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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to test the quality of arguments advanced by journalists in award-winning reporting. The arguments will be outlined and evaluated with tools from argumentation theory, informal logic, and critical thinking that engage the reporting's evidence and reasoning. The benefits of using argumentation, informal logic, and critical thinking to evaluate journalism will follow from journalism's own theory of its role in a democracy.

Goals

Journalists are fond of telling audiences why it is important that journalists produce journalism. Journalists are also fond of telling audiences why it is important that audiences consume journalism or, lately, with some exceptions, that audiences produce journalism themselves (for example, Beckett, 2008; but see Pitts Jr., 2010).

Journalists are less fond of telling audiences when the audiences have consumed a sufficient amount of journalism, or when the available journalism is simply not worth consuming. But journalists must have answers to these questions. Their answers need not be a dichotomous "yes" or "no", but journalists must have a point at which they would concede that their profession's output is of such poor quality that the audience would generally be better off doing something else. Otherwise, journalists risk being stuck in an absolutist position of saying that anything called "journalism" is always valuable.

The success of this paper can, then, be judged by whether it accomplishes two goals. One goal is suggesting a measure along which journalism's quality can be said to pass the low point of no return, as it were. That measure is based in the attention given to reasoning and evidence by argumentation and informal logic. The other goal is testing the measure on the apex of achievement in American journalism: Pulitzer Prize-winning reporting.

Rationale

Why is it important to know the strength of evidence and reasoning in journalists' arguments? Because that knowledge helps people confront a core question of living in a democracy, one that journalists themselves attempt to help people confront: "What should we do?"

People seeking to participate in democracies by answering "what should we do?" need avenues for studying the way their world is and how it should be. Journalists, through their reports, attempt to describe the world — its governance, its economy, its arts and sciences, and so on — and occasionally also contemplate how the world should be.

Journalists justify their importance in a democracy through these reports. As will be discussed, they have created a theory of democracy in which their work, based on their monitoring of local communities and beyond, provides information without which democratic citizens could not, and perhaps would not, fully participate in a democracy.

But journalists are only one purveyor of descriptions of and ideas about the world. People could get their fill of descriptions and ideas by, say, studying government reports, or reading philosophy,

or talking with their neighbors.

Confronting these options — and also confronting the limited time available to do any of them — one must choose some routes to pursue ideas and information over others. But how?

One way to choose, if the goal is to study the world, is by considering the quality of the arguments available via each option.[1]

Audiences using a quality-of-argument measure will want to know whether they will likely come away from the journalism, government report, philosophy, or conversation having been confronted with a position that was backed by reasons and evidence, or at least whether they can expect the reasons and evidence to have affected their positions. Or, is it more likely that they will be disappointed?

Argumentation and informal logic can aid in measuring the quality of reasoning and evidence, and in turn the quality of arguments, whose target is our beliefs about the way the world is.

A source that continually provides substandard arguments such that audiences rarely can adopt the conclusions or have their thinking affected probably does not deserve much of their limited time (assuming, at least, that superior options exist). Says Hitchcock (2005):

> information used to arrive at an answer to one's question must be good information, in terms of the conditions previously mentioned for justified premisses [e.g., that appeals to expertise be made only regarding "some subject matter in which there is expertise"]. There is no point in taking bad information into account, still less in devoting time and effort to acquiring it. (p. 383)

Hence, the justification for this paper is that its conclusions about whether journalism provides sound arguments will help determine whether journalism deserves the time of people who crave knowledge about the world as part of their participation in democracy. The paper will also test journalists on how well they fulfill their own vision of the role of journalism in democracy.

[1]This option isn't the obvious choice it might seem to be, as highlighted by the briskly evolving ethical standards of online journalism. In the middle of a conflict-of-interest controversy at the technology blog TechCrunch, M.G. Siegler, then a journalist at the site, wrote that "information," not necessarily arguments, seduces news consumers: "Ultimately there is only one thing that matters: information. People don't care how they get it, just that they get it. If they don't think they can trust it from one source, they'll find another way to get it. It really is that simple. The market will decide. All this back-and-forth is meaningless" (Siegler, 2011, para. 26; for commentary, see Anderson, 2011).

The next section introduces more fully journalism's theory of democracy, along with the fields of argumentation, informal logic, and critical thinking. It also reviews literature related to the four fields. This paper lacks the space to provide the overview that these fields deserve, but enough depth can be provided to illustrate how they interrelate.

Following that review, the research questions are presented and the methodology detailed. Next comes the analysis of the sample, followed by a summary and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

The first half of this section introduces the ideas motivating the upcoming analysis. A review of the relevant literature then follows.

Journalism's theory of democracy

The story journalists tell about themselves is, overwhelmingly, one of service to democracy. Hanitzsch et al. recently surveyed journalists around the world and found wide agreement that a primary goal of journalism is to provide information related to political decisions (2011, p. 280). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) found much the same in their surveys of journalists and "journalism mission statements" (p. 14–15).

From a theoretical perspective, Christians et al. (2009) found that the "monitorial" role of journalism in a democracy "is probably the most widely recognized and least controversial in terms of conventional ideas about what the press should be doing" (p. 125).

Gans (2003) termed this phenomenon "Journalism's Theory of Democracy" (p. 55). Under the theory, journalists are given the task of informing citizens, under the assumption that citizens who attend to the news will increase their participation in politics, thereby improving democracy (p. 34).

