

Who Wants Impartial News? Investigating Determinants of Preferences for Impartiality in 40 Countries

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Despite the centrality of impartiality for many journalistic cultures, and widespread support across audiences, there is still limited research about which aspects influence people's preferences for impartial news. This article draws on survey data across 40 markets to investigate the factors shaping audience preferences for impartial news. Although most express a preference for impartial news, there are several overlapping groups of people who, probably for different reasons, are more likely to prefer news that shares their point of view: (a) the ideological and politically engaged; (b) young people, especially those who rely mainly on social media for news; (c) women; and (d)

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less socioeconomically advantaged groups. We find systematic patterns across countries in preferences for alternatives to impartial news with greater support in places where people use more different sources of news and that are ranked lower in terms of quality of their democracies.

Keywords: impartiality, objectivity, news audiences, journalistic practices

Impartiality has long been a cornerstone of professional journalism in many countries (Sambrook, 2012; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972), but scholars and practitioners have noted rising demand for forms of news that reflect other points of view, especially among younger audiences (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020) and strong partisans (Peterson, Goel, & Iyengar, 2021; Stroud, 2011). Although impartial news remains popular in principle across different contexts with large shares of the public saying they prefer it (Mont'Alverne et al., 2023), there has been minimal systematic investigation into what individual user characteristics explain preferences for news that departs from impartiality.

Among journalism and communication researchers, the subject of impartiality has generated considerable attention over the years, but mainly from the perspective of news producers (Molotch & Lester, 1974; Schudson, 2001; Soontjens, Beckers, Walgrave, van der Goot, & van der Meer, 2023; Tuchman, 1972). Audience attitudes about impartiality have rarely been studied, and even less so in the context of what individual- and country-level aspects explain preferences for impartial news. Interpreting the nature of these relationships in any generalizable manner, especially outside the confines of a select few Western democracies, requires a broader comparative approach.

Understanding what audiences think about impartiality matters for several reasons. First, in many places, journalism's claim to authority is at least in part anchored in the notion of impartiality (Carlson, 2017; Schudson & Anderson, 2009), and theories about its role in society often conceptualize the news media as a Fourth Estate, providing impartial, independent information for citizens to make informed decisions about politics and social affairs (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Nielsen, 2017;). If significant segments of the public actually look to news media to reaffirm their beliefs—or do so to differing degrees in different types of political contexts—that implies a different role in practice for journalism as an institution, which existing theories may not reflect. Second, there has been a rise in more partial news sources that explicitly put a premium on opinion and partisanship (Stroud, 2011), but those advocating such alternative forms of journalism may be mistaken about how widespread public support may be. Third, impartiality is a defining principle for public service media across the world (Sambrook & Cushion, 2024). As many of these media are facing political and funding pressures (for example, see Hughes, Morani, Cushion, & Kyriakidou, 2023, in the United Kingdom), understanding which groups are more likely to value a key trait of their products can help identify blind spots and ways of engaging audiences they currently struggle to reach.

This article aims to investigate the factors determining audience preferences for impartial news and how this can be explained by individual and country-level aspects across a wide range of countries. We use survey data from the 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, which spans 40 media markets across the Global North and South, to provide empirical evidence about what style of news audiences say they prefer

and its association with political and demographic factors. We use data from that wave because it includes a battery of questions on various aspects of impartiality. We find that most of the public across countries express preferences for impartial news. Those who say they prefer news that shares their point of view (as opposed to impartial news as conventionally defined) are more likely to come from three overlapping groups: (a) the ideological and politically engaged, (b) young people and those who rely mainly on social media for news, (c) women, and (d) less socioeconomically advantaged groups. Individuals in each group may prefer news that shares their perspectives for different reasons. We further demonstrate systematic differences across countries in preferences for impartiality in news, with greater support for alternatives to impartial news in places where people generally use various sources of news, places ranked lower in terms of the quality of their democracies, and places where journalists are perceived to operate less autonomously from political influence. Overall, our analysis suggests that preferences for impartiality might emerge for different reasons depending on the groups studied. Such differences potentially reflect the complexity of understandings about what impartiality is, and we suggest they may be, at least in part, because of subjective understandings of what counts as fair, accurate, and balanced news without a point of view—a contested concept in irreducibly diverse societies and in pluralistic media environments.

Competing Notions About Impartiality and Who Prefers It

In this section, we review the relevant academic literature on impartiality in journalism to motivate our hypotheses and subsequent analyses. In general, mirroring debates that have taken place within and outside the profession of journalism, contemporary academic research has tended to cast the concept of impartiality in a somewhat more skeptical light, questioning the feasibility of achieving such an ideal or even the desirability of striving to do so. The idea that news ought to be reported neutrally, free of bias (objectively), is a relatively modern notion that has been variously attributed to different sociotechnical, economic, and cultural factors (for review see Schudson, 2001). Nonetheless, in increasingly pluralistic media environments, there is growing disagreement about what journalism could (and should) offer to societies or how journalists ought to properly perform their duties (Nielsen, 2017; Schudson, 2008)—roles that are often in tension.

