

# Truth and Verification

## What is Journalism's First Obligation?

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth



Newsweek's Quran Report Leads to 17 Deaths, then is retracted because of faulty Information

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### Consequences of a failure to verify



Newsweek's Quran Reports Leads to 17 Deaths

## Four Big Questions today:

- 1) *What IS truth?*
- 2) *How does the verification process work?*
- 3) *Why does it break down?*
- 4) *What kinds of evidence should a news consumer look for?*

## Shattered Glass

Due at lecture #9  
Screening: Thursday, 6-8pm,  
137 Hariman



## What are your biases?



Project Implicit

### Another Take on Cognitive Dissonance

*"Rarely do any of us sit down before a table of facts, weigh them pro and con, and choose the most logical and rational belief, regardless of what we previously believed..."*

-Michael Shermer, author  
*"Why People Believe Weird Things"*

## Truth and Verification

### What is Journalism's First Obligation?

## Truth and Verification

### Journalism's First Obligation Is to the Truth

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## What Is Truth?



What Do Journalists Mean By 'Truth'?

## What Is Truth?



*'A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to put its pants on.'*

Winston Churchill

### What Is Truth?

*'Often the surest way to convey misinformation is to tell the strict truth.'*

-Mark Twain



### What Is Truth?

*'Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.'*

-Mark Twain



### What Is Truth?

*'What I tell you three times is true.'*

-Lewis Carroll



### What Is Truth?



**"Truthiness"\***

-Stephen Colbert

\*"The quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true."

-The American Dialect Society

Truthiness.wmv

## Truth and Verification

### Disinterested Pursuit of the Truth

## Truth and Verification

**Disinterested Pursuit of the Truth**

## What Do Journalists Mean By Truth?

- Is getting the facts right the truth?
- Is being 'objective' the same thing as being truthful?
- Is being 'fair' the same thing as being truthful?
- Is there one truth we can all agree on?

## The Truth Debate



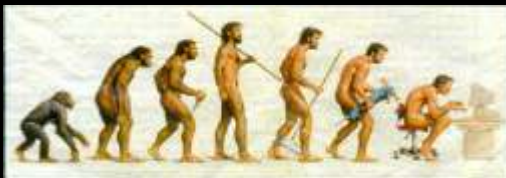
Video on Blackboard: See assignment folder

## Scientific Truth



*Scientific truth is a statement of probability proportional to the evidence. It will change over time as the evidence changes.*

## Journalism and Science



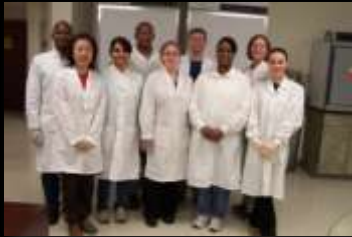
Like scientists, journalists do not believe in absolute truth. Truth is *provisional*. It changes over time.

## Journalism and Science



Like scientists, journalists strive for a pragmatic truth, a truth that helps explain the world and helps you function day-to-day

## Journalism and Science



Like science, journalism employs a system of peer review.

## Journalism and Science



Like the scientific method, the journalistic process of verification relies on a system of sorting and testing information

## Truth is Provisional

Newsday, Sept. 15, 2009

Newsday, Sept. 16, 2009

Newsday, Sept. 18, 2009

Newsday, Sept. 17, 2009

**The Hofstra Rape Case**

4 held in rape of Hofstra student

Why Her Story Changed

DA: She Made It Up

Fear And Anger On Campus

CBCnews | World

6 months into Japan's cleanup, radiation a major worry

Japan's radiation rises to

EARTH'S Japan by Missing persons

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## Truth is Provisional



Journalists Are Given the Wrong Information


## Truth is Provisional

Pluto Is Demoted to 'Dwarf Planet'




We Extend the Frontiers of Knowledge

## Truth is Provisional



**Wired Science**  
Can Neutrinos Move Faster Than Light?



We Extend the Frontiers of Knowledge

## Truth is Provisional



**Discovery News**  
FTL NEUTRINO RESEARCH  
'ALMOST CERTAINLY WRONG'

Analysis by Dan O'Neil  
Wed Oct 12, 2011 05:19 AM ET  
(16) Comments | Leave a Comment



## Truth is Provisional



**ELSA TODAY Your Life**

**Mammography is 'terribly imperfect,' though recommended**



By Jane Marder, ELSA TODAY  
Rosanne Urso, a mammography technologist, examines a mammogram in a patient at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCSF.

