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Truth: The First and Most Confusing Principle

A few days after John F. Kennedy was murdered, the man who succeeded Kennedy as president, Lyndon Johnson, sent for his secretary of defense. Johnson wanted to know what was really going on ten thousand miles across the globe, in a tiny country called Vietnam. Johnson didn't trust what he'd been told as vice president. He wanted his own information. Press reports at the time suggested the situation in South

Vietnam had deteriorated in recent months following the takeover of a new government in a coup d'etat. How bad was it? Defense Secretary Robert McNamara flew to Saigon and spent three days talking to all the generals and touring the various battle zones.

On his way back, McNamara gave a press conference at Tan Son Nhat Airport. The enemy activity had eased, he announced, and he was "optimistic as to the progress that can be made in the coming year."[1] When he landed at Andrews Air Force Base the next day, McNamara took a helicopter to the White House to report to Johnson personally. Afterward, in brief remarks to White House reporters, he described his meeting with the president: "We reviewed in great detail the plans of the South Vietnamese and the plans of our own military advisors for operations during 1964. We have every reason to believe they will be successful. We are determined that they shall be." As Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of the *Washington Post* at the time, would put it many years later, "And the world heard nothing more about the secretary's visit or his report to President Johnson."[2]

Eight years later, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published a secret government-written history about what the leaders really knew and thought about the Vietnam War. Among the mountain of documents, which came to be called the Pentagon Papers, was the substance of what McNamara in fact had reported to the President that day. "The situation is very disturbing," McNamara's private memorandum to Johnson warned. "Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2–3 months, will lead to neutralization at best," he wrote, using the term at the time for a stalemate, "and more likely to a Communist-controlled state," in other words, utter U.S. defeat in Vietnam in early 1964. The new South Vietnamese government was "indecisive and drifting." The U.S. team helping them "lacks leadership, has been poorly informed, and is not working to a common plan." The situation with the enemy "has been deteriorating in the countryside since July to a far greater extent than we realized...."

It was a startling appraisal, utterly at odds with everything McNamara had said publicly, starker and more alarming than anything that the American public would know.

The seriousness of the situation in Vietnam was hardly a mystery to reporters in Vietnam. Two days after McNamara's report to the President, David Halberstam of the *New York Times* authored a detailed assessment of the situation there. The struggle in Vietnam had reached "a critical point," wrote Halberstam, who had just returned from fifteen months in the country. Halberstam's thesis in some ways even mirrored McNamara's private memo.[3] Halberstam's sources, however, were anonymous, described in the couched language of "experienced Western observers" and unnamed "officials." United Press International reporter Neil Sheehan had gone even further. His story about McNamara's visit to Vietnam suggested that the defense secretary had been blunt with Vietnamese leaders about how badly things were going. Yet Sheehan's sources were also unnamed, and he made no mention, or apparently had no idea, of how stark an assessment McNamara would give to Johnson.

"What might have happened," Bradlee would wonder two decades later, "had the truth emerged in 1963 instead of 1971," about what McNamara really thought and what he had really told the President?[4]

We use the words every day—*truth* and *lies*, *accurate* and *false*—and we think they convey something meaningful. McNamara *lied* during his press conferences. The Pentagon Papers revealed the *truth* of what he really thought and reported to Johnson. The press reported accurately what McNamara said in his press conferences. Some reporters even tried to convey, using unnamed sources, the sense that McNamara might have been more worried than he was letting on. But they did not get at the truth of what he had written and told the President. The Pentagon Papers would be a sensation eight years later, so much so that the Nixon White House would try—and fail—to use the Supreme Court to stop their publication. The war would go on another decade

before the defeat McNamara predicted finally occurred.

Over the last three hundred years, news professionals have developed a loose set of principles and values to fulfill the function of providing news—the indirect knowledge by which people come to form their opinions about the world. Foremost among these principles is this:

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.

On this there is absolute unanimity and also utter confusion: Everyone agrees journalists must tell the truth, yet people are befuddled about what "the truth" means.

