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Information Ethics: A Profession Seeks the Truth

By the end of this chapter, you should be familiar with:

- both the Enlightenment and pragmatic constructions of truth.
- the development and several criticisms of objective news reporting as a professional ideal.
- why truth in “getting” the news may be as important as truth in reporting it.
- how to develop a personal list of ethical news values.

INTRODUCTION

Each traditional profession has laid claims to a central tenet of philosophy. Law is equated with justice; medicine with the duty to render aid. Journalism, too, has a lofty ideal: the communication of truth.

But the ideal of truth is problematic. We often consider truth a stable commodity: it doesn't change much for us on a day-to-day basis, nor does it vary greatly among members of a community. However, the concept of truth has changed throughout history. At one level or another, human beings since ancient times have acknowledged that how truth is defined may vary. Since Plato's analogy of life as experienced by individuals human beings as “truthful” in the same way as shadows on the wall of a cave resemble the physical objects that cast those shadows more than 3,000 years ago, people have grappled with the amorphous nature of truth. Today, while we accept some cultural “lies”—the existence of Santa Claus—we condemn others—income tax evasion or fraud. Most of the time, we know what the boundaries are, at least when we deal with one another face-to-face.

Compounding the modern problem of the shifting nature of truth is the changing media audience. When a profession accepts the responsibility of printing and broadcasting the truth, facts that are apparent in face-to-face interaction become

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subject to different interpretations among the geographically and culturally diverse readers and viewers. Ideas once readily accepted are open to debate. Telling the truth becomes not merely a matter of possessing good moral character but something that requires learning how to recognize truth and conveying it in the least distorted manner possible.

A CHANGING VIEW OF TRUTH

One pre-Socratic Greek tradition viewed truth—*alethea*—as encompassing what humans remember, singled out through memory from everything that is destined for *Lethe*, the river of forgetfulness (Bok 1978). Linking truth and remembrance is essential in an oral culture, one that requires information be memorized and repeated so as not to be forgotten. Repeating the message, often in the form of songs or poetry, meant that ideas and knowledge were kept alive or true for subsequent generations. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or much of the Bible's Old Testament served this function.

This oral notion of truth, as noted in Table 2.1, was gradually discarded once words and ideas were written down. However, it has come to the fore with the advent of television and its computer cousins YouTube, etc., that allow viewers to hear the words of the president rather than wait for those words to be passed down to them. When we see something on television or our computer screen, we assume that it closely corresponds to reality. The maxim "Seeing is believing" reminds us that truth has become entangled with pictures, an oral concept of truth that has been a dormant form of knowledge for hundreds of years until technology made "seeing" events live worldwide possible.

While the ancient Greeks tied truth to memory, Plato was the first to link truth to human rationality and intellect. In *The Republic*, Plato equated truth with a world of pure form, a world to which human beings had only indirect access. In Plato's vision, there was an ideal notion of a chair—but that ideal chair did not exist in reality. What people thought of as a chair was similar to the ideal chair as the shadows on the wall of the cave are to the objects illuminated by the fire. To Plato, truth was knowable only to the human intellect—it could not be touched or verified. We're living in the cave.

Plato's metaphor of the cave has had a profound influence on Western thought. Not only did Plato link truth to rationality, as opposed to human experience, but his work implies that truth is something that can be captured only through the intellect. Platonic truth is implicit within a thing itself; truth defined the "perfect form." Plato's concept of the truth separated the concept from the external world in which physical objects exist.

Subsequent centuries and thinkers adhered to Plato's view. Medieval theologians believed truth was revealed only by God or by the Church. The intellectual legacy of the Reformation centered on whether it is possible for the average person to ascertain truth without benefit of a priest or a king. About 200 years later, Milton suggested that competing notions of the truth should be allowed to coexist, with the ultimate truth eventually emerging (see Table 2.1).

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TABLE 2.1. A Philosophy of Truth Emerges

Source	Truth Equals
Ancient Greeks	What is memorable and is handed down
Plato	What abides in the world of perfect forms
Medieval	What the king, Church or God says
Milton	What emerges from the "marketplace of ideas"
Enlightenment	What is verifiable, replicable, universal
Pragmatists	What is filtered through individual perception

Milton's assertions foreshadowed the philosophy of the Enlightenment, from which modern journalism borrows its notion of truth. The Enlightenment cast truth in secular terms, divorced from the church, and developed a "correspondence theory" of truth still held today. The correspondence theory asserts that truth should correspond to external facts or observations. The Enlightenment concept of truth was linked to what human beings could perceive with their senses harnessed through the intellect. Truth acquired substance. It was something that could be known and something that could be replicated.