One way that democracy's hold on journalism is exemplified is that the connection remains a part of justifications for journalism, even when those justifications simultaneously critique its

mainstream practice. For example, the "public journalism" movement of the 1990s advocated for an expanded presence for journalists in public life, but Charity (1995) reported that the journalists who introduced the movement thought "journalism ought to make it as easy as possible for citizens to make intelligent decisions about public affairs" (p. 2). The communitarian perspective advocated by Christians, Ferré, and Fackler (1993) also gave an important role to claims about the way the world is (for example, p. 97) — the sorts of claims required of the monitorial role.

To critique journalism on whether it meets its democratic goals requires a way to actually measure whether journalists accomplish those goals. One method of measurement uses theories of argumentation, informal logic, and critical thinking.

Argumentation

According to van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans, argumentation theory examines "the production, analysis, and evaluation of argumentative discourse" (1996, p. 12).[2] They define argumentation as "activity of reason aimed at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint ... by putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judge." (p. 5)

Modern argumentation theory begins with a particular concern for the way humans actually argue in daily life — how they take stances on issues.

To begin with, humans generally argue about controversial issues. "A person is in an argumentative situation when he [or she] addresses himself persuasively to an idea against which objections are likely to be in his audience's minds," said Black (1965, pp. 149–150).

Yet despite the existence of controversy, the purpose of engaging in arguments, at least as analyzed with argumentation theory, is not to "win." Instead, the purpose is to explore the possibility for improving, and acknowledge the complexity of, human affairs (Cherwitz & Darwin, 1995).

[2]This paper understands "argument" in the form that O'Keefe (1977) defined as "argument (1)," indicating a position, an argument "that" something. O'Keefe distinguished it from "argument (2)," or arguments "about" something. Later, Hample (1985) introduced "argument (0)," which considered the relationship between cognition and argumentation.

Indeed, a strong strand of humanism has influenced modern argumentation research (see Boger, 2006). Brockriede (1975) proudly "[denied] an interest in logical systems, in messages, in reasoning, in evidence, or in propositions — *unless these things involve human activity rather directly*" (p. 179, his emphasis).

Informal logic

Informal logic takes up the development of ideas relating to answering: How good is this argument? In particular, it has an interest in analyzing "nontechnical everyday discourse and discourse about issues in the *polis*." (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 164).

Informal logicians seek to answer "how good is this argument?" while avoiding formal logic (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 177). They turn, in part, to fallacy theory to provide a standard for providing that answer. Fallacies

> stem from a structural flaw in the argument, from the irrelevance of a premise, from the unacceptability of a premise, from the insufficiency of the combined premises of an argument to establish a conclusion, or from the failure to give an effective rebuttal. (Damer, 2005, p. 43)

Contemporary work in fallacies among informal logicians largely stems from Hamblin's (1970) attack on the "standard treatment" of them. Hamblin "issued a challenge to logicians to rebuild the theory of fallacy" (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 180).

For example, it is generally accepted today that "fallacious" reasoning is not always harmful to an argument (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 181). So, scholars have questioned when, say, appeals to authority are acceptable and the appropriate response to them (Hardwig, 1985; Cederblom and Paulsen, 1988). Other research investigates "new" fallacies or refines existing ones (for example, Leddy, 1986).

Even an adherent of fallacy theory must admit, however, that there is not always consensus regarding how to label errors as one fallacy or another. For consistency, then, this paper will rely on Damer's (2005) classifications. His list is extensive, and he also helpfully suggests constructive responses to someone using the fallacies he outlines.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking can be seen as an extension of informal logic. It prepares consumers of information for people who, in "textbooks, magazines, and on the Internet . . . present ideas they want us to accept" (Browne & Keeley, 2004, p. 2).

A critical thinking approach to arguments includes examining them for harmful fallacies. But critical thinking also encompasses questions such as:

- What are the issues and the conclusions?
- Which words or phrases are ambiguous?
- How good is the evidence? (Browne & Keeley, 2004, p. 13).

Additionally, an important distinction from critical thinking used in this paper is one between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" issues, or arguments. "Prescriptive issues are those that raise questions about what we should do or what is right or wrong" (Browne & Keeley, 2004, p. 17). Descriptive issues "demand answers that attempt to describe the way the world is, was, or is going to be" (p. 17).

The critical questions involved in addressing prescriptive and descriptive arguments differ slightly; in any case, this paper, for the most part, addresses the arguments offered by journalists about the way the world is, was, or will be — journalists' descriptive arguments.

Putting it together

News headlines help illustrate that journalists generally do present descriptive arguments:

- "High-end medical option prompts Medicare worries"
- "As many as 1,000 killed in Ivory Coast town, Red Cross says"
- "Budget Battle to Be Followed by an Even Bigger Fight"

These are stories about the way the world is, was, or will be. Some people *are* worried about Medicare; many people *were* killed in Africa; there *will be* a political fight about a particular topic.

If journalism generally consists of offering descriptive arguments about the world, as these headlines suggest, and if critical thinking addresses descriptive arguments, then journalism can be analyzed and judged using the tools of critical thinking, and by extension informal logic and argumentation.

Each of these critical questions outlined above moves a thinker towards accepting, or rejecting as incomplete, the conclusions in an argument. The critical questions assist people who have to make decisions while they continually confront information relevant to those decisions.

