Fact-Checking Techniques workshop

Handout: bit.ly/verifyordiefc

Slides: bit.ly/verifyordiecraft

Checklist: bit.ly/gray-verify

Barbara Gray – chief librarian at CUNY J-school, ex-NYT. Associate prof, teaches research methods

Checking outlet that put smthng out is a first step

Are they accountable?

Transparent about where they got the info?

Beware single sources

Errors erode your credibility and make readers cynical.

Good for readers to be skeptical, not cynical. (And it’s reporter’s job to be skeptical)

Fact-checking is a discipline; it’s your job. Don’t put burden of verification on the reader

Need to develop a workflow/ process for fact-checking

Case study: Sheila Abdus-Salaam obit

Obits are a good case study. Often written years in advance, req thorough research into a life. Tons of corrections often necessary.

Lots of facts, but some vagueness and hedging

“many of”, “apparently”

Story seems to imply the suicide expl

Keep purpose in mind – tell who the person was

Pretty much everything in the story is a checkable fact.

An opinion’s not a fact. An assertion based on a fact… isn’t a fact, but you should check and address the fact it’s based on.

Notes that millennials share fake news on social a lot less than older gens, measurably. Skepticism!

Cf Rolling Stone U Virginia rape case; inadequate fact-checking was disservice both to the mag, to blamed uni officials, and to the victim.

Will go into how to fact-check someone you want to trust

Who counts as a public citizen? If they’re not famous, treat them as private person. This includes uni officials.

NYmag story a/b Stuy senior who supposedly made millions in stocks, turned out false. He’d handed them a statement that the reporter and fact-checker believed.

Should’ve compared the stock statement to other stock statements; called the issuer to verify that did indeed issue it; asked kid to show where his money was, exactly what it was in; talked to his family (siblings/ parents are good way to catch fabricators!)

Some mags have fact checkers. Most everywhere, though, are on your own to validate everything in your story. Copy editors may check easily verifiable facts, but you’re ultimately responsible.

What is a fact?

A verifiable statement

Verify every statement of fact

Verify every assertion based on fact

Need to counterargue w/ claims that you’d *like* to be true or *expect* to be true; watch for appeal to cog biases

Quick fake news checks:

whoxy.com for domain registry info is often useful

Whoxy gives history of connected websites, which can also be quite useful.

Website “About us” pages are often enough – tons of fake news sites say they’re satire or etc

Checking Snopes is good.

What do other trusted sites say?

Bit.ly/factchecksites-search – customized thing by the prof for searching mult factcheck sites at once

Google to see how (and if!) claim appears on legit journo sites

GScholar search for the claim, find scholars and researchers – see what they say about the claim!

There is somewhere out there an academic studying even super obscure things. V good to talk to such people and ask them about the claim you see!

Frequent sources of error

1. Working from memory
2. Making assumptions
3. Second-hand sources

Making assumptions – e.g. critic who watched series in wrong order and criticized it for being unclear

Memory is unreliable, both your own and other peoples’. Find documentation.

40th anniversary of moon landing – reporter who initially reported on it did an anniversary piece, said that there was a full moon that night. There wasn’t! Misremembered.

Verifiable info – what do I check? *Always* check these, even if doing 3 stories a day. Make a checklist!

* Proper names
* Place names
* Refs to time, distance, date, season
* Physical descriptions (of people, places)
* Refs to sex of anyone described
* Quotations – *and* the fact-claims within that quotatin! Don’t quote a holocaust denier w/o a check!
* Any argument or narrative that *depends on* fact

Common mistakes:

* Numbers and stats, esp bil vs mil
* Names of people, titles, locations
* Ages
* Historical facts
* Superlatives! Only, first, never, most…
  + You usually cannot verify these! Hedge if you can’t. “One of the first”, “many” rather than “most”
* Dates

“Canned facts” – always put TK or something to facts you haven’t checked yet. Easy to forget whether you’ve checked, so always mark.

Cubib – public records site, great for names, emails, relatives, addresses, voter registration

Search public records to see who house is owned by

NYT article on woman claiming to be ex gang member – should’ve asked to see her claimed gang tattoos! Should’ve asked her family!

Wikipedia

Example: sales of Catcher in the Rye. Wiki said 250k per year, with total worldwide 65m

But cited source said 10m, not 65m!