This Enlightenment notion of truth is essential to the scientific method. Truth has become increasingly tied to what is written down, what can be empirically verified, what can be perceived by the human senses. Enlightenment truth does not vary among people or cultures. It is a truth uniquely suited to the written word, for it links what is written with what is factual, accurate and important.

Truth and Objectivity

This Enlightenment view of truth is the basis for the journalistic ideal of objectivity. While objectivity has many definitions, at the least it is the requirement that journalists are to divorce fact from opinion. Objectivity is a way of knowing that connects human perception with facts and then knowledge. Objectivity is also a process of information collection (Ward 2004). Journalists view objectivity as refusing to allow individual bias to influence what they report or how they cover it. It is in journalism that all facts and people are regarded as equal and equally worthy of coverage. Culture, an individual sense of mission, and individual and organizational feelings and views do not belong in objective news accounts. An Enlightenment view of truth allowed objectivity to be considered an attainable ideal.

However, philosophy was not the only reason or even the most important reason, that objectivity became a professional standard in the early 1900s. The early American press was not really a mass press, and it garnered much of its financial support from political advertising and most of its readers through avowedly partisan political reporting. But America became more urban in the late 1800s, and publishers realized that to convince potential advertisers that their advertising would be seen by a large audience, they had to make certain their publications would be read. Partisan publications could not ensure that, for strong views offended potential

readers. What publishers at the turn of the 20th century needed was a product that built on an Enlightenment principle that guaranteed that facts would be facts, no matter who was doing the reading. Opinion would be relegated to specific pages and both facts and opinion could be wrapped around advertising (Schudson 1978).

The normative ideal of objectivity came along at an advantageous time for yet another reason. The mass press of the early 1900s was deeply and corruptly involved in yellow journalism. Fabricated stories were common; newspaper wars were close to the real thing. Objectivity was a good way to clean up journalism's act with a set of standards where seemingly none had existed before. It fit the cultural expectations of the Enlightenment that truth was knowable and ascertainable. And it made sure that readers of news columns would remain unoffended long enough to glance at the ads.

The Enlightenment view of truth also was compatible with democracy and its emphasis on rational government. People who could reason together could arrive at some shared "truth" of how they could govern themselves. Information was essential to government, for it allowed citizens to scrutinize government. As long as truth was ascertainable, government could function. Under this view, *information provided the social glue as well as the grease of society*. Citizens and government needed information in order to continue their rational function. Information, and the notion that it corresponded in some essential way with the truth, carried enormous promise:

That changed when the 20th-century pragmatists—most notably Americans John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Charles Sanders Pierce and William James—challenged the Enlightenment view of truth. They held that the perception of truth depended on how it was investigated and on who was doing the investigating. Further, they rejected the notion that there was only one proper method of investigation—that is, the scientific method. Borrowing from Einstein, pragmatists argued that truth, like matter, was relative.

Specifically, the pragmatists proposed that knowledge and reality were not *fixed by* but instead were *the result of* an evolving stream of consciousness and learning. Reality itself varied based on the psychological, social, historical or cultural context. Additionally, reality was defined as that which was probable, not as something intrinsic (the Platonic view) or something determined by only one method of observation (the Enlightenment view). Pragmatism found a comfortable home in the 20th-century United States. Under pragmatism truth lost much of its universality, but it was in remarkable agreement with the American value of democratic individualism. Soon pragmatism filtered through literature, science and some professions, such as law.

Pragmatism provided a challenge to objectivity. No sooner had the journalistic community embraced objectivity than the culture adopted more pragmatic notions of truth. That clash fueled criticism of objectivity. Several questions surfaced. If truth is subjective, can it be reported by an impassive, objective and detached reporter? Does such a reporter exist? Is truth a construct that relies on context?

Postmodern philosophy (see *The Matrix* that follows) has taken these questions to their logical extension, suggesting that the concept of truth is devoid of meaning.

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Postmodernism asserts that context is literally everything, and that meaning cannot exist apart from context, which is directly opposed to fact-based journalism which assumed that facts were facts regardless of context.

The last 30 years have added yet another level of complexity to the problem: the information explosion. Facts and truth come to us quickly from all over the globe. Today, the Internet has removed the financial imperative of objectivity and made it once again financially viable to operate a partisan press, especially a virtual one. While objective reporting is still *one* standard, it is not the *only* standard. The recent ratings success of Fox News (higher in some ratings than CBS news programs) might indicate that the partisan press—Fox's claim of "fair and balanced" notwithstanding—can be made profitable. With the advent of blogs such as Huffington Post, which include not just words, but images, aggregated from many sources, yet a different notion of truth is emerging—what philosophers call the convergence or coherence theory of truth. Under this view, truth is discovered not through any single method of investigation but by determining which set of facts form a coherent mental picture of events and ideas investigated through a variety of methods. Convergence journalism—which uses sounds, images and words to cover stories—is one professional response to the coherence theory of truth and the technological possibilities of the Internet and the personal computer. Of course, convergence journalism requires an active audience. All too often, it is possible to be overwhelmed by the information available to us rather than devoting the time and effort required to make sense of it.