Citizens in a democracy face many decisions. In a democracy, they get to choose which people and ideas they support. What or whom should they choose?

Enter journalism, whose *raison d'etre* is to provide information vital to this choosing process. Journalists justify their work through its contribution of information relevant to decision-making in democracy.

So the tools and ideas of critical thinking, informal logic, and argumentation apply to journalistic discourse — that is, descriptive arguments. It is no accident that the early argumentation theorists promoted "argumentative discourse to broaden and secure a more democratic society" (Boger, 2006, p. 152).

Critical thinking draws on informal logic, and so shall this paper. The existence of errors in reasoning tips off audiences to reasons for which one would potentially, though not certainly, reject a conclusion of a journalist.

Argumentation theory, while not necessarily commenting on the acceptability of arguments, assists in providing a clear statement of them. The Toulmin model is one of many models offered by argumentation as a means of mapping arguments. This paper will employ the Toulmin model because of its ubiquity (Loui, 2005) and seemingly broad applicability (within fields of communication, see Ripley, 2008).

There is a final reason for thinking argumentation and informal logic apply in particular to journalism: Their explicit focus on analyzing everyday, imperfect argumentation born out of particular contexts.

Argumentation and informal logic utilize ideas that target how real people work and the moments when they must decide and act, in situations where they are expected to use methods other than force to affect their interlocutors.

Concurrently, journalism fashions itself as the "first draft of history." It is understandably imperfect because of deadlines, reticent sources, or other constraints.

So applying the complex, exacting tools of formal logic to evaluate journalism would be unfair. Argumentation, critical thinking, and informal logic are more appropriate for evaluating journalism because they agreeably meet journalism on its pockmarked turf and happily play by its pragmatic rules.

The next section reviews previous literature merging argumentation, informal logic, critical thinking, and journalism. Scholars in journalism have approached the kinds of questions of interest to informal logicians,[3] and informal logicians have commented on those questions in regard to journalism, but both sides often use different language and approaches. Studies of journalism and argumentation, however, are less frequent.

Literature review

Argumentation

From argumentation, Kruse (2001) studied themes in French and German newspaper coverage of an environmental crisis to determine the positions on the crisis they evoked in readers. She concluded that the themes of the articles constituted arguments. Brossmann and Canary (1990) focused more on arguments "about" something in their quantitative analysis of "Nightline" debates. They counted the frequency of particular argumentative moves by the moderator and participants.

[3]For brevity, the literature review uses "informal logic" to refer to both it and critical thinking except where specified.

Richardson (2001) employed theories from van Eemeren and Toulmin in the service of uncovering racism within letters to the editor published in British newspapers.

From journalism, Barnhurst and Mutz's (1997) content analysis of changes in what constituted "news" from 1894 to 1994 implicated the arguments journalists present, and the warrants and backing needed to demonstrate them. Similarly, Schudson's (1982) study of changes in "conventions" of press coverage of State of the Union addresses (p. 99), while not "[making] reporting less truthful," implied that journalist changed the stakes: They must appeal to more than their senses to demonstrate the truth of what they write.

Fallacies

A few writers explicitly address news and fallacies.[4]

Buss and Hofstetter (1977) analyzed the "logical structure" of political news on CBS, ABC, and NBC (p. 341). They counted the frequency of "idiosyncracies," including *argumentum ad populum* and *ad hominem*, but they did not record anything beyond a running total.

From journalism, Merrill and Odell (1983) wrote a textbook to introduce philosophical subjects relevant to journalism students, including rhetoric, logic, and epistemology. Despite their efforts, complaints persist that journalists allow interviewees to hold forth fallaciously, unchallenged (Stoff, 2008).

Some fallacies attract increased attention online. Of late, Jay Rosen has attacked what he calls the "linkless hypebuster." This term describes articles supposedly debunking claims without linking to any examples of the claims in question — in essence, the articles contain straw-man arguments (Rosen, 2011).

Arguments from authority

Authorities are everywhere modern life, but when is an appeal to them fallacious?

[4]The use of "news" is intentional. Discussions of informal logic or argumentation commonly suggest that the fields be tested on newspaper editorials (for example, Scriven, 1976, p. 167; Rothbart, 1983, p. 16; Jason, 1987, p. 22;). That's fine, but it should be made clear that this paper focuses on the news columns.

Some scholars who have studied fallacies have concluded that not all appeals to authority are fallacious. Browne and Keeley say an appeal to authority is fallacious "unless we know that these authorities have special knowledge about [the] issue" (p. 89). For Damer, an appeal is fallacious if the authority is not actually authoritative, unidentified, or prone to bias (p. 79; see also Walton, 1997).

The way in which authority is invoked is also important. Walton and Macagno (2011), in work that might especially interest journalists, outlined several critical questions that arise from the citation of an authority through a quotation. They also have reservations about the argumentative potency of anonymous sources.

Assumptions and bias

The concept of assumptions — unstated prescriptive or descriptive premises needed for an argument to be true (Browne & Keeley, 2004, pp. 53–55) — is crucial to informal logic. O'Halloran (2009) argued that news media attune their audiences to implicit premises over time through the way they cover a topic. McMurtry (1988) and Ulrich (1992) discussed unasked questions in mass media about topics such as capitalism, along with assumptions favoring political centrism, if not conservatism.

