

DE&I Media Narratives in the US

This report was created using ChatGPT's Deep Research on March 15, 2025 using the following prompt:

Research media coverage about DE&I over the last 12 months. Focus on media outlets that have a high reputation and readership. Help me understand the top narratives about DE&I, positive sentiment, negative sentiment, implications for brands and other blind spots. Focus coverage on the US.

Over the past year, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) have been hotly debated across corporate boardrooms, college campuses, Hollywood studios, and government offices. Top-tier media coverage reveals a **push-pull narrative**: some herald DE&I as essential to progress and talent retention, while others frame it as divisive “woke” overreach. This report analyzes key media narratives, dominant themes, and sentiment trends in four sectors – **Corporate, Education, Entertainment, and Government** – and compares them with public and consumer discourse. It also examines implications for brands and highlights blind spots in coverage.

Corporate Sector: DE&I Narratives and Themes

Backlash and Rollbacks in Corporate America

Major news outlets have documented a corporate DE&I rollback trend. Following the 2020 racial justice movement, many companies pledged sweeping DE&I reforms – but in the last 12 months, a growing number have scaled back or dropped these initiatives. An Associated Press report noted “a growing number of prominent companies have scaled back or set aside... DEI initiatives” that corporate America embraced after George Floyd’s murder. Examples include:

- **Goldman Sachs** ending its board diversity requirement for IPO clients ([Which US companies are pulling back on diversity initiatives? | The Associated Press](#)).
- **Target** overhauling its “Belonging at the Bullseye” strategy and ending a program for Black employees.
- **Meta (Facebook)** dismantling its flagship DEI program.
- **Walmart, McDonald’s, Amazon, Ford, Lowe’s**, and others making similar retreats.

Conservative activism and legal threats are frequent backdrops to these rollbacks. Media explain that critics argue DE&I programs can be “*discriminatory*” by focusing on race or gender, leading to lawsuits and political pressure. Right-leaning voices brand DE&I as “illegal quotas” or even “*just another word for racism*,” as echoed by figures like Elon Musk. Reuters reported that at least **six major U.S. companies** (e.g. American Airlines, Lowe’s) quietly altered or scrubbed diversity policies after conservative shareholders and advocacy groups threatened litigation.

Changes often involved removing language about programs for underrepresented groups or dialing back diversity hiring goals.

This **anti-“woke” backlash narrative** dominates much coverage, with a generally **negative tone toward DE&I** in conservative media and business press focusing on the legal risks. Headlines highlight “DEI under attack” and quote executives worried about “*increased pressure to do away with [DEI]*”. The Society for Human Resource Management’s CEO even predicted DE&I would come under “*full-out attack in 2024*” ([What Happened to the ‘E’ in DEI? I Built In](#)), a warning widely cited in the media ([What Happened to the ‘E’ in DEI? I Built In](#)).

Commitment and Evolving Strategies

Balanced against the rollback stories, top-tier outlets also feature **counter-narratives of resilience and adaptation**. Many companies remain committed to DE&I, though sometimes with rebranding or quieter approaches. PR and business media (e.g. *Provoke Media*, *CNN*) report that **only 5% of companies have eliminated DEI programs**, while **22% are increasing DEI budgets** despite the noise. High-profile firms like **Apple, Costco, and e.l.f. Beauty** have doubled down on inclusion efforts, “*defying shareholder pressure*”. Their stance, portrayed with a positive or proactive sentiment, emphasizes DE&I as “*essential to long-term success*”.

Some coverage suggests companies are tweaking terminology to stay below the radar. For instance, **Victoria’s Secret** swapped the term “DEI” for “inclusion and belonging,” and **Target** renamed its “Supplier Diversity” team to “Supplier Engagement” as it wound down formal goals. According to *Retail Dive*, “*not all companies are abandoning DEI – some are ducking the spotlight by renaming initiatives while keeping substance intact.*” This reflects a **neutral-to-positive media tone** that corporate DE&I is evolving, not vanishing, in response to political climates.

