Principles of journalism: The discipline of verification

J201: Introduction to Mass Communication

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We talked last week about the grand aims of journalism:

- To inform the public
- To investigate issues & problems
- To offer analysis
- To empathize
- To be a public forum
- To mobilize citizens
NOW HOW DOES THIS GET DONE?

The bedrock of these purposes of journalism is a search for *truth*

This is a high aspiration!

But when it gets lost, you find some of journalism’s greatest failures and errors
IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

A variety of principles and techniques

That can aid the journalist in finding and presenting truth

But can also lead the journalist astray when misapplied; see Kovach & Rosenstiel reading
HOW DO WE KNOW THE WORLD OUT THERE?

The famous problem posed by Walter Lippmann

“The world outside and the pictures in our heads”
“For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world. Their persistent difficulty is to secure maps on which their own need, or someone else's need, has not sketched in the coast of Bohemia.”

The pseudo-environment

Key: citizens, politicians must act in a world that can never be fully known
Gedrängte Frühjahrsbericht
von
EUROPA
im Jahre
1915.
Machtab bis auf weiteres
3. gegen T
Verlag von Lucas Grüne, Hamburg.
THE INEVITABILITY OF BIAS

Who is unbiased?

What would it mean to be unbiased?
To be unaffected by your values?
How would you function?
LIPPMANN’S STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are ultimately *simplifications* that constitute our *pseudo-environments*

They are highly *adaptive*

Today they have a strong *pejorative* connotation

But Lippmann’s analysis of stereotypes was more *descriptive*
“… the problem with stereotypes is **not that they are untrue**, but that they are **incomplete**. They make one story become the only story.”

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
So how can we prepare journalists to transcend incompleteness, misleading pseudo-environments, biases, stereotypes?

Lippmann: train them to apply more scientific techniques of *evidence* and *verification*

*Objectivity*
“The lost meaning of objectivity”

-Kovach & Rosenstiel
REMEMBER:

Journalism that took hold in Progressive era
(1890s-1920s)

Rise of scientific rationality and the refinement of the scientific method:

Sense that scientific investigation and reason can lead us to truth
THE OBJECTIVITY DEBATE

We are a long way from the Progressive era:
Increasing skepticism *anyone* can be objective

This can yield a corrosively fatalistic response:
We are inherently compromised by our own interests and prejudices. So why bother look for truth at all? Instead, offer audiences pointedly partisan news.

This leads *nowhere democratic*, only to a struggle for power free of any public making use of its reason.
THE OBJECTIVITY DEBATE

But this misunderstands early conceptions of objectivity

Walter Lippmann: a properly trained journalist applying scientific methods + reason

Kovach and Rosenstiel: an objectivity of method, not of journalist
What techniques can help to bring us closest to the truth?
THE GRAND PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM

Balance
Fairness
Accuracy/Verification
Independence
Providing context
Transparency
Relevance and engagement
Holding power accountable
BALANCE AND FALSE EQUIVALENCY

Balance: is there another side to this story? What would they say?

Giving similar scrutiny to sides in an argument
He Said, She Said, and the Truth

By MARGARET SULLIVAN
Published: September 15, 2012 | 319 Comments

IN journalism, as in life, balance sounds like an unassailably good thing.

But while balance may be necessary to mediating a dispute between teenage siblings, a different kind of balance — some call it “false equivalency” — has come under increasing fire. The firing squad is the public: readers and viewers who rely on accurate news reporting to make them informed citizens.

Simply put, false balance is the journalistic practice of giving equal weight to both sides of a story, regardless of an established truth on one side. And many people are fed up with it. They don’t want to hear lies or half-truths given credence on one side, and shot down on the other. They want some real answers.
ORIGINS OF FALSE EQUIVALENCY

A great desire to appear neutral

Kovack & Rosenstiel: There is a difference between the product (or appearance) and the process

Result:

• Excessive balance ("he said, she said")
• Heavy reliance on official sources
Opinions of Climate and Earth Scientists on Global Warming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Largely Caused By Humans</th>
<th>Little or No Human Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGU / AMS Member Scientists</td>
<td>Most Frequently Published Climatologists</td>
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<td>200 Most Published Climate Scientists</td>
<td>Climatologists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earth Science Faculty / Researchers</td>
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http://blogs.berkeley.edu/2012/05/16/the-climate-misinformation-nation/
GLOBAL WARMING
THE DEBATE

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE
Are scientists convinced?

