

Recitation 08 - Truth and Verification

OBJECTIVE

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A robust discussion of the big ideas about provisional truth from the Lecture and also some exercises and discussions aimed at understanding the realities of Verification. Does the truth really change?

Organization

1. Take attendance

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~~N~~News Quiz

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~~1. Question 1~~

~~a) comments~~

Introduction discussion

Does the “truth” really “change”?

A 10 min. open discussion of whether or not journalism aims at a truth that won't change from day to day seems worthwhile.

There's an old chestnut of a thought experiment that epistemologists are fond of, involving three blind men and an elephant that instructors may go through and discuss. To briefly rehearse: three blind men encounter an elephant and each is able to learn something about the elephant by feeling it with his hands. But elephants are big, and each only gets a partial picture of the whole elephant. Hence they might disagree about the nature of elephants - one saying they're like tree trunks, another like garden hoses, and another like a rope and smelling of dung (having felt the elephant's leg, trunk, and tail respectively).

None of them is really "wrong" but none is completely "right" either, and the trick is to discover what sort of creature could produce all the profiles that are encountered from each perspective. Throughout this, is there only one elephant or several? Is the elephant or the truth about it changing as they investigate? What sorts of complications can be introduced (what if the elephant is changing, e.g. it grows, gets old, and dies)? Can we draw an analogy to journalism?

Are there sorts of stories that we would say there is a truth about, even if we are unlikely to ever know it? Are there sorts of stories that we would say the truth is actually changing as time goes on? Does the “newness” of “news” put time constraints on how close to the “Truth” journalism gets? What can we reasonably expect from journalists?

Recap Lecture

~~Concepts go here:~~

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Review Assignments

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Class Discussion

Option 1. Inference Exercise – “What has it got in its pocketses, precious?”

1. Instructor empties the contents of his/her pockets on the table. Alternatively the instructor may bring in a box of stuff taken of their desk, or something to this effect. The point is to have a bunch of quasi-personal objects, so seed the pool with some interesting stuff if possible. Invite a few students up to examine these objects and report the rest of the class. They may want to write them on the board.
2. What inferences can the students draw from this random collection of objects about the person whom they belong to? Get them to write these inferences on the board as well.
3. Allow the students to critically examine these inferences, justifying them if possible, and evaluating which of them they have the most confidence in. At this point, you can pause the activity and discuss how one may make more modest inferences and be more certain about their soundness, but such inferences are typically boring. Alternatively they can make bolder inferences, but this means that they will inevitably lose some confidence in their soundness. Discuss what the “sweet spot” is on this spectrum of boldness and confidence. Which of their conclusions about the owner of these objects is bold enough to be interesting, but modest enough to be responsible.
4. Give students the opportunity to follow up on their “theories” by asking questions. What sorts of questions would they ask, and of whom? How can they verify some of the dicier but more interesting conclusions that were discussed in steps 2 & 3? Anticipate distinctions and concepts that will be introduced in the following weeks of the course, including distinctions between evidence (and its relative directness) and testimony from sources.

Comment [v1]: This focus on inference is out of proportion with the attention inference receives in lecture. We don't really dwell too much on inference in lecture, and so I wonder if this exercise is necessary.

Option 2. Verification Exercise – “Verification: Maybe Not As Easy As it Sounds”

Divide the class into three or four groups. Tell them their group has a set amount of time (use what’s left) to figure out how to verify two pieces of information. (You can think up your own, but here are some for simplicity. Point is, you want a little competition among the groups.

When time runs out, have them report and discuss each other’s steps and reflect on the difficulty of verifying, under time pressure. Did they make conscious choices to seek direct evidence, mitigate indirect, etc...

Examples:

- The security door in my dorm has been broken for a week, even though several students have reported it.
- Seven people got food poisoning at the dining hall by eating turkey burgers.
- Four cars were broken into last night in the lot by my dorm/apartment.
- My boss was once Chechnya’s ambassador to the Court of St. James.