Also, secondary source – WashPo – not primary source like govt report or casefile, which reqs more caution

So, asked publisher and literary agent (Harold Ober), neither of whom would give saves

Google string that used – catcher\*rye million (sold OR printed) “harold ober”

See CUNY research guide site for googling advice

The \* indicates w/in a certain number of words

Found affidavit signed by literary agent saying 35m copies sold

Court records are great, bc often have to quantify things! E.g. if claiming harm, need to quantify the harm, so people give statements there

Companies aren’t under obligation to tell the public things, but if they sue or are sued, then they have obligation to tell things

Court records: complaint, exhibit, transcripts, affidavits (and other sworn statements) good to check

Courtreference.com – great for finding court records. Links to local courts in diff jurisdictions.

Court docs are underused! Do stuff w/ them

I bet auto-running a lot of stuff through Tabula and OCR and searching some strings would be fun

Wiki and press releases are easy to read. Need to add value beyond just reading the easy sources! Add value, in the form of context, detail, and history, which tends to be fact-based and need to be checked

Article: claiming 20b tampons and pads end up in NAm landfills every year

Was puff piece on diva cup – prob got the number straight from them w/o checking it

This has perpetuated across the web from this article! No one cites good source for it

Good approach is to start w/ sales. If there aren’t 20b units sold a year, then there’s not 20b in landfills a year

Statista database – v useful source, not open access. Statista always gives a source.

Here, cites an industry publication called IRL Storebrands. Links to original report that came from, which gives more context for the info

402m pads and 185m tampons sold 2014 US. So, 20b not plausible.

Also: always have local library card of wherever you are, and remote access to state library of any other place you work

Having access to state library databases is v useful

Lots of unis give remote access to their libraries to alums, and these often include useful databases

What’s an authoritative source?

Always ask

 Who says?

 “How do they know?”

 “Are they biased?”

 “What don’t I know?”

Eval your sources

* Any page can provide useful leads to information. Don’t stop there!
* Whose page is it? Go to the “About” page on the site. Search whoxy.com to see if registry info is public.
* Domain name: .edu, .gov, .mil?
* Do you recognize the agency, institution, individual?
* Peer-reviewed, edited scholarly publication or reference work.
  + In sci, remember peer review just means it’s not *obviously* wrong…
* If the page sources the info, go to the source.
* Is the info current? Always look for the most recent info from a primary source.
* Recognize parody, trolls or bias

Fact checking is a process

Start by keeping meticulous track/ notes of your research, incl methods and sources

Evernote/ Zotero are good. Can DL a chrome extension to keep track of sites used, download snapshot of site into Zotero, auto-annotates, space for notes

Free

You might need to turn your research over to your general counsel

Get physical with your story. Take a printout and circle everything that needs a factcheck.

When you’re writing, you’re trying to convey concepts. When you factcheck, it’s a diff task. You need to shift from more mechanical, less high-concept. V impt to make it look diff, check in diff format than you wrote it in, so that you don’t gloss over things

Example – putting line thru each letter of each word as make sure it’s correct

Read it out loud! Great for spelling and related errors

Take a break bw writing and checking

Read from the bottom back up to the top – great way to jar yourself out of glossing over.

**Where do I check?**

Always want a cocktail of sources, not just one. Not just Google, not just Lexis

Barbara’s workflow: Google News (what do journos say?), Lexis/ Factiva (great for industry reports)/ Emarketer (great for brands and media)/ SIBYL (science, industry, and business)/ related database, GScholar (what do scholars say?), at least one commercial database, sometimes public records, social media (FB/ Twitter/ Instagram for what people talk about when it comes to this – v useful for informing you on where the interest is and possible misconceptions)

Go to primary source when possible

Court doc, govt reports, transcripts, video recordings, scholarly research, autobiography

Use uni lib/ public lib/ news org electronic and print resources

Search databases of news and journo articles, like LexisNexis or ScienceDirect, which aren’t available on the web but are available thru libraries

Lexis is great for stuff from decades back that’s not gonna be free online

Never stop at just one thing!

And seeing mult sources gives you new angles, new topcis to report on

There’s a law now that federally funded research has to be open-access. Many open-access repositories are opening up

Disciplinary Repositories link in the handout for this – anthropology, etc.

