



# Representing the Doukhobors in the Media

*This MysteryQuest examines newspaper articles about the Doukhobors in the early twentieth century around the time of the killing of their leader, Peter Verigin. Students learn to distinguish biased from impartial reporting in newspaper accounts of the Doukhobors.*

*A critical thinking challenge to accompany*

*Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History*

*Explosion on the Kettle Valley Line:  
The Death of Peter Verigin*

<http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/21/indexen.html>

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*based on an approach developed by The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC<sup>2</sup>)  
[www.tc2.ca](http://www.tc2.ca)*

## **Ages**

14-16

## **Courses**

Canadian history, civics, social studies

## **Key Topics**

- fair and biased reporting
- immigrant relations in early 20th century Canada
- religious and ethnic prejudice
- the Doukhobors in Canada

## Critical Challenges

- Determine the extent to which each of two newspaper articles are fair or impartial reporting.
- Write an editorial to explain why the least impartial article is substantially fair or rewrite it to offer a more impartial report.

## Broad Understanding

- Students will learn about the relationship of the Doukhobor community with mainstream society in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada.
- Students learn to distinguish biased from impartial reporting in newspaper accounts of events involving immigrant groups.

## Requisite Tools



### *Background knowledge*

- knowledge of the Doukhobor way of life in Canada in the early 20th century
- knowledge of biased and impartial perspectives



### *Criteria for judgment*

- criteria for impartial reporting (e.g., contains accurate and important information, offers an impartial perspective of the event)



### *Critical thinking vocabulary*

- media bias



### *Thinking strategies*

- data chart
- rating scale



### *Habits of mind*

- fair-minded
- full-minded
- open-minded

## Independent Study

This lesson can be used as a self-directed activity by having students individually or in pairs work their way through the guided instructions and support material found at <http://www.mysteryquests.ca/quests/21/indexen.html>.

## Whole Class Activities

On the following pages are suggested modifications of the self-guided procedures found on the MysteryQuest website for use with a class of students. For convenience, each support material and set of directions found on the website is reproduced next to the relevant suggestions for whole class instruction.

## Suggested Activities

### Introduce the concepts of bias and unfair reporting

- Ask students to comment on the kinds of articles that appear in the press about young people. After a number of students have responded, ask if they think unfair reporting is a recent phenomenon that comes about because of age difference or if it has always been evident in the media. Explain that they are going to look at historical newspaper articles to test that hypothesis.

### Introduce the Verigin case

- Using *Introduction* as a guide, explain to students the challenge that is the focus of their investigation.

#### INTRODUCTION

Late in the evening of October 28, 1924, Peter Verigin boarded a Canadian Pacific Railway train at Brilliant, British Columbia, the headquarters of the Doukhobor community. About one in the morning a horrific explosion blew away the roof and sides of the coach. Verigin and eight others perished in the explosion, which investigators on the scene quickly concluded was no accident.

Known by the single name "Lordly," Peter Verigin lived like royalty among a group of Russian immigrants to Canada, the Doukhobors, whose motto was "Toil and Peaceful Life." The Doukhobors preached equality and rejected the authority of both Church and State. As a result, they were persecuted in Russia. In 1902, their leader, Peter Verigin, and many of his community came to Canada to take up a new life.

Yet they did not find peace in Canada. Doukhobor protests against what they saw as governmental interference with their religious and political freedoms involved arson, public nudity, and refusal to pay taxes or send their children to school. Because of this unusual behaviour, many regarded the Doukhobors as undesirable citizens and they were under surveillance by the RCMP. The reports about the Doukhobors in the press were often negative. Was this fair reporting or evidence of media bias against this group? Even if the reporting was positive, does it mean that it was necessarily unbiased?

- Using *The Task* as a guide, outline the activities that students will undertake.
- You may want to download and display pictures to help your students conceptualize the Doukhobor way of life and the time period that this MysteryQuest refers to.

#### THE TASK

In this MysteryQuest, you will evaluate two articles written in 1924 about the controversial behaviour of a religious group, the Doukhobors. You must determine the extent to which each of the articles is fair or impartial reporting, and then defend or rewrite one of the articles.

