook. In these cases, what people saw as impartial was often news aligned with their own political preferences. Ricardo, a Brazilian man who supported former President Bolsonaro and listened to *Os Pingos nos Is*, a right-wing radio show, said that he liked it because the anchors are "trying to fix the wrong news," referring to sources which presented themselves as impartial but tried "to impose a political view on you." He preferred *Os Pingos nos Is* because it would "review this information and criticize it when the information is wrong." In an example from the US, Lawrence, a strong supporter of former President Trump, said he consumed mostly conservative news sources because he believed most journalists' political agendas prevented them from being impartial. While Lawrence expressed views sympathetic to the QAnon internet conspiracy theory, he also asserted that news "stories need to be presented objectively and not subjectively," critiquing the way he believed the American press had mistreated Trump and given President Biden a free pass.

> You can see in the press conferences, compare the way that President Trump's press people had—he had four really good people. They sat up there and answered all the questions. I mean, President Trump went out there and would sit there and talk for an hour. Now they've got a guy that runs off the stage immediately when you start asking him questions, and they ask him, "What's your favorite ice cream?" or they let this girl say, "Well, I'll circle back to you." It's two different things you can see.

To Lawrence, the version of the truth presented by the news media was intentionally deceptive. The public was only provided "one side of the story"—a side that hurt Trump and favored his opponents.

Lawrence was more extreme in the degree to which he was convinced news media were guided by partisan interests, but his skepticism about journalists' nefarious political motives was not unusual. Even less partisan participants expressed similar beliefs about the importance of political agendas underlying how news outlets operated. Take, for example, Rebeca, a Brazilian woman who previously supported the Worker's Party (PT) and used to watch a channel that belongs to one of the largest media conglomerates in Latin America. Rebeca said she now rejected both the channel and PT, arguing that the news organization had become "too political." Having lost trust in all political institutions, her distrust extended to news as well. "This channel did everything they could against PT. Now, they are capable of kissing PT just to support a politician." Although she opposed the then President Jair Bolsonaro, who often clashed with the brand, she also thought the news outlet "exaggerates" and was suspicious of its motives.

> When this channel wants something, they get it. They went against Dilma [Rousseff, Brazil's former president who was impeached] and they won. When they want something, they invest into the news to favor them. They dislike Bolsonaro so they do everything in their power to oppose him.

Others, too, rejected brands they believed, rightly or wrongly, operated according to underlying political motives. Rajendra (IN) explained his rejection of an Indian TV news channel by saying, "they didn't show the truth. They just show the wrong side of the Modi government." He argued that the channel was expecting the government to "collapse and Congress party will come to power." In Brazil, India, and the US, people often

evaluated impartiality in the news in ways that were closely intertwined with their attitudes about polarizing politicians and how favorably or unfavorably they were treated in the news media.

In the UK, specific political figures were somewhat less central to these considerations. The same brands were sometimes viewed as politically biased in different directions by different people, particularly broadcasters, which are under legal obligation to remain impartial. A broadcaster was often regarded by some participants as "generally speaking fairly neutral" (Christopher, UK) but by others as too accommodating to the then Conservative government. As Laura (UK) argued, "You don't feel like the British media are holding people to account who should be held to account." Still others felt some broadcasters have "too many agendas" around "educating people in political correctness," which led Paul (UK) to prefer those "where they just tell you things" ostensibly less tethered to ideological motives.

To be clear, not all perceptions of political motives in news are accurate. Nor are biases always imagined. But such notions are often more impressionistic than specific. Samantha (UK), in an exception, recalled a concrete incident where a TV host was conducting an interview about Brexit "and the person who was interviewing was just so clearly biased and just shooting down this person's views." No doubt such instances occur, and previous experiences are relevant for how people form their ideas about journalism. But Samantha took it as evidence that the folk theory about journalists' political agendas was the norm rather than the exception. She concluded, "You can't really trust anywhere, can you? Everyone's got some kind of agenda." Likewise, Jatin (IN) was dismissive of the value of news organizations in his country altogether, leading him to question their function for democracy: "As we have heard this thing that news channels are the pillar of democracy, this is all the dialogue, but the news channels are mostly propagating only for the parties' point of view, they are white-washing all their scams." In these cases, people often applied their distrust in politicians and broader political institutions to how they felt about all news media.