In short, objectivity has been deeply undermined by both philosophical shift and technological innovation (Christians, Ferré and Fackler 1993). Telling your readers and viewers the truth has become a complicated business as Sissela Bok points out:

Telling the "truth" therefore is not solely a matter of moral character; it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them. . . . Telling the truth, therefore, is something which must be learnt. This will sound very shocking to anyone who thinks that it must all depend on moral character and that if this is blameless the rest is child's play. But the simple fact is that the ethics cannot be detached from reality, and consequently continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action. (Bok 1978, 302–303)

WHO'S DOING THE TALKING ANYWAY?

The pragmatic's critique of objectivity has called attention to the question of who writes the news. Journalists—primarily male, Caucasian, well educated, and middle to upper class—are often asked to cover issues and questions that life experiences has not prepared them to cover. Stephen Hess (1981) noted that journalists (particularly the Eastern "elite" media), in terms of their socioeconomic status, look a great deal more like the famous or powerful people they cover than the people they are supposedly writing for. Work on the national press corps has shown similar results

The Matrix: A Postmodern Examination of Truth

"Do you ever have that feeling where you're not sure whether you are awake or still dreaming?"

"Yeah, all the time. . . . It just sounds to me like you might need to unplug, man . . . get some R&R?"

Thus begins Neo's journey down the rabbit hole (like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*) where reality literally turns inside out on itself. A computer wizard, and unknown genetic mutation, Neo—who is awakened to the possibilities courtesy of Morpheus—literally unplugs himself from the reality of a computer simulation where human beings serve as batteries for machines that run the world. Reality for most people is nothing more than a computer code invented by the artificial intelligence and inserted electronically into their neural systems from infancy onward. Neo is the person who has the capacity to crack and overcome the code.

The Matrix set the early standard for smart films about the potential of the computers that power the information age. The film was stylish. In fact, the long, black trench coats Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss wore were eerily predictive of the attire worn by the Columbine High School shooters. The special effects and set design, based as they were on a comic book reality, gave form to one vision of hyper-reality, as did the film's otherworldly, violent content.

Besides being provocative, the film provides an accessible discussion of the postmodern approach to truth.

Postmodernism is a logical outgrowth of pragmatism. Instead of suggesting that truth varies with receiver, or sender or context, postmodernism suggests that truth—if it exists at all—is unknowable. Those who believe they know the truth, like Neo at the beginning of the film,

discover that their "reality" is false consciousness, founded on invalid assumptions that shift constantly in a chaotic environment.

Postmodernism rejects the correspondence theory of truth, or the Platonic ideal that truth is knowable only as an intellectual construct. In postmodernism, revealed truth does not exist, and the marketplace of ideas yields either falsity or babble. In the film, dreams are real, reality shifts and absolutely nothing is what it seems. Control, in the form of computer programs (malleable by both the programmers and the programmed), and death, in the form of biological waste, remain.

Most journalistic endeavors reject postmodern thinking on the grounds that the essence of humanity itself provides an irrefutable challenge to postmodernism's premise. Others have noted that postmodernism too easily falls into the trap of solipsism—the notion that it is impossible to know anything outside of one's individual thoughts and perceptions.

While traditional theory and theorists may reject postmodernism, contemporary culture sometimes embraces what Morpheus calls "the desert of the real." If postmodernism is an appropriate worldview, does that mean journalists and persuasion professionals should abandon their jobs or their ancient foundations?

We think not.

Neo and Morpheus still have to act. They learn to think in new ways, but their actions remain centered on their belief in human independence and the "rightness" of thinking about and connecting with others. Even in this postmodern vision, ethical thinking still has a place. Neo's goal, after all, is to dismantle one matrix so humanity can make its own choices.

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(Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes and Wilhoit 2007). Journalists are better paid and better educated than the audience for their product, especially “legacy” media where the audience is aging every year.

In the past 30 years, almost every professional journalistic organization has developed programs specifically to attract and retain women and minorities with only incremental and sporadic success. This lack of access to the engines of information has not been lost on a variety of minority groups—from religious fundamentalists, who have in some cases established their own broadcasting networks, to racial minorities, who fail to find themselves either as owners or managers of media outlets. They argue that the result is news about middle-class Caucasians, for middle-class Caucasians. Perhaps the election of the nation’s first African-American president will change media habits, but results to both employ and cover minorities have traditionally been slow and sporadic.