Academic and Industry Perspectives on Impartiality in News

One strategy journalists usually employ to navigate these competing expectations is a reliance on routinized news production practices (Tuchman, 1972). Although these practices may change according to cultural contexts (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), some remain as core practices even when challenged. Impartiality and objectivity, often used interchangeably, are arguably such core rituals. Thomas (2019) argues that impartiality is one part of a broader concept of objectivity alongside accuracy, balance, fairness, and other principles. Sambrook (2012) defines objectivity and impartiality as independent concepts, in which the latter is the absence of bias in the journalistic content and the former concerns the approach taken to isolate evidence and facts. In this article, we adhere to this definition of impartiality, acknowledging its connection to objectivity but underscoring the avoidance of bias as its critical trait. As Schudson (2001) suggests, objectivity has become intricately tied to expectations about how journalists should produce news—a moral ideal that underlies a set of reporting practices. If much of the public shares this ideal, impartiality can also

serve as part of journalism's public legitimacy strategy, protecting practitioners from criticism that they favor specific individuals, groups, or perspectives.

A main trait of the concept of impartiality is not favoring any specific point of view. Hartley (2019), for example, proposes that impartiality is a strategy employed by reporters based on considering a full range of views and opinions, their relative weight, and how this weight changes over time. Hughes et al. (2023) document that impartiality has been historically interpreted as offering equal airtime to different parties in the United Kingdom, but this becomes increasingly complex when there are more than two competitive parties in a political system. Sambrook and Cushion (2024) describe many elements of impartiality, including attention to facts and evidence, transparency, independence, and representing an appropriate diversity of views. Despite some minor differences in these definitions, expressing no preference for a particular point of view is central to how authors commonly conceptualize impartiality and also guides our empirical operationalization of the concept.

In practice, how journalists enact impartiality has been criticized as a performative ritual that circumscribes political debate within simplistic frameworks that sustain the status quo (Merritt, 1995). Many suggest these practices narrow the range of views heard on important issues (Wahl-Jorgensen, Berry, Garcia-Blanco, Bennett, & Cable, 2017), privilege elite voices (Altschull, 1984), and inhibit pluralism (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2017), while blurring boundaries between the press and political leaders (Merritt, 1995; Palmer, Toff, & Nielsen, 2020) and excluding or denigrating minorities and less-advantaged groups (Cook, 2005; but see Elmasry & El-Nawawy, 2017; Mendes, 2011). Given the history of harm done in the name of neutrality, some have questioned whether impartiality is even a desirable aim (Usher, 2021).² Some argue the detachment required to produce impartial coverage is unsuitable in certain contexts including war, natural disasters, or racial subjugation (Green & Maras, 2002; Usher, 2009).

Journalists themselves have increasingly expressed similar concerns about impartiality as the guiding principle underlying news and editorial decision making. Drawing on interviews with American journalists, Downie and Heyward (2023) argue that a reliance on the concept has become a "dangerous trap," advocating for abandoning it in favor of alternative approaches that place trust-building and engagement, particularly with historically underserved groups, at the center of news organizations' journalistic practices.

To be sure, despite critiques of impartial journalism in practice, it continues to have many defenders as a process for acknowledging and countering bias (see, e.g., Baron, 2023). As Thomas (2019) argues, when the ideals of impartiality are fully realized, it helps to guarantee audiences receive the best obtainable version of the truth. When practiced as a method, impartial journalism seeks to at least minimize bias and slant, even if eliminating it is entirely not possible, intending to "ensure consistent and transparent approaches to assessing information with the intention of achieving accuracy and fairness" (Sambrook, 2012, p. 5). Partly for these reasons, in some countries, impartiality is also required by law for some organizations, including broadcast license holders and especially public service media. Even in these cases, however,

² It is also worth noting that although the idea of impartiality has been adopted in many countries across the world, media-party parallelism remains common in many media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

impartiality is not treated as a universal principle, since these rules are based on the idea of due impartiality (Ofcom, 2023), which raises difficult questions about what the scope should be and what the limits are.