Folk Theory 2: News Organizations and Journalists Lack Impartiality Because They Seek to Manipulate the Public for Commercial Gain

Where people do not see political motives as underlying news organizations' actions, many ascribed profit-seeking motives as the other major reason why they felt journalists generally were not impartial. As Artur (BR) said, describing news organizations in Brazil, they "use monopoly to manipulate news the way they want it." Or as Christopher (UK) asserted, news organizations are "a slave to the advertisers." Similar financial considerations were often at the core of suspicions about journalistic practices. "Many organizations work only for-profit," Aadil (IN) noted, explaining how this results in bias with outlets willing to "do anything to reach on top even if it [means they] provide fake news or tend to ignite somebody's personal view."

Alice (UK) said she thought news is "obviously all economically driven," singling out "certain companies owned by certain people; they spin the news in a certain way." Many journalists she believed were "very money-oriented," which prevents them from being impartial. In some cases, the perception that news is guided by commercial interests was connected to a more general view about how the world works, which people then projected onto news organizations. Pamela (US) doubted that news organizations

could be "truly independent" because "our society does believe that anything can be bought and needs to be paid for."

In India, many saw commercial interests inevitably intertwined with political interests. Indians were particularly likely to emphasize government as the source of influence over media, but commercial factors were interlaced and often inseparable: news is pressured "by the government or bureaucrats or the capitalist companies" as Farah (IN) put it. She reminisced about the past when "news was very simple" in contrast to today where "I feel like it's very manipulated, you just can't see through things." This was somewhat different from the other countries, where manipulation was mainly presented as a consequence of news organizations' own interests. The way some Indian participants articulated the importance of commercial interests for news in their country may reflect the enduring resonance of the paid media scandal (Ashraf 2014).

While many who expressed concerns about the underlying political agendas of journalists tended to have strong partisan or ideological identities of their own—often critiquing news in line with the hostile media phenomenon—those who were concerned about commercial interests shaping editorial practices often cut across political lines. This folk theory regarding the importance of commercial considerations was widely expressed regardless of respondents' political orientations. There were, however, some differences between countries. Participants from the UK brought up such concerns more frequently than people in other countries, perhaps due to the country's long tradition of public-funded media. Many singled out commercial alternatives as less trustworthy for this reason. "If it's a single person funding it [a news organization], it's always going to be slightly biased," Alexander (UK) concluded. Likewise, Laura (UK) said she was concerned about "ownership of multiple news outlets by the same small group of people", and Robert (UK) said he believed the BBC was more reliable due to its funding model, "There's something about the BBC because they're meant to be, well, you don't have adverts, etc., so it's not about making money." In the US, even though traditions of public broadcasting are weaker, similar points were made about publicly-funded and non-profit media. Russell (US) explained how NPR's non-commercial model "probably allows them to be a little less biased, especially if they're accepting funds from other organizations, and things like that, not necessarily political action committees or corporations," to which he believed commercial media were more beholden. These specific arguments were hardly mentioned in Brazil and India.

To be sure, not all participants were able to identify exactly what the ulterior motives were that prevented journalists from being impartial in their coverage. These participants argued more broadly that journalists and news organizations operated according to self-interested motivations rather than a professional commitment to serve the public. These views were common even among the group who was otherwise generally more trusting toward news. André, a Brazilian man from the more trusting group said he did not believe news in his country was impartial because "the media always seeks to manipulate according to what and who best favors it." Antônia (BR) similarly explained why she did not believe much of what she sees on television despite otherwise trusting information in the news in general: "Everyone has their own game of interest, whether political or financial," adding "they want to manipulate the mass with often distorted news."

