



Developing a Method of Verification

Project for Excellence in Journalism

As we listened to and studied the thoughts of journalists, citizens, and others who have thought about the news, we began to see a core set of ideas that form the intellectual foundation of this discipline of verification. These concepts underlie most of the good reporting methods we encountered.

Never add anything that was not there.

Do not add means simply, do not add things that did not happen. This goes further than "never invent" or make things up, for it also encompasses rearranging events in time or place or conflating characters or events. If a siren rings out during the taping of a TV story, and for dramatic effect it is moved from one scene to another, it has been added to that second place. What was once a fact becomes a fiction.

Never deceive the audience.

Do not deceive means never mislead the audience. Fooling people is a form of lying and mocks the idea that journalism is committed to truthfulness. It is closely related to "do not add." If you move the sound of the siren and do not tell the audience, you are deceiving them. If acknowledging what you've done would make it unpalatable to the audience, then it is self-evidently improper. This is a useful check.

Do not deceive means that if one is going to engage in any narrative or storytelling techniques that vary from the most literal form of eyewitness reporting, the audience should know. In quoting people, a survey of journalists that we conducted found broad agreement on this point. Except for word changes to correct grammar, the overwhelming majority of journalists believe that some signal should be sent to audiences- such as ellipses or brackets- if words inside quotation marks are changed or phrases deleted for clarity.

The Rule of Transparency

Be as transparent as possible about your reporting methods and motives.

If journalists are truth seekers, it must follow that they be honest and truthful with their audiences, too-

that they be truth presenters. If nothing else, this responsibility means journalists be as open and honest with audiences as they can about what they know and what they don't.

The only way in practice to level with people about what you know is to reveal as much as possible about sources and methods. How do you know what you know? Who are your sources? How direct is their knowledge? What biases might they have? Are there conflicting accounts? What don't we know? Call it the rule of transparency. We consider it the most important single element in creating a better discipline of verification.

Most of the limitations journalists face in trying to move from accuracy to truth are addressed, if not overcome, by being honest about the nature of our knowledge, why we trust it, what efforts we make to learn more.

Transparency has a second important virtue: it signals the journalist's respect for the audience. It allows the audience to judge the validity of the information, the process by which it was secured and the motives and biases of the journalist providing it. This makes transparency the best protection against errors and deception by sources. If the best information a journalist has comes from a potentially biased source, naming the source will reveal to the audience the possible bias of information- and may inhibit the source from deceiving as well.

It is the same principle that governs scientific method: explain how you learned something and why you believe it- so the audience can do the same. In science, the reliability of an experiment, or its objectivity, is defined by whether someone else could replicate the experiment. In journalism, only by explaining how we know what we know can we approximate this idea of people being able, if they were of a mind to, to replicate the reporting. This is what is meant by objectivity of method in science, or in journalism.

Even as he began to develop doubts about whether journalists could really sort out the truth, Walter Lippmann recognized this. "There is no defense, no extenuation, no excuse whatsoever, for stating six times that Lenin is dead when the only information the paper possesses is a report that he is dead from a source repeatedly shown as unreliable. The news, in that instance, is not that 'Lenin is dead' but 'Helsingfors says Lenin is dead.' And a newspaper can be asked to take the responsibility of not making Lenin more dead than the source of the news is reliable. If there is one subject on which editors are most responsible it is in their judgment of the reliability of the source."

Transparency and Dealing with Sources

The Rule of Transparency also suggests something about the way journalists deal with their sources. Obviously journalists should not lie to or mislead their sources in the process of trying to tell the truth to their audiences.

Unfortunately, journalists, without having thought the principle through, all too often have failed to see this. Bluffing sources, failing to level with sources about the real point of the story, even simply lying to

sources about the point of stories are all techniques some journalists have applied- in the name of truth seeking. While at first glance candor may seem like handcuffs on reporters, in most cases it won't be. Many reporters have come to find that it can win them enormous influence. "I've found it is always better to level with sources, tell them what I'm doing and where I'm going, " then Boston Globe political correspondent Jill Zuckman told us. Washington Post reporter Jay Matthews makes a habit of showing sources drafts of stories. He believes it increases the accuracy and nuances of his pieces.

At the same time, journalists should expect veracity from their sources. A growing number of journalists believe that if a source who has been granted anonymity is found to have misled the reporter, the source's identity should be revealed. Part of the bargain for anonymity is truthfulness.

Originality: Rely on Your Own Reporting

Beyond demanding more transparency from journalists, citizens and journalists can also look for something else in judging the value of a news report. Michael Oreskes, the former Washington bureau chief of the New York Times, has offered this deceptively simple but powerful idea in the discipline for pursuing truth: Do your own work.

Throughout the sex and legal scandal involving President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky, news organizations found themselves in the uncomfortable position of what to do with anonymously sourced exposes from other news organizations that they could not verify themselves. Because they were anonymously sourced, the news organization had to take even greater responsibility for the veracity of the story than if it were quoting someone. Based on such sourcing, three different news organizations reported that a third-party witness had seen the president and Lewinsky in an intimate encounter- stories that were later found to be inaccurate. Should a news organization report these exposes because they know others might and that the story will be, in the popular phrase, "out there"?

Oreskes concludes the answer is an adamant no. "The people who got it right were those who did their own work, who were careful about it, who followed the basic standards of sourcing and got their information from multiple sources. The people who worried about what was 'out there,' to use that horrible phrase that justifies so many journalistic sins, the people who worried about getting beaten, rather than just trying to do it as well as they could as quickly as they could, they messed up."

Keep an Open Mind: Humility

One way journalists can err is by assuming they understand too much.

Journalists should not only be skeptical of what they see and hear, but also their ability to know what it really means.

In other words, journalists need to recognize their own fallibility, the limitations of their knowledge.

They should avoid false omniscience.

They should acknowledge to themselves what they are unsure of, or only think they understand-and then check it out.

This makes their judgment more precise and their reporting more incisive.

It avoids fudging.

Don't just write around it.

Several journalists have advocated similar ideas.

Jack Fuller, the author, novelist, editor, and newspaper executive, has suggested that journalists need to show "modesty in their judgment" about what they know and how they know it.

Gregory Fauve, the longtime editor in Sacramento and Chicago, says his rule is simple. **DO NOT PRINT ONE IOTA BEYOND WHAT YOU KNOW.**

First, you have to be honest about what you know, versus what you assume you know, or think you know.

A key way to avoid misrepresenting events is a disciplined honesty about the limits of one's knowledge and the power of one's perception.

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