When the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Committee of Concerned Journalists asked journalists in 1999 which news values they considered paramount, 100 percent answered "getting the facts right."[5]

In long interviews with our university research partners, journalists from both old and new media similarly volunteered "truth" overwhelmingly as a primary mission.[6] In forums, even ideological journalists gave the same answer. "What we're saying is you cannot be objective because you're going to go in with certain biases," said Patty Calhoun, the editor of the alternative weekly paper *Westword*. "But you can certainly pursue accuracy and fairness and the truth, and that pursuit continues."[7]

The desire that information be truthful is elemental. Since news is the material that people use to learn and think about the world beyond themselves, the most important quality it can possess is that it be usable and reliable. Will it rain tomorrow? Is there a traffic jam ahead? Did my team win? What did the President say? Truthfulness creates, in effect, the sense of security that grows from awareness and is at the essence of news.

This basic desire for truthfulness is so powerful, the

evidence suggests it is innate. "In the beginning was the Word" is the opening line of the Gospel of John in the New Testament. The earliest journalists—messengers in preliterate societies—were expected to recall matters accurately and reliably, partly out of need. Often the news these messengers carried was a matter of survival. The chiefs needed accurate word about whether the tribe on the other side of the hill might attack.

It is interesting that oppressive societies tend to belittle literal definitions of truthfulness and accuracy, just as postmodernists do today (although for different reasons). In the Middle Ages, for instance, monks held that there was actually a hierarchy of truth. At the highest level were messages that told us about the fate of the universe, such as whether heaven existed. Next came moral truth, which taught us how to live. This was followed by allegorical truth, which exclaimed the moral of stories. Finally, at the bottom, the least important, was the literal truth, which the theorists said was usually empty of meaning and irrelevant. As one fourteenth-century manual explained, using logic similar to what we might hear today from a postmodern scholar or a Hollywood producer, "Whether it is truth of history or fiction doesn't matter, because the example is not supplied for its own sake but for its signification."[8]

Modern political operatives are enamored of similar notions and often preach the idea that in public life perception is reality. The operatives around Richard Nixon in 1968 extolled such notions to aggrandize their role in that election, for instance, as would operatives for politicians as diverse as Bill Clinton and Mitt Romney.[9]

Consider also what an anonymous advisor to George W. Bush told reporter Ron Suskind for a 2004 piece in the *New York Times Magazine* about how the government tries to control information in the new world: "[Journalists] are in what we call the reality-based community.... That's not the way the world really works anymore.... When we act, we create our own reality. While you are studying that

reality … we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too."[10]

The tools for such information management arguably are even greater today. The technology that creates the idea of citizen journalism also empowers political powers to control the image of them that is presented to the public. A 2013 study of Twitter messages from reporters at fifty-one U.S. newspapers found that "politicians were quoted in tweets 12 times more often than citizens, and along with government employees, accounted for 75 percent of quotes," reflecting the extent to which new communications technology has opened the public mind to special interest messages.[11]

The goal of official message management, whether it was medieval church leaders or modern political operatives today, is not enlightenment so much as control. They don't want literal facts to get in the way of political or religious persuasion. An accurate understanding of the day offers contradiction and dissonance to orthodoxy.

As the modern press began to form with the birth of democratic theory, the promise of being truthful and accurate quickly became a powerful part of even the earliest marketing of journalism. The first identifiable regular newspaper in England proposed to rely "on the best and most certain intelligence." The editor of the first paper in France, though his enterprise was government-owned, promised in his maiden issue, "In one thing I will yield to nobody—I mean in my endeavor to get at the truth." Similar promises to accuracy are found in the earliest papers in America, Germany, Spain, and elsewhere.[12]

The earliest colonial journalism was a strange mix of essay and fact. The information about shipping and cargoes was accurate. The political vitriol was less so, yet it was also obviously more opinion or speech than strict information. Even James Callender, the notorious scandal monger who made his reputation with sex exposés of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, did not make his stories up, but trafficked in facts mixed with rumor.[13]

In the nineteenth century, as it disentangled itself from political control, journalism sought its first mass audience in part by relying on sensational crime, scandal, thrill seeking, and celebrity worship, but also by writing the news in plain language for regular people. The move away from party affiliation began with the *New York Sun* in the 1830s, and journalism gained new heights of popularity and sensation at the end of the century. These were the years of William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and "yellow journalism." Yet even the Lords of the Yellow Press sought to assure readers that they could believe what they read, even if the pledge was not always honored. Hearst's *Journal*, which was guilty more of sensationalism than of invention, claimed it was the most truthful paper in town. Pulitzer's *World* operated under the motto "Accuracy, Accuracy, Accuracy" and was more reliable than is usually credited.[14]