In these cases, precisely who "they" might be was often left unspecified. In India, Aadil estimated that "90% of Indian news channels are manipulative." Aparna (IN) similarly

avoided most news because "I feel like it's not true or it is manipulated." In the UK, Antoine emphasized the importance of "being aware that whoever's printed something is going to have their own motives, agendas, and are pushing certain ways of thinking." A woman from the more trusting group in the UK, Abigail, painted an even more Orwellian picture of the news media operating as a Big Brother of sorts: "I think that somebody somewhere or some organization is controlling, almost, what we get to hear as the news." Most participants, however, ascribed either political or commercial motives as the explanation—or a combination of the two—and drew heavily on these folk theories as they identified what they saw as violations of impartiality in most news media they encountered.

Discussion

Impartiality is a central but also sometimes controversial norm among journalists and media scholars worldwide. Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US, this study adds to a small but growing literature focused on audience perspectives on these matters (Newman, Fletcher, and Schulz 2021; Ojala 2021; Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova 2019; Wilner, Valle, and Masullo 2021). We find that while there is considerable agreement about what impartial journalism looks like in the abstract (RQ1), many held divergent views about what constitutes impartial news in practice (RQ2), complicating the notion of any consensus on the nature of impartial news. Generally, interviewees and focus group participants described impartial news as news that does not take a side but is fair, balanced, and factually accurate, with most referring to it as an important and much desired characteristic of news despite coming from somewhat different journalistic traditions. However, most study participants also saw news as falling short of this ideal. In describing perceived violations of impartiality, many drew on folk theories about the intentions and motives of journalists and news organizations as often as, or even more so, than specific concerns about the content itself or details of reporting practices. Similar to other sociocultural narratives people draw on when considering the role of journalism in their lives (Nelson and Lewis 2021; Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2020), many believed news outlets made editorial decisions on the basis of ulterior motives, specifically a desire to persuade or manipulate the public for political or commercial gain. These concerns are not focused on specific issues like factual accuracy of news content or the balance between different sources featured in it, but the underlying motivations of the journalists and news media who produce the news. Those who held such views, widespread not only among people who lacked trust in news but even among some who were more generally trusting, tended to see journalists not as the public's guardians, as professionals often present themselves (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), but instead as self-interested actors willing to deceive.

The fact these negative perceptions of journalists were shared in such different journalistic contexts and among those with varying levels of trust in news is an indication of how important perceptions about the *intentions* underlying how news is made can be to structuring how people think about the content itself. Whereas academic and professional proponents of impartiality argue that it serves as an important guardrail for curtailing individual and institutional imperfections, we find that as widely embraced the normative ideal may be, many feel it is often used as a cover to mask ulterior motives and imperfections at the individual and institutional level—a common trend in all four countries

analyzed. Our results reaffirm previous research, which has highlighted the important role played by partisan predispositions in how audiences interpret and evaluate news (Soontjens and van Erkel 2022) as well as the "nexus" that exists between how people evaluate news and attitudes toward broader political institutions (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Our findings also underscore the importance of not only gauging support for the concept of "impartiality," which both survey data and our qualitative research suggests is broad-based, but the specific folk theories audiences may draw on when they are critical of news organizations they think fall short of this ideal. The issue we identify here is not that people *in principle* want something drastically different from what many journalists would like to offer, but that they do not believe existing journalism *in practice* is what it often claims to be—impartial.

Our findings provide several contributions to the existing literature. First, the critiques we identify through our audience-centric approach differ from those most often emphasized in the academic literature and by practitioners, which tend to focus on news content itself—the tendency of journalists to over-index perspectives of privileged groups or provide a lack of balance in sourcing (Bennett 1990; Wahl-Jorgensen, Berry, and Garcia-Blanco 2017). Few interviewees voiced such concerns, and when asked directly, some even disagreed that news should emphasize the views of everyday people. While some scholars and practitioners have entertained dispensing with impartiality in favor of prioritizing alternative values (Rosen and Merritt 1994), few interviewees saw such moves as appealing, even if most were highly critical of many characteristics of news. Our findings point to the importance of taking these audience perspectives seriously. While there may be many ways journalism as it is practiced can be improved, audiences typically said they wanted more impartiality, not less—even as what they saw as evidence of a commitment to impartiality often diverged.

