Some institutions (e.g., religions, the news media) serve as arbiters in determining the "truth" status of a variety of issues of doctrine and fact. This article examines the routine "truth" producing activities of one such institution: an organization charged with assembling and publishing an encyclopedia. The articles that comprised this encyclopedia are shown to be products of various negotiations, bargains, and "creative uses of facts," all fundamentally shaped by practical features and constraints of this particular organizational setting.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH
Editing an Encyclopedia

GRAHAM TOMLINSON

THEOLOGIANS, moral philosophers, and others who grapple with questions of truth have not been especially helpful in the sociological understanding of truthfulness and lying. Some who claim to know the truth advise us never to lie. Others have excused some lies if told in defense of a "higher" truth (Bok, 1978: 7), thereby according priority to this higher truth and exonerating falsehoods perpetrated in its service. Still others would justify falsehoods told to one's enemies for the sake of saving oneself or others.

One recent analysis (Bok, 1978) emphasizes the distinction between truth and truthfulness, between matters of epistemology and matters of ethics. Although "the whole truth *is* out of reach" (1978: 4), determinations of truthfulness centering around questions of intention are more feasible. Truthfulness implies intentional honesty, whereas

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: An earlier draft of this article was presented at the Conference on Qualitative Research, University of Waterloo, Ontario, May 1985. Since then, I have benefited from critical readings by Sissela Bok, Gary Alan Fine, Thomas Gieryn, Allen Grimshaw, Charles Tucker, and anonymous reviewers for *Urban Life.* I am especially grateful to Robert M. Emerson and Jaber Gubrium, without whose encouragement and critical comments the article would not have evolved into its present form.

URBAN LIFE, Vol. 15 No. 2, July 1986 197-213

a falsehood (a lie) is "an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement" (Bok, 1978: 15). This article accepts the usefulness of this distinction and is focused on adaptive practices involved in truthfulness and falsehoods.[1]

If one agrees with Bok that the truth is beyond our reach, then we should turn our attention to that which is within reach—the practices that make up the construction of "truth." These practices are of analytic and theoretic interest and can be empirically investigated.

In choosing to study truthfulness, we do *not* have to abandon the study of truth. What we abandon is the positing of one more version of truth in a world already cluttered with truth claims. To wit, we live in a world of truth-claimers in which certain institutions make stronger claims than others. Advertisers, parents, and professional card dealers will privately acknowledge the precariousness of their truth claims. On the other hand, many religions, the news media, and encyclopedias display little embarrassment when asserting the truth and truthfulness of their claims.

The assertion of truth by an organization is a form of reification. It posits an object with characteristics practically devoid of the human activities that were responsible for its creation. All authoritative sources of truth should be examined through the practices by which that truth is achieved. Theologies should be studied through the practical affairs of theologians and churches; news reports through the practices found in newsrooms (Lester, 1980), television studios, and the activities of journalists on the street; and science through the adaptations employed in the labs and the field (Yearley, 1981; H. Zukerman, 1984). The study of these practices reveal not so much deliberate deception but adaptations to the organizational rhythms, settings, and requirements that come to play a central part in the daily routines of those involved.

Against this background of philosophical and social scientific investigations of truth and truthfulness, this study

examines the social construction of "truth" as achieved in writing articles for an encyclopedia. On one hand, there is the final product—the encyclopedia—promoted and perceived as the truth, on the other hand, there are the routine, daily practices of those involved in the processes of creating that product. One would expect a consistency between the two, but this analysis shows gaps of varying widths between them.

SETTING AND METHOD

During the 1970s, I was employed for 18 months as an associate social science editor for the revision of a major one-volume encyclopedia produced at a prestigious university press. Located in a major metropolitan area, the university press was housed in a brownstone building just off campus. Gentleness and respect characterized the working ambience among editors, who, despite their varying statuses, treated one another with a kindness that sharply contrasted with the noisy city outside.

The editorial staff was formally divided into four statuses: 2 editors-in-chief at the top, 6 senior editors, a third level of 24 associate editors, and, finally, a number of assistant and copy editors. Senior editors supervised anywhere from four to eight associate editors. In addition to this editorial staff, a number of free-lance editors were hired to write specific articles and nearly a hundred scholars (two-thirds of them from the university) received fees from serving as consultants. The editorial responsibilities were formally divided into four areas: geography, humanities, physical and natural sciences, and social sciences. Although my responsibilities were in the general area of social science, I occasionally received assignments in other areas. Within the social science department there were three associate editors in addition to myself.

