

# How Journalists Verify Information

**Piotr Zaremba**

I began working as a journalist in 1991. I did not study journalism and therefore did not have the opportunity to learn the journalistic code of professional standards at university. Nevertheless, I became familiar with it in my first editorial position. This was important for all of us at the time. Journalism was supposed to differ from that of the communist era.

## In search of credibility

From the start, we considered some of these standards to be an unfulfilled ideal. For example, a recommendation from the BBC that any information should, as far as possible, be confirmed from at least two sources. The phrase 'as far as possible' opened up a wide field for compromise with reality. Other principles, however, were more realistic. Above all, the one that a voice should be given to both sides of a conflict. Also, if we expose someone, we allow them to defend themselves and request a comment.

There were also recommendations concerning newspaper editing itself, for example, separation of news itself from commentary on it. There was a belief that ensured the credibility of information itself. Some types of media did not comply with this rule. Weeklies offered texts that were a mixture of stories about reality and journalism. Yet, attempts were made to apply that principle in daily newspapers and the electronic media.

**The principle of confirming news by referring at least to a second source was intended to guarantee journalistic diligence and reliability.** There is no need to confirm anything at all with facts that are generally available. On the other hand, texts on various secrets usually conceal sources. Thus, this recommendation can be regarded as a moral guideline addressed to journalists. In theory, also in legal terms, since we pledge not to reveal our sources, even during legal proceedings. We can

thereby perceive such rules as an additional assurance to ourselves that we are writing a solid and documented text.

## **In the trap of being one-sided**

This does not mean that there is no excuse for violating this principle. Let us imagine a situation from background as a political journalist. Someone covers a conversation between two prominent politicians in person. Sometimes, it is very spectacular. Every meeting between President Lech Kaczyński and Prime Minister Donald Tusk between 2007 and 2010 ended in a leak.

The original source of information must be one of them, although it can also be provided by someone close to one of the politicians who personally heard from a participant of events. Will we not publish it? Importantly, we are dependent here on the possibility of being misled. Much depends on our own assessment of source reliability. Was that interlocutor truthful in other situations? Did a report prove true? In the case of leaks from Kaczynski-Tusk summit meetings, the source was usually people close to Tusk. No wonder that the picture painted was unfavourable to the President.

Of course, if not certain, we can relativise our news by adding a reservation to the story: 'As the circles close to ... say' or 'As is claimed by a politician close to (and here follows the name)....' The trouble is that by disclosing unofficial information of great importance we are also interested in making it sound sufficiently categorical. We therefore try to objectify it. Otherwise, our entire discovery may be considered questionable or suspicious. A journalist will always move between two aims here: on one hand to convince the public of truly knowing something 'for sure' and, on the other hand, to tell the truth and not something not fully credible.

## **Rumour, i.e. fact**

Of course, there are situations when the need to confirm news becomes absurd in itself. Several years ago, I would report every few months about the resignation of one of Beata Szydło's government ministers. When I finally met him, he reacted

with resentment. I understand him because such news did not strengthen his position within his own ministry or among fellow politicians.

However, that minister demanded that I confirm the news with him before each subsequent publication of such type. I tried to explain to him that he was neither impartial in the matter (it is obvious that he would deny it) nor necessarily someone who needed to know the plan for his own dismissal. This was decided by others. Soon, he was actually dismissed.

Of course, news of this kind, which is not immediately confirmed, gives some readers the impression of journalistic unreliability, seeking sensationalism at all cost. This is especially the case if it targets people they like. Therefore, we should not exaggerate with its duplication.

At the same time, the existence of a rumour is also a specific fact. It is worth noting, but on the condition that we describe a phenomenon of a slightly different nature from hard data. We must be careful here, since **a journalist can easily turn from a reality reporter to a reality creator.**

This is nicely shown by a scene from *The House of Cards* series: a new Secretary of State is to be appointed; the US President, together with his female cabinet chief, comments on the conjecture of a political web portal pointing to one person and not another. In fact, they begin to be guided by it even though they, and not the portal, will decide on the person.

Political news is rarely litigated. Politicians generally do not sue when they are attributed with the content of secret talks or closed meetings. This gives political journalists more freedom, but also exposes them to a temptation to manipulate facts. A journalist knowing the political scene well can even invent some. It is only reputation and prestige that can protect against similar accusations.

## Risk of playing with fire

This is different for investigative journalists. The risk of error is greater, often with a legal dimension, hence the need for repeated verification of information or

confirmation through documents. In this situation, principles of journalistic ethics protect against getting your fingers burned.

The need to know the version of the person against whom specific charges are raised, often tied to political and legal responsibility, protects an investigative journalist from a charge of unreliability that may be made in court. However, the same principles may also prove to be a ball and chain undermining the effectiveness of a text. We ask someone: 'What do you say to that?' and that someone fuels the subject in favourable media. I know of such cases and there is no general recipe to remedy this situation.

Incidentally, an investigative journalist can fall into one-sidedness. This concerns another type of risk: dependence on a source, for example, an institution interested in revealing or hiding certain information. Individual facts described by a journalist may be true, but the picture of reality recorded in texts is distorted.

This risk also applies to political journalists (including those writing about the economy or justice system). As someone dealing with political issues for years, I now often recognise whose anonymous statements a given journalist quotes or from whose point of view reality is highlighted. On several occasions, I have also faced the risk of being overly dependent on a politician I know, whose reasoning I have assumed and whose version of events I have considered most credible.

## Trapped in bubbles

Today, this phenomenon is more widespread due to journalists with particularly strong political leanings. It takes great determination to emerge from one's own 'information bubble'. At the same time, other phenomena have a negative impact on the form of journalistic texts.

The nature of online media forces the pace of producing texts, including those creating new news. What matters is clickability, so it pays to doctor up a message by using aggressive titles that often deform actual content.

The business model of all media renders it difficult to invest in texts produced for more than a day or two. In the past, investigative journalism was based on

publications prepared for weeks, if not months. Today, it suffices to have a 'ready-made piece' offered by a befriended politician or official. Lacking careful verification or analysis to further seek the truth, it only serves to evoke a certain impression, usually negative towards a given participant of events.

This also applies to other standards. **Now, the line between information and commentary is blurred in almost all media.** We do not remember the obligation to attribute earlier publication by someone else if we use it. On the contrary, many media ban that practice as, after all, benefitting the competition.

The economic weakness of the media, especially the print media, condemns us to randomness and mediocrity. I do not know whether there is still someone today in editorial offices with more media workers than journalists, who reminds colleagues of the old journalistic code.

Translation: Mikołaj Sekrecki

Proofreading: Edward Assarabowski