

# Principles of journalism: The discipline of verification

J201: Introduction to Mass Communication

January 30, 2017

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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”

# WALTER LIPPMANN

“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**





# 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**

# 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



# BALANCE AND FALSE EQUIVALENCY


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

Giving similar **scrutiny** to sides in an argument

THE PUBLIC EDITOR

# 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.



[More Public Editor Columns](#)  
[The Public Editor's Journal](#)

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.



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REPRINTS





# ORIGINS OF FALSE EQUIVALENCY

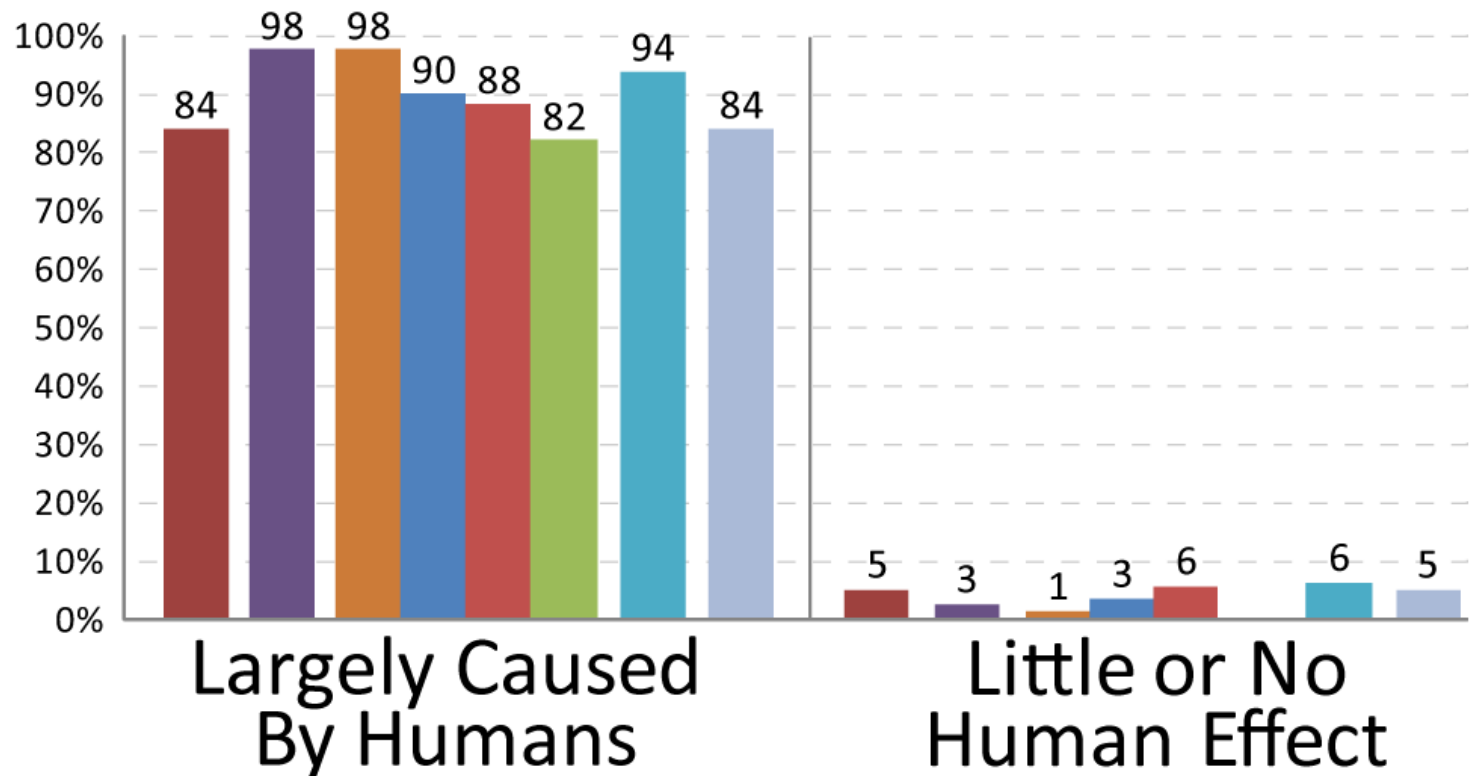
A great desire to **appear neutral**

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



Farnsworth & Lichter (2011)  
■ AGU / AMS Member Scientists

Anderegg et al. (2010)  
■ 200 Most Published Climate Scientists

Doran & Zimmerman (2009)  
■ Most Frequently Published Climatologists  
■ Scientists Publishing on Climate Change  
■ Climatologists  
■ Earth Science Faculty / Researchers

Bray & Von Storch (2008)  
■ Climate Scientists

STATS / Harris Interactive (2007)  
■ AGU / AMS Member Scientists

# 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

Surveys have found that over 97% of actively publishing climate scientists are convinced humans are significantly changing global temperatures (Cook, 2013). Not only is there a vast difference in the number of convinced versus unconvinced scientists, there is also a considerable gap in expertise between the two groups (Weisberg, 2013).



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 skeptic  
viewpoint or denies  
man-made warming

Because of the institutionalized journalistic norm of balanced reporting, United States television news coverage has perpetuated an informational bias by significantly diverging from the consensus view in climate science that humans contribute to global warming (Boydell, 2008).



Media coverage misrepresents scientific  
understanding of man-made global warming

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Are the public convinced?

