Images of Essence: Journalists’ Discourse on the Professional “Discipline of Verification”

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ABSTRACT The verification of factual accuracy is widely held as essential to journalists’ professional identity. Our rhetorical analysis of interviews with award-winning and semi-randomly selected newspaper reporters confirms this professional norm while revealing a preference for four types of image to describe verification methods. Spatial and temporal travel images paint verification as an embedded but adaptable heuristic process. Images of conflict suggest verification as a weapon and a shield against implied enemies. Journalists speak of vision both literally as the preeminent tool of verification, and figuratively as a metaphor for interpretation. Meanwhile, a fourth and seemingly predominant image—that of storytelling—functions to integrate the images of travel, battle, and observation and the different forms of professional identity that they connote. The quest for truth through storytelling likewise suggests a rich, if ambiguous, sense of good journalism as combining the instruments of fact with the craft of fiction.

KEYWORDS Journalism; Rhetoric; Newspapers; Verification; Professional identity

RÉSUMÉ La vérification de l'exactitude des faits est généralement considérée comme un élément essentiel de l'identité professionnelle des journalistes. Notre analyse rhétorique d'entretiens, réalisés auprès de journalistes auteurs d'articles primés ou sélectionnés de manière semi-aléatoire, confirme cette norme professionnelle tout en révélant une préférence pour quatre types d'images textuelles pour décrire leurs méthodes de vérification. Les images liées au voyage, c'est-à-dire le déplacement dans le temps et l'espace, dépeignent la vérification comme un processus heuristique intégré mais adaptable. Celles rattachées au conflit suggèrent que la vérification puisse servir d'arme et de bouclier contre des ennemis

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implicites. Les journalistes évoquent la vision autant au sens propre, c’est-à-dire l’œil comme outil prééminent de vérification, mais aussi au sens métaphorique sur le plan de l’interprétation. Une quatrième image, apparemment prédominante, celle du récit, sert à rassembler celles du voyage, du combat et de l’observation, ainsi que les différentes formes de l’identité professionnelle connotées par chacune d’entre elles. De même, la quête de vérité par le récit suggère de manière riche, quoique ambiguë, une idée du « bon » journalisme qui combine les instruments factuels et l’art de la fiction.

MOTS CLÉS Journalisme; Rhétorique; Journaux; Vérification; Identité professionnelle

Introduction

This article, an analysis of rhetorical choices in journalists’ descriptions of their verification practices, is part of a larger interview-based study of how Canadian newspaper journalists describe and evaluate their pursuit of accuracy. Although the criteria for quality journalism have traditionally been tacit, intuitive, and varied rather than codified or standardized (Ruellan, 2007; Schultz, 2007; Shapiro, 2010; Shapiro, Albanese & Doyle, 2006; Soloski, 1989), several studies have shown that, even across cultural and socio-demographic lines, journalists tend to share core professional values (Pritchard, Brewer & Sauvageau, 2005; Weaver & Wu, 1998). The trend toward a unified set of values has been associated with globalization (Hanitzsch, 2007) and professionalization (Deuze, 2005). And the single most frequently and clearly stated value expressed in journalists’ self-identification is a drive for accuracy (Bogart, 2004; Cleghorn, 1990; Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2006; Gladney, Shapiro & Castaldo, 2007; Meyer, 2004; Shapiro et al., 2006). This focus on accuracy as a key identifying professional characteristic in turn requires that journalistic methodology be centred to some degree on verification. In what rapidly became a widely lauded handbook on quality journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) wrote that “the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification” (p. 12).