The final product—that is, the published encyclopedia—weighed 10.5 pounds and contained over 50,000 articles

and about 7 million words. The encyclopedia was the major revenue producer for the university press and supported its other publications. When the first edition was pending in the 1930s, there was substantial opposition within the university faculty. Many professors argued that such a publication under the auspices of their university would tarnish their scholarly reputations. This opposition was easily overcome when many of them were hired on and coopted as consultants.

The encyclopedia enjoys an excellent reputation and is revised about once every decade. Many of the same editors are rehired from edition to edition. The editors are not academicians (although some have advanced degrees) but hire unemployed academics serving either as consultants as free-lancers or as full-time employees when positions are open.

When initially hired, I had no intention of conducting research; having just completed a stint in a marketing research job, I was merely looking for a job. But about six months into my employment, as I watched myself and others becoming more and more "creative" in writing articles, I decided to keep field notes on these activities. Initially the notes were primarily descriptive as I recorded editors' adaptive practices in producing articles. During a data collection period of about 12 months I kept field notes on my own practices and those of other associate editors. I also kept notes on the *queries* from the senior editors Queries were questions, usually written out in memos, addressed by senior editors to articles or parts of articles produced by associate editors. Queries were usually placed in a basket on the desks of associate editors on a daily basis.

The practices that are analyzed in this article involve aspects of the larger generic process referred to as truthful adaptations later in the article.[2] These adaptations may be viewed collectively as the ways that associate editors and senior editors adjust to a variety of organizational and personal constraints in order to carry out their respective jobs.

LEARNING THE ROPES: THE WORK OF ASSOCIATE EDITORS

One of my duties as associate editor consisted of examining "social science" articles (ethnic groups, political and social organizations, prominent figures in the social sciences) from the previous edition to determine which articles should be deleted and which should be retained and perhaps revised. For example, a previous article on "food" was dropped because it was considered too broad a topic. Some of the material from that article was to be subdivided and included in other articles, such as that on milk.

The primary responsibility for deleting or adding articles fell to the senior editors with little consultation with the associate editors. Determining a "major" figure involved a good deal of caprice: Bob Dylan was included but Erik Erikson was not. Little or no revision was required for deceased notables. Selection of major figures often seemed to turn on the particular favorites of the senior editors, or their lack of knowledge about a particular field (my senior editor's background was in English literature). On occasion he would ask my opinion about an addition. Among others, I suggested C. Wright Mills should be included. He had never heard of him, and so Mills was not included. I tried Erving Goffman, with the same result. Eventually, I gave up suggesting additions.

An additional task of associate editors was revising old articles or writing new ones. Each associate editor was provided a book of guidelines containing proofreaders' rules, stylistic rules, and reference rules associated with factual changes. Proofreaders' rules were the standard ones used by newspaper editors. Stylistic rules included such "fashionable" changes as altering the spelling of "Moslem" to "Muslim," or ceasing to refer to various groups of Native Americans as "tribes." Reference rules specified that any factual change must be accompanied by a bibliography card that would be kept on file. My senior editor suggested that I could pick up these rules on my own, but

he did emphasize strongly one rule: *Never get information from another encyclopedia or reference book.* Another major encyclopedia had just completed a revision and this might prove a temptation among the editors.

The lines of responsibility were such that associate editors were responsible to only one senior editor. My senior editor had a production quota of 2,000 lines of copy per week due to the editors-in-chief. Each of the associate editors had quotas of 500 lines of copy due weekly. If all the associate editors met their quotas, the senior editor would have his quota. My weekly quota was delivered to the senior editor on Fridays, and his quota was due to the editors-in-chief on Wednesdays.

The senior editor would review my copy and return articles periodically to my desk with queries. Sometimes the queries were simple requests for clarification: One associate editor was asked to clarify why he referred to tennis as a bisexual sport, by which he meant that it was played by both sexes. Others asked only for additional information (the senior editor was well-versed in opera and tended to return all opera-related articles for further information) or for additional bibliographical references (for example, recent books on subjects known to the senior editor but overlooked by the associate editor). Other queries were far more extensive.

The workday began with the editors' irregular arrivals between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m., during which time we drank coffee and read newspapers. Between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. the editors gradually began to attend to their editing duties. Around 9:30 a.m., I typically left the office and went to one of the numerous libraries located on campus to find and work with relevant references. Normally, I did not return to my office until the following morning.

Initially, I could not meet my weekly quota of 500 lines of copy. I was quite scrupulous, following the guidelines exactly, even working on weekends in an attempt to maintain my quota. My senior editor assured me that all novice

editors had this problem and that I would soon overcome it. He insisted only that I work within the guidelines. However, despite my best efforts, I found that I could produce only about 300 lines per week. After a couple of months on the job, I began to sense growing irritability on the part of the senior editor with my failure to meet the stated quota.