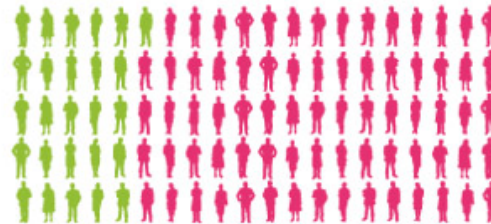
**YES**  
**26%**

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

A recent poll by the BBC / Populus suggests that since the 'unintegrated' coverage in the media there has been an increase in the amount of people sceptical about man-made global warming. However, the scientific consensus has not changed over this period (BBC News).



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 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



<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/will-unraveling-rolling-stones-uva-sexual-assault-story-make-victims-reluctant-speak/>

# ACCURACY

## 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

# NPR ON ATTRIBUTION

## 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,



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## BUT: PRESSURE SNEAKS IN

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 EXAMPLE

J-School student with an internship at the  
Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel (2012)

# NPR ON POLITICAL IMPARTIALITY

## 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?

# INDEPENDENCE FROM: SOURCES

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*



# REUTERS ON SOURCES

## **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*

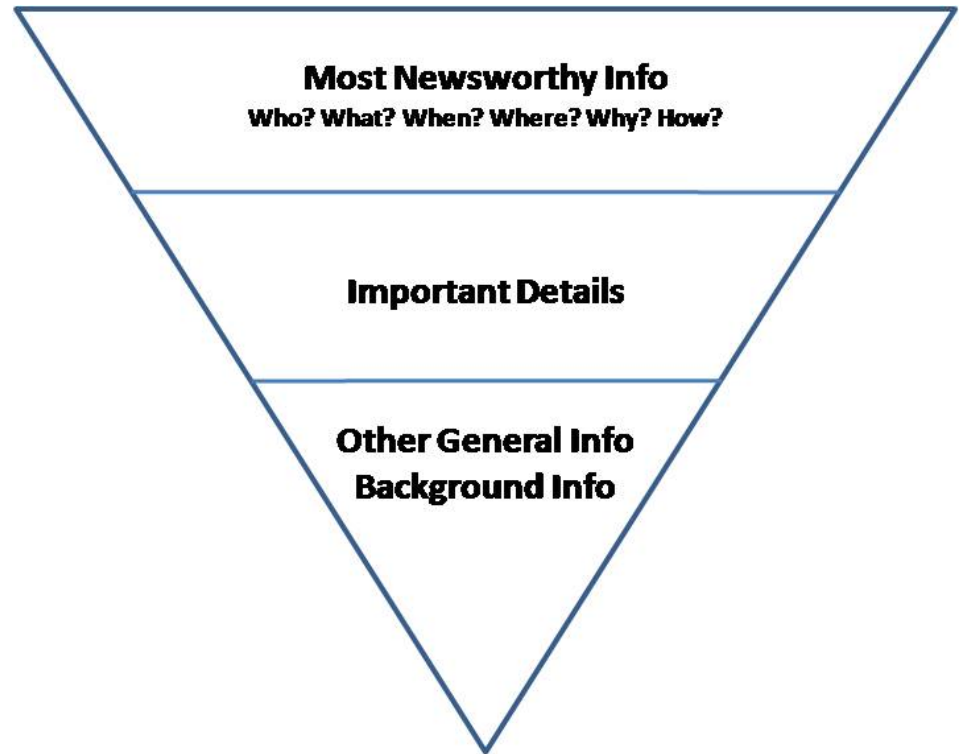
But nothing is really new; everything that happens is connected to something that happened before

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*

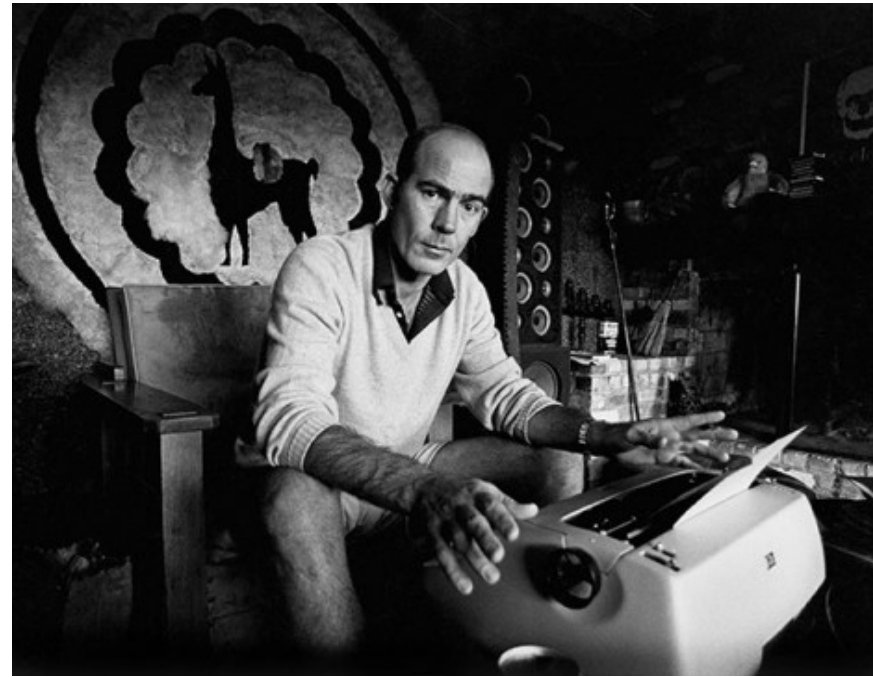


Other forms of content: news summaries, editorials, special sections

# TRANSPARENCY

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*”



Image: <http://watchdog.org/new-jersey/about/>

A QUESTION TO  
KEEP IN MIND:  
WHEN AND WHERE  
DO THESE  
PRINCIPLES APPLY?