To assure his readers they could believe what they read, Pulitzer created a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play in the *New York World* in 1913. In a 1984 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Cassandra Tate described how the *World*'s first ombudsman noticed a pattern in the newspaper's reporting on shipwrecks: Each such story featured a cat that had survived. When the ombudsman asked the reporter about this curious coincidence, he was told:

> One of those wrecked ships had a cat, and the crew went back to save it. I made the cat a feature of my story, while the other reporters failed to mention the cat, and were called down by their city editors for being beaten. The next time there was a shipwreck, there was no cat but the other ship news reporters did not wish to take a chance, and put the cat in. I wrote the report, leaving out the cat, and then I was severely chided for being beaten. Now when there is a shipwreck all of us always put in the cat.[15]

The irony, of course, is that the embellishments were all put there to create a sense of realism.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, journalists began to realize that realism and reality—or accuracy and truth—were not so easily equated. In 1920, Walter Lippmann used the terms *truth* and *news* interchangeably in his book *Liberty and the News*. But in 1922, in *Public Opinion*, he wrote: "News and truth are not the same thing.... The function of news is to signalize an event," or make people aware of it. "The function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality upon which men can act."[16] By 1938, journalism textbooks were beginning to question how truthful the news could really be.[17]

Over the next fifty years, after decades of debate and argument, sometimes by political ideologues and sometimes by postmodern deconstructionist academics, we came to the point where some denied that anyone could put facts into a meaningful context to report the truth about them. An epistemological skepticism began to pervade every aspect of our intellectual life, from art, literature, law, and physics to history. Columbia University historian Simon Schama suggested that "the certainty of an ultimately observable, empirically verifiable truth" was dead.[18]

With the digital age, some have suggested that what we considered truth was merely "consensus" arrived at by an oligarchical press system canvassing the opinions of a limited number of establishment sources, something changeable and far less solid than what we imagined. "Truth is a judgment about what persuades us to believe a particular assertion," NYU professor Clay Shirky has argued.[19]

The arguments doubting that there is anything such as truth, in other words, are long-standing. Truth, it seems, is too complicated for us to pursue—in our journalism or anything else. Or perhaps it doesn't even exist, since we are all subjective individuals. These are interesting arguments—maybe, on some philosophical level, even valid. But where does that leave what we

call journalism? Is the word *truth* now something adequate for everyday conversation but something that doesn't hold up to real scrutiny?

Clearly, there are levels. "The journalist at the *New York Times* told us the other day that the New York Giants lost a football game by a score of 20–8," journalist and press critic Richard Harwood told us at one of the forums we organized to research this book. "Now that was a small piece of truth. But the story of why the Giants lost can be told in a hundred different ways—each story being written through a different lens that is fogged over by stereotypes and personal predilections."[20]

So what does journalism's obligation to the truth mean? The usual efforts to answer this question, at seminars or in philosophical tracts, end up in a muddle. One reason is that the conversation is usually not grounded in the real world. Philosophical discussions of whether "truth" really exists founder in semantics.

Another reason is that journalists themselves have never been very clear about what they mean by truthfulness. Journalism by nature is reactive and practical rather than philosophical and introspective. The serious literature by journalists thinking through such issues is not rich, and what little there is most journalists have not read. Theories of journalism are left to the academy, and many newspeople have historically devalued journalism education, arguing that the only place to learn is through osmosis on the job. As Ted Koppel, the highly respected network TV journalist, once declared: "Journalism schools are an absolute and total waste of time."[21]

The conventional explanations by journalists of how they get at the truth tend to be quick responses drawn from interviews or speeches or, worse, marketing slogans, and they often rely on crude metaphors. The press is "a mirror" on society, said David Bartlett, then president of the Radio and Television News Directors Association, echoing a common phrase of the time. Journalism is "a reflection of the passions of the day," leading television broadcaster Tom Brokaw told our academic research partners. News is whatever is "most

newsworthy on a given day," said a CNN producer.[22] These explanations made journalists seem passive—mere recorders of events rather than investigators, selectors, or editors.[23] It's as if they thought truth was something that rises up by itself, like bread dough. Rather than defend their techniques and methods for finding truth, journalists tended to deny that they existed.