One morning, while entering the reference room of the undergraduate library, I was surprised to find two associate editors from another department poring over a volume from another encyclopedia. Initially, the editors were unaware of my presence, and I watched in mild surprise and then in shock; they appeared to be copying from this other encyclopedia. In a joking way I inquired as to whether they were copying or not. One quickly replied that they were merely checking their facts against this encyclopedia. At this point, however, they gathered their materials and left. I doubted his statement and decided to investigate. I mentally noted the article they were working on, removed it from the turn-in basket the following Friday, copied it, and went back to the encyclopedia in the reference room. The two articles matched almost word for word. I then suspected how other editors so easily met their quotas.

There was an initial period of shock, but oddly accompanied a feeling of having obtained some useful information. Conversations with friends about my new-found information produced a range of reactions from shock to "that's the way the world works." With some degree of hesitancy I, too, began "to check facts" in other encyclopedias. When I gradually realized that the senior editors would probably never know of this activity, the "checking" increased.

Over the next few months I began to make systematic observations of the other editors. Periodically I would check the reference rooms of the libraries, noting the frequency with which I saw editors examining other encyclopedias and reference books. As all new material added to the encyclopedia was supposed to be derived from original sources, this seemed a clear violation of the spirit and

perhaps the letter of the rule against consulting other encyclopedias. Yet it was also clear that this was a widespread practice; I observed editors from all departments using secondary sources. It was also certain that one's quota could be achieved using these and related methods.[3]

TRUTHFUL ADAPTATIONS

In subsequently categorizing and analyzing my data, I came to identify and focus on two distinct issues relevant to the production of "truthful" encyclopedia articles. First, associate editors used a series of *circumvention practices* to avoid or prevent the query process; second, the *query process* and *strategies for responding to queries* were subject to a weekly pattern, varying in rhythm and emotional tone.

CIRCUMVENTION PRACTICES

Articles, once queried and returned to the associate editor, could not be counted in future quotas. Therefore, queried articles became extra weight. It behooved the associate editor to circumvent this prospect whenever possible.

Associate editors employed a number of circumvention practices to avoid or mute the query process. First, articles that proved particularly difficult because of technical information could be assigned to free-lance editors by the associate editors. Typically, the associate editors would allow these articles to accumulate until there were enough to make it worth a free-lancer's time and then make the assignment. The university press paid for this work, and the returned articles were allowed as part of one's quota. However, the expense involved and the fact that it reflected poorly on the associate editor's reputation made *free-lancing* a practice that had to be used infrequently. Nonetheless, the use of free-lancers had the merit of shifting the responsibility for any particular article away from the associate editor.

Second, associate editors might engage in the practice I came to term *underediting.* Many of the senior editors had worked together on previous editions of this encyclopedia, as well as on editions of other encyclopedias and reference books.[4] Thus, my senior editor had written many of the articles assigned to me from the previous edition. I discovered that changes I made in his articles would often be queried. For example, one article on a well-known black writer asserted, "His writings express the violent hatred of a black man for all aspects of white society." Not only would many people consider this to be an inaccurate statement, but it seemed to me to be inappropriate in an encyclopedia. The senior editor queried and rejected my efforts to change this statement. Or, again, the wine article contained only two sentences on the wines of Spain. My copy expanding the treatment of this topic was rejected on the grounds that Spanish wine was not of worldwide importance (even though I pointed out that Spain was the third-largest wine-producing country in the world). Eventually, it became clear that if I made as few changes as possible in certain articles, the likelihood of receiving queries decreased.

Underlings in any organization soon learn the consequences of challenging those in authority. Although I did not perceive my actions as a challenge—on the contrary, I viewed my editorial suggestions as those of a conscientious editor—they were so perceived by the senior editor. Successful apprentices in trades, graduate students, or students in such professions as medicine and law all learn that their conscientiousness may well prevent their advancement because it is perceived as a challenge by those above them.

Third, associate editors might avoid queries through the practice of *paraphrasing.* Particularly in light of the possibility that articles in other encyclopedias or reference books had been written or edited by these same senior editors, paraphrasing the articles would typically result in their approval and hence in an unqueried article.[5] I quickly found out, for instance, that if I wanted to include additional

historical information on organizations, I was well-advised to check and see what information other reference books or encyclopedias included on the organization at issue. Indeed, despite the directive to use only original sources, such sources were in practice distrusted· articles relying heavily or exclusively on original sources were more apt to receive queries than those modeled closely on already published secondary accounts.