In order to complete this task, you will first learn about the Doukhobors – their religious practices, their communal way of life, and their dislike of many aspects of Canadian society. You will also consider criteria for distinguishing biased from impartial reporting. Next, you will assess the two articles and decide on the extent to which they represent biased or fair reporting of the Doukhobors. Finally, you will write an editorial explaining why the least impartial article is substantially fair or you will rewrite it to offer a more impartial report.

### Learn about the Doukhobors

- Using *Step 1: Learn about the Doukhobors* as a guide, explain to students that historians have provided two documents that they believe offer an impartial summary of Doukhobor activities during the 1920s.

#### STEP 1: LEARN ABOUT THE DOUKHOBORS

To begin it will be helpful to learn something about the Doukhobors and their most famous leader, Peter Verigin. The historians working on the website Explosion on the Kettle Valley Line have provided two documents that they believe to offer an impartial summary of Doukhobor activities during the 1920s. The two documents are found in the "Secondary documents" section of *Evidence in the Case*.

As you read these interpretations, make note of key details about the Doukhobors' history and way of life. You may want to use the chart Information Summary to record information on the following topics:

- origins before coming to Canada;
- religion;
- work and social organization;
- education;
- opinion on war;
- actions of their leader, Peter Verigin.

- Direct students to the documents found in the Secondary Documents section of *Evidence in the Case*.
- Duplicate and distribute to students copies of *Information Summary* to record information on the Doukhobors.

#### EVIDENCE IN THE CASE

Secondary documents  
 Peter Verigin – History  
 Conflicts Among Doukhobors and With Their Neighbours



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Support Materials 1 (Activity Sheet)

#### Information Summary

Origins	
Religion	
Work and social organization	
Education	
Opinion on war	
Peter Verigin	

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#### Reflect on bias and perspective

- Using *Step 2: Reflect on bias and perspective* as a guide, discuss with students the terms “bias,” “perspective,” and “impartial.”
- Ask students to suggest how a very large teen event that required crowd control (such as a rock concert) might be described from the perspective of young people and the same event from the perspective of adults who do not have children. Ask students if either description might be biased. How would the event be described from an impartial perspective?

#### STEP 2: REFLECT ON BIAS AND PERSPECTIVE

Before we can decide whether or not a newspaper account is unbiased, we must be clear about the difference between the concepts of “bias” and “perspective.” Many people use these terms interchangeably, creating the impression that everyone is biased simply because each of us has our own perspective or view on the world. This may be an overly simplistic and misleading assumption. If all people are necessarily biased, does this mean that no one is able to examine issues fairly and draw warranted conclusions in light of the available evidence?

If we look carefully at the meaning of these terms, we can better understand how some perspectives may be biased and others may not be. A perspective is a viewpoint from which a person sees an event. A perspective is biased if it unfairly prejudices the result in favour of one person or group. The opposite of bias is impartial. An impartial perspective indicates that the person has attempted to remove any prejudice in favour of or against one person or group by ensuring that all sides are fully represented and respected. Because it is difficult to be completely impartial, it makes more sense to talk about the degree to which a person’s perspective is biased or impartial. The following factors are helpful when making this assessment:

##### A perspective is impartial to the extent that the person is

- *Open-minded*: the person willingly accepts new ideas and alters her opinions based on new evidence;
- *Full-minded*: the person considers the available evidence from the various individuals or groups involved in the event;
- *Fair-minded*: the person sincerely tries to put personal interests or preferences aside when weighing the competing evidence.

##### A perspective is biased to the extent that the person is

- *Closed-minded*: the person is unwilling to consider evidence that might go counter to a predetermined view;
- *One-sided*: the person reaches conclusions by focusing largely on information that favours his preferred position;
- *Prejudiced*: personal attachments prejudice the result in favour of one group or view over the others.

Read the three fictional newspaper accounts of a high school hockey game found in *Exploring Media Bias*. In each case, look for indications of author bias or impartiality. If you have trouble determining which of the three accounts is the most impartial, read *Distinguishing Biased and Impartial Perspectives* to learn more about these concepts.