Assumptions — or "bias" — is a perennial topic of journalism studies. Hallin's (1986) spheres of legitimate controversy, consensus, and deviance can be seen as describing assumptions that must hold for the arguments in mass media to make sense (p. 116). Scholars also note that even non-mainstream journalism must carry at least some assumptions that can be questioned (Atton, 2008).

Language and ambiguity

A subset of research in argumentation and informal logic about journalism discusses journalism's tendency to argue "by suggestion." For example, Marlin (1984) suggested that verbs in newspaper headlines ("fled," "fouls up") can be dangerously ambiguous. May (1988) discussed "invited in-

ferences," defined as "suggestions or pragmatic meanings" prompted by certain kinds of speech (p. 114). Audiences are invited, even encouraged, May said, to not approach ambiguities in reporting.

Glasser and Ettema (1993) approached the power of suggestion from the side of journalism in their analysis of the use of irony in news. As with May's invited inferences, what the ironic journalistic text "means" is not what it explicitly "says" (Glasser & Ettema, 1993, p. 325). Yet somewhere there must be a meaning for those with the proper background knowledge.

Evidence

Lastly, there is perhaps the quintessential news question: How good is the evidence?

From critical thinking, Johnson (1988) reminded readers that most reporting on polls lacks the information required to fully accept or reject the polls' findings. Kahane (1980) dedicated a part of a textbook chapter to evaluating evidence in the news (p. 222).

From journalism, Rupar (2006), in a study of New Zealand newspapers, found that nearly two-thirds of stories lacked contextual information about how at least some information was obtained. The commentator Jack Shafer maintains a "bogus trend story" series, which targets stories claiming that, for example, child pornography is increasing but lacking sufficient data to show it (Shafer, 2010).

3. Methodology

This study examines the quality of argument in journalism using tools from argumentation, informal logic, and critical thinking. It asks research questions that provide the raw material, so to speak, for choosing whether to accept an argument:

1. What are the issues and conclusions offered in a sample of Pulitzer-Prize winning stories?

2. What reasons and evidence to support those conclusions are offered in the stories?

3. What important ambiguities do the stories contain? Important ambiguities here means undefined terms in stories that (a) could be reasonably defined in several ways and (b) would not support a story's conclusion under at least one of those alternate definitions.

4. What important descriptive assumptions do the stories contain?

5. What fallacies are present in the stories?

6. How well do the reasons and evidence support the conclusion?

Critical case sampling was used to select the stories reviewed. Critical case samples are used to examine unusually important instances of a class. The conclusions drawn from the critical cases can lead to "logical generalizations" that "'if it happens here, it will happen anywhere,' or ... 'if that group is having problems, then we can be sure all of the groups are having problems"' (Patton, 1990, p. 174).

This study analyzed the 2011 Pulitzer Prize winners in the Public Service and Investigative Reporting categories, or a total of 25 stories.[5] The analyses are based on the versions of each story available on the Pulitzer Prize website, except where otherwise noted.[6]

The Pulitzer Prizes denote what the profession considers unusually powerful journalism (see Bates, 1991). A critical case sample of Pulitzer-winning reporting, then, provides a window into whether audiences could expect everyday journalism to provide quality arguments: If the elite reporting has problems, then it seems more likely that everyday reporting has problems, too.

The stories

The *Los Angeles Times* and *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* captured the 2011 Pulitzer Prizes in the two categories under study.

[5]This paper derives from a larger study that also analyzed the arguments in the stories that won the 2011 Pulitzer in Explanatory Reporting. The larger study, available at http://argumentinjournalism.wordpress.com/thesis, also examined some instances of stronger argumentation within the stories reviewed. Additional commentary and any errata to this paper will also be posted to that website.

[6]Non-text material from each series included on the Pulitzer website, such as illustrations, was also left out of the analysis.

The Pulitzer Prize in Public Service is awarded for "a distinguished example of meritorious public service by a newspaper or news site through the use of its journalistic resources." The *Los Angeles Times* won the 2011 award for "its exposure of corruption in the small California city of Bell where officials tapped the treasury to pay themselves exorbitant salaries, resulting in arrests and reforms" (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2011b). In all, the *Times* published more than 200 stories about Bell (Santo, 2011). Sixteen stories, dated July 15 to December 28, 2010, were made available as Pulitzer entries.

Paige St. John of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* won the Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Reporting. The award goes to "a distinguished example of investigative reporting by an individual or team, presented as a single article or series, using any available journalistic tool." St. John examined "weaknesses in the murky property-insurance system vital to Florida homeowners, providing handy data to assess insurer reliability and stirring regulatory action" (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2011a).

This study has its basis in journalism's attempt to benefit democracy, and the benefit to democracy that would result from strong arguments presented in these three series is generally clear. For the *Los Angeles Times*, exposing corruption by local officials seems transparently beneficial to democracy. The *Herald-Tribune* series, while nominally about the insurance industry, also has implications for democratic life. It examines the relationship between what is legal for Florida insurers to do and the actions of state elected officials and regulators, both of which St. John often questions.

4. Results and analysis

The first half of this section will describe some commonalities, or themes, among the arguments in each of the stories analyzed. These themes specifically address RQ2, regarding reasons and evidence; RQ4, regarding important descriptive assumptions; and RQ5, regarding fallacies, particularly Damer's fallacy of Irrelevant Authority. The second half of this section will approach the research questions by providing a full analysis of the quality of arguments in one story from the

sample.