Whether it was secrecy, idealism, or ineptness, the failure by journalists to articulate what they were doing left citizens suspicious that the press was either deluding itself or hiding something. This is one reason the discussion of journalistic objectivity became such a trap. The term is so misunderstood and battered, the discussion mostly goes off track. It is also one of the reasons that a new era of digital pioneers, as they tried to contemplate the journalism they were disrupting, have tended to dismiss journalistic professionalism. They imagined journalists were largely stenographers, with random lists of sources, using fairly crude notions of balance to get at accuracy. Many if not most journalists were doing much more. But they had little vocabulary, let alone standard method, and even less journalistic literature, to explain themselves.

As we will discuss in more depth in chapter 4, on verification, originally it was not the journalist who was imagined to be objective. It was his or her method. Today, however, in part because journalists have failed to articulate what they are doing, our contemporary understanding of objectivity is mostly muddled and confused. Most people, as we noted earlier and will detail more later, mistake objectivity to mean neutrality.

Despite the public's confusion, there is little doubt that journalists believe themselves to be engaged in pursuing truth, not just free speech or commerce. They have to be—for this is what society requires of them.

And, as we will see, "journalistic truth" means more than mere accuracy. It is a sorting-out process that takes place between the initial story and the interaction among the public, newsmakers, and journalists. This first principle of journalism—its disinterested pursuit

of truth—is ultimately what sets journalism apart from other forms of communication.

JOURNALISTIC TRUTH

To understand this sorting-out process, it is important to remember that journalism exists in a social context. Out of necessity, citizens and societies depend on accurate and reliable accounts of events. They develop procedures and processes to arrive at what might be called "functional truth." Police track down and arrest suspects based on facts. Judges hold trials. Juries render verdicts. Industries are regulated, taxes are collected, and laws are made. We teach our children rules, history, physics, and biology. All of these truths —even the laws of science—are subject to revision, but we operate by them in the meantime because they are necessary and they work.

This is what our journalism must be after—a practical or functional form of truth. It is not truth in the absolute or philosophical sense. It is not the truth of a chemical equation. Journalism can—and must—pursue the truths by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis. "We don't think it's unreasonable to expect jurors to render fair verdicts, or teachers to teach honest lessons, or historians to write impartial history, scientists to perform unbiased research. Why should we set any lower goals for poor journalists?" Bill Keller of the *New York Times* asked us. "Whether true objectivity is ever possible—I don't think that is what we're here for.... We strive for coverage that aims as much as possible to present the reader with enough information to make up his or her own mind. That's our fine ideal."[24]

Does this suggest that journalism should stick simply to accuracy, getting the names and dates right? Is that sufficient? The increasingly interpretative nature of most modern journalism tells us no. A journalism built merely on accuracy fails to serve contemporary civil society.

In the first place, mere accuracy can be a kind of distortion all its own. As long ago as 1947, the

Hutchins Commission, a group of scholars who spent years producing a document that outlined the obligations of journalism, warned of the dangers of publishing accounts that were "factually correct but substantially untrue."[25] Even then, the commission cited stories about members of minority groups that, by failing to provide context or by emphasizing race or ethnicity pointlessly, reinforced false stereotypes. "It is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact," the commission concluded.

Mere accuracy is also not what people are looking for. In his book *News Values* journalist Jack Fuller described how philosophers imagine there are two tests of truth: one is correspondence, the other is coherence. For journalism, these tests roughly translate into getting the facts straight and making sense of the facts. Coherence must be the ultimate test of journalistic truth, Fuller decided. "Regardless of what the radical skeptics argue, people still passionately believe in meaning. They want the whole picture, not just part of it.... They are tired of polarized discussion...."[26]

Common sense tells us something similar. A report that the mayor praised the police at the Garden Club luncheon seem inadequate—even foolish—if the police are in fact entangled in a corruption scandal; the mayor's comments are clearly political rhetoric, and they come in response to some recent attack by his critics.