Ask scholars what databases *they* look for stuff in!

Base-search.net – huge open-access scholarly portal

Semantic Scholar – all comp sci and cog sci right now, but great searchability – includes text, images, figures, data, graphs are searchable

Journalist’s Resource – database of scholarly research for journalists

INFOdocket – list of reports from govt, think tanks, interest groups, etc

Find experts or stakeholders – someone interested in topic you’re interested in here

Academic who studies immigration; interest groups that advocate for immigrants; employers of immigrants

Interest groups, think tanks, watchdogs often good sources of stats

Don’t just think a/b your question, think a/b what answer could look like. Are you going to find it in an archive? From an expert?

Who would know this? Where do they work? (Also, check out any expert you use, google them at least. Check their reputation)

If you check 5 sources every time in a workflow, you’ll be adding a lot of value whenever you write ab smthng

Even if you’re responsible for writing 6 stories a day, fact check slow

Create a habit to jar yourself out of writing mode into fact-checking mode. Make yourself feel you’re looking at smthng new. Change font, background color, text size to do that; work w/ a printout; read aloud; read from the bottom up

Check all names (business card, phone call, email), titles, place names

Ask people to write their names/ titles for you, and take what they wrote it on

Check all stats! When someone cites numbers, ask for and check the original source

Check quotations! (Record?)

Are you assuming anything? This is *not* impossible to catch. Keep track of where you got it, read your work very granularly.

Update! If you’re reporting on a crime story, make sure you refer to the latest status of the case – have they been convicted, acquitted?

Check the context in case your editor inadvertently edits in errors

Be transparent about where you get your material. Link it in your story whenever you can

Keep really good records

Snapshots of webpages and articles you use as sources

Crucial to establish a routine, a set of things you do every time.

Don’t rely on a single source. Look for evidence and independent corroboration, build your story from the outside in.

When interviewing someone, if they do not give you the details you need to corroborate their account, that is a problem.

Build story from the outside in. Get all of your external sources first, then interview the key person

Or person -> check sources -> return to person, check on what they said that didn’t corroborate

If you’re writing smthng potentially derogatory, you MUST give the person a chance to respond!

Be aware of your biases.

Confirmation bias is huge. Tendency to favor info that confirms your beliefs

When you feel that reaction, control yourself.

Crucial to challenge yourself

UVa case – survivor said reporter had preconceived notion of showing that frats bad and administration uncaring

Also, reporter never contacted friends or alleged attacker directly, only secondhand

thru Jackie

In testimony had phrases like “I had a sense” and “I trusted her” – don’t trust your instincts like that. Journalism is not a faith-based institution

Nothing is too difficult to address. If have to ask painful questions, you can put it through “my editor needs me to ask.” (When have to ask tough questions, blame your editor).

Let someone share their story (maybe over hours) w/o interruptions

Then follow-up interview to go over what’s hazy from that

Need to ask what they told police (and compare that to police report!), ask them to respond to what perpetrator (whom you must also contact) claims

How do you talk to someone whose family member just died? Think a/b what the goal is

This is the one time that this family will get to tell their story

This is chance for the world to care about them

Find out about this person so can tell their story. Journalism is about people. You are there to tell that person’s story. Slash, give them a chance to tell their story.

People often refuse initially and then come back to you. B/c this *is* only chance to tell it before news cycle moves on.

And need to question people vs sources, tell them what sources say and ask again in light of it.

Thwart your confirmation bias

Counter-argue your story hyp, or source’s assertion

Ask expert what opponents of a claim say – and who are they!

Actively seek out contrary info

Rigorously test and verify every fact and assertion of fact before you publish, so you’ll be able to stand by the accuracy of your work later

Need to get to the point that no one can come back and show opposing evidence you overlooked.