Dominant themes in corporate DE&I coverage include:

- **Legal and Political Pressure:** The impact of lawsuits, state laws, and a potential Trump administration on corporate DE&I (often negative framing).
- **Reputation and Consumer Backlash:** Cases like Target illustrate how retrenchment can spark boycotts and PR crises. After Target scaled back DEI, it faced “*significant boycotts... resulting in reputational damage and financial losses*”. Media discuss the brand risk of being seen as “anti-diversity.”
- **Workplace Impact:** Outlets also note internal effects. The *Conference Board* reported **58% of U.S. workers support their company’s DEI approach**, while 21% want even more effort. Such data-driven pieces, often neutral or upbeat in tone, highlight that many employees find DE&I improves **belonging, engagement, and retention** – reinforcing a business case narrative.

Overall, corporate DE&I media sentiment is **mixed**. Progressive and mainstream outlets tend to lament rollbacks as “*undermining workplace equality*”, whereas business journals and

conservative voices stress “**risks of DEI**” and cast the pullbacks as prudent or legally necessary. This dichotomy sets the stage for contrasting perspectives in other sectors.

Education Sector: Campus DE&I Under Fire

Affirmative Action Ruling and State Bans

In education, the June 2023 Supreme Court decision ending affirmative action in college admissions was a watershed moment. Top media outlets connect this ruling to a cascade of **anti-DE&I measures in academia**. For example, **NPR and Axios** reported that even “*before the Supreme Court ruled against affirmative action... lawmakers in some states were trying to dismantle DEI*” initiatives on campuses. Over the past year, at least **four states (Florida, Texas, Iowa, Utah) banned DEI offices** at public universities, and others (e.g. Alabama) imposed restrictions. This trend is frequently covered as part of a broader “**education culture war**” narrative.

Media stories often center on states like **Florida**, where Governor Ron DeSantis championed the “Stop WOKE Act” to curtail diversity training, or **Texas**, which passed a law to defund university DEI programs. Coverage in mainstream outlets (e.g. *AP*, *ABC News*) tends to be factual but with a concerned tone, noting how these laws “*target DEI measures*” in hiring and student groups. The sentiment in education press and national outlets leans **negative on these bans**, highlighting pushback from academics and civil rights groups. For instance, **The Guardian** observed that DEI policies face a “*full-out attack*” and detailed lawsuits challenging such bans ([What Happened to the ‘E’ in DEI? | Built In](#)). Meanwhile, conservative commentary frames these moves as getting politics “*out of the classroom*” or eliminating “*wasteful*” programs, reflecting a **positive spin for anti-DEI actions** (often cited in opinion pieces rather than straight news).

A dominant theme here is the **post-affirmative-action landscape**. Many outlets link the Supreme Court’s decision to emboldening DEI opponents. “*A 2023 Supreme Court decision... emboldened conservative groups to bring or threaten lawsuits*” against diversity efforts, noted an AP analysis of Target’s changes. In higher ed, that has meant **lawsuits and investigations** into scholarship programs, minority student organizations, and even faculty hiring practices. Another theme is the clash between **university values and political edicts**. Reporting on states like **North Carolina or Wisconsin** (where legislatures debated DEI funding) often highlights university leaders struggling to reconcile inclusive missions with new legal limits, usually in a **concerned or critical tone**.

Campus Climate and Sentiment

Media coverage also delves into how these policy changes affect campus climate and discourse. Prominent stories in *Inside Higher Ed*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and NPR describe **fears among students and faculty of eroding diversity** in classrooms. The sentiment

here is largely **negative** – e.g., quoting students who feel “*marginalized by the rollback of DEI support*” or administrators worried about recruitment of diverse talent. On the other hand, some outlets present student conservative voices who applaud the changes, saying DE&I offices “*stifled meritocracy*” – though these are less common in top-tier media.

Notably, **federal responses** made headlines too. The Biden Administration (prior to 2025) had promoted campus diversity efforts, but with the new conservative White House in 2025, media noted a sharp reversal. CNN reported that **Trump, within hours of being sworn in (Jan 2025), banned DEI and “equity” initiatives in federal hiring and put federal DEI staff on leave**. This federal stance indirectly pressures universities via funding and signals; coverage of this action was factual but underscored its sweeping, unprecedented nature, often quoting experts calling it “*a war on inclusive policies*”.

In summary, education sector coverage is characterized by **politically charged narratives: legal battles and state-versus-campus conflicts**, with sentiment largely split along ideological lines. Mainstream and education-focused media emphasize risks to diversity and academic freedom (negative outlook on the bans), while political/conservative media emphasize curbing what they see as ideological excess on campuses (positive toward the rollback).