- Duplicate and distribute to students copies of *Distinguishing Biased and Impartial Perspectives* and *Exploring Media Bias*. Ask students to read the three fictional accounts of a high school hockey game and look for indications of author bias or impartiality. Suggest that if they have difficulty determining which of the three accounts is the most impartial, they should refer to the briefing sheet that provides background information.

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Support Materials 2 (Briefing Sheet)

**Exploring Media Bias**

Read the following three fictional newspaper accounts of a high school hockey game. Look for indications of bias or impartiality on the part of the author.

**Account One: "Pearson High Cheated of Victory"**

Our girls struggled hard on the rink last night, but could not get by the rough play by the Queensville Hawks. The result was a disappointing 3 — 2 defeat. Pearson was ahead by a goal for much of the game. The vicious checking by the Hawks and a couple of tripping infractions that the referee deliberately ignored late in the game allowed the Hawks to score two lucky goals for the win.

**Account Two: "Hawks Power to Victory"**

Female Hawks are flying high this season as they chalked up a decisive 3 — 2 victory over the flagging Pearson Arrows. Pearson's skaters could not keep up with the determined efforts of the Hawks. Our team's "never say die" attitude paid off with two beautiful goals late in the game to secure the victory.

**Account Three: "Hawks and Arrows Battle Until the End"**

The Pearson High Arrows and Queensville Hawks showed great determination and skill as they battled in a closely fought game. Although the Arrows were leading by a goal near the end of the game, they lost focus when the referee did not call two penalties that the Arrows' players thought were deserved. One of these incidents probably deserved a penalty, but a championship team can't let these misfortunes push them off their game. And the Hawks made the best of their opportunities with two quick goals to secure a 3 — 2 "come from behind" win.

### Analyse the articles

- Using *Step 3: Analysing the articles* as a guide, duplicate and distribute the two primary documents found in *Evidence in the Case*, as well as copies of the activity sheet *Putting the Articles in Context*. Suggest that students read each of the primary documents twice – the first time to look for the overall tone and purpose of the article, using the questions from the activity sheet to guide their reading, and the second time to look more closely for the factors listed in Step 3.

### DISTINGUISHING BIASED AND IMPARTIAL PERSPECTIVES

It is often suggested that everyone has a particular perspective, and that this implies everyone must necessarily be biased in their opinions. This impression is popular among people who think that "perspective" and "bias" are synonyms — that the two words have identical meaning. We believe there is an important difference between these terms.

#### What is the difference between a biased and an impartial perspective?

A perspective is a viewpoint from which a person sees an event. For example, I might look at an event from a teacher's or from a student's point of view, or I might look at an event from high above or from ground level. Clearly, the perspective will influence what a person sees. However, this is not the same as saying one's perspective is necessarily biased. A biased perspective implies that it unfairly prejudices the result in favour of one person or group. For example, if I looked at an event solely from a teacher's point of view, I might be biased against the students — I might neglect their side of the story. But what if the perspective I took was to look from both points of view? Instead of favouritism towards one group, I sought to make sure both sides were fully represented and respected. In other words, what if I tried to look at it from an impartial perspective?

#### Is it possible to offer an impartial perspective?

Can anyone put aside their personal feelings completely and look at an event fairly? You may have a favourite sport team, and naturally you would like them to win the championship. Just because you are a fan of the team, does it mean you are incapable of making an impartial assessment of which team is most likely to win the championship? Surely, if you fairly considered all the evidence and put aside temporarily your personal hopes for the team, you could reach a warranted conclusion. Certainly, the Canadian legal system expects judges to bring an impartial perspective to the cases they hear — they are not to allow their personal wishes to distract them from reaching an informed conclusion based on a fair hearing on all sides in the case. Even if people are not always completely successful in their attempts, it does not mean that they should not try to achieve this goal. This would be like a runner who cannot always beat his personal record, so he decides that he should not make any effort to do so. Because impartiality is an ideal to strive for, it may be more appropriate to talk about the degree to which a person's perspective is impartial, rather than seeing perspectives as either completely biased or completely impartial.