Until two years ago, medical groups largely agreed women should get annual mammograms beginning at age 40. In 2009, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, a group of doctors who evaluate screening tests, broke ranks by encouraging women to talk to their doctors and make up their own minds.

Yet the debate continues. Though few dispute the facts about mammograms, they often disagree on how women should act on results, says Otto Drazewy, chief medical officer at the American Cancer Society.

We Extend the Frontiers of Knowledge

## What IS the Truth?



**Cancer on msnbc.com**

**New mammogram guidelines raise questions**

Benefits of screening before age 50 don't outweigh risks, task force says

A government task force said Monday that most women don't need mammograms in their 40s and should get one every two years starting at 50 — a stunning reversal and a break with the American Cancer Society's long-standing position. What's more, the panel said breast self-exams do no good, and women shouldn't be taught to do them.

## Provisional Truth Confuses



**Aol Healthy Living HEALTH NEWS**

**Don McNay**  
Author of *Prostate My Book*, *Wealth Without Wall Street*, & *Wall Street Guide to Saving Money*

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The PSA Exam and Watching My Father Die Needlessly

## Wait...WHAT?



**philly.com**

**Prostate Cancer: Experts discourage vitamins and PSA test**

By Marie McCullough  
Inquirer Staff Writer

A major national study in Wednesday's *Journal of the American Medical Association* concludes that selenium and vitamin E supplements do not ward off the disease — and vitamin E alone can somehow promote it.

## Journalistic Truth

Journalistic truth is the best obtainable version of the truth on any given day.

It is a continuing journey toward understanding . . . which begins on the first day of a story and builds over time.

## The Lesson for the News Consumer

Follow  
the Story  
Over Time

## Four Big Questions today:

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## Seeking Truth

### The Journalist's Discipline of Verification

- Gather, Assess, and Weigh Evidence
- Place Facts in The Big Picture (Context)
- As Appropriate, Adjust Balance or Fairness
- Explain How They Know . . . (and What They Don't Know) \*

\*This is called "Transparency."

## Seeking Truth

When Searching for the Truth  
Not All Evidence is Equal

Direct Evidence



Arm's Length Evidence



## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### A Hierarchy of Evidence

- Photographs and Videos
- Documents and Records
- Personal Observation
- Eyewitnesses

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

Top of the Hierarchy: Photos and Video



You wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it

Climber.wmv

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

Top of the Hierarchy: Photos and Video



It's a "He said...She said..." story until you see the pictures



"Birthersm" folds in the face of documentary evidence

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth Personal Observation



The four had been covering fighting near Ajdabiya last Tuesday when they decided that the battle had grown too dangerous for them to continue safely. Their driver, however, inadvertently drove into a checkpoint manned by forces loyal to Colonel Qaddafi. By the time they knew they were in trouble, it was too late.

"I was yelling to the driver, 'Keep driving! Don't stop! Don't stop!'" Mr. Hicks recalled in a telephone interview from the hotel where he and the three others were recuperating. "I knew that the consequences of being stopped would be very bad."



## Personal Observation

TripoliHighway.wmv



## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### Personal Observation



**BATTLE FOR LIBYA**  
BENGHAZI REPORTEDLY IN REBEL CONTROL

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### Eyewitnesses describe 'panic' after metro explosions

Topic: Blasts in Moscow metro: reports, photos and videos



Eyewitnesses Provide Details, Emotion, "Color"

## Eyewitnesses and The Truth


### Is the Human Mind a Digital Recorder?

Innocence.wmv

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### Eyewitnesses

# INNOCENCE PROJECT



## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### WARNING: Evidence from Arm's Length

#### Second and Third-hand accounts

#### "White House Spokesperson Jay Carney"

#### Police Commissioners (relaying officer info)

#### Expert Reconstruction/Re-creation

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth

### Evidence from Arm's Length

#### Police Spokespersons (relaying officer info)



A former employee who had recently been fired from Palm Bay Hospital returned there Thursday afternoon carrying a gun, pointed himself up in an office, then apparently killed himself, officials said.