Contemporary debates about impartiality have also played out against the backdrop of a changing media environment, which has not only altered journalists' routines but amplified criticism about mainstream news media and coverage that purports to be neutral (Arguedas et al., 2022; Blaagaard, 2013; Cushion, McDowell-Naylor, & Thomas, 2021). The diversification of information sources also means there are more fierce disputes about what journalism should be, with alternative sources often criticizing traditional media protocols or accusing it of lack of impartiality (Chadha & Bhat, 2022; Mont'Alverne et al., 2023). Increased media choice means audiences can more easily find and select like-minded sources (Hiaeshutter-Rice & Weeks, 2021), and online platforms can also make opinion content and news reporting more difficult to distinguish (Peacock, Masullo, & Stroud, 2020), which may affect audience perceptions about journalistic norms (Lee, Lindsey, & Kim, 2017).

To the extent that the contemporary environment incentivizes journalists to cultivate a presence on digital platforms, doing so in places saturated with expressions of opinion and distinct points of view (Rogstad, 2014) can also be risky for practitioners who seek to remain committed to impartiality. Some digital news organizations have achieved a degree of success by embracing more ideological modes (such as Breitbart on the right or HuffPost on the left, albeit to different extents and in different ways), and cable television (e.g., Fox News) and newspaper publishing (many European titles) have long offered explicitly partisan news. Other news media have sought instead to reassert commitments to impartiality (BBC, 2020; Riordan, 2014).

Audience Perspectives on Impartiality

Although journalism scholarship has devoted a great deal of attention to journalistic practices around impartiality, far less research has been conducted on the public's preferences. How desirable is impartial news from an audience perspective? There are some indications that audiences systematically differ when it comes to these preferences—although most of the work focuses narrowly on specific parts of the world. Fisher, Flew, Park, Lee, and Dulleck (2021) show that Australian audiences in general strongly support journalists having a neutral standpoint on contentious topics, whereas Mont'Alverne et al. (2023) demonstrate that audiences in four Global North and Global South countries widely express support for the idea of impartiality in abstract, but disagree about what it means in practice. Looking at diversity in news, Beckers (2024) shows that people notice when stories have diverse viewpoints and actors, something that can be a trait of impartiality, even if it does not change how credible they think these stories are. These findings, although limited to particular contexts, illustrate how people have different reasons for supporting or rejecting impartiality, and we argue this could be partly explained by demographic and political factors.

When it comes to particular groups, Vos, Eichholz, and Karaliova (2019) show that older, conservative Americans tend to value the role of journalism as a detached observer more so than younger, liberal news users. In Finland, Ojala's (2021) focus groups revealed that older citizens were more likely to criticize a lack of alternative political perspectives in the news. Cross-nationally, Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, and Nielsen (2020) demonstrate that younger audiences tend to be more likely than older

groups to say they prefer news that adopts a particular point of view as an alternative to conventional forms of impartiality.

Politics is also expected to play a role in perceptions about impartiality and evaluations of journalist performance. Although some argue that one of the elements driving suspicion is an increasing perception that news is biased and partisan (Soontjens & van Erkel, 2020), others say distrust in news is rising because traditional approaches to objective news result in a press that too often normalizes extreme views or does not sufficiently challenge the status quo (Snipes & Mudde, 2020). Examining survey data from 46 countries, Robertson (2023) demonstrates that respondents say politicians and political activists are the main source of news criticism they are exposed to, indicating the prevalence of political aspects in people's suspicions about the media and, potentially, about how fair and impartial the coverage is. In another survey study in the same countries, Robertson (2021) indicates that left-wingers in some European countries and in the United States are more likely to say neutral journalism does not make sense for some issues. Looking at the Finnish context, Ojala (2021) notes that participants' perceptions of impartiality and neutrality are aligned with people's political views, with conservatives raising concerns about being poorly represented in Finnish news.

Besides ideology itself, political interest is another factor that can shape people's perceptions of impartiality, as this is usually a powerful predictor of political behavior, including knowledge and news consumption (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Prior, 2010). Politically interested people tend to have clearer ideological preferences and to be more knowledgeable (Elo & Rapeli, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2018), which potentially has a twofold implication for their preferences about impartiality. On the one hand, more politically interested people may be more likely to look for sources that share their points of view (Stroud, 2011). On the other hand, they might also be more confident, rightly or wrongly, in their abilities to assess what is and is not accurate information about events in the world and therefore feel less inclined to prioritize impartial news, assuming they will encounter it naturally as part of their broader news consumption. In sum, politically interested respondents might turn to news with a point of view as a supplement to impartial news rather than as an exclusive alternative.

These studies suggest that preferences for impartiality might vary depending on geographic context and other factors, underscoring the need for more comparative research.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Drawing on our review of existing research, we formulated hypotheses and research questions focused on (a) individual-level and (b) country-level factors as predictors of preferences for alternatives to impartial news. Even in cases where previous work does not address exactly the same aspects we are testing in this study, we rely on the related, more extensive literature on news media preferences to motivate our hypotheses.

