

# How Journalists Verify Information

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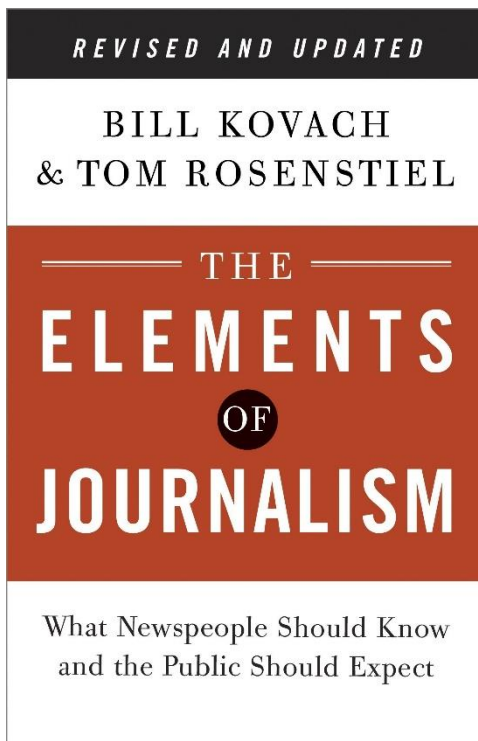
**Historically journalists have played a central role in shaping public discourse in democracies. And they do this by framing various current events or those that have happened in the past. Journalists can be neutral intermediaries, or they can interpret the facts in such a way that they deviate from the truth. Especially in the age of virtual reality and user-generated content in interaction with audiences, the difference in reporting is made by transparency and the verification of facts. Some tips on how to achieve this can be read in this article.**

In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel wrote that the essence of journalism is a 'discipline of verification'. But that's easier said than done. Different practices of verification differ not only from the agenda of the editorial office or the journalist himself, but also according to the professional culture of the environment where the journalism is practised. In post-communist countries, for example, their societies are characterized by having little trust in political parties, public institutions and an apathy to participate in political decision-making. Under these conditions, journalism assumes a dominant role. The medium is a channel through which political ideas are transmitted, and the journalist is a mediator between politics and society. Journalists turn into active agents of politics. Even in societies with developed democracies, the economy of information encourages journalists to establish relationships with politicians as their sources. This type of arrangement is symbiotic and all parties involved benefit from it. However, the public seeking independent information loses out from this relationship.

Various studies show that despite the problems, journalists tend to verify information. But you cannot expect them to check every fact as if they were scientists, and above all journalists have a deadline to keep. Walter Lippmann, one of the most influential writers and reporters in the United States, insisted that journalists should be guided by a scientific approach when it comes to checking information. The challenge with news verification lies in the fact that there is no strict rule on how it is performed.

Every newsroom has its own model and every journalist also has his or her own individual verification discipline. It is precisely the discipline of verifying information that distinguishes journalism from propaganda, fiction, art and entertainment. Propaganda writers select facts or invent them to serve a specific purpose and to manipulate the target group they choose. Authors of literature or art, on the other hand, use information and facts to present the truth in a more personal way. While writers of the entertainment and performances focus on aspects that aim to entertain the audience.

Cover of *The Elements of Journalism, Revised and Updated 3rd Edition: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, 2014. [accessed 08 April 2021]. Available on Amazon: <https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/71UvczheGzL.jpg>



The third edition of the much-distinguished book entitled *The Elements of Journalism* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (Three Rivers Press, New York, 2014).

Returning to verification as the essential discipline of journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel point out, among other things, these elements of verification as the most important: do not add anything other than facts; do not deceive or manipulate the audience; and be as transparent about methods and motives.

Let us look at concrete examples of how these elements affect journalists when reporting current and historical events.

## Do not invent and add things that did not happen.

In sensational or boulevard journalism, narrative fiction has been used for decades to report nonfiction events. This has been done to gain the attention of the audience. In principle, if we cannot verify the facts, then we better give up the publication of the article. The latest example where a journalist mixes fiction with facts at the expense of truth is that of the editor of the prestigious German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, Claas Relotius, in 2018. Relotius published a report on the border between Mexico and the USA, in which many dialogues and interview excerpts were invented. This caught the eye of colleagues who deal with verifying articles before they are published. After checking over 60 articles published by him in the magazine, it was revealed that most of them were either fabricated or contained manipulated facts, so his readership had been deceived.



Author: Klaus Stuttmann [accessed 08 April 2021]. Available on *Der Tagesspiegel* GmbH: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/medien/betrugsaffaere-um-spiegel-reporter-ein-fall-relotius-darf-sich-nicht-wiederholen/23780530.html>

↑ A drawing with a smashed mirror on the cover of *Der Spiegel* (German: 'the mirror') weekly, illustrating its fall after a scandal involving the journalist Claas Relotius.

In times of crisis or a pandemic like Covid-19, a lot of fake news and conspiracy theories circulate on social media. The news is supplemented with unverified information and distributed on twitter, Instagram and Facebook, and journalists themselves do not have much time to verify the sources. Such news circulates about

vaccines, about the usefulness of masks, various medicines, shortages at supermarkets and the number of deaths. Of course, the general public is not specialized in checking the sources and analysing who posts the news and for what purpose. Therefore, there is a need for journalists to remain professional more than ever in times of crisis.

### **Do not manipulate.**

Journalism in totalitarian regimes has become a reliable ally in the process of propaganda and manipulation. Journalists' loyalty was no longer directed towards the readers, but towards the dictatorial regime. In Albania, for example, the communist dictatorship lasted from November 1944 to March 1991. The image of communism was built by the information and narratives the press conveyed that did not correspond with the sad reality. Extreme poverty was masked in television reports, and documentaries described false achievements and manipulated economic growth figures. During the Albanian dictatorship, almost a third of the population was imprisoned, exiled, executed and persecuted. Journalists witnessed this annihilating policy, but were not allowed to report the truth. Whoever went against the system was personally punished, and even their family suffered the consequences. A large part of society, although experiencing the reality, had little information about the real crimes of the totalitarian regime. When they became acquainted with this dimension, after the establishment of the democratic system in the 1990s, they could hardly believe it.

### **Be transparent.**

Transparency allows the public to judge the authenticity of information and the author's motives and the way in which he has sought and gathered the facts. In the age of fake news, on the one hand, technology allows you to more quickly verify the inaccuracy of information. On the other hand, the 24-hour-news-update cycle forces journalists to publish incessantly and does not give them enough time for in-depth reporting. A challenge for the newsroom and the audience alike remains that audio-

visual production (photos and videos) can be technically manipulated in such a convincing way that they can hardly be distinguished with simple fact-checking programs. Old videos are widely used today to illustrate new events, confusing the public. This was observed during the earthquake in Albania in November 2019 where 51 people lost their lives. Photographs and videos of similar disasters elsewhere were used to illustrate the aftermath of the earthquake. Representatives of the government and local government also appeared in many photos distributing aid to affected families. But later it was verified that these photos were old and used only as illustrations, without this being made clear to the public. Most traditional and online media also fell prey to audio-visual material that they published quickly and without prior verification.

RAPSHQIP (@rapshqip.com, As emotional as it can be..., 26.11.2019 [accessed 08 April 2021]. Available on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rapshqip/status/1199342804608016385>



The 2016 recording published on Twitter by the user albanianmilitary accompanied reports of a 2019 earthquake in Albania.

In conclusion, **at a time when anyone can be a reporter on the web, the journalist takes on the role of a forum moderator, while the audience are no longer just consumers, but also producers.** Therefore, today more than ever, the discipline of verification requires an approach using scientific exactness to get the right facts.

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