For the sake of reducing monotony, in this section the six research questions are usually addressed by their content, not number. Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraphs in the story under discussion, and references to Damer indicate (2005).

Commonalities among the arguments

Insufficient evidence

This research set out with a focus on fallacies in journalists' arguments. But fallacies were not found to be a common source of weakness. Instead, far more stories than expected showed difficulty marshaling enough evidence to support their claims.[7] Some provided little or no evidence at all.

The kinds of conclusions for which insufficient evidence was presented were not limited to broad or narrow conclusions, or long or short articles.

On September 6, the *Los Angeles Times* argued that the city of Bell "went on an aggressive push to increase municipal revenue by impounding cars in the city, police officers say" (1). The police officers quoted by the reporter[8] presented plenty of evidence to support the claim that the city "aggressively pushed" to impound cars (4, 16, 18, 19, 21). The city, too, confirmed the impound effort. On the other hand, none of the quotes or paraphrases of the police or of city officials spoke to the motivation behind the increase.

So although the reporter claimed that the impounds were to increase municipal revenue, which is an important claim, nothing she reported police officers as saying confirmed it.

The most direct evidence supporting the reporter's conclusion about the motivation behind the impounds was a reference to another police officer, James Corcoran, who, the reporter said, told

[7] "Claim" and "conclusion" are used interchangeably in this section.

[8] Although this paper refers to "the reporter" and "reporters" as the progenitors of the arguments under analysis, it acknowledges that such references are oversimplifications of how newsrooms operate and the potential influences on how stories turn out.

"city leaders" in 2009 that the impounds were meant to increase revenue, not seize cars endangering the city.

But the reporter did not tell readers anything about the conversation itself, such as what the city said in return, or how Corcoran "complained" to officials. Was it in a meeting? By letter? Readers weren't even told the source of the reporter's knowledge about the complaint or its content. It had no attribution.

The reporter in this story easily showed that Bell aggressively impounded cars, but offered little to demonstrate that the purpose of the impounds was, as she stated, to "increase municipal revenue." Although the reporter in this case made some attempt to provide evidence for their claims a surprising number of conclusions in stories for both the *Times* and the *Herald-Tribune* had no support.

Some of these conclusions were fairly serious ones. For instance, the *Times* wrote in their lede on November 2 that "officials in Bell arbitrarily required some businesses to make payments to the city totaling tens of thousands of dollars annually, in at least one case threatening a business owner with closure if he failed to comply, according to interviews and records reviewed by The Times" (1). The claim that "in at least one case" a business owner was threatened was never revisited or substantiated in the story.

Many other conclusions rested on generic references to "documents" or to a single "expert" of questionable authority. Such claims were found in, for example, the *Times*' stories of July 15 (about the national ranking of Bell officials' salaries), August 8 (about the "norm" of compensation packages for city managers) and September 1 (about some characteristics of loans given by the city of Bell)

"Insufficient evidence" is a relative allegation, and some readers might find sufficient what this study labels otherwise. But the evidence described above provides a good sense of what is meant by "insufficient" here. Although no attempt at formal quantification was made, evidence problems similar to the above sketches affected roughly half of the conclusions examined for this study.

Problematic descriptive assumptions

RQ4 asked, What important descriptive assumptions do the stories contain? Although much media criticism focuses on assumptions in stories relating to some sort of political bias, the pattern of note in this study focuses on those descriptive assumptions that are less polarizing, but still capable of instilling doubt in the strength of reporters' conclusions.

The frequency of key descriptive assumptions in stories was less than the frequency of conclusions with poor evidence, or even instances of appeals to irrelevant authority, discussed below. Instead, what was noticeable, particularly in the *Los Angeles Times*, were key descriptive assumptions embedded in conclusions likely to outrage readers.

For example, in the first story of the *Times*' series, the reporters questioned whether the city manager and other top officials in Bell deserved their salaries, which were in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.[9] Paragraph 2 attempted to justify their concern by noting that the salary of the Bell police chief, Randy Adams, was higher than those of the Los Angeles police chief, Los Angeles County sheriff, and New York City police commissioner.

If readers accepted the descriptive assumption that, usually, pay for police chiefs (or any city official) should be positively correlated with a city's population or square mileage, then the comparison gave them reason to think that Adams's salary was overkill. But readers were given no basis to accept that descriptive assumption.

Even were some basis for it given, the assumption could be easily challenged as oversimplistic, considering other information in the story. The story offered several bases on which city officials' pay might be structured: the job responsibilities, work product, or what residents feel comfortable paying. Readers could also probably think of other ways to calculate that salary, such as past successes.

[9]The reporters did not explicitly say that "top officials in Bell are overpaid." But much of their story consisted of providing evidence that answered the question "Do top officials in Bell deserve their salaries?" in the negative. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) confronted a similar scenario in analyzing *The New York Times*'s reporting during the 2008 presidential race that Sen. John McCain might have had an affair with a lobbyist. Drawing on semiotics — "the study of understanding language and symbol" (p. 113) — they considered it reasonable to say that the story's conclusion was that McCain had the affair even though the report didn't say so outright. The connotation and implication of the words used in the story conveyed it (p. 112).

The discussion of the salary of Robert Rizzo, the city administrator and the *Times*'s highest-value target, met a similar fate. His salary was compared to administrators in "a far wealthier city with about 7,000 fewer people," a city "with a population close to 500,000," and the Los Angeles County Chief Executive. Each comparison was packed with a descriptive assumption — that pay for city administrators should correlate with population, citizen wealth, or Los Angeles County. While any of these assumptions might be justified, the reporters did not provide a reason to think so or a reason against other possible bases for comparison.