How individual journalists and the corporations they work for should remedy the situation is unclear. But as demographics changed us from a culture that is predominantly Caucasian to one that is not, the mass media, particularly newspapers, will play a decreasing role unless journalists find a way to report news that is of interest to the new majority of their readers. In the beginning of the 21st century, worldwide newspaper readership and broadcast viewership continued to decline. The winners: the Internet (including newspaper Web sites) and magazines that focus on celebrities rather than public affairs (Thorson, Duffy and Schumann 2007). Traditional journalists faced an audience in open rebellion with no clear strategy to regain the “eyeballs” advertisers desire or the public focus that civic engagement requires.

SEEING ISN'T BELIEVING

More than 80 years ago, journalist Walter Lippmann (1922) said, “For the most part, we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.” He added that we tend to pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and then perceive it in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.

In one classic study (Rainville and McCormick 1977), a blind New York journalism professor claimed he could predict the race of football players being described in the play-by-play by what was said about them. Caucasian athletes were described as intellectually gifted while African-American athletes were described as physically gifted. In a culture that values brains over brawn, African-American football players were the subject of repeated stereotypical insults—all couched as praise. And even though the study is now more than 30 years old, the tendency to revert to these stereotypes continues on sports broadcasts today in which athletes are called “smart” and which are called “athletic.” In the former, the quality was obtained by hard work; in the latter, it was a gift of genetics.

Women, the elderly and the gay community have conducted studies with similar results. Their conclusion has been that while journalists maintain that they are objective, they (like their readers and viewers) bring something to the message that literally changes what they see and what they report (Lester 1996).

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In a *Columbia Journalism Review* cover story entitled “Rethinking Objectivity,” author Brent Cunningham (2003) says that “objectivity can trip us up on the way to truth. Objectivity excuses lazy reporting. If you’re on deadline and all you have is ‘both sides of the story,’ then that’s often good enough.” Cunningham cites numerous incidences of enterprising reporting spiked by editors. Cunningham points to a study of 414 Iraq war stories broadcast on ABC, CBS and NBC leading up to the 2003 conflict. All but 34 originated from the White House, the Pentagon or the State Department. The result: the “official truth” becomes the received truth, and only the bravest journalists dared depart from it. Timothy Crouse in his campaign memoir *The Boys on the Bus* reported the same phenomenon—stories outside the mainstream were not rewarded, they were spiked.

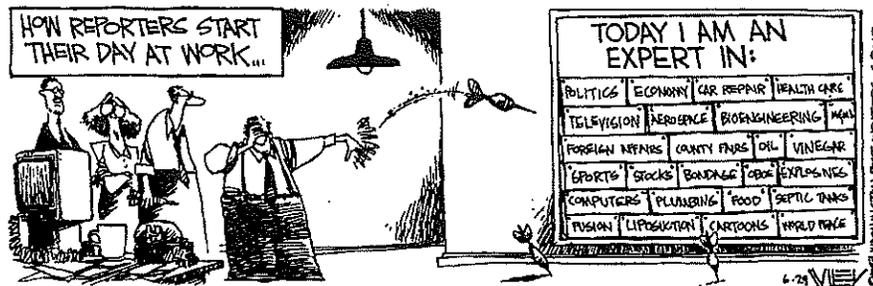
E. J. Dionne (1996) claims that the press is in internal contradiction. It must be neutral, yet investigative. It must be disengaged, but have an impact. It must be fair minded but have an edge. The conflicts make objectivity virtually impossible to define and even harder to practice.

DEFINING AND CONSTRUCTING THE NEWS

News reflects certain cultural values and professional norms. In a classic study, sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) studied how stories became news at *Newsweek* and CBS and found that almost all news stories reflected these six cultural values: (1) ethnocentrism; (2) altruistic democracy; (3) responsible capitalism; (4) individualism; (5) an emphasis on the need for and maintenance of social order; and (6) leadership. These dominant values helped to shape which stories were printed and what they said, what communication scholars call “framing.”

Gans called these values the “para-ideology” of the media. He added that “the news is not so much conservative or liberal as it is reformist.” Researcher James Carey (quoted in Cunningham 2003) says that it is this para-ideology that results in charges of liberal bias against the media. “There is a bit of the reformer in anyone who enters journalism. And reformers are always going to make conservatives uncomfortable.”

News stories about middle-class or upper-class people, those who tend to successfully adopt the culture’s values, made the American news “budget,” according



1993, Washington Post Writers Group. Reprinted with permission.