Entertainment Sector: Diversity in Hollywood’s Spotlight

Hollywood’s DE&I Initiatives and Retrenchment

In Hollywood and the entertainment industry, DE&I coverage over the last year often asks: **Did the diversity push of 2020 stick, or has Hollywood backpedaled?** A much-discussed *Vanity Fair* piece (Dec 2024) provocatively declared “*Hollywood’s DEI Programs Have Begun to D-I-E*”. Top-tier media highlight a pattern: several high-profile **diversity executives exited major studios** in mid-2023, raising concern that Tinseltown’s post-2020 DE&I commitments were wavering. The *Los Angeles Times*, *Guardian*, and industry trades covered the near-simultaneous departures of Black women executives overseeing DE&I at **Disney, Netflix, Warner Bros. Discovery, and the Academy of Motion Pictures**. Lawmakers in California even took notice – members of the Legislative Black Caucus held a press conference in July 2023, which media covered with headlines about a “*troubling pattern*” and Hollywood “**under fire**” for potentially abandoning inclusion efforts.

Narratives in this sector often juxtapose **public promises vs. actual progress**. Entertainment conglomerates in 2020-2021 pledged to “*knit diversity into the fabric of the industry*,” but recent coverage questions the follow-through. For example, outlets report that some studios quietly **scaled back funding for affinity groups, mentorship programs, or content diversity quotas** during industry-wide cost cutting. The tone here is generally critical or disappointed. Experts quoted in *Variety* and *The Guardian* argue the exodus of DE&I leaders “*gives the impression that creating an inclusive culture... is not a priority*” in Hollywood. There is also discussion of “**diversity**

fatigue” – an idea that after a couple of years, the industry’s largely White male leadership grew weary of DE&I and refocused on other priorities, especially amid the dual writers’ and actors’ strikes in 2023 (which themselves drew attention to equity issues).

However, it’s not all negative. Some entertainment media coverage points to **gains in representation**: record numbers of women and people of color directing or starring in content, and new inclusion standards for the Oscars (taking effect in 2024) that encourage diverse casts and crews. Reports like UCLA’s annual **Hollywood Diversity Report** get coverage for charting incremental improvements (e.g., more proportionate representation of Black and Asian actors in film leads). The sentiment in these pieces is cautiously optimistic – acknowledging progress while noting much work remains. Still, even these discussions are often framed by the recent pullbacks (“**one step forward, two steps back?**”).

Public Reaction and Cultural Impact

Mainstream news and entertainment press also explore how consumers and creatives are responding. Social media discourse around Hollywood DE&I is often referenced. For instance, the sudden DE&I exec departures sparked viral discussion on Twitter/X and LinkedIn, with many expressing outrage or concern that studios were “quietly cutting diversity roles once the spotlight dimmed.” At the same time, conservative media commentators cheered Disney or Netflix for “*dropping woke executives*,” framing it as studios “getting back to business.” This demonstrates a **sentiment split** similar to other sectors, but with an extra layer of fandom and creative community input.

A key theme is **content vs. corporate diversity**. Media reviews and think pieces question if on-screen representation has meaning if behind-the-scenes decision-makers are not diverse. Coverage of film and TV awards often touches on DE&I by noting which stories are being elevated. For example, the 2024 Oscars’ new diversity criteria made news, heralded by some outlets as a progressive milestone, but derided by others as “*forced representation*.” This reflects how DE&I in entertainment draws both **cultural celebration and culture-war backlash**.

In summary, the entertainment DE&I narrative in media is one of **initial enthusiasm meeting headwinds**. The dominant tone in top-tier coverage is **concerned or critical**: concerned that diversity efforts are stalling, critical of Hollywood for possibly treating DE&I as a fad. Yet, positive undercurrents exist in stories of creative successes from diverse talents and acknowledgment of audience demand for inclusive content (such as coverage noting that 71% of certain demographic audiences favor inclusive media content).

Government Sector: Policy Shifts and Political Rhetoric

Federal Government – From Expansion to Rollback

Media coverage of DE&I in the government sector has been largely defined by the stark policy reversal at the federal level. Under President Biden (early 2023), federal agencies were actively implementing Equity Action Plans per Executive Order 13985, which got modest coverage for advancing DE&I in areas like government contracting and hiring. However, it was the **change in administration in January 2025** that truly grabbed headlines.