A fourth practice, often employed as a last resort, involved *losing* an article, perhaps by hiding it in your desk, perhaps by literally throwing it away. If an associate editor has a particularly difficult article—typically because few references on the topic were available—that article could be deposited in one's desk. The senior editor did not require the return of articles in any particular sequence and kept no systematic records as to which and how many articles had been queried. At any given time an associate editor would have articles on as many as six or seven topics, and the senior editor was unconcerned about which topic one was working on. Only on a few occasions did the senior editor request a specific article. If an article were repeatedly queried, associate editors might, in exasperation, simply destroy the article. This solution befell even a number of articles that had appeared in the previous edition.

Finally, an editor might *thin-air* an article. This practice involved "creating" some piece of information if such information were not available. For instance, articles on religious groups, ethnic groups, and organizations required current population figures. These figures were not always available and in a number of cases had not ever been compiled. (Many groups of people in Third World countries, as well as native American groups, for example, had never been included in any systematic census.) The senior editor always insisted that we "search harder" when informed of the unavailability of such data. Although many of these articles were "lost," the fact that each such article needed only a population figure to gain acceptance provided

strong temptation to "invent" a number.[6] In the same way that population figures could be invented, so could the references documenting and supporting them.

All of these practices represent practical adaptations to organizational routines and constraints. In one sense they were survival techniques that got the job done, even if they circumvented the stated aims of the organization. Free-lancing allowed the associate editor to shift responsibility; underediting and paraphrasing permitted associate editors to "speak the same language" as senior editors and thereby avoid the vulnerability of using original sources. In the more extreme instances, when backed into a corner, associate editors turned to the practices of losing and thin-airing.

THE RHYTHM OF THE QUERY AND RESPONSE PROCESSES

The query process possessed its own internal order and temporal rhythm. Hall (1984), Jaques (1982), Zerubavel (1981), and others have distinguished between time as measured by a clock and time as experienced by the person. Clock time in the encyclopedia editing process was imposed by the publication deadline, which was in turn broken down into smaller and smaller deadlines. The senior editor's weekly rhythm was controlled by the 2,000-line quota and that of associate editors by their 500-line quota. The quotas represent clock time. However, experienced time, although constructed within the frame of clock time, possessed its own distinctive emotional tone, reflected in the character of queries. Some queries appeared inconsistent with the generally polite atmosphere of the workplace. Some queries were neutral requests for additional information, whereas others were framed in polite or even pleading language. Still others were sarcastic, sometimes even insulting: For example, the death date I put on a biographical article was returned with the query, "Are you sure this is on his tombstone?" After I began to keep systematic records, I soon established that the tone of the queries corresponded

with particular days of the week. Comparisons with queries from my senior editor with those from other senior editors showed the same pattern.

On Monday, two days from the senior editor's due date, the tone was usually *neutral.* On Tuesday, the tone of the queries turned *polite.* On the day the senior editor's quota was due, the tone became *pleading.* On Thursday, the day after copy had been turned in, queries tended to be *sarcastic.* By Friday, the tone had escalated to *insulting.* Presumably, the weekend offered enough of a buffer so that senior editors could feel their sarcastic and insulting queries would be forgotten by Monday.

The response strategies to queries by the associate editors were structurally related to these weekly rhythms. The strategies involved compliance and avoidance. Although there were exceptions to the two patterns described below, observations indicated that these were typical response strategies.

On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, when the tone of the queries was neutral, polite, or pleading, the typical response strategy was one of compliance. In addition, on these days the query standards were relaxed. For example, I had an article on concentration camps queried on Monday because of a lack of bibliographical references. On a Wednesday (pleading tone from the senior editor) the article was resubmitted and accepted in the same form as it had originally been presented.

During the first three days of the work week, the working relationship between senior editors and associate editors could be characterized as cooperative. The tone of the queries established a framework for cooperative behaviors by the associate editors. Requests for documented evidence on Friday frequently would be dropped by Wednesday. Circumvention practices typically would not be employed during these times. Associate editors tried to help the senior editors perform their job.

On Thursday and Friday, when the tone of the queries turned sarcastic or insulting, the behavior of the associate

editors tended toward avoidance. Associate editors practiced avoidance by failing to respond to the queries. As associate editors' copy was due on Friday, they concentrated their efforts on completing new articles rather than on responding to the senior editor's queries. In fact, many of the queries generated on these two days were hidden away, lost, or destroyed.