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to Gans. While Gans focused on journalism about the United States, other scholars have noted the same phenomenon, called *domesticating the foreign*, in international coverage (Gurevitch et al. 1991). Journalists working for U.S. media outlets tell stories about international events in cultural terms Americans can readily understand but which also sacrifice accuracy. For example, routine coverage of elections in Britain or Israel is conveyed in horse-race metaphors even though both countries employ a parliamentary system where governing coalitions are common and who wins the horse race not nearly so important.

PACKAGING THE STORY: NEWS AS MANUFACTURED PRODUCT

The goal of telling a "good story" also raises other ethical questions, specifically those that focus on packaging to highlight drama and human interest. Ethical questions about packaging began with newspapers but have intensified with television. Television demands video, and television's video imperative dominates both story selection and placement. For instance, when President Obama found himself in trouble for saying the Cambridge police "acted stupidly" in the arrest of Harvard professor and Obama friend Henry Gates, it was not the his verbal explanation that eased the tension. Instead, it was the made-for-television "beer summit" between Obama, Gates and the arresting officer that brought media closure to the situation and provided the lead story for the nightly news.

Journalists need something to package, which has led to a professional drive to find an "event" to report and to be there first. Few consumers realize it, but news is "manufactured" daily, just as surely as furniture, cars or the meal at your favorite fast food restaurant—and often the process can be messy. Journalists start the day with a blank computer screen and with press time or broadcast time looming. They end the day with a print story, a video package or a Web page—or often all three. And adding to the built-in tension of deadlines is the challenge to be fair, complete, accurate and, above all, interesting. Whole industries—particularly public relations or "strategic communications"—have emerged to help journalists package their daily stories on deadline.

The need to find an event has meant journalists have missed some important stories because they were not events but rather historic developments with both a past and a future. For example, major social developments such as the women's movement (Mills 1989), the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement were under-covered until their leaders created events such as sit-ins and demonstrations for the media to report. Director Michael Moore said he began his career with the 1989 film *Roger and Me* about the devastation of General Motors layoffs on his hometown of Flint, Michigan, because he "didn't see on the silver screen or the television screen what happened to people like us. It was a story then (in the mid-1980s) and it's a story now and that's part of the reason I did the movie" (Smith 1992). This preoccupation with events affects coverage of science which is most frequently reported as a series of discoveries and "firsts" rather than as a process (Nelkin 1987). We are treated to stories about



the new cures often without the necessary context—political, economic, etc.—to interpret the latest research results. Nelkin says that the twin dramas of “new hope” and “no hope” drive most science reporting. Former Vice-President and Nobel Laureate Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* was an example of making an “event” out of more than 50 years of science, all in an attempt to spur public debate.

Other stories are missed or misreported when they lack the easy “peg” editors look for. When thousands of lives were lost in Bhopal, India by a malfunctioning plant, coverage focused entirely on the event and not the socioeconomic, scientific and political causes that led to the disaster. Instead, news coverage focused on the picture-friendly event (Wilkins 1987). A deeper look at news coverage of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, something Charles Perrow calls a “normal accident” in his book of the same title, found coverage echoed the stereotype of American superiority and Russian inferiority rather an approach focusing on science and risk (Patterson 1989).

Because of their nature, slow-onset disasters such as topsoil erosion, climate change and waste management have historically been under-reported. Phenomena not linked to specific events such as the growth of a permanent American underclass went unreported for years waiting for an appropriate news peg, such as the health care debate of 2009, to supply the needed event and photo opportunities required to make the news agenda.

Under event-oriented journalism, elections become horse races with “front-runners” and the “rest of the pack” counted and handicapped daily with each new poll. But reporting an election as a contest fails to focus on the policy issues, which is what democratic elections are supposed to be about. The quintessential example of this can be seen in the California election of Arnold Schwarzenegger where many said they voted for the actor simply because they deemed him “electable.”

The phenomenon of “pack journalism” has been chronicled in several films, dating back to the classic *The Front Page* and later *The Boys on the Bus* (Crouse 1974) and the book *Feeding Frenzy* (Sabato 1992). All emphasize journalistic excesses and an unwillingness to engage in independent thought that would disturb enlightened and pragmatic philosophers alike. They also expose a system easily manipulated by politicians as editors remain skeptical of “scoops” that no other journalist has. This unwillingness to leave the “pack” with a break-out story led to many of the hottest political stories of the new century being reported first on the Web where these institutional pressures do not exist.