Individual-Level Factors

We focus on three hypotheses about overlapping groups of individuals presumed to be most likely to prefer news that shares their points of view. First, given long-standing research on partisan selective

exposure (Peterson et al., 2021; Stroud, 2011), we expect that (H1) those who are most ideologically and politically engaged are also most likely to express preferences for news that shares their point of view. Second, based on prior research (Newman et al., 2020; Vos et al., 2019), we also expect that (H2a) those who are younger and (H2b) those who rely mainly on social media for news will also be more likely to express preferences for news that shares their point of view. Third, and in line with the view that preference for news that shares one's point of view stems from a perceived lack of representation in news (Downie & Heyward, 2023), we expect to find that (H3a) women and (H3b) those who are less privileged or socioeconomically advantaged will also express preferences for news that shares their point of view. We expect that each may have distinct reasons for preferring news that shares their point of view over conventional impartial news but given the intersecting nature of some of these groups, we test which characteristics are most salient when evaluated in a multivariate manner.

Country-Level Factors

Besides looking at individual-level relationships, we also explore variation at the macro level. Country-level studies looking at impartiality are rare, but previous research on the role of media for democracy or different journalistic styles indicate important factors to consider. Esser and Umbricht (2014) investigate how objective and interpretative journalism evolved in Western countries, showing how journalism practiced in the United States differs from continental Europe in the degree to which news tends to separate facts from opinion and rely on experts and direct quotations in presenting sources in stories. That has historically meant that American news outlets tend to promote a greater diversity of points of view within the same news organization, whereas elsewhere, audiences expect to find this variety across the range of news outlets available in the country. Then, it is possible that the various sources people use in certain countries may be connected to preferences around impartiality, with those who follow more news organizations being more likely to prefer impartial news, although we acknowledge this can vary according to media markets' traits. As Esser and Umbricht (2013) argue, countries with a tradition of internal pluralism in journalism, where each media outlet offers a diversity of viewpoints, are more likely to present different sides of a debate. Furthermore, in a study about factors explaining news avoidance, Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) show that reliance on more news sources at the country level is associated with higher rates of news avoidance, indicating that variety in news sources can also shape people's choices in increasingly complex information environments. As such, we are interested in whether the various sources relate to people's preferences around impartiality. Therefore, we ask:

RQ1a: Is the number of sources generally used by participants in each country associated with higher or lower preferences for impartial news in general?

Next, considering that impartiality is often a cornerstone of public media organizations, especially in Western countries, it seems pertinent to investigate how preferences for impartiality are associated, or not, with the quality of democracy. Neff and Pickard (2021) show that securing funding for public service media and ensuring it is politically and economically independent tends to occur in places viewed as having healthier democracies, which might lead public in those places to express a higher preference for impartial news as well. On the other hand, such places may also be countries with traditions of pluralism, which may lead to more criticism of news and preference for news that is clearly aligned with one's point of view.

Stronger democracies also tend to value aspects such as accountability, transparency, and pluralism (Nord et al., 2024), and these traditions potentially relate to audiences' expectations about journalism. Therefore, we also ask:

RQ1b: Is the quality of a country's democracy associated with higher or lower preferences for impartial news in general?

Finally, we also consider whether journalistic practices may relate to audience preferences for impartial news. Hanitzsch and colleagues (2019) show how perceptions of political influence among journalists vary considerably among 67 countries, with journalists from non-Western and less democratic places perceiving stronger influences in their work than those from more democratic countries. These differences are illustrated by how majorities of the public in Southern European countries, where there is a tradition of party-political influence over the media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), perceive undue political or government influence over the news media, in contrast with Nordic countries where these perceptions are much more limited (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Kleis Nielsen, 2022). It is conceivable therefore that audiences in places where journalists can operate more independently from political influence might view the concept of impartial news differently than audiences elsewhere. This prompts our third research question pertaining to country-level factors:

RQ1c: To what extent are perceived levels of political influence on journalism associated with higher or lower preferences for impartial news in general?

Data and Methods

We draw on secondary cross-country audience data collected by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism as part of its 2020 Digital News Report (Newman, et al., 2020), which surveyed respondents across 40 media markets in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The online survey (N = 80,155) was fielded by YouGov in January and February 2020. Samples in each country reflect the online populations in each country based on quotas for age, gender, region, and education. Additional information is provided in the supplemental material.³

The variable that is the main focus in this study—preferences for impartial news—is operationalized using a question that asked respondents whether they preferred “getting news from sources that share your point of view”; “getting news from sources that don’t have a particular point of view”; “getting news from sources that challenge your point of view”; or “don’t know.” To ease interpretation, responses to this question are treated as four distinct dichotomous dependent variables, although we focus primarily on the first two response options, which account for 51% and 24% of all responses, respectively. These response options come closest to capturing the main attitudes about impartiality that our hypotheses and research questions are structured to examine (we include analyses of the other responses in the supplemental material). Although this question does not cover the full complexity of impartiality (Mont'Alverne et al., 2023), it does capture its central trait: the absence of an explicit editorial line providing a point of view on

³ Access supplemental material here: <https://osf.io/cztv7/>.

how the news is reported. As we summarize in Figure 1, responses to this question varied considerably across countries, but in 26 of them, most said they prefer impartial news. Turkey is the only country where more than 50% of respondents said they prefer news that shares their point of view.