#### How do we determine if someone is impartial?

We can best determine the degree to which a person's perspective is biased or impartial by knowing how they arrived at their conclusions. Unfortunately, historians rarely have the luxury of interviewing people to determine the thinking behind their conclusions. Instead, historians must look for evidence in the writing that people have left behind that might suggest bias or impartiality in their perspectives. The following factors are helpful in determining the degree to which an account is biased or impartial.

Impartial Perspective	Biased Perspective
<i>Open-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author was (or would be) willing to accept new ideas and alter his opinions based on new evidence?	<i>Closed-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author was (or would be) unwilling to consider evidence that might go counter to a predetermined view?
<i>Full-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author was well informed and considered available evidence from various perspectives?	<i>One-sided:</i> Is there any indication the author reached conclusions on inadequate or partial evidence, especially by focusing on information that <u>favoured</u> the author's preferred position?
<i>Fair-minded:</i> Is there any indication the author sincerely tried to put personal interests aside when weighing the competing evidence?	<i>Prejudiced:</i> Is there any indication the author's personal attachments pre-judged the result in <u>favour</u> of one side over the others?



MysteryQuest 21 Support Materials 3 (Activity Sheet)

#### Putting the Articles in Context

	Article title:	Article title:
What is the purpose of the article?		
What can we tell about who wrote it?		
Does the author have a positive or negative bias or prejudice?		
What sources of information does the author appear to draw upon to support the conclusion?		

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### STEP 3: ANALYSING THE ARTICLES

You are now ready to analyse the two articles found in the "Primary documents" section of *Evidence in the Case*. We suggest you read each article twice. The first time look for the overall tone and purpose of the article. You may want to use the four questions found in the chart Putting the Articles in Context to guide your initial reading of the articles.

As you read each article a second time, look more closely for evidence of the following factors:

- *open-mindedness* or *close-mindedness*;
- *full-mindedness* or *one-sided treatment*;
- *fair-mindedness* or *prejudice*.

For each article, use a copy of *Identifying the Degree of Bias* to record clues you find about the author's impartiality or bias. Assign each factor a score from +4 (highly impartial) to -4 (highly biased). Afterwards, offer your overall assessment of the degree of bias or impartiality of the document.

### EVIDENCE IN THE CASE

#### Primary documents

Magazine article, Mrs. W. Garland Foster, "A Doomed Utopia", *Saturday Night*, June 14, 1924  
Newspaper article, Oregon Editorial Regarding Doukhobors, *Oregon Daily Journal*, April 15, 1924

- Duplicate and distribute to students copies of *Identifying the Degree of Bias* to record clues about the authors' impartiality or bias.

MysteryQuest 21 Support Materials 4 (Activity Sheet)

**Identifying the Degree of Bias**

Document \_\_\_\_\_

	Impartial perspective ←	Biased perspective →
<b>Open-minded</b> willing to accept new ideas and alter his opinions based on new evidence.	Very open-minded ← +4 +3 +2 +1 0 -1 -2 -3 -4 → Evidence:	Very closed-minded → <b>Closed-minded</b> unwilling to consider evidence that might go counter to a predetermined view.
<b>Full-minded</b> well informed and considered available evidence from various sides.	Very full-minded ← +4 +3 +2 +1 0 -1 -2 -3 -4 → Evidence:	Very one-sided → <b>One-sided</b> reached conclusions on inadequate or partial evidence.
<b>Fair-minded</b> put personal interests aside when weighing the evidence.	Very fair-minded ← +4 +3 +2 +1 0 -1 -2 -3 -4 → Evidence:	Very prejudiced → <b>Prejudiced</b> personal attachments prejudged the result in favour of one side over the others.

**Overall assessment** - This account is:  
 Highly impartial     Somewhat impartial     Somewhat biased     Highly biased

**Reasons:**

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### Rewrite or defend one of the articles

- Using *Step 4: Rewrite or defend one of the articles* as a guide, instruct students to choose one of the two articles they assessed (perhaps the one that is more biased) and write an editorial to explain why it is substantially fair or rewrite it to offer a more impartial report.