For instance, the *New York Times* resorted to quoting the supermarket tabloid the *National Enquirer* in its coverage of the O. J. Simpson murder case largely in an effort to keep up with media competition. Equally significant, the *Enquirer* had the story right. And, the entire Washington press corps was confounded when Internet gadfly Matt Drudge, who styles himself a political reporter, published what became the first mention of the President Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal. Drudge has said that he prints rumor as well as fact; traditional journalists, who want to separate the two, remain deeply troubled by the impact of the speed of the Internet on the need to check facts before more traditional publication.

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Journalists have also been cowed by the threat of litigation. The film *The Insider* presents a fictionalized but nonetheless fact-based account about the impact of litigation on reporting stories critical of big tobacco. Seymour Hersh's original reporting of the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, which eventually appeared in the *New York Times*, was held up because no other reporter had a similar story and a particular media outlet was afraid to stick its neck out.

Truth is more than just a collection of facts. Facts have a relationship to one another and to other facts, forming a larger whole. Yet analytic coverage of American institutions, of science and technology, of politics and of social movements is rare. What is more common—especially on cable news outlets—is to invite two or more parties with conflicting views, allot them too little time to discuss the issue at hand and then sit back and let the resulting heated exchange take the place of reporting. If the role of the mass media is not only to detail events and issues, but to make the relationship among them clear, is merely rounding up conflicting talking heads sufficient? Or do we need to do it better?

Stephen Hess (1981) has argued that journalists need to engage in reporting that looks more like social science than storytelling. Gans (1979) argues for news that is labeled as originating from a particular point of view. If readers and viewers are alerted to the worldview of those who have selected the news (as they were during the era of the partisan press) they would be better able to place news in context. Other scholars argue for news that is analytical rather than anecdotal, proactive rather than reactive and contextual rather than detached. On a practical level, working reporters and editors insist that individual journalists need to do a better job of understanding their own biases and compensating for them.

The accumulated evidence, both anecdotal and scholarly, today strikes at the core of objectivity and shows that intellectually, we are living in a pragmatic era, but professionally we seem to be unable to develop a working alternative to the Enlightenment's view of truth. Because of this, mainstream media are increasingly seen as irrelevant, particularly to a younger audience for whom truth is more likely to be a video on YouTube than a report on the network's dwindling nightly newscasts.

ON THE ETHICS OF DECEPTION

In a profession that values truth, is it ever ethical to lie? To editors? To readers? To sources, who may be liars themselves? Are there levels of lying? Is flattering someone to get an interview as serious a transgression as doctoring a quote or photograph? Is withholding information the same thing as lying? If you can only get one side of the story, do you go with it? Does it matter today if opinion mingles with news?

Crises of credibility have faced media outlets of all sizes including spectacular instances at both *USA Today* and the *New York Times* that resulted in front page editorial apologies and multi-page retractions. In the case of the *Times*, it started when a 27-year-old reporter, Jayson Blair, fabricated all or part of more than

Errors in Journalism: Inevitability and Arrogance

Confounding truth and deception in journalism is the problem of errors. Inadvertent mistakes in stories are common. One freelance fact checker (Hart 2003) wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that she had not experienced an error-free story in three years of fact checking for *CJR*, one of journalism's leading watchdog publications. Her calls to fellow fact-checkers at other publications led her to believe that articles with errors are the rule, not the exception.

However, mistakes are different from fabrication and do not indicate a lack of dedication to the truth. Some, if not most, mistakes are matters of interpretation, but others are outright errors of fact. In her article, "Delusions of Accuracy," Ariel

Hart says that hearing journalists proudly claim to have had no errors or fewer errors than the *Times* found in Blair's writing is "scary, not the least because it encourages delusions of accuracy."

One problem seems to be audience members so disconnected from the media that they don't bother to correct our mistakes or, worse, assume as readers of the *Times* evidently did, that fabrication is *de rigueur* for journalists. "Journalists surely make mistakes often, but I think we don't—or can't—admit it to ourselves because the idea of a mistake is so stigmatized. . . . So mistakes need to be destigmatized or restigmatized and dealt with accordingly. They should be treated like language errors," Hart argues.

40 stories. After his resignation from the paper, the *Times* ran four full pages of corrections documenting every error discovered in Blair's reporting. The *Times'* correction made it clear that the *Times* had failed to correct the problem in earlier stages despite many opportunities to do so. In a subsequent analysis of the case, many at the *Times* and other places suggested that one reason Blair's actions had been unchecked for so long was because of his race. Blair was African-American, and he had been hired as part of the *Times'* diversity program. His mentors at the paper, Executive Editor Howell Raines and Managing Editor Gerald Boyd, who also was African-American, were among Blair's strongest supporters and both eventually resigned in the fallout. While the *Times* denied that race was the reason that Blair had been promoted, Blair himself did not.