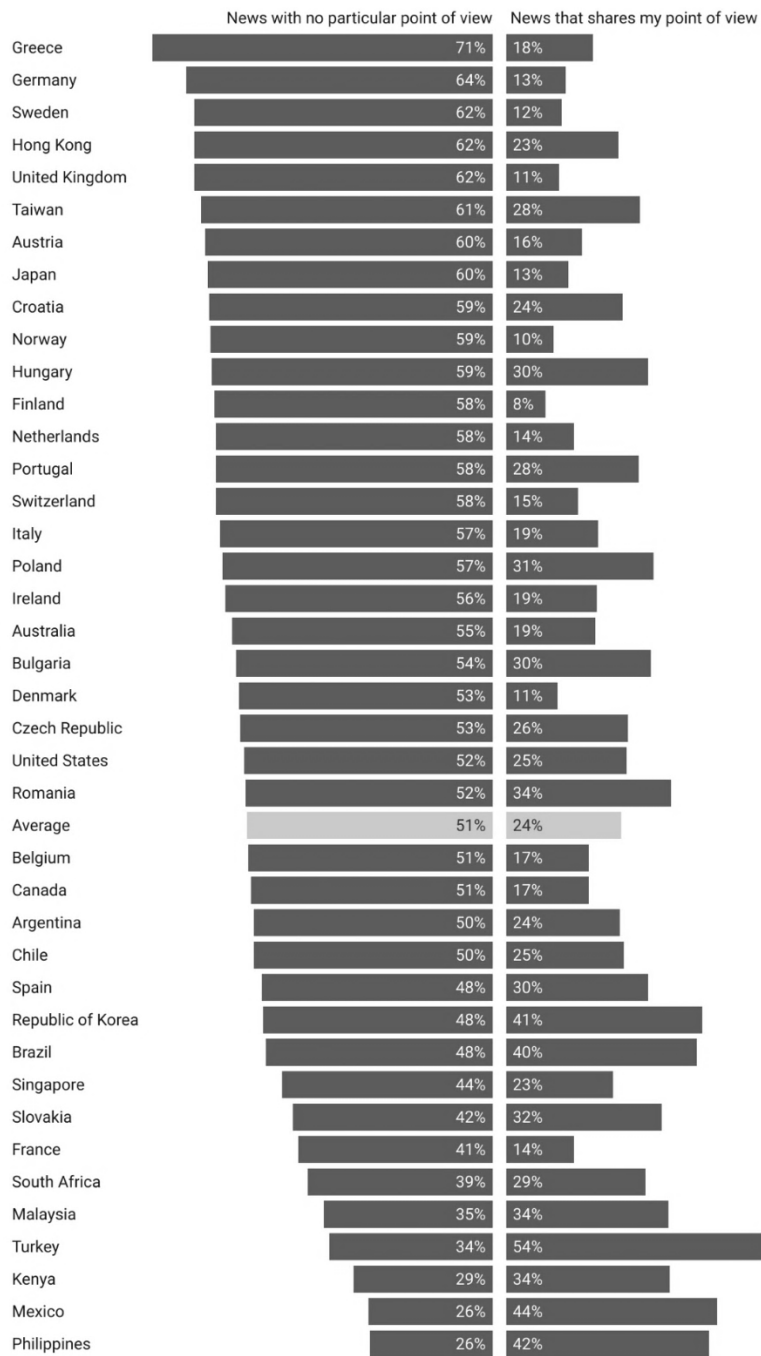


Figure 1. Percentage in each country who say they prefer news with no point of view or news that shares their point of view.

To examine our hypotheses, we estimate multilevel linear models examining individual-level predictors for each preference, while accounting for the way respondents are clustered in different countries.⁴ We focus on the significance of political attitudes (H1), including ideological self-placement on a left-right scale, political interest, and frequency of news use, age (H2a), and a question that asked respondents to select which type of media they relied on as their main source of news (H2b), whether social media, online news websites, television, 24-hour television, or print newspapers. We look at the role of gender (H3a) along with levels of formal schooling and household income (H3b). For explanatory purposes, we also compare the multilevel models to models estimated individually for each country. All calculations were done in RStudio using lme4 and lmerTest packages.