The incident began about 2:20 p.m., when Palm Bay police got a call from people in the hospital cafeteria who said a man was pointing the gun at anyone who tried to talk to him, said police spokeswoman Yvonne Martinez.

"Initially, when he came into the hospital waving the gun, anybody that attempted to make contact with him or communicate with him he just dismissed and pointed the gun at them," she said. "Clearly, he appeared to be on a mission."

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth Evidence from Arm's Length

Second and Third-hand accounts  
"C.J. Karamargin, an aide to Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords..."



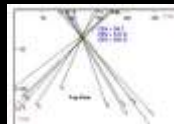
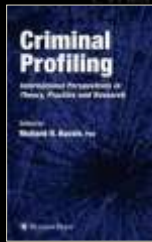
## Indirect Evidence



Jessica Low, a 22-year-old law student at Northeastern University, said she works during spring break. But some of her friends treat it as a week-long party: "There's no mom, no dad, no boundaries. There's lots of young people and that hard mentality sets in, like 'Let's party.'"

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth Evidence from Arm's Length

Expert suppositions/hypotheticals



## CBS\_Binladen.wmv

## How Journalists Pursue the Truth Evidence from Arm's Length

CBS News' Reconstruction/Recreation of Bin Laden Raid



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## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ Journalists rush to get the story first, jump the gun
- ✓ Facing deadline, some journalists get sloppy or provide incomplete reports
- ✓ People (sources) give reporters incorrect information...or outright lie
- ✓ Verification is very difficult, even when sources are helpful

## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ Journalists rush to get the story first, jump the gun



## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ Facing deadline, some journalists get sloppy or provide incomplete reports

### The New York Times

As appraised on Saturday about Walter Cronkite's career (included a number of errors. In some copies, it misstated the date that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed and referred incorrectly to Mr. Cronkite's coverage of D-Day. Dr. King was killed on April 4, 1968, not April 6. Mr. Cronkite covered the D-Day landing from a warplane; he did not storm the beaches. In addition, Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon on July 20, 1969, not July 17. "The CBS Evening News" overtook "The Huntley-Brinkley Report" on NBC in the ratings during the 1970-71 television season, not after Chet Huntley retired in 1970. A communications satellite used to relay correspondents' reports from around the world was Telstar, not Telstar. Howard E. Smith was not one of the CBS correspondents Mr. Cronkite would turn to for reports from the field after he became anchor of "The CBS Evening News" in 1962; he left CBS before Mr. Cronkite was hired. Because of an editing error, the appraisal also misstated the name of the news agency for which Mr. Cronkite was Moscow bureau chief after World War II. At that time it was United Press, not United Press International.

## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ People (sources) give reporters incorrect information...or outright lie

Lori Willis, communications director of the Schnucks grocery chain, issued this response after a reporter with the Memphis Commercial Appeal recently asked if the rumors were true that her company was selling its local stores to Kroger.

Typically, we would not comment on rumor and speculation, but I will acknowledge these rumors have gotten to a point with the media where I feel I need to tell you there is no truth to those rumors. There is no deal regarding any sale or purchase with regard to the Schnucks company.

...Eight days later, Schnucks announced it was selling its Memphis stores to Kroger.

## Why Verification Breaks Down



Cooperoil.wmv

## Quiz Time:

1. "What event is the subject of the *"Myth Making..."* reading
2. What major error is the subject of this article?
3. The reporter said he could have avoided the error if he had done one thing. What was it?

## Lesson #3 for the News Consumer



## Lesson #3 for the News Consumer



Always ask:  
Did the  
Reporter  
Open the  
Freezer?

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### How Journalists Pursue the Truth

## Hierarchy of Evidence: Wreck Scene

### Direct Evidence:

- Driver of Car
- Eyewitnesses
- Breathalyzer Report
- Driving Records
- Accident Reports for the Road



### Arm's Length Evidence:

- Campus Police
- University Officials
- Lawyer for Driver
- Friends and Relatives of Victims
- Family of Driver
- Students on Campus

## Pursuing Reliable Information

- 1) What IS truth?
- 2) How does the verification process work?
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- 4) What kinds of evidence should a news consumer look for?

## A Big Day: Two Key Lessons

- Follow the story.
- Ask yourself: has the reporter opened the freezer?