CONCLUSION

I have described a set of adaptive practices that intervene between organizational requirements and rhythms and encyclopedia submissions. Several organizational features stand out as encouraging these practices. First, most of the interchanges between the senior editor and the associate editors were *written.* Senior editors usually placed the queries on associate editors' desks while the associate editors were not there; similarly, copy with completed queries was returned in the absence of the senior editor—associate editors usually made these returns prior to the arrival of senior editors in the morning. Face-to-face interaction centered around the query process rarely occurred, maintaining a distant relationship between the senior editor and the associate editors. Additionally, associate editors and the senior editor worked in different places, the senior editor in the office and associate editors in the libraries. This distance provided a condition under which the kinds of adaptive practices described here could flourish.

Second, quantitative criteria governed editorial relations. With such criteria, meeting quota deadlines tended to become an end in itself.[7] The stated goal of the enterprise—the production of a truthful document—was undermined by the practical pressures to meet the ever-persistent quota deadlines.

Within the kinds of structural constraints mentioned above, a kind of dual fabrication (Goffman, 1974: 83-123) was taking place. From the associate editor's standpoint, circumvention procedures were designed to short-circuit

the query process, and if those failed, the avoidance was implemented. Yet another kind of fabrication was occurring, one that linked these micro practices to more macro levels. The final product, the published encyclopedia, is sold to the public as a version of the truth. Yet the practical and organizational constraints that went into its production are repressed and hidden from public sight.

The close links between the practices described here and the final product cannot be overemphasized. When organizations are established with the aim of producing the truth, problems will arise because those persons charged with this task must and will develop strategic adaptations to the real, practical constraints to which this organizational production is subject. It is perhaps even the case that those organizations that make the boldest truth claims may also be the ones most imbued with the greatest use of what has been termed, in this paper, *truthful adaptations.*

Many institutions are subject to the sorts of organizational constraints, quantitative criteria, and deadline pressures examined here. The adaptations of encyclopedia editors do not differ greatly from those found in the news media (except perhaps for time frame); Lester (1980) has shown how bargains and negotiations enter into what is considered newsworthy, and Tuchman (1978a, 1978b) demonstrates how organizational and other aspects of the institution generate and shape what the public takes to be an accurate rendering of the world. And untruthful adaptive practices employed to produce the truth have been located in other institutional settings. Human service institutions have been shown to "create" numerical data by fitting questionable behaviors into categories that are available for counting) because such data are deemed more valid by those at the top of accountability chains (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1979). Jacobs (1979) discovered that marketing research was replete with adaptative practices that, although not in accordance with research guidelines, allowed people to get the job done. At the largest level, what is being produced is culture (Peterson, 1976; Tuchman, 1983), cul-

ture which may become reified and accepted uncritically by many of its consumers.

NOTES

1. Useful studies conducted on issues dealing with truthfulness include Ludwig (1965), Blumenstiel (1970), Wolk and Henley (1970), Knapp et al. (1974), Ditton (1977), Knapp and Comadena (1979), Prus (1982), Lindskold and Walters (1983), Klockars (1984), and M. Zukerman (1984).

2. The development of generic concepts has been a goal for a number of qualitative researchers, including Miyamato (1959), Strauss (1970), Lofland (1970, 1976), Bigus et al. (1982), Couch (1984), and Prus (1985).

3. For the most part, there seemed to be a tacit understanding among associate editors that "everyone" used other encyclopedias. It was not verbalized frequently and, when it was, it was usually done in a joking manner. The longer I remained in the job, the more open other associate editors became in their use of encyclopedias and reference books; that is to say, they made no attempt to hide it when I observed them.

4. Although I was aware that certain occupations were reputedly gay-dominated (e.g., hairdressers), I was surprised to learn of a rather substantial gay component among encyclopedia and reference book editors. My guess is that certain occupations have substantial gay representation, although they are not identified in the public as "gay" occupations. Some occupations may move through a history in which a few gays are initially employed, become tolerated, and then achieve roughly equal employment rates as heterosexuals. Encyclopedia editing in the setting studied seemed to have reached this latter point.

5. Editors achieved job mobility by moving from the revision of one encyclopedia or reference book to the revision of another. When one became an editor-in-chief, he or she had a ready network of previously known editors to draw on.

6. The notion of pulling numbers out of thin-air, in fact, did occur. Included in this notion was guessing what the population of an organization or ethnic group might be, based on the latest available figure. However, the latest available figure might be ten years old or from a questionable source, and associate editors had no adequate way of estimating what the accurate figure might be. Had they increased or decreased? One often did not know.

7. Other studies have demonstrated this tendency in police work (Skolnick, 1978) and war (Chomsky and Zinn, 1972; Halberstam, 1972).

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