YES 97%
of climate scientists think global warming is significantly due to human activity

NO 3%
of climate scientists do not think global warming is significantly due to human activity

There's a consensus of scientists because there's a consensus of evidence

MEDIA COVERAGE
Does reporting reflect the consensus?

YES 28%
of news coverage depicts human contribution to warming as significant

NO 72%
of news coverage includes a skeptical view of or downplays man-made warming

Media coverage misrepresents scientific understanding of man-made global warming

PUBLIC PERCEPTION
Are the public convinced?

YES 26%
of people believe global warming is happening and humans are causing it

NO 74%
of people are not convinced or deny humans are causing global warming

Media coverage of global warming is not "balanced" and is affecting public opinion throughout the world

AND ANOTHER PROBLEM…

What if there are more than “2 sides”?

→ Another problem with “balance” is that usually the two sides represented are Democrats and Republicans.

→ For instance, in *Buying the War*, it is clear that one reason that the press did not question rationales for the Iraq War is that even most Democrats were not willing to publicly criticize the Bush Administration (and those that did had little power).
SO WHAT IS LEFT OF BALANCE?

Problems of false balance do not relieve journalists of thinking about balance

They still need to critically think about it:

But it may be more useful to think of it as: what perspectives have not been represented here? Has anyone been left out? Does any one perspective receive the preponderance of the attention?
**FAIRNESS**

Fairness does *NOT* mean *niceness*; or *pleasing sources;*

It *does* mean giving sources or perspectives comparable treatment.

If you go in depth to understand a viewpoint, do you do the same work to understand another one?

Do you give sources the chance to give their side of the story?
AN EXAMPLE: FAIRNESS IN PRACTICE

When a claim is made about someone, they should be consulted.

This is then communicated to readers/listeners:

“____ declined our request for comment.”

“____ did not respond to multiple requests for comment.”

“____ did not respond immediately to requests for comment.”
EXAMPLE

Fairness (also professional courtesy)

The New Yorker’s practice of contacting people before they appear in the magazine
PROBLEMATIC EXAMPLE

Getting it right

We have been talking about getting it right in the larger sense, of getting the bigger meaning right, of not leaving things out.

But there is also the small-scale, nitty gritty, of “did something happen?”; “did someone say that?”
VERIFICATION PROCEDURES

2+ independent sources

Contacting sources

Attribution and anonymous sources
Attribute everything.

Attribute, attribute and attribute some more. No material from another source should ever be included verbatim, or substantially so, without attribution. This includes material from Associated Press reports. We should not, for example, produce news “spots” or other pieces that closely resemble wire service stories. Our writing should be our own. There is no excuse for writing that repeats the wire stories that we use word-for-word, or nearly so.

When in doubt, err on the side of attributing — that is, make it very clear where we’ve gotten our information (or where the organization we give credit to has gotten its information). Every NPR reporter and editor should be able to immediately identify the source of any facts in our stories — and why we consider them credible. And every reader or listener should know where we got our information from. “Media reports” or “sources say” is not good enough. Be specific.
FACTCHECKING

Today, a complex and highly varied practice

Several high-prestige media outlets—mostly magazines—set the gold standard (most famously the *New Yorker*)

Writers turn in notes, contact information, interview transcripts

A team of *independent* factcheckers checks all the facts
INDEPENDENCE

“Journalists must maintain an independence from those they cover”
Kovach & Rosenstiel, p. 97

From whom?
Economics: advertisers
Government, politics, & interest groups
Personal financial interests
Sources
INDEPENDENCE FROM: ADVERTISERS

The need to remain independent from advertisers

“The Wall”
THE Chicago Tribune,

THE GREAT NEWSPAPER OF THE WEST,
Is pre-eminently the PEOPLE’S Paper,
HAVING NO EQUAL
In the fullness of its Local and General News; the variety of its Correspondence and Miscellaneous Reading Matter.