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However, Blair's Pulitzer Prize-winning work became public through stringers who discovered errors filed with no rooms where Blair was actual on-the-scene and common in the Blair incident that since they felt that a cal appraisal of journalism the profession.

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However, Blair wasn't the only bad news for the *Times* during those weeks. Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Rick Bragg also resigned from the paper after it became public that he, too, had published stories based largely on the reporting of stringers who did not receive a byline in the *Times*. Furthermore, some of his stories filed with non-New York datelines had been written on airplanes and in hotel rooms where Bragg was functioning more as a rewrite editor rather than doing actual on-the-scene reporting. Bragg said his practices were known at the *Times* and common in the industry. That comment aligns with one heard frequently in the Blair incident that sources did not complain to the *Times* about incorrect stories since they felt that fictionalizing stories was just the way things are done. This cynical appraisal of journalism threatens our credibility, which is the chief currency of the profession.

So, how do journalists feel about deception? A survey of members of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) provides some insight into the profession's thinking (Lee 2005). Journalists think about deception on a continuum. At one end, there is almost universal rejection of lying to readers, viewers and listeners. IRE members regard such lies as among the worst ethical professional breaches. At the other end, more than half of the IRE members surveyed said they approved of flattering a source to get an interview, even though that flattery could be considered deceptive and certainly was insincere.

In the same survey, lies of omission—such as withholding information from readers and viewers and also editors and bosses—were considered less of a problem than fabricating facts in a story or fabricating entire stories, which was almost universally condemned. IRE members were more willing to withhold information in instances when national security issues were involved. The journalists also said some lies were justified; they approved of lying if it would save a life or prevent injury to a source.

The journalists surveyed also noted that there were outside influences on these judgments. Broadcast journalists were more accepting of hidden cameras and altering video than were print journalists, although that difference might be changing as more print journalists get video experience via their newspaper's Web sites. And, those who worked in competitive markets were more willing to accept deception than were those who saw themselves in less competitive environments. The more experienced a journalist was, the less likely he or she was to accept any form of deception. Finally, the survey revealed what journalists worry about is the impact such reporting methods have on the believability of news accounts and on journalists' ability to cover subsequent stories if caught in an ethical lapse.

Is it ethical to lie to liars? Is withholding information the same thing as lying? If not, under what circumstances might it be appropriate? If it is, are there ethically based justifications for such an act? Sissela Bok (1978) has written eloquently on lying to liars. She argues that such an act raises two questions. Will the lie serve a larger social good, and does the act of lying mean that we as professionals are willing to be lied to in return?

Bok suggests that most of the time, when we lie we want "free rider" status—gaining the benefits of lying without incurring the risks of being lied to. In other

words, some journalists may believe it's acceptable to lie to a crook to get a story, but they professionally resent being lied to by any source, regardless of motive.

Lying is a way to get and maintain power. Those in positions of power often believe they have the right to lie because they have a greater than ordinary understanding of what is at stake. Lying in a crisis (to prevent panic) and lying to enemies (to protect national security) are two examples. In both circumstances journalists can be—either actively or without their knowledge—involved in the deception. Do journalists have a right to counter this lying with lies of their own, told under the guise of the public's need to know? Does a journalist have the right to print the truth when printing it will cause one of the evils—panic or a threat to national security—that the lie was concocted to prevent?

Then there is the "omission versus commission" issue. In the first, the lie is that some part of the truth was conveniently left out; in the latter, the lie is an untruth told purposefully. Bok asserts that a genuinely white lie may be excusable on some grounds, but that all forms of lying must stand up to questions of fairness and mutuality. According to Kant's categorical imperative, the teller of the white lie must also be willing to be lied to. Even lying to liars can have its downside as Bok points out in her book, *Lying*.

In the end, the participants in deception they take to be mutually understood may end up with coarsened judgment and diminished credibility. But if, finally, the liar to whom one wishes to lie is also in a position to do one harm, then the balance may shift; not because he is a liar, but because of the threat he poses (Bok 1978, 140).

Reporting *via* the Internet has given new urgency to the issue of lying by omission. In most instances failing to identify yourself as a reporter when collecting information electronically from news groups, chat rooms or other modes of public discussion is considered problematic. Journalists, when pressed, note that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled Internet transmissions are public. The ethical issue emerges when most of those involved in the discussion are not aware of the legal standards and expect, instead, the more ethically based relations of face-to-face interactions. Ethical thought leaves journalists with difficult choices.