Checking user-generated content, e.g. social media

Have to make sure stuff’s not an old video, or a video of smthng completely diff of what’s claimed – those things happen a log

Example 2-step process from Patrick Meier, who does humanitarian (eg NGO) social media reporting

1. Authenticate source
   1. Examine profile info, number, content and history of posts, bias, no of ollowers/ friends, retweets
      1. Have they been posting from this location/ on this topic for a long time?
   2. Engage source
      1. Talk to them. Put the burden on the source – ask for more info, pictures, videos
      2. Andy Carvin did great Arab Spring coverage, from the US. This is his method.
      3. Ask source if they know anyone w/ more info, more videos, etc – this tends to dissuade fakers
2. Triangulate info
   1. Ay multiple, indep sources corroborating this story?
   2. ID and authenticate the origin of this story
   3. Crowdsourcing – have people in the field who know other people in the field
      1. Need to engage w/ people before you need them! Build a social net, base of contacts
      2. But always check and challenge what you’re told
   4. Follow photographic clues – see First Draft’s Guide For Verifying Photos and Videos
      1. First Draft is a great source of guides for verifying online content

Storyful’s verification checklist – 3-step

**Date**: timestamp, other corroborating uploads and sources/ reports, EXIF data (dates, locations, names of files)

**Source**: account history, linked websites, linked social profiles, account profile pic reverse image searching

**Location**: geo data, Google Satellite imagery, google maps, weather reports from Wolfram Alpha

Location of the sun, whether there are leaves on the trees, visible buildings – good for location claims

DW Verification Checklist

What is the content claiming to show? What’s the language used – (“Syrian” source w/ a Brooklyn accent)? Google username/ twitter handle of person

Spotting hoax twitter accounts during breaking news

1. Look at past tweets. Same place over years? Talking about same topics over years?
2. Check bio and social footprint
3. Get to know the area
4. Reach out and talk to someone else
5. Can go w/ your gut if aren’t certain they’re reliable

It is better to be right than first

Twitter advanced search often lets you debunk stuff

“Serena Williams” “I saw” for example

V useful to use natural language – “I”, sometimes profanity

Searching someone’s Twitter handle can often let you get their real name, and from there contact info

Call e.g. restaurant or other establishment they make claims about – often can get security video if something happened!

Hoaxy – new fact-checking site

Can apply to FB Signal group – bunch of journalistic social media analysis there, good way to get to user-generated content, see what’s bubbling up

Ban.jo – can get free access as a media pro. Ask for it! [jvernon@teambanjo.com](mailto:jvernon@teambanjo.com) ask for login and training.

Geolocated social content – only stuff that’s geotagged. Good for verifying

Draws from bunch of social media sites. Uses ML to aggregate. Uses weather reports, police scanners, and traffic reports to check for likely hoaxes

Can search by geolocation on Twitter – do that, then narrow down with a keyword search. Knowing where it’s coming from is v helpful.

Geo Search Tool – can search location, time, keyword for youtube videos

Frame by Frame for Youtube – often can let you detect hoaxes, e.g. spot seams, note landmarks

First Draft News – great resource for how to verify

Verification Handbook for Investigate Reporting is also good

Bellingcat – great open source int, crowdsourcing info on conflicts around the world

Founder noted for proving, using old missile specs and pictures of containers, that Assad had indeed used chem weapons

Re talking to experts – what’s a good way to make them get back to you?

Always make sure to have backups! Email all at one time, maybe follow up w/ a phone call, see if can get 1/ 3 to get back to you

Approach: want them to know you’ve already done a bunch of research, know a lot – make it clear you’re not asking them to swoop in and solve all your problems. Make your due diligence clear, let them know what you did already, what you already know, and what you want them to answer! Not “tell me everything you know about X.”

A “I can’t imagine it taking more than 15/ 20 minutes of your time” is often helpful.

Asking people for a 2nd opinion is often effective way to get response

Embedding tweets – no, you don’t need person’s permission, bc it’s on another platform. But in general do need permission to use other peoples’ content. If is breaking news and v newsworthy, can use like one picture and small quote, unlikely to have a problem. If use more, might be a problem. A status or a tweet isn’t a problem.

FOIA and FOIL requests

Muckrock has good resources for how-to – platform for sending out a request through them. Recommend more making smthg *using* their template, then copy-paste and send it out yourself

Need to send to right agency FOIL officer. There’s a template, need to state that your request is based on this law, make request as specific as possible (but not *so* specific that excludes useful info! Balance), and do follow-up nicely at first and then w/ what’s called an effective denial notice if still don’t get it.

As journo, always want to ask for a public interest waiver so don’t get charged for labor/ processing

Companies, unis, researchers do a ton of these requests, more than journos do

Email Barbara Gray if have more questions!