Second, our study also makes contributions to the existing literature on folk theories of journalism. As Nielsen (2016, 842–843) argued when advocating for applying the concept to the study of journalism, folk theories are meant to be conceptually generative for studying how audiences relate to news and make choices around its use. These include questions that are ontological ("what is journalism?"), procedural ("what do journalists do?"), epistemological ("what do journalists know and how do they know it?"), and ethical ("what is good journalism?"). Here we show how focusing on questions that are causal in nature ("why do journalists do what they do?") elucidates fundamental differences around how people evaluate news. We do so by considering folk theories across different media and political environments beyond the Global North, showing how such theories structure the way many audiences perceive news as living up to or falling short of its ideals. Journalists may believe that their work speaks for itself, but our findings underscore the degree to which audiences read between the lines in assessing motivations lurking behind editorial decisions.

Third, our findings point the way toward future research that delves more deeply into examining where such causal folk theories about journalists' commercial or political motivations may come from. In some cases, interviewees referenced specific encounters with news but more often such beliefs appear informed by broader social, cultural, and political forces. After all, assumptions about intentions are just that—assumptions—that can rarely be proven true or false. Some are anchored in previous experiences, especially brands' antagonistic relationships with politicians including Brazilian

newspapers with respect to impeachments (Marques, Mont'Alverne, and Mitozo 2019), British media during Brexit (Walter 2019), American news organizations' relationship with Trump (Boczkowski and Papacharissi 2018), and relationships between politicians and the media in India after Modi's election (Iqbal 2019). Such observations contributed to general impressions many held about news media as an institution staking out political stances. Likewise, consumers' experiences with sensationalism and clickbait do not help individual brands promote more positive views about their own motives.

Our study has several limitations. Our sample of participants, although diverse and much more international than most, was not designed to be fully representative of the populations in each country; recruitment restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that wealthier, more educated, and younger people are particularly overrepresented. Representative survey data would help assess how widely embraced the folk theories identified in this study may be in these four countries and beyond. Furthermore, our research design does not allow us to assess precisely how such views take hold or what might be done to change them. Controlled experiments and longitudinal studies would be useful in this regard.

Nonetheless, our results have important implications for the practice of journalism even if we acknowledge that the folk theories identified here may not be universally held nor embraced to the same degree. Paying attention to how audiences think about violations of impartiality suggests that journalists may need to convince distrusting audiences not only that their content is balanced but also that editorial decisions are not based on ulterior motives—a no less challenging proposition. This might produce the impression there is little journalists can do to challenge these folk theories. But given that editorial decision-making around why stories are covered (or not), what voices are included (or excluded), and how news is framed is typically opaque and poorly understood (Amazeen and Bucy 2019; Toff et al. 2021), news outlets could at a minimum be far more transparent about these decisions and make such information front and center in their coverage (see Chen, Curry, and Whipple 2019). At the same time, by doing more to differentiate themselves as independent from other political and commercial institutions by more explicitly addressing their own motivations, journalists might stand a better chance of convincing a dubious public of their intentions than presuming that their work speaks for itself. To be sure, approaches around building trust that simply emphasize editorial standards in reporting practices, or even those that involve innovative engagement initiatives, may be insufficient by themselves to convince audiences that there is no particular agenda beneath the surface. Subjective perceptions about hidden objectives are more insidious, but confronting and reshaping the public's beliefs about journalists' intentions requires first forthrightly recognizing the nature of these concerns.

Notes

1. Some news organizations, for example the BBC in the UK, are required to be impartial. But even in the case of the BBC, there are limits to this requirement. The BBC is required to be *duly* impartial, meaning that there are a set of values (like respect for democratic principles) about which the organization is not required to remain absolutely impartial, illustrating the different ways in which the concept can be operationalized and enforced.

2. The study was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of the University of Oxford (R72293/RE001).

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