Within days of taking office, President Trump issued an executive order **banning federal DEI programs and roles**. CNN and AP described how this order directed agencies to *“terminate all DEI/DEIA offices, training and initiatives”* as part of *“ending... ‘wasteful’ government DEI programs”*. The move was reported as an unprecedented sweep: *“virtually all aspects of the Federal Government”* were ordered to drop DEI considerations. Sentiment in mainstream coverage was largely negative or alarmed, framing it as a politically motivated purge. Outlets noted the rhetoric of the order itself, which labeled Biden’s DE&I efforts *“immense public waste and shameful discrimination”* – language indicating a **highly charged, negative stance**. Experts in these stories raised concerns about impacts on federal hiring of minorities, military readiness (as the Pentagon’s diversity initiatives were curtailed), and the fate of programs aimed at underserved communities.

On the flip side, conservative media and commentators presented the federal rollback positively. They emphasized **“merit-based”** approaches replacing *“quotas”*, echoing the order’s statement that government should serve everyone with *“equal dignity...expending resources only on making America great”*. This alignment in messaging shows the government DE&I narrative is **highly partisan** in media portrayal.

State and Local Government – A Mixed Bag

State governments have been another front in DE&I coverage. We’ve already touched on state university bans, but more broadly, outlets like *NBC News* and *Axios* mapped a trend of **state legislation**: *“Republican lawmakers in more than 30 states have introduced or passed 100+ bills to restrict DEI”* in government and education. Media coverage often itemizes these moves: from banning implicit bias training for state employees to eliminating city-level diversity commissions. The dominant theme is a **political backlash against DE&I** driven by certain state leaders.

Interestingly, some coverage also highlighted **resistance and inconsistencies**. For instance, while Texas banned DEI in public universities, cities like Austin continued community DEI programs – creating a patchwork that media describe with nuance. Another example is the military: DE&I efforts in the U.S. Armed Forces (such as addressing extremism and increasing diversity in the ranks) became a talking point, with congressional debates that news outlets covered from both sides. The overall sentiment in government DE&I stories splits along ideological lines, but a common narrative is that DE&I has become a **political symbol** – praised or vilified depending on the platform.

Dominant themes in government DE&I media coverage include:

- **“War on Woke” in Policy:** Descriptions of the new administration’s crusade against DE&I, linking it to broader moves against ESG and “critical race theory” in government.
- **Legal and Constitutional Framing:** Discussions of whether banning DE&I offices infringes on civil rights or if DEI practices themselves violated constitutional principles (coverage here is often analytical, citing legal experts).
- **Impacts on Public Services:** Some outlets explore how cutting DEI programs affects government output – e.g., will health and housing programs be less equitable? These pieces are generally sympathetic to DE&I, noting potential “blind spots” created by the absence of diversity oversight.

In short, the government sector narrative is one of **polarization and sweeping change**, with sentiment tightly correlated to political leanings of the media source.

Consumer and Public Discourse vs. Media Narratives

Public Opinion and Employee Perspectives

When comparing media narratives to **consumer discourse**, we find both **alignments and gaps**. While headlines often focus on controversy and backlash, **public opinion data shows nuanced support for DE&I** that sometimes gets less attention. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, **56% of U.S. workers** said focusing on DE&I at work is a “*good thing*,” versus only 16% calling it bad. Similarly, a *Conference Board* study in 2024 found nearly **60% of workers support their company’s current DE&I efforts**, and an additional **21% wish for more DE&I**. These figures underscore a generally **positive sentiment among employees**, aligning with media stories that emphasize the business case for DE&I (e.g., improved belonging, collaboration, and retention).

However, this public support contrasts with the prominence of **negative DE&I storylines** in media. The vocal backlash – while real – may be amplified by coverage that spotlights legal fights and political rhetoric. In consumer discourse (social media, forums), one can see this discrepancy: many consumers and employees champion inclusive workplaces and call out companies that retreat. For instance, when SHRM (a major HR association) dropped “Equity” from its terminology, hundreds of HR professionals protested on LinkedIn, feeling the move “*gave up on the fight for equitable workplaces*”. Likewise, after Target’s DEI rollback, consumer advocacy groups trended hashtags like **#BoycottTarget** and **#TargetDEI** on X/Twitter, criticizing the company for backtracking. These grassroots sentiments echo the **pro-DE&I perspective** that DE&I is both morally and economically beneficial – a viewpoint present but less sensationalized in mainstream news.