This is far from suggesting that accuracy doesn't matter, that facts are all relative—just another form of fodder for debate. On the contrary, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built: context, interpretation, debate, and all of public communication. If the foundation is faulty, everything else is flawed. A debate between opponents arguing with false figures or purely on prejudice fails to inform. It only inflames. It takes the society nowhere. It is more helpful, and more realistic, to understand the truth we seek or can expect from journalism to be a process—or a continuing journey toward understanding—that begins with the first account of an

event and builds over time. For instance, the first news accounts signal a new situation or trend. They may begin with reports of something simple—an accident, a meeting, an inflammatory statement. They may come in the form of a brief alert with few details. The time and place of the accident, the damage done, the types of vehicles, arrests, unusual weather or road conditions—in effect, the physical externalities of the case—are facts that can be recorded and checked. Once they have verified the facts, those engaged in reporting the news should strive to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalist Carl Bernstein has described this as reporters striving to provide "the best obtainable version of the truth."[27] Journalist Howie Schneider has called it "conditional truth," subject to revision with new information. The principles of the *Washington Post*, drafted by Eugene Meyer in 1933, describe telling "the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained."[28]

An individual reporter may not be able to move much beyond a surface level of accuracy in a first account, particularly if that account is written in real time as a blog post or an alert. But the first account builds to a second, in which the sources of news have responded to initial mistakes and missing elements, and the second account builds to a third, and so on. Context is added in each successive layer. In more important and complex stories, there are subsequent contributions on the editorial pages, in blogs, social media discourse, in official responses—the full range of public and private conversation. This practical truth is a protean thing that, like learning, grows like a stalactite in a cave, drop by drop, over time.

The truth is a complicated and sometimes contradictory phenomenon, but if it is seen as a process over time, journalism can get at it. First by stripping information of any attached misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting bias and then by letting the community react, in the sorting-out process that ensues. As always, the search for truth becomes a conversation.

This definition helps reconcile the way we use the words *true* and *false* every day with the way we deconstruct those words in the petri dish of a philosophical debate. This definition comes closer to journalists' intuitive understanding of what they do than the crude metaphors of mirrors and reflections that are commonly handed out.

We understand truth as a goal—at best elusive—and still embrace it. We embrace it the same way as Albert Einstein did when he said of science that it was not about truth but about making what we know less false. For this is how life really is—we're often striving and never fully achieving. As historian Gordon Wood has said about writing history: "One can accept the view that the historical record is fragmentary and incomplete … and that historians will never finally agree in their interpretations" and yet still believe "in an objective truth about the past that can be observed and empirically verified." This is more than a leap of faith. In real life, people can tell when someone has come closer to getting it right, when the sourcing is authoritative, when the research is exhaustive, when the method is transparent. Or as Wood put it, "Historians may never see and present that truth wholly and finally, but some of them will come closer than others, be more nearly complete, more objective, more honest, in their written history, and we will know it, and have known it, when we see it."[29]

Those who have worked in news or in public life say much the same thing: Getting news that comes closer to a complete version of the truth has real consequences. In the first hours of an event, when being accurate is most difficult, accuracy is perhaps most important. It is during this time that public attitudes are formed, sometimes stubbornly, by the context within which the information is presented. Is it a threat to me? Is it good for me? Is it something I should be concerned about? The answer to these questions determines how carefully I follow a new event, how much verification of the facts I will look for. Based on his experience, Hodding Carter, a longtime journalist who served as assistant secretary of

state for public affairs in the Carter administration's State Department, has said that this is the time in which the government can exercise its greatest control over the public mind: "If given three days without serious challenge, the government will have set the context for an event and can control public perception of that event."[30]

The digital age adds pressures in both directions to this process of searching for functional or conditional truth. The first pressure is speed. In the context of gathering news, speed is almost always the enemy of accuracy. It offers those who seek to report less time to check facts. This is why cable news channels that report continuously (such as CNN and Fox News) tend to report more erroneous information than the broadcast channels (NBC, CBS, or ABC) that have hours to vet their reports for a single network evening newscast. Posting news in real time on Twitter or elsewhere online, thus, tends to make all news organizations as vulnerable as cable.

The second pressure is the growing orientation toward commentary and argument. As people compose polemics, they are focused on persuasion. They naturally tend to choose facts that help them make their case. But this pushes the emphasis away by degrees from fact checking, from getting to the bottom of what happened and arriving at the most complete understanding of the facts.

An open networked media environment also means that more rumors, more misinformation are passed along in public—creating more confusion for users and more pressure on news organizations.

Those pressures pulling against truth and accuracy are balanced against others brought by the digital age that move in the opposite direction. The opening of the media system to more voices, particularly through social media, has the potential to strengthen the process of verification magnificently. More sources are likely to spot falsehoods and point them out. And there are countless examples. During political speeches, such as Paul Ryan's vice presidential acceptance speech at the 2012 Republican Convention, people pointed out

inaccuracies in almost real time. When some media outlets in 2011 mistakenly reported that Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords had been shot to death by a gunman in Tucson while others reported she had been taken to a hospital, citizens pointed out the discrepancy on Twitter immediately, and news organizations had corrected the error within fifteen minutes.