One basis for the salary structure that was given in the story, however, is the law. If nothing else, it probably would have been justifiable for the reporters to assume that an answer to "What should Rizzo and Adams be paid?" is that the pay should be legal. But the reporters quoted a member of the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office saying that the pay *was* legal (14), so that approach wouldn't help justify their conclusion.

Irrelevant Authority

Irrelevant Authority, another prominent fallacy, appeared in the stories under analysis here in the form of relying on authorities or experts whose weight was questionable.

Although there were plenty of appeals to authority in the Investigative and Public Service series, there was no noticeable pattern of when questionable appeals would appear. In her October 24 story, for example, St. John generically referred to "industry watchers" (81) to support her claim that insurers' financial reserves were declining. But she named none of the watchers or described why they would have expertise about the situation.

The same goes for Dave Mora, the "West Coast regional director of the International City/ County Management Association, and a retired city manager," who was called upon, along with "experts in city government," by the *Times* in their initial story in the series on July 15 (12). The experts were said by the reporters to have been "amazed at the salaries" Bell paid to its officials. None of these "experts" were named or described, no reason was given to think that the "West Coast regional director" of the management association would be a position with expertise or

training in paying city officials, and no sense of whether "expertise" in such things could exist was on offer. Additionally, Mora's experience as a city manager was questionable in that the reporters did not say where or when he worked as a manager or why readers should believe his experience remained relevant today.

There were instances of similarly questionable appeals to authority throughout the Public Service and Investigative categories, but they were not overwhelming. For that matter, it was not clear that the questionable appeals even outnumbered the substantiated ones.

Story analysis

The remainder of this section presents an in-depth analysis of one story in the sample, drawn from the Investigative category. The analysis will also include a Toulmin model of one of its conclusions.

'Weak insurers put millions of Floridians at risk' (February 28, 2010)

This first story in Paige St. John's series asked a broad question: "Are private insurance companies in Florida equipped to protect homeowners in case of a hurricane?"

She opened with what appeared to be a clear statement of the conclusions she planned to demonstrate:

> The Herald-Tribune spent more than a year examining Florida's property insurers, tracing the ownership of more than 70 companies through shell corporations and reviewing the financial filings of each. It found:
>
> - One in three privately insured Florida homeowners relies on insurers that exhibit one or more signs of financial risk.
> - More than 100,000 homeowners relied on companies barely capable of paying for house fires, let alone hurricanes. These insurers' reserves come so close to the state's $4 million minimum requirement that they operate with only a few hundred thousand dollars of their own to pay claims.
> - During the 2009 hurricane season, at least 38,000 Florida homes were insured by companies state regulators knew would fail. Homeowners were not told until after hurricane season, when one company was shut down and the other had to sell.

- Lawmakers and regulators have ignored warnings and encouraged private companies to stretch their limited cash further. They have pushed companies to insure more and more homes without increasing the money set aside to pay claims, a practice that put state residents farther out on a limb.
- Larger dangers loom. Despite rising property values, one in three Florida carriers has decreased the cash set aside for storms. (6–11)

St. John provided other conclusions in the story besides the above. For example, her lede stated that "millions of Floridians now bet their homes on property insurers that teeter on the edge of financial failure." The second section, under the heading "Why upstart insurers dominate in Florida," was a short argument about that topic. The clarity of the story was harmed, in fact, by the lack of a clear issue statement, leaving readers unsure of how or whether these non-bulleted conclusions were meant to mesh with the neatly listed ones.

This analysis will focus on only the claims in the list just quoted, primarily because of the language used to introduce them — namely the preface describing a yearlong examination of insurers. The presentation invites a critical examination.

So, starting from the top, what evidence did St. John use to demonstrate that "one in three privately insured Florida homeowners relies on insurers that exhibit one or more signs of financial risk"?

She was fairly clear in how she defined whether a company was at risk and why she chose that definition. She consulted with "a half-dozen experts" from "the industry" who gave "several important indicators of financial weakness and they provided benchmarks for each" (60–62). She turned to people in insurance, she said, because the state "will not name the companies ['on the verge of collapse'] or say how many are in trouble" (59). However, she did not specify what records she examined, where she obtained them, or her methodology in examining them.[10]

Reporting the result of her examination, she wrote:

[10]To St. John's credit, however, she and the Herald-Tribune compiled an online database of insurers and information about them such as "capital" and "South Florida Risk." Readers unconvinced or curious about her conclusions can use the database to supplement the information in the stories. As said, however, the potential availability of outside evidence that would influence the strength of St. John's written arguments, while important, is not considered in this paper's analysis.

> The Herald-Tribune found that about 30 companies out of more than 70 reviewed appear fiscally sound. Forty-two failed at least one of the benchmarks.
>
> That means one in three privately insured homes in Florida – some 2 million families – relies upon an at-risk insurer for hurricane protection. (63–64)

Her reasoning, outlined in a Toulmin model in Figure 1, contained two weaknesses that made it difficult for readers to accept it.

The first weakness was an unsteady use of terms. Her statement of the conclusion in bullet-point form referred to insurers "that exhibit one or more signs of financial risk." However, she later said her data "means" that one in three privately insured homes "relies upon an at-risk insurer."