**STEP 4: REWRITE OR DEFEND ONE OF THE ARTICLES**

Choose one of the two articles you assessed, perhaps the one that is more biased. Your task is rewrite the article if it is biased, making sure you respect the criteria for impartial reporting, OR to write a newspaper editorial that explains to readers how and why it is fair or unbiased reporting.

Review the criteria for impartial reporting as you rework the text to bring it up to standard, or to defend its impartial nature. Make sure that your text meets the criteria of impartial reporting. Don't forget you are writing for a newspaper and that it will be important to respect the style appropriate for an article.

## Evaluation

- Use the rubric *Assessing the Degree of Bias* to evaluate how well students were able to identify the impartiality in each article. Use the rubric *Assessing an Impartial Account* to rewrite or defend an article as impartial.



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Evaluation Materials 1 (Rubric)

### Assessing the Degree of Bias

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Identifies indicators of bias/impartiality</b>	Identifies many obvious and less obvious indicators.	Identifies many indicators including some less obvious examples.	Identifies the most obvious indicators.	Identifies some indicators but obvious examples are omitted.	Identifies no relevant indicators.
<b>Offers plausible conclusion about degree of bias/impartiality</b>	The conclusion is highly plausible and highly justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusion is clearly plausible and justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusion is plausible and somewhat justifiable in light of the evidence.	The conclusion is barely justifiable given the evidence.	The conclusion is implausible and not justifiable given the evidence.



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Evaluation Materials 2 (Rubric)

### Assessing an Impartial Account

	Outstanding	Very good	Competent	Satisfactory	In-progress
<b>Provides accurate and important information</b>	Provides abundant factual information that is accurate and includes all the important details.	Factual information is sufficient, mostly accurate, and includes most of the important details.	Factual information is sufficient, mostly accurate, and includes many important details.	Factual information is adequate, sometimes accurate, and includes some important details.	Factual information is very limited, seldom accurate, and misses all the important details.
<b>Offers impartial perspective</b>	Shows consistent openness to other conclusions, considers information from various perspectives, and obviously tries to offer conclusions that are very fair to all sides.	Shows clear signs of openness to other conclusions, regularly considers information from various perspectives, and tries to reach conclusions that are fair to all sides.	Shows passing openness to other conclusions, considers an alternative perspective on key issues, and offers conclusions that show some sensitivity to other sides.	Shows no clear openness to other conclusions, occasionally considers an alternative perspective, and offers conclusions that show very modest sensitivity to other sides.	Is obviously very fixed on the conclusion, consistently considers one perspective only, and gives obvious preference to one side over others.
<b>Communicates clearly</b>	Is very clearly written and highly appropriate for the intended audience.	Is mostly clearly written and largely appropriate for the intended audience.	Is generally clear and often appropriate for the intended audience.	Some ideas are clearly expressed and may be somewhat appropriate for the intended audience.	Account is generally unclear and not at all suited to the intended audience.

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## Extension

- Invite students to work individually or as a class to pursue the suggested activities listed in *Extension*.

### EXTENSION

#### Explore other articles about the Doukhobors

Go the Archives and find other articles on the Doukhobors. Using the criteria for impartial reporting, determine the extent to which these articles are biased.

#### Are present-day newspapers more fair?

Find an article in your own local newspaper and apply the criteria for impartial reporting to see if it is more or less biased than the articles from 1924 that you read.

#### Find out more about the Doukhobors

Using the following websites, do more research into the Doukhobor society of early twentieth century society:

British Columbia Archives

Canadian Museum of Civilization – The Doukhobors: “Spirit Wrestlers”

Doukhobor Genealogy Website

Doukhobor Village Museum, Castlegar, British Columbia

Library and Archives Canada

The Spirit Wrestlers

Conflicts regarding the Doukhobors J.A. Fraser, Chief Constable, to A.M. Johnson, Deputy Attorney General of British Columbia, July 22, 1919

#### Explore other challenges

Apply your detective skills to other mysteries associated with the Doukhobors:

- MysteryQuest 8 invites you to try to understand the Doukhobors' actions from their perspective;
- MysteryQuest 11 invites you to reconstruct the crime scene;
- and MysteryQuest 12 invites you to collect evidence about one of the suspects in the death of Peter Verigin.