As powerful and profound as the network is, however, it's an oversimplification—a hope that cannot be sustained—to think that in the networked culture the sorting out process always works efficiently—that the Internet, as some have put it, is a self-cleaning oven. In addition to the speed, a variety of other factors get in the way. In a fragmented media culture, more people may be operating in their own bubbles of self-selected interests and sources. We may, as we scatter to our own sources for information, lack a central gathering place or a common understanding of the basic facts. The initial account of an event is always the most important, and the more hastily it is put together, the more inaccurate it is likely to be. That problem is added to by the phenomenon of our simply moving on, deciding we have learned what we needed about something and are on to the next thing, like the student only paying half attention in class and getting a general sense of the topic but botching all the details. Only there is no test at the end of the unit to tell us we got it about half-wrong.

The more compelling sense is that truth requires commitment, a dedication to a process of verification, and that search is made more powerful when journalists and the public are knit together in a way that mixes the structure of traditional journalism techniques and authority with the power of the networked community.

Consider the case of Ian Tomlinson, a newspaper vendor who died after being caught in the middle of a protest over the G20 meeting in England in April 2009. The initial police account held that Tomlinson suffered a heart attack while walking home and that protesters

were culpable for getting in the way of medics whose treatment might have saved his life. The next day's *Evening Standard* newspaper, the paper Tomlinson sold, bore the headline: "Police pelted with bricks as they help dying man."

The *Guardian* newspaper, skeptical of that version and of police secrecy surrounding the case, pursued two lines of inquiry to go deeper. One, traditional shoe-leather reporting, had journalists covering the protest go through their notebooks of interviewees to identify possible eyewitnesses; the paper also pored over its photos to see if anyone had inadvertently caught a glimpse of the incident. The effort found one eyewitness and photographic evidence that seemed to prove Tomlinson had fallen to the ground at the feet of police, one hundred yards from where he would later fall again and die.

The second line of inquiry reached out to readers on the Internet. After taking four days to conclusively establish that its photos indeed proved Tomlinson had fallen earlier, near police, the *Guardian* put its photographic evidence online and asked if anyone knew more. The paper thus became part of the online conversation questioning the circumstances of Tomlinson's death. Via Twitter, *Guardian* reporter Paul Lewis discovered photo albums on another social media platform, Flickr, that contained more images raising doubts about Tomlinson's death. But all of this was circumstantial evidence, feeding online speculation, Lewis thought, not yet proof of any wrongdoing. The crowd, like the *Guardian*, in other words, was uneasy, but it did not really know what had happened.

One member of that crowd was Chris La Jaunie, an investment fund manager in New York who had been in London during the protest. La Jaunie had shot video that he thought might be explosive; it showed a policeman pushing Tomlinson. He had considered releasing it on YouTube, but had had second thoughts. It might go unnoticed. It might be challenged. It would also lack any context, a lone video posted by an unfamiliar source. Believing the *Guardian* had been

the most effective interrogator of the police version of events, he contacted Lewis. The paper verified his account, triangulated his footage with other evidence, and eight days later overturned what in effect was a police cover-up, establishing that Tomlinson had died as a result of actions by police.

The Tomlinson case, Lewis argues, illustrates the synergy of what the *Guardian* calls Open Journalism, which combines the professionalism of journalists and their access to the observations and knowledge of public witness and experience.[31]

One striking feature of the Tomlinson story is that there are parallels to it from earlier times, which reveal just how much the means of getting at the truth have changed, while the goal of pursuing it has not.

Fifty years earlier, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, three students were killed and more than twenty others injured in what police described as "an exchange of gunfire" with state troopers during a protest over civil rights. After hearing about the shootings, reporter Jack Nelson, the Atlanta bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, flew to South Carolina to check out the story. While most reporters were gathered at press conferences, Nelson went to the Orangeburg Regional Hospital, where twenty-seven wounded students were being treated. He stuffed two reporter's notebooks in his inside jacket pocket, creating a bulge underneath that resembled a shoulder holster holding a handgun, and walked into the office of the hospital administrator, Phil Mabry. Nelson identified himself "as being from the Atlanta bureau" and said he wanted to examine the medical records of the wounded students. Mabry assumed Nelson was from the Atlanta office of the FBI. Nelson did not disabuse him.