The latter statement was stronger. It said not that the companies showed a sign of financial risk but that they actually were at risk. The latter statement also conflicted with the St. John of three paragraphs prior:

> A half-dozen experts consulted by the Herald-Tribune cautioned that no single measure told the strength of an insurer. (61)

Her experts cautioned that "no single measure told the strength of an insurer." St. John reported that 42 companies failed at least one benchmark, but that only 14 failed two or more (65). So 28 firms of the 42 failed only one benchmark, which, by her previous statement, was not enough to determine "the strength of an insurer" and certainly not enough to show that the insurer was "at-risk."

So were readers to accept either the stronger or weaker form of St. John's conclusion, they would be better off accepting the weaker one — which required showing only what St. John does, that the companies showed signs of financial risk — but they must parse St. John's flip-flopping prose to get there.

The second weakness concerned St. John's conclusion that "one in three privately insured homes" relied on (take your pick) an at-risk insurer or one with a sign of failure. There simply were no data offered to indicate the source of the population figure. That 42 of "more than 70 reviewed" companies showed warning flags doesn't indicate anything about the number of homes those companies insured. Presumably St. John didn't mean that one-third of insurers showed signs

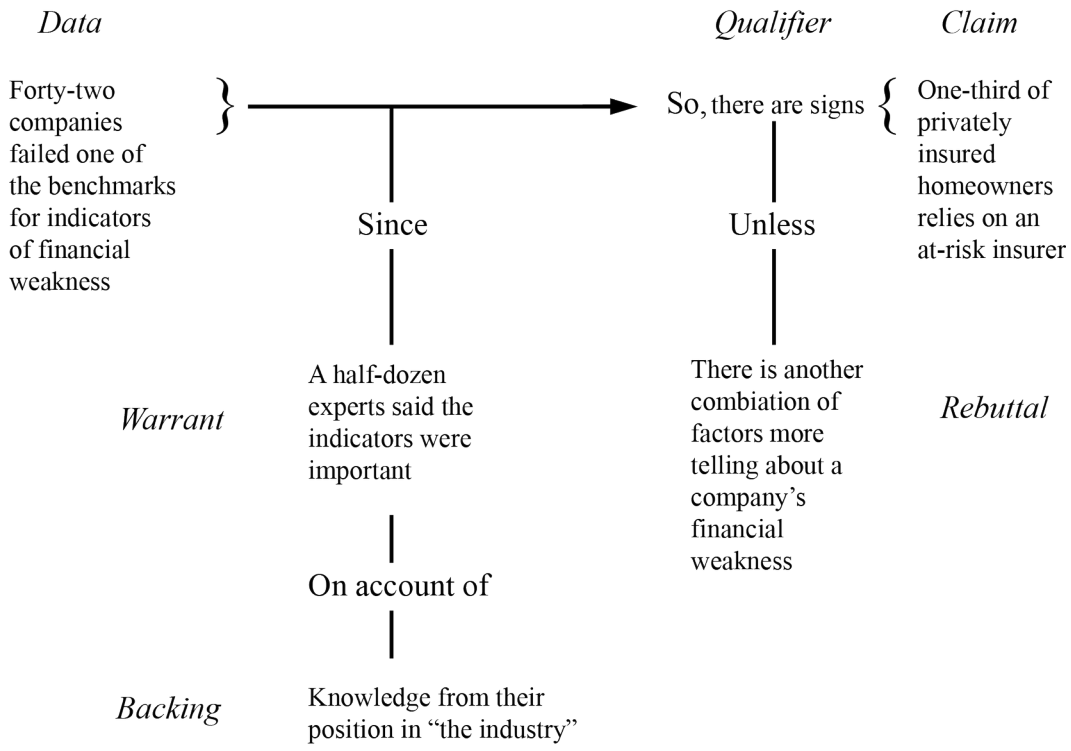

Figure 1: Toulmin model for February 28 H-T story

of risk, because even 42 divided by 80 is more than 50%, not one in three, and had she reviewed "more than 80 companies" she probably would have said so. The reader simply must take on her authority that the number of homes affected by the "at-risk" companies was what she said.

Moving on to St. John's second conclusion:

- More than 100,000 homeowners relied on companies barely capable of paying for house fires, let alone hurricanes. These insurers' reserves come so close to the state's $4 million minimum requirement that they operate with only a few hundred thousand dollars of their own to pay claims. (8)

Not enough evidence was presented to support this conclusion, although it came close. Under the heading of "Not enough money to pay off house fires," St. John discussed the quick rise and fall of an insurance company called Northern Capital Select.

> Financial statements and reinsurance contracts show that in 2009 it was operating with barely a $300,000 cushion above what it needed to meet state solvency requirements – not even enough to cover a handful of house fires. (45)

Assuming that St. John was correct to say that $300,000 is insufficient to cover house fires, she left out any detail about how she knew that Northern Capital Select insured more than 100,000 homeowners — a fairly easy fact to include and one needed to demonstrate her claim.

Further in the story St. John discussed the even quicker rise and fall of another insurance company, Magnolia. She did mention that Magnolia was "responsible for the financial security of 100,000 homeowners" by the end of 2008 (98). But throughout her discussion of the financial collapse of the company, she never said anything about whether the company's coffers were falling toward state solvency requirements, as she did with Northern Capital Select, and which she said would put them in house-fires-only territory.