To address country-level factors in explaining variation in preferences for impartiality, we draw on data from three separate sources. To examine RQ1a, or the effect of source variety in a given market, we use a separate question in the DNR to calculate a country-level average for the number of news sources individuals say they used in the previous week.⁵ To examine RQ1b, or the effect associated with the quality of a country's democracy, we use measures provided by Freedom House (2020), which reports on political rights and civil liberties in each country based on analysis by analysts and advisers. Last, to examine RQ1c, or the degree to which journalists in each country are independent from political influence, we use a measure provided by the Worlds of Journalism Survey (2012–2016; Hanitzsch et al., 2019), which captures journalist perceptions about the news media by country. Because country-level data are not available for all 40 markets included in the DNR, we examine these relationships separately by estimating simple bivariate Pearson correlations between each of these variables and mean levels of preferences for news without a point of view. Doing so helps us to maximize the breadth of our analysis, but it means we are unable to look more closely at how country-level variation may covary along these same three dimensions or with other individual-level factors examined in the first part of our analysis.⁶

Findings

We summarize our results in two sections corresponding to our hypotheses and research questions. We find confirmatory evidence of systematic differences in preferences around impartial news among all hypothesized individual groups: those who are more politically engaged with stronger ideological leanings, those who are younger, and those who mainly get news from social media are all more likely to prefer news that shares their points of view. We also find evidence that less-advantaged groups in society, including

⁴ Although each outcome variable is binary in the first set of models, we estimate linear models because it allows for more straightforward interpretation and typically produces substantively similar results as nonlinear models (see Gomila, 2021). We also ran a multinomial regression that did not change our interpretation in any substantive ways. See supplemental material: <https://osf.io/cztv7/>

⁵ Participants were asked to select which brands they used in the last week from a list of around 30 online and offline brands in their countries. For our country-level variable, we averaged across the number of sources each respondent said they used in each country.

⁶ We acknowledge that levels of polarization in society could also be a relevant factor to our research questions, but we found no impact of polarization over preference for impartial news in the country level. Therefore, we opted not to include this variable in our analysis.

women and those who are less wealthy and educated, are also more likely to gravitate away from impartiality. At the country level, we find on average that places where more sources are used for news and places where journalists are perceived to be less independent from political influences tend to be places with lower levels of preferences for impartial news, whereas places rated as having higher-quality democracies tend to be associated with higher levels of support for impartial news.

Individual Correlates of Preferences for Impartial News

To account for both cross-country differences and possible confounding variables, given overlapping characteristics between the groups identified in our first set of hypotheses, we estimated multilevel linear mixed models with random intercepts by country, which we summarize in Table 1.⁷

Table 1. Multilevel Linear Mixed Models of the Correlates of News Preferences.

	Prefer sources with no particular point of view	Prefer sources that share my point of view
(Intercept)	0.59 *** (0.02)	0.23 *** (0.02)
<i>SES</i>		
Gender (female)	-0.02 *** (0.00)	0.01 * (0.00)
Education	0.02 *** (0.00)	-0.01 *** (0.00)
Household Income	0.03 *** (0.00)	-0.01 *** (0.00)
<i>Youth and Media Preferences</i>		
Age group	0.02 *** (0.00)	-0.03 *** (0.00)
Social media	-0.04 *** (0.01)	0.02 * (0.01)
Online websites	0.04 *** (0.01)	-0.04 *** (0.01)
TV	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
24h-TV	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 * (0.01)
Newspapers	-0.01	0.01

⁷ Bivariate analyses also show negative relationships between all hypothesized groups and preferences for impartiality (see supplemental material).

	(0.01)	(0.01)
<i>Political Engagement</i>		
News frequency	-0.01 *** (0.00)	0.02 *** (0.00)
Political interest	-0.02 *** (0.00)	0.04 *** (0.00)
Ideology (Don't know)	-0.15 *** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Ideology (Right)	-0.07 *** (0.01)	0.08 *** (0.00)
Ideology (Left)	-0.06 *** (0.01)	0.07 *** (0.00)
N (respondents)	68,257	68,257
N (countries)	40	40
AIC	94,095.41	74,584.81
ICC	0.05	0.06
R ² (fixed)	0.03	0.03
R ² (total)	0.07	0.08

Notes. Models include random effects by country. In the supplemental material, results for preferring news that challenges one's point of view and don't know responses are also included. Center is the reference category for ideology. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Although effect sizes are generally small, these models provide evidence in support of our hypotheses. Consistent with H1, political engagement variables including interest in politics, frequency of news use, and ideological self-placement on the right or the left are each associated negatively with preferences for impartial news and positively with preferring news that shares one's point of view. We also find, in support of H2a, that being younger, and in support of H2b, preferring social media for news (in contrast to other sources) is also negatively associated with preferences for impartial news and positively related to preferring news that shares one's point of view. The supplemental material (Appendices 8 and 9) brings results for individual models per country, showing how these patterns hold in each of them. In most countries analyzed, there is a significant negative association between age and preference for news that shares their points of view. The multilevel models also offer evidence for a third category of people who tend to favor news that shares their point of view: women (H3a) and those who are less educated and from lower-income households (H3b). That these less-advantaged groups in society are also somewhat more likely to prefer news that shares their points of view suggests that different groups may have different reasons for doing so.