The dutiful hospital administrator laid the medical records out on his desk. The records showed what had really happened. Most of the wounded students, and the ones who had died, had been shot in the back, caught in the cross fire as they were running away. Nelson corroborated the medical records with eyewitness interviews and other official records to prove the police account was false. He wanted his story

to be airtight. His account proved the state police were lying and added momentum to the civil rights protests.[32]

Paul Lewis combined traditional shoe leather, documentary evidence, and the power of social media to get definitive proof of what happened to Ian Tomlinson. A half century earlier, Jack Nelson used toughness, bluff, the trained knowledge of where official documentary records could be located, and the formal and informal reporting techniques required to establish what really happened in Orangeburg. In both cases, truth was a process—but within reach.

Over time there have been people, even inside traditional journalism, who were unsure if truth was a practical goal for news. At different times, some journalists have suggested substitutes. Probably the two most common of these have been fairness and balance. If newspeople cannot know the truth, they can at least be fair and balanced. But both of these concepts, under scrutiny, are inadequate. Fairness is too abstract and, in the end, is more subjective than truth. Fair to whom? How do you test fairness? Truthfulness, for all its difficulties, at least can be tested.

Balance, too, is subjective. Balancing a story by being fair to both sides may not be fair to the truth if both sides do not, in fact, have equal weight. And in those many cases where there are more than two sides to a story, how does one determine which side to honor? Balance, if it amounts to false balance, becomes distortion.

Technology has added obstacles to the process before. By the late 1990s, as we detailed in our book *Warp Speed*, various forces were converging to weaken journalists' pursuit of truthfulness, despite the continuing allegiance most journalists professed to it. With the advent of the continuous 24-7 news cycle, which began with cable and grew with the Web, the news became more piecemeal; what were once the raw ingredients of journalism began to be passed on to the public directly. As the number of outlets for news

proliferated, the sources who talked to the press, and wanted to influence the public, gained more relative power over the journalists who covered them; more outlets, in effect, made it more of a seller's market for information. As audiences fragmented, different news outlets began to adapt differing standards of journalism. In the continuous news culture, news channels trying to shovel out the latest information had less time to check things out. Amid growing competition and speed, there emerged what we called a new Journalism of Assertion that was overwhelming the more traditional Journalism of Verification, which had moved more slowly and put a higher premium on getting things right first.

That process was well under way before the arrival of the Internet as a force in our news culture. In the first years of the Web, as the audience further fragmented and a proliferating number of news outlets competed to get the attention of that audience, we saw the rapid rise of a third model of media—a Journalism of Affirmation, epitomized by talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Rachel Maddow, who attracted audiences through reassurance, or the affirming of preconceptions. (We will talk more about these different models in later chapters.)

In short, what had been a fairly homogeneous notion of journalism that was grounded in reporting, even if it had somewhat differing styles in alternative weeklies versus daily newspapers or nightly local TV, was giving way to different models built on speed and convenience in one model and reassurance in another. The changes were subtle. Even some of the journalists who worked in these new media barely recognized the values shift occurring. Cable TV journalists did not readily acknowledge that they put less of a premium on verification. They just imagined they did it differently. The shift in the core appeal to the audience represented, however subtly, a shift in ethics. And that shift was predicated on more choice and more competition for the one thing that could not grow—the amount of time in the day. More outlets were competing for what was a finite level of audience

attention.

With the Internet, there emerged a new and important fourth model—a Journalism of Aggregation—in which publishers such as Yahoo News, search engines such as Google, or Web communities such as Reddit—and with the rise of social media, in turn, individual citizens themselves—recommended and passed along content that they had no direct role in producing and, often, made no effort to verify. Google became one of the most powerful institutions on earth by aggregating for users the material produced by others, with the assurance that its computerized algorithm was ranking its searches based on the reputational record of the source. There is no doubting the incomparable richness of a curated news environment. The experience of sorting through numerous accounts of an event effortlessly in minutes offers a depth, context, and control that the reading of the single account in the past could not come close to. But it is also important to recognize that we now operate in a distributed media environment where most publishers are passing along work they cannot possibly vouch for—and may make no effort to—and that we accept this now without a second thought. The burden of verification has been passed incrementally from the news deliverer to the consumer.