Some emphasis should be made on the investigative nature of this exercise. What sorts of things would we expect to see that would unambiguously test the claim in question. Instructor should float from group to group and supply content for the evidence they are seeking out (intentionally throwing roadblocks and dead-ends in their way). For instance, if the students are trying to confirm the food poisoning rumor, and they get a first hand testimony from someone claiming to have been one of those who got sick, ask if they can confirm this. How do they know it’s not the flu? Or a hangover? If they look for clinic records, tell them that the clinic refuses to release such information. Begin to anticipate some of the source evaluation issues that will come up the following week.

Option 3. Sean Bell exercise

~~One technique for helping news consumers distinguish what they can reasonably conclude after reading a news story is the following: draw a line down the center of a blank piece of paper; on one side list every piece of information in the story that they believe is verified; on the other side, list everything they believe is asserted. (There are many assertions.)~~

~~When they’re done, ask:-~~

- ~~• What do they know?~~
- ~~• How do they know it?~~
- ~~• What don’t they know?~~

Option 43. The Secret Sponsors

Go through the story, on the board, and see what students come up with for verification steps. (Can have them write it). This article illustrates how difficult the verification process is—how a reporter can be stonewalled at every turn in his attempt to track down the group responsible for the anti-health care reform commercial.

Option 4, A Case Study: Manti T'eo

NPR did a nice job reviewing the Manti T'eo case, and why reporters and the public (and perhaps Te'o himself) were duped. This case study also serves as an opportunity to revisit cognitive dissonance by asking: why were reporters, who are supposed to be skeptical pursuers of truth, so easily taken in by this hogwash?

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Here are the NPR reports:

<http://www.npr.org/2013/01/18/169674364/media-circus-the-football-star-and-the-will-to-believe>

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<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/17/169591741/manti-teo-story-attributed-to-parents-hard-to-reconcile-with-hoax-report>

You might have students read the original stories linked to in the NPR reports (by Sports Illustrated and the South Bend Tribune, among others) which assumed that T'eo's girlfriend existed. Then see if students can spot red flags in the stories—a lack of verification, or incomplete testimony from sources, or conspicuous unknowns. One obvious question: Didn't anyone attempt to contact the girlfriend or her family? Then continue with a discussion of what this scenario teaches us about the importance of following stories, about checking evidence in news reports, about our own implicit biases (that journalists share). We also see peer review at work here, as it was BuzzFeed that pursued the story further and exposed the hoax.

Option 6: Newtown

<http://www.npr.org/2012/12/18/167466320/coverage-rapid-and-often-wrong-in-tragedys-early-hours>

<http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/errors-in-newtown-shootings-coverage-reflect-growing-pressures/>

In the links above, NPR's media reporter and the NY Times public editor reflect on the errors in the reporting on the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT. They discuss how rapidly the reports were posted on-line, and how rapidly they were corrected. The main point here seems to be how cautious we need to be when consuming up-to-the-minute news on-line. The disadvantage is that mistakes spread faster and wider, but they are also corrected faster.

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Announcements

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Follow-up assignment

(NOTE: This follow-up assignment assumes a Tue/Thurs lecture/recitation schedule. Adapt as necessary for other schedules)

Open up a discussion board where students will pursue the issues re:verification discussed in recitation in a context involving a concrete news story.

Split the class into 2 groups. Members of the first group must each post a story where there is a

claim that is hinted at but isn't quite verified yet. They must identify what the claim that one may want to make is, and explain why it isn't verified. This first round of posts must be up by Saturday at noon.

Members of the second group must each post a follow-up comment on the initial posts, offering an independent piece of evidence that putatively verifies the unverified claim identified by the first poster. They must post the source of their evidence, specify what the evidence is, and explain whether or not the claim in question can be considered "verified" now. This second round of posting must be done by Sunday at midnight.

Members of both groups must now offer at least one further comment in the discussions that have sprouted up in the first two rounds. These comments must articulate whether and why the claims identified by the first poster have or have not been verified by the supplemental information provided in the second round. This third round of posting must be completed before the next lecture.

This assignment is intended to model active news reading habits. To read the news with a critical eye requires a level of active reading that is well addressed in the course. There is an further level of activity, however, that requires that students anticipate evidence that will strengthen the sorts of conclusions they can draw and go looking for that evidence. A good reporter is a detective, and a good reader must be as well.