Although not the focus of this study, effects of other individual-level factors vary to only a limited degree from country to country in explaining preferences for impartial news. The effects of age, frequency

of news consumption, political interest, and using social media as the main source of news tend to be consistent across the countries in our data, although we do find some country outliers.

Country-Level Correlates of Preferences for Impartial News

Besides looking at individual-level predictors for people's preferences around impartial news, we also explore aspects that can explain preference for impartiality across countries (Table 2). To do so, we rely on bivariate correlations between preferences for impartiality and three previously mentioned variables in RQ1a, RQ1b, and RQ1c.⁸ We find a negative correlation between the number of sources people use on average and the level of preferences for impartiality in that market, and a positive association with preference for news that share their points of view. This might be explained by the fact that in markets dominated by fewer brands—often publicly funded ones such as the BBC—respondents in that market also tend to express higher levels of preference for impartiality. In the United Kingdom, where respondents used an average of four news brands, the lowest number across all countries, 62% of respondents said they prefer news with no point of view. In Kenya and Turkey, on the other hand, two of the countries with an above-average number of news brands used (13 for each), a much lower percentage said they preferred news with no point of view (29% and 34%, respectively).

About RQ1b, we find a strong positive relationship between the quality of democracy in that market and levels of preferences for impartial news, and a negative association with preference for news that shares their point of view. Again, Turkey and Kenya are the two countries in the DNR with the lowest quality of democracy scores and, similarly, among those with lowest preferences for news without a point of view. On the other end of the scale, Nordic countries like Sweden are rated highest on the democratic index and also where respondents express preferences for impartial news at a much higher rate, potentially a consequence of their tradition of Democratic Corporatist media systems in which impartiality is an important trait for several widely used brands, most notably public service media.

Finally, with respect to RQ1c, we find lower preferences for impartial news in places where journalists rate their media systems as being less independent from political influence, and higher preferences for news that shares their points of view. In other words, audiences are more likely to prefer alternatives to impartial news in contexts where news is perceived by journalists themselves as particularly influenced by politics, perhaps reflecting the view that dominant news media purporting to be impartial may be more likely to be viewed as doing the bidding of political officials. Malaysia and Turkey are the countries where journalists rate political influence over the news media highest and where audience preferences for impartiality tends to be among the lowest.

⁸ We also estimated models that included these country-level variables alongside the individual-level variables examined in our first hypotheses. Given correlations between the country-level variables, we tested them both separately and in models that included multiple country-level variables to examine their relative importance as explanatory factors. All three were significant with effects of comparable magnitude. Because these models do not change any of our interpretation of the relationship between preferences around impartial news across countries, we opt only to present bivariate correlations for the sake of brevity.

Table 2. Country-Level Correlations Between Audience Preferences for and Against Impartial News and Characteristics of Each Market.

	Source variety		Quality of democracy		Political influence	
Preference for impartiality	-0.33*	--	0.65***	--	-0.63***	--
Preference for news that shares my POV	--	0.08***	--	-0.08 ***	--	0.07***
N(Countries)	40	40	40	40	37	37
R ²	0.11	0.51	0.42	0.52	0.39	0.38

Notes. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Poland, Slovakia, and Taiwan are excluded from correlations with political influence as they are not included in the Worlds of Journalism Study data.

Discussion

This article draws on large-scale survey data of audience attitudes about impartiality across 40 media markets worldwide. We show that audience preferences for impartial news remain popular worldwide but that preferences for news that shares one's point of view are relatively more common with several overlapping groups: those who are politically engaged with strong ideological leanings, those who are younger and rely on social media for news, and among less-advantaged groups including women and those who are less educated and from lower-income households. These results, although aligned with past research in some respects (American Press Institute, 2021; Vos et al., 2019), also suggest that preferences around impartiality may be driven by different kinds of dynamics for different groups. Furthermore, we find systematic patterns across countries and media environments, suggesting that preferences for impartial news tend to be lowest in places where audiences tend to use many individual news brands—an indication of how media variety may be associated with reduced preferences for impartial news—and highest in places that rank toward the top in terms of the quality of their democracies and where journalists perceive themselves as operating more independently from political influence.