Reporting *on* the contents of the Internet—and cable television—raises another series of challenges. How should journalist go about debunking rumors that circulate on the Internet? Conventional wisdom for the legacy media holds that re-printing or re-broadcasting rumors only furthers them. However, people seem to believe what they see on the Internet, no matter how implausible. News organizations in New Orleans covering Hurricane Katrina faced a series of difficult news decisions in face of the rumors sweeping the city. In some instances, they elected to print or broadcast that they could not substantiate rumors prevalent in the networked world. The same problems continue to plague journalists in stories as distinct as news of Michael Jackson's death or terrorist attacks in India.

Deciding how to handle rumors, however, appears to be only one challenge for journalists when the Internet is involved. A second, and perhaps more serious, challenge is how to treat information promulgated by well-known sources—information that is false. The best known example of this problem in former Alaska Governor

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and 2008 Vice-President candidate Sarah Palin's assertion on her Facebook page that the medical reform legislation moving through Congress in 2009 contained a provision for "death panels" for the elderly. While Palin's entry was not true, it was widely circulated through many media outlets—including FOX News—and left journalists with the almost impossible task of proving a negative. Calling someone a liar, at one level, seems the height of non-objective journalism. But, when the facts suggest that a source is lying—even if that source is not held to the same standards of truth-telling as journalists are—what becomes an acceptable professional mechanism to hold non-journalist sources to account?

ETHICAL NEWS VALUES

Most mass media courses present a list of qualities that define news. Most such lists include proximity, timeliness, conflict, consequence, prominence, rarity, change, concreteness, action and personality. Additional elements may include notions of mystery, drama, adventure, celebration, self-improvement and even ethics. While these lists are helpful to beginning journalists, they probably will not help you decide how to recount the news ethically.

We suggest you expand your journalistic definitions of news to include a list of ethical news values. These values are intended to reflect the philosophic tensions inherent in a profession with a commitment to truth. If news values were constructed from ethical reasoning, we believe the following elements would be emphasized by both journalists and the organizations for which they work.

Accuracy—using the correct facts and the right words and putting things in context. Journalists need to be as independent as they can when framing stories. They need to be aware of their own biases, including those they "inherit" as social class, gender and ethnicity, as well as learned professional norms.

Confirmation—writing articles that are able to withstand scrutiny inside and outside the newsroom. Media ethicist Sandy Borden (2007) refers to this as the "discipline of confirmation," a concept that reflects how difficult it can be to capture even a portion of the truth in sometimes complex news situations.

Tenacity—knowing when a story is important enough to require additional effort, both personal and institutional. Tenacity drives journalists to provide all the depth they can regardless of the individual assignment. It has institutional implications, too, for the individual cannot function well in an environment where resources are too scarce or the corporate bottom line too dominant. In addition, news organizations need to trust journalists when they report independently rather than expect them to act as part of a pack.

Dignity—leaving the subject of a story as much self-respect as possible. Dignity values each person regardless of the particular story or the particular role the individual plays. Dignity allows the individual journalist to recognize that news gathering is a cooperative enterprise where each plays a role, including editors, videographers, designers and advertising sales staff.

Reciprocity—treating others as you wish to be treated. Too often, journalism is “writing for the lowest common denominator.” Reciprocity demands respect for the reader. It also rejects the notion of journalism as benevolent paternalism—“We’ll tell you what we think is good for you”—and recognizes that journalists and their viewers and readers are partners both in discovering what is important and in gleaning meaning from it.

Sufficiency—allocating adequate resources to important issues. On the individual level, sufficiency can mean thoroughness, for example, checking both people and documents for every scrap of fact before beginning to write. On an organizational level, it means allocating adequate resources to the newsgathering process. With virtually every media outlet suffering from declining readers or viewers, thanks mainly to the Web, this is probably the central issue of the current media landscape.

Equity—seeking justice for all involved in controversial issues and treating all sources and subjects equally. Equity assumes a complicated world with a variety of points of view. Equity demands that all points of view be considered, but does not demand that all sides be framed as equally compelling. Equity expands the journalistic norms of “telling both sides of the story” to “telling all sides of the story.”

Community—valuing social cohesion. On the organization level, a sense of community means that media outlets and the corporations that own them need to consider themselves as citizens rather than mere “profit centers.” On the individual level, it means evaluating stories with an eye first to social good.

Diversity—covering all segments of the audience fairly and adequately. There appears to be almost overwhelming evidence that news organizations do not “look like” the society they cover. While management can remedy part of this problem by changing hiring patterns, individual journalists can learn to “think diversity” regardless of their individual heritages.

Like all lists, ours should not be considered inclusive or without some measure of internal contradiction. We believe those contradictions, however, provide an important continuum within which informed ethical choice can be made.

Suggested Readings

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