Add to this pressure the shrinking resources in newsrooms dedicated to direct reporting, as the advertising dollars in legacy platforms were replaced by digital dimes. It is a world in which an initial error in reporting or editing or interpretation can turn into a kind of original sin that influences us forever.

The instinct for truth is no less important today—but it is more pressured. Peter Viereck, professor emeritus in history at Mount Holyoke College, has argued that in a networked and connected world, the value of a group dedicated to pursuing truth is now greater. "I can think of nothing more gallant," Viereck says, "even though again and again we fail, than attempting to get at the facts; attempting to tell things as they really are. For at least reality, though never fully attained, can be

defined. Reality is that which, when you don't believe it, doesn't go away."[33]

In practical terms, more information makes truth more challenging, even though it means that at the end of the process the truth we arrive at will likely be more accurate. The process, however, becomes more demanding. Call it the paradox of learning in the Information Age. When information is a commodity in oversupply—when there is so much more input—knowledge becomes more difficult to acquire because one must sift and synthesize more information to set things in order. The knowledge acquired may be deeper and better, but it will likely also be more specialized.

This paradox may be the most daunting tension currently affecting our ability to know what's true. There is a gulf between the abundance of news and information available and our ability to sort through it all.

And when the media become background noise, our capacity to focus is diminished. It becomes more difficult to rise above the din. If Winston Churchill was correct that "a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on," greater technology has only speeded up the process, aiding truth and falsehood alike.[34]

These factors help to explain why the new partisan journalism of the twenty-first century, the Journalism of Affirmation, is even more appealing for some audiences. It makes things easier. It is a way of achieving order in a more confusing world, without so much sifting and heavy lifting. It offers comfort. They tidied up our mental rooms for us. The neo-partisans, be they Bill O'Reilly or Stephanie Miller or a growing array of ideological websites, create the impression for audiences that they are sense makers.

Rather than rush to add interpretation, we need to ensure that we also have a journalism that establishes what has truly happened before it rushes to tell us what it means—a journalism that first concentrates on context and verification. We should look for news that makes transparent how it was produced—the sourcing, evidence, and journalistic decision making that went

into it. We should look for journalism that has explicitly tried to sift out rumor, innuendo, and spin and shows evidence of that effort. We need a journalism, in other words, that allows us to answer the question "Why should I believe this?" rather than "Do I agree with it?"

And the more journalism, through its transparency, encourages consumers to think about how the news was put together, the more it will increase their skills for making informed judgments about what constitutes reliable news.

What we need from our journalism in the twenty-first century, in short, is not so different from what we needed in the twentieth. What journalism looks like, however, how it is presented, and even the routines that journalists use to achieve those goals are very different. The new journalism cannot presume anymore to be the only content its audience sees. It cannot present itself as a singular omniscient account of events. It must assume that we have seen other, more partial information in real time, but it also must provide a coherent account on its own in case we have not. It must be conscious and try to correct false information that has previously been presented, particularly if there is a reason to think that misinformation has resonated in the marketplace of ideas. Put more simply, the best new journalism will compete in the marketplace of ideas by being more deeply reported and more transparent, by correcting the record for audiences that have been misinformed and by answering questions other accounts have left unclear.

The impact of this new journalism, in turn, will extend beyond its direct audience, for it will impact and change the work others produce about the same news events. And if it is produced by smart managers, they will spend more effort than they once did marketing this work to elevate its impact both on the public and other news producers and analysts.

We will explain the new ways in which this journalism must be created and presented in subsequent chapters. But it all begins with the recognition that the new journalism, even in a

networked era, must be built on a foundation of truth—and that truth cannot be assumed to occur automatically based on the presence of more sources. The pursuit of truth is a process that requires an intellectual discipline and vigilance. It also requires memory—not forgetting about misinformation simply because the discussion has quickly moved on. And the need for this is greater, not lesser, in the new century, because the likelihood of untruth has become so much greater.

For truth to prevail, journalists must make clear to whom they owe their first loyalty. That is the next step.

3

Who Journalists Work For

In most businesses, accountability is tied to fairly straightforward metrics. Usually, success is measured in dollars. The bonuses of lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, and most of upper management are tied to how much money their operations bring in.

What is the best mark of value for someone producing journalism?

For years, journalists were evaluated mostly based on highly subjective judgments about the quality of