

Dear Almar,

As journalists and believers in the First Amendment, we know the value of an opinion page for the airing of views. However, Opinion's lack of fact-checking and transparency, and its apparent disregard for evidence, undermine our readers' trust and our ability to gain credibility with sources.

Many readers already cannot tell the difference between reporting and Opinion. And from those who know of the divide, reporters nonetheless face questions about the Journal's accuracy and fairness because of errors published in Opinion. Some of us have been told by sources that they won't talk to us because they don't trust that the WSJ is independent of the editorial page; many of us have heard sources and readers complain about the paper's "bias" as a result of what they've read in Opinion.

In a recent prominent example, Opinion published an [article](#) by the vice president without checking government figures. Scrutinizing these numbers would have required no more than a Google search. The Washington Post had prominently reported a [story](#) highlighting the vice president's discrepancies more than a month earlier; Opinion nevertheless published the figures without apparent scrutiny. Opinion issued a correction to the article only several days later, after a government employee with knowledge of the numbers complained to Opinion and a WSJ journalist [reported](#) on the error.

Opinion articles often make assertions that are contradicted by WSJ reporting. The headline of the vice-president's article read [There Isn't a Coronavirus 'Second Wave'](#). Here's our reporting from more than a week prior to that Opinion piece: [California and Some Other States See Coronavirus Cases Rise](#).

Other popular articles in Opinion have propelled misinformation. For several days, Opinion's [The Myth of Systemic Police Racism](#) was the WSJ's most-read article, beating out reporting for readers' attention. The article ended up being one of the Journal's top articles for the month of June; Google alone referred 1.7 million readers. By comparison, the second-most referred article, another Opinion piece, received around 383,000 referrals.

The article selectively presented facts and drew an erroneous conclusion from the underlying data. Among several problems in this piece, one of the peer-reviewed studies cited had its main finding corrected after two letters from peers. The Opinion piece makes no mention of this, even though the study's correction had been flagged at the top of the page in the [link](#). The authors of the [study have since retracted their study](#), citing its "misuse" in the Wall Street Journal among their reasons.

The article also cherry-picked another study, ignoring the fact that its conclusion – police are indeed more likely to use nonlethal physical force on Black people – flatly contradicted the piece's own argument. ([Here](#) is an interview with the Harvard researcher behind the study.)

Three weeks after this article ran, [Opinion published an op-ed](#) by that Harvard researcher in which he stated that his work has been “widely misrepresented and misused” and “wrongly cited as evidence that there is no racism in policing.” He also wrote, “People who invoke our work to argue that *systemic police racism is a myth* conveniently ignore these statistics” [italics added]. Because no URL linking to the earlier WSJ article was embedded in those words, many readers might not even have realized that the researcher’s outrage over the distortion of his findings was directed at the Opinion page itself. This is opacity and misdirection, not the transparency that WSJ stands for. Separately, our traffic metrics indicate this op-ed didn’t get nearly the amount of readership as the original problematic Opinion article.

Multiple employees of color publicly spoke out about the pain this Opinion piece caused them during company-held discussions surrounding diversity initiatives, including but not limited to the BlackInsight@DJ meeting on June 8 and the Listen & Change meeting on July 7. If the company is serious about better supporting its employees of color, at a bare minimum it should raise Opinion’s standards so that misinformation about racism isn’t published.

Opinion has also published basic factual inaccuracies about taxes. In a 2019 op-ed that topped the “Most Popular” list for days, titled “[Congress is Coming for Your IRA](#),” author Philip DeMuth criticized a retirement bill for making it less attractive from a tax perspective to leave IRAs to heirs. He wrote twice that the bill mandates annuities, claiming “The insurance industry loves the Secure Act’s mandate that annuities be offered as a payout option in all retirement plans” and “The mandatory offer of an annuity is a first step that could lead to the mandatory annuitization of all retirement accounts.” But the Secure Act does not mandate annuities in retirement accounts. Instead, it gives 401(k) plans that choose to offer annuities and follow certain procedures some legal protection should the insurer backing the annuity go bust. Mr. DeMuth also wrote that “under the Secure Act, IRAs will no longer be subject to annual required minimum distributions...,” which is incorrect. (The statement would have been accurate had it been written about inherited IRAs.)

A 2017 editorial titled “[The Senate’s Tax Panic](#)” asserted that “ObamaCare created a 3.8-percentage-point surtax on capital gains, dividends, interest and other forms of so-called ‘unearned income.’ This tax increase on capital was sold as hitting the rich, but note that it brought the top rate to 23.8% for singles earning as little as \$200,000 and couples \$250,000. That’s a middle-class couple.” In fact, the 23.8% rate applied to singles earning above \$418,400 and couples earning above \$470,700 at the time — not exactly middle class. That error tainted the entire piece.

We are troubled by other mishaps of research in Opinion. Last year, BuzzFeed News reported that [an Opinion contributor had white nationalist ties](#) and had been charged with assaulting a Black woman. He reportedly had been writing for Opinion under a thinly veiled byline. The Journal’s spokesperson reportedly said the WSJ was “not aware that he has written under any other byline.”

Opinion's disregard for the newsroom has also endangered newsroom safety. Not long ago, an Opinion contributor falsely claimed in a tweet that one of our Middle East-based reporters had friends in the Muslim Brotherhood. The safety of our reporter was put at risk by this false claim because she worked frequently in Saudi Arabia, which views the Brotherhood as an enemy. Members of the newsroom were told that the Opinion page agreed to stop using this contributor, but months later he was back writing for the section, suggesting that even endangering a WSJ employee by publishing misinformation isn't a serious infraction.

Opinion's actions affect how the newsroom can operate and improve. Our newsroom is overwhelmingly white and now more than ever our management wants to actively recruit more people of color. As reporters, we have been told over the years to seek more diverse people as sources, given their overall lack of representation in our news coverage. But as long as Opinion in its current state is part of our brand, we will face difficulties recruiting diverse talent and building trust with sources. It's understandable why someone who reads about systemic police racism being a "myth" in the WSJ might not trust our newsroom to be fair, honest or welcoming.

Proposed Solutions

Since many readers do not understand the division between WSJ's news and opinion divisions, we propose making this divide clearer. We propose prominently labeling editorials and op-eds as such, on both the website and the WSJ app, e.g. "The Wall Street Journal's Opinion pages are independent of its newsroom."

On WSJ.com, we propose removing content from the editorial pages currently mixed in among the "Recommended Videos" and "Most Popular Articles" blocks on the right rail, and instead highlighting that content separately as "Most Popular in Opinion."

We also propose that WSJ journalists should not be reprimanded for writing about errors published in Opinion, whether we make those observations in our articles, on social media or elsewhere.

Subscribers expect accuracy and a high level of transparency across the Wall Street Journal. As we are independent of Opinion, we are not positioned to advise on how they should address the problem, but at the very least, fact-checking and a genuine commitment to transparency should be required before publishing to millions of readers.

We hope that our letter will serve as a call to action and serve as a record of the newsroom's concerns. We trust that management will seriously consider these issues. We request you share your plans to address them with the newsroom by August 20.

Thank you for your consideration.