Conversely, consumer discourse also contains the **anti-DE&I strain** mirrored in certain media. Influential figures (e.g., some politicians, business leaders, or celebrities on social platforms) label DE&I initiatives as unfair or performative. Their messages (such as Bill Ackman or Vivek

Ramaswamy’s tweets opposing corporate DE&I) often get media pickup. But it’s worth noting that these voices, while loud, **do not represent a majority** of consumers according to polling. This is a key discrepancy: media coverage might suggest a nation deeply divided on DE&I, yet surveys indicate a tilt toward general acceptance, with divisions more pronounced among political partisans or certain demographics.

To summarize alignment vs. discrepancy: **media narratives capture the conflict and drama around DE&I, whereas consumer sentiment is often more favorable and concerned with practical outcomes.** Many employees and customers value DE&I (e.g., nearly half of women say they wouldn’t work for a non-diverse employer), and this pragmatic stance sometimes clashes with how DE&I debates are portrayed in the press. That said, media and public discourse do align on one thing – DE&I has become a litmus test for brand values, and people are paying attention to whether actions meet the stated commitments.

Table: Media Narratives vs. Public Sentiment on DE&I

Sector	Media Narrative (Dominant Themes)	General Public Sentiment
Corporate	“DEI Backlash” – legal threats, budget cuts; vs. “DEI for Talent and Brand” – companies standing firm.	Employees largely supportive of DEI; most see it as improving culture and retention. Some backlash among a minority who feel it’s overdone.
Education	Politicized – state bans and affirmative action fallout framed as protecting merit vs. harming diversity.	College students and faculty in affected states largely oppose DEI cuts (protests, statements), while conservative student groups support “neutral” policies. Overall public split by party on affirmative action.
Entertainment	Hollywood under scrutiny – rhetoric of failed promises and “diversity fatigue” vs. praise for representation wins.	Audiences increasingly expect diverse content (e.g., strong support for inclusive casts). Fans react negatively when inclusion appears tokenistic or when execs exit en masse.
Government	Highly polarized – “War on Woke” narrative in conservative media vs. civil rights alarm in mainstream outlets.	Public opinion divided on party lines. Many support merit-based hiring <i>and</i> DEI goals simultaneously. Federal employees reported concern about morale after DEI offices cut (per union statements).

(Sources: Pew Research, AP News, CNN, Conference Board, Guardian, Variety)

This table illustrates that **media focus on flashpoints**, whereas the public often holds more moderate or consistently positive views on DE&I's value, with differences mostly along partisan lines rather than outright rejection or acceptance.

Implications for Brands and Blind Spots in Coverage

Implications for Brands

For companies and brands, the media and consumer dynamics around DE&I carry several implications:

- **Brand Reputation is Tied to DE&I Stance:** Media coverage ensures that DE&I decisions are public knowledge. Firms that scale back DE&I may face **reputational risks**, as seen with Target's stock dip and boycotts following its pullback. Conversely, brands that uphold DE&I could strengthen loyalty among the majority of consumers and employees who support such values. Communicators advise that *"brands not backing away from DE&I need to speak up and own it"* – leveraging positive sentiment and differentiating themselves.
- **Navigating the Polarization:** Brands must tread carefully in messaging. Given polarized media narratives, companies often choose **neutral language or quieter efforts** to avoid becoming a lightning rod. Some have opted to rebrand DE&I efforts (as "belonging," "inclusion," etc.) instead of eliminating them – aiming to maintain progress without attracting negative press. The implication is that **authenticity and consistency** are key; any perceived pandering or sudden reversals can trigger public cynicism.
- **Legal and Policy Compliance vs. Values:** With new laws and threats, brands face real legal considerations (e.g., quota-like practices can prompt lawsuits). Media coverage of legal challenges means brands are watched closely. They must ensure DE&I programs are structured equitably and in compliance, **communicating the merit-based aspects** to preempt criticism ([Some companies alter diversity policies after conservatives' lawsuit threat | Reuters](#)). At the same time, dropping DE&I entirely could harm innovation and talent acquisition – a point made in business media that *diverse teams drive better outcomes* (a **missed narrative** in some coverage, but crucial for long-term brand performance).
- **Employee Relations:** Internal sentiment often doesn't mirror the loudest external voices. Companies that ignore the predominantly positive internal view of DE&I risk employee disengagement or turnover. As media publish workforce surveys and stories of employee reactions, brands should recognize that **employees expect action on DE&I** and will notice lip service versus concrete commitment. In an era of labor transparency (e.g., via LinkedIn or Glassdoor), failing on DE&I can damage a brand's employer value.