It is certainly possible, even likely, that Northern Capital Select insured more than 100,000 homes or that Magnolia could have covered only "a handful of house fires." But it was left for readers to assume so. The story instead omitted simple statements that would have provided the final push in presenting an easily acceptable argument.[11]

Bullet points 3, 4, and 5 can be addressed swiftly: St. John never returned to them. Not a word was said in support of her accusation that "lawmakers and other regulators have ignored warnings," that "one in three Florida carriers has decreased the cash set aside for storms," or that "larger dangers loom."[12]

A person reading her whole series would eventually find that she addresses some of these conclusions more fully in future stories. But no reader of only the first story could know that, especially when the second story in the series appeared two weeks later (the stories available on the Pulitzer website indicate that the series lasted through at least November 2010).

Possibly the most glaring weakness in St. John's story, then, was that it was unclear to readers what she wanted to argue. The problem goes beyond not explicitly stating an issue or conclusion,

[11]Neither Northern Capital Select nor Magnolia were included in the Herald-Tribune's online insurance company database as of June 2012.

[12]There is some ambiguity in bullet point 4, in the phrase "without increating the money set aside to pay claims." It is unclear whether the phrase refers to "lawmakers and regulators" or "private companies." This paper has guessed that it is the latter. If it was the former, though, then it would be fair to say that St. John does begin to address the point in the section of the story titled "What happens if your insurer fails." The discussion there still does not seem strong enough to support the bulleted claim, however.

which happened occasionally in the *Los Angeles Times* stories. Instead, there were so many of what seemed to be conclusions that when they weren't addressed again, readers could be confused as to whether it was they or St. John who missed something.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to justify and test the application of the fields of argumentation, informal logic, and critical thinking to journalism. Based on a conception of "argument" as an attempt to demonstrate something that is, was, or will be true about the world, this paper sees much of the work of journalists as arguments capable of evaluation based on the strength of their reasons and evidence in support of a conclusion.

Concepts from argumentation et al. were applied to a critical case sample of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism. As Pulitzer Prizes are generally considered to reward the best American journalism, they should be the source of journalism containing the best of arguments from American journalists. According to the logic of the critical case model, success or blunder in Pulitzer Prize-winning argument provides a basis for inferring the state of argument quality in journalism generally.

More research is required to know whether the conclusions of this paper are generalizable, as the logic of the critical case sample would suggest. Fortunately, the ideas discussed in this paper lend themselves to many branches of further study.

Future research in this area might consider attempting to determine why journalistic arguments turn out the way they do. To be sure, journalists are not typically trained in universities or in newsrooms to think in reasons, evidence, and conclusions, at least not in the way this paper envisions them. Nor, importantly, are the copy chiefs, web producers, and desk editors whose decisions play an important role in creating news stories.

Accordingly, sociological research can ask: In what way, if at all, do journalists perceive themselves as giving reasons and evidence towards conclusions, and how do their answers affect their

journalistic output? Do traditional newspaper reporters and online-savvy journalists differ in their perception? Would either group be willing to change its mind?

Journalists' view of argument could also be studied in the manner of Ettema and Glasser (1998). They examined how journalists structured their stories to draw moral conclusions while maintaining the self-perception that they do not draw moral conclusions. In the same way, the differences between journalists' self-perception about their own descriptive conclusions and their actual stories might be worth another thorough, ethnographic study.

Finally, this study began by noting an interest in determining how to best spend the time we have (and even briefer time with the good fortune of having full use of our faculties). The question, of course, requires the work of more than journalists, argumentation theorists, or philosophers. But, despite what was written in the introduction, this paper will have accomplished a small goal if it inspired some thinking on the matter.

Appendix: Stories analyzed

The text of these stories was downloaded from http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/2011 and used in the analysis:

Los Angeles Times

- July 15, 2010: "Is a city manager worth $800,000?"
- July 23, 2010: "336 voters opened Bell's wallet"
- July 27, 2010: "Bell's money flowed uphill"
- July 30, 2010: "Bell property tax burden second highest in county"
- August 8, 2010: "Big benefits boosted Bell official's take"
- August 14, 2010: "Bell told to reduce property taxes"
- August 22, 2010: "Rizzo's horse had come in"
- September 6, 2010: "Bell impounded cars to boost coffers, police say"
- September 22, 2010: "Bell leaders hauled off in cuffs"
- September 1, 2010: "Rizzo loaned Bell's money to firms"
- September 3, 2010: "Bell assessed illegal sewer fees"
- September 17, 2010: "More illegal taxes by Bell found"
- September 21, 2010: "Audit finds Rizzo got Bell funds"
- November 2, 2010: "Business owners face big fees in Bell"
- December 16, 2010: "Bell's codes a cash cow"
- December 28, 2010: "How Bell hit bottom"

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

- February 28, 2010: "Weak insurers put millions of Floridians at risk"
- March 14, 2010: "How insurers make millions on the side"
- April 18, 2010: "How regulators put Florida homeowners at risk"
- April 19, 2010: "Regulators take gamble on discount insurance"
- November 14, 2010: "Creating an $82 billion threat"
- November 15, 2010: "Hurricane models: garbage in, gospel out"

- October 24, 2010: “Sending billions overseas”
- October 25, 2010: “How Bermuda rigs rates”
- December 5, 2010: “How State Farm cashed in on a crisis”

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