IT IS UNSURPASSED
In the vigor and originality of its editorial discussions and in the extent and correctness of its

MARKET REPORTS. IT HAS NO SUPERIOR.

TERMS OF SUBSCRIPTION.

DAILY, per annum, $12.00
TRI-WEEKLY, " 6.00
WEEKLY, " 2.00

Rates for advertising can be obtained upon application at the office.

Address, TRIBUNE COMPANY,
CHICAGO, ILL.
Walter Isaacson, CEO of CNN (*Buying the War*): “not direct pressure from advertisers, but big people in corporations were calling up and saying, you’re being anti-American here.”

Isaacson’s memo to staff:

“Seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan…”
INDEPENDENCE FROM: GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

The challenge of civic engagement vs. journalistic independence

Can journalists remain independent and still be engaged?

If we believe in an *objectivity of method*, then probably yes
BUT: COMPLICATIONS

News organizations skittish about *appearance* of conflict of interest (e.g., Linda Greenhouse)

And there are ethical issues when journalists’ political activity directly *relates to reporting* and is *not disclosed* (e.g., George Will, William Kristol, Walter Lippmann)

But the issue there is a breach of the reader’s faith and *transparency*
AND, MANIPULATION

There is a different problem, besides failure to disclose, with such consultations. While those who allow themselves to act as insiders see little problem, they are usually deluding themselves as to what is really going on here. As a rule, politicians are far less interested in what any journalist might actually contribute to a speech, which probably already has more authors than it needs, and far more interested in making the journalist imagine that his or her rhetorical and intellectual powers are so magical that the journalist just had to be consulted. Often these negotiations are far more likely attempts to ensure good press than to elicit whatever a journalist has to contribute.
J-School student with an internship at the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel (2012)
Impartiality in our personal lives

GUIDELINE

Be aware that a loved one’s political activity may create a perception of bias.

Some of our family members — including spouses, companions and children — may be involved in politics or advocacy. We are sensitive to the perception of bias. So we inform our supervisors and work with them to avoid even the appearance of conflicts of interest.
INDEPENDENCE FROM: PERSONAL FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Could be someone paying you, in $ or in kind (e.g., experiences, fun, drinks, dinner, travel)

Or could involve your investments

Example: If you hold stock in BP, should you really be covering an oil spill and its implications?
A tricky dance

Journalists develop relationships with sources that last years

Sources are essential sources of information, but also have their own agenda

And may punish journalists with reduced access
Checking back with sources

Reuters never submits stories, scripts or images to sources to vet before publication. This breaches our independence. We may, of our own volition, check back with a source to verify a quote or to satisfy ourselves about the reliability of factual information but we also need to ensure that in doing so we do not give sources an opportunity to retract or materially alter a quote or information to their advantage.
Providing Context

The “news” is *new*

But nothing is really new; everything that happens is connected to something that happened before.

How much should journalists provide background—context—in their reports of new events?

Part of the core purpose of *informing readers*
MECHANISMS TO PROVIDE CONTEXT

The *inverted pyramid*

Other forms of content: news summaries, editorials, special sections
Don’t add. Don’t deceive.
Transparency about *methods* and *motives*

Get as close as possible to original sources
Assume nothing

- What is a source’s perspective?
- What reasons might a source have for their account?
RELEVANCE AND ENGAGEMENT

To be a public forum, journalism must cover the events of importance to the public

Role in community

Is the outlet able to be a resource for community conversation?

For the recognition of community problems and efforts to address them?
HOLDING POWER ACCOUNTABLE

The “watchdog” role

Government

Corporations

Others with “power”

Considering the “public interest”
A QUESTION TO KEEP IN MIND: WHEN AND WHERE DO THESE PRINCIPLES APPLY?