proposition.

Blind Spots and Overlooked Areas in Coverage

Media coverage, while extensive, has its blind spots regarding DE&I:

- **Nuanced Success Stories:** Much coverage centers on conflict – bans, lawsuits, executive firings – whereas **quiet success stories** of DE&I often get overlooked. For example, the positive impact of Target’s DE&I on customer satisfaction and turnover was mentioned in niche outlets, but such data rarely makes national headlines. This leaves a gap in understanding the tangible benefits of inclusion. Brands that have improved performance through DE&I (higher innovation, market expansion to diverse audiences) are underreported in mainstream media.
- **Broader Dimensions of Diversity:** The public discourse around DE&I is frequently reduced to race and gender dynamics, given the political framing. **Less-visible aspects** like disability inclusion, LGBTQ+ rights, age diversity, or socio-economic diversity get comparatively scant media attention in these “DEI wars.” For instance, corporate DE&I cuts might disproportionately affect disability hiring programs or LGBTQ+ resource groups, but coverage seldom explores that level of detail. This blind spot means brands could neglect certain groups if they follow media focus too narrowly. A holistic DE&I strategy looks at all underrepresented facets, not just the ones in the political spotlight.
- **Equity and Inclusion vs. Diversity:** Media often use “DEI” as a lump term, but the **“Equity” component is often overshadowed**. A notable example was SHRM’s removal of “Equity” from its terminology, which sparked debate but only in specialized media. The nuance of ensuring fairness (equity) in opportunities and outcomes is less discussed than representation numbers (“diversity”) or cultural programs (“inclusion”). As a result, the public might not fully grasp efforts like pay equity audits or equitable promotion policies – areas where brands could lead and educate, even if media aren’t highlighting them.
- **Consumer Voice in Media:** While social media amplifies consumer reactions, traditional media coverage sometimes underrepresents **everyday consumer perspectives** on DE&I. We see quotes from CEOs, politicians, and activists more than from regular customers or junior employees. This can be a blind spot because it’s unclear from media alone how the average person in the marketplace truly feels (e.g., media might show a viral boycott, but not the silent majority who continues shopping). Brands should seek direct feedback and not rely solely on media narratives to gauge public opinion.

In conclusion, the past 12 months of DE&I coverage paint a picture of a deeply polarized discourse that brands must navigate. **Key narratives** range from backlash and retreat to

steadfast commitment and evolution of DE&I strategies. **Dominant themes** include political intervention, legal challenges, accountability for past promises, and the measurable impact of DE&I on performance and culture. **Sentiment trends** in media skew negative where DE&I is politicized, but are positive or supportive in contexts highlighting success and moral imperative. Meanwhile, the **consumer/public perspective** tends to be more favorable toward DE&I than the controversy in headlines suggests, though it is not monolithic. Brands that understand these nuances – and recognize what’s *not* being said in coverage – can better position themselves, addressing stakeholder concerns, upholding their values, and filling the gaps by communicating the full value of DE&I.

Sources:

- Associated Press – Corporate DEI pullbacks
- Provoke Media – Corporate commitments vs. backlash
- Built In / The Guardian – DEI under attack, state legislation ([What Happened to the ‘E’ in DEI? | Built In](#))
- Conference Board – Employee support for DEI
- Pew Research Center – Majority view DEI as a good thing
- Central Valley Voice/California Black Media – Hollywood exec exodus
- Diversity.com – Target DEI rollback and impacts
- CNN – Federal DEI ban executive order
- Reuters – Companies altering DEI policies under threat
- Vanity Fair – (referenced) Hollywood DEI programs analysis (Joy Press, Dec 2024).