Our findings indicate that preferences for impartiality can be driven by three factors: politics, social disadvantages, and media consumption preferences. About politics, those politically interested and with strong ideological preferences might prefer news that shares their point of view both given their interest in ideologically congruent sources and to their higher levels of news consumption than the rest of the population, leading them to prefer news that shares their point of view as a supplement to impartial sources they also use. People belonging to socially disadvantaged groups, such as women, younger, lower-income, and lower-educated participants, may find themselves less attached to journalistic norms that they do not feel have served their interests, which may be a reflection of grievances about journalistic shortcomings with respect to news that purports to be impartial but can come across as biased in favor of more privileged parts of society—especially when it comes to coverage of groups that are often stigmatized or ignored (Mendes, 2011). For some of these audiences, expressing a preference for news that shares their points of view might be another way of saying they prefer news that portrays people like themselves more fairly (see also Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Robertson, 2021). Finally, when it comes to media consumption preferences, those who mainly get news on social media might have different expectations for journalism

than those who prefer traditional sources. Taken together, our findings indicate that although politics partially explains preferences for impartiality, broader inequalities in societies and people's gateways to information also play a role. This has implications both for practitioners, who will be more likely to connect with certain segments of the public depending on the characteristics of the content produced, and to journalism scholars, who face a complex environment when explaining people's preferences.

Our findings demonstrate the complexities around interpreting audience attitudes about impartiality, which depend not only on individual preferences but also individual assessments about the supply of news available in each market and the degree to which consumers believe news in general lives up to their expectations and delivers full, fair, and accurate information. Does the fact that BBC News commands a large proportion of Web traffic for news consumption in the United Kingdom (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2021) reflect audience preferences for impartial news, which the BBC is required to provide both by the Broadcast Code and its remits as described in the Royal Charter, or do audience preferences for news with "no point of view" largely reflect the BBC's dominance in this market, the relative health of the United Kingdom's democracy (as argued by Neff & Pickard, 2021), or the degree to which British journalists are able to operate independent from political pressures, at least compared with other places in the world? It is not possible based on these observational data to say with certainty, but our analysis of cross-country patterns in these data is consistent with all three of these expectations.

Our findings add another layer of complexity for why people prefer or reject impartial news, and what the majoritarian support for impartiality actually means, reinforcing existing evidence that expectations around impartiality are highly varied in contemporary societies despite agreements on its desirability on the surface (Mont'Alverne et al., 2023). We should also note that the nature of this relationship varies across countries, which shows how different contextual dynamics might also shape how audiences think about what "news with no point of view" means. Although impartiality is sometimes assumed to be a universal principle of journalism, it is clearly not valued in the same way in all places, as it certainly has not historically been practiced in the same way in all places. It is up to news organizations and journalists, therefore, to evaluate which approach better suits their contexts.

On the other hand, because respondents may be anchoring preferences to the available supply of news available to them, it suggests that these preferences could change in response to the changes in the media environment. The relatively lower levels of preferences for impartiality we find among less-advantaged individuals and women could be a reflection of frustration about news media that they do not believe overall are living up to this ideal—in effect, a form of expressive responding. Likewise, when respondents say they prefer news with "no point of view," as embraced by relatively more advantaged individuals in most countries, it is possible that what they are expressing is a preference for news that mirrors and does not challenge dominant perspectives in society. These respondents might answer differently should they encounter "impartial" news that did not overwhelmingly reflect their own lived experiences or outlooks on the world.

Our study advances understanding of preferences around impartial news relying on an extensive data set encompassing different contexts in the world, but it is limited in what it can say about consequences of impartiality for people's relationship with journalism. Future studies should look at the relationship

between impartiality and various outcomes including trust in news alongside related questions such as whether preferences around impartiality and trust relate to audiences' willingness to pay for news and how journalistic perceptions around such preferences can in turn influence editorial decisions.

The study has several limitations. We have operationalized preferences for and against impartial news using responses to a single item that does not capture the construct's full complexities. Ideally, it would be helpful to have data on what audiences think "news with no point of view" actually looks like and the degree to which audiences are stating preferences in the abstract versus given the options for news available to them. Additionally, the DNR sample does not capture some older and less economically advantaged populations who are excluded from the survey because they do not have access to the Internet. We also acknowledge that the three variables we use are hardly the totality of country-level factors relevant to explaining preferences for impartiality, but the few previous studies of audience attitudes and how they differ by country makes it challenging to narrow our focus, and we hope this study will encourage further comparative work on audience preferences. Despite these limitations, this large-scale, comparative study contributes much-needed empirical evidence around one of the central principles of journalistic practice in many parts of the world. Our study also reveals the importance of understanding audiences' perceptions about key aspects of journalism and how they might vary across different groups, offering empirical evidence for reflections about the consequences of impartiality and practitioners' relationships with audiences.

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