Despite this enduring professional norm of verification, empirical studies have long suggested shortcomings in efforts toward, and achievement of, actual accuracy in ordinary news reports (Charnley, 1936; Jones, 2009; Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas & Mosdell, 2008; Machill & Beiler, 2009; Maier, 2005; Owen, 2003; Stepp, 2009). Professional practice appears to strive for a higher standard in investigative reporting (Cribb, Jobb, McKie & Vallance-Jones, 2006; Ettema & Glasser, 1985; Hunter, Hanson, Sabbagh, Sengers, Sullivan & Thordsen, 2009; Ruvinsky, 2008), while newsroom guidelines emphasize balance, fairness and a hierarchy of “reliable sources” with official sources at the top and the lowly single anonymous source at the bottom (Chepesiuk, Howell & Lee, 1997; Ericson, 1998; Ericson, Chan & Baranek, 1987; Rosner, 2008). As news consumers gain access to exponentially more news sources as well as raw information, some have suggested that the need for journalists’ verification efforts is on the wane, with public trust now better placed in post-publication correction by audiences (Ingram, 2012; Lasica, 1998, 2003). Yet, accuracy of public-interest journalism may still be seen as a vital check on government and other powerful institutions (Rosen, 1999; Scheuer, 2008; Singer, 2003; Slattery, 2009; Stewart & Robertson, 2009).
Against this background, our project explored journalists’ practices and personal norms for establishing the credibility of information, through obtaining journalists’ own accounts of their practice in seeking accuracy. In a previous report, we undertook a thematic, content analysis of the methods of verification that journalists claimed to use and suggested that journalists’ approach to verification was uniquely complex: in a nutshell, they deemed various types of facts and their contexts more or less worthy of rigorous checking (Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé & Mychajlowycz, 2013). Nevertheless, despite the variety of methods they said they used, we noted that most of the journalists spoke of verification as the essence of—or at least as an essential value within—journalistic practice.

In the current article, we deepen our exploration of the tension between the journalists’ description of verification as a singular guiding professional value and their explanations of the diverse methods they use in practice by conducting a rhetorical analysis of the rich, heterogeneous imagery they employed to characterize their methods of verification. Although journalists’ epideictic rhetoric about verification as a feature of their professional identity praises a semi-scientific purpose when they speak about their responsibilities in the abstract, when they are invited to describe how they seek to achieve that purpose, they are apt to use metaphors that emphasize movement, conflict, sensory attachment, and narrative rather than references to tight evidentiary standards and methodological norms. Our analysis suggests that this imagery both reflects and contributes to the tensions and ambiguities within journalists’ understandings of verification as simultaneously an essential professional norm and a complex, shifting cluster of practical methods. However, the recurring characterization of verification as the key protagonist within journalists’ quest for truth through storytelling provides an integrating image of their methods as combining the art of fiction with the science of factual accuracy.

Data collection and methods of analysis

We conducted qualitative interviews with fourteen Canadian anglophone journalists, in the course of which they described their approach to verification in semi-randomly selected news reports and feature articles published in the main news sections of the Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, The Gazette (Montréal), and the Ottawa Citizen. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted 60 to 120 minutes. In order to ensure that respondents described their verification choices candidly, without regard to how those choices might be viewed by peers and supervisors, we promised not to publish identifying information, and have used gendered pronouns at random in this article. Although they were informal in tone, the interviews followed a predetermined pattern. To begin, we asked the journalist in a general way for her views on accuracy and verification, through open-ended questions, and for some basic information about her background and experience, and how this story came about. Participants were then led through a detailed reconstruction of where, how and why the reporter verified the reported information in the chosen story—first, with reference to the groups of facts of similar type (people’s names, dates, dollar amounts, etc.), and then, with reference to each paragraph of the story in turn, asking how each piece of factual information was ascertained. We then asked a few concluding questions, including whether the se-
lected article was a typical example of the participant's work in terms of verification, time constraints, and prepublication review. Finally, the respondents were asked to comment on Kovach and Rosenstiel's above-mentioned statement that “the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification.”

The data examined in our study consists entirely of the transcripts of the interviews, rather than any empirical evidence related to the articles discussed (for example, we made no effort to check the facts reported in the articles). This is because we were seeking information on the extent to which journalists themselves aspire to accuracy as a norm of practice, how they understand the parameters of this norm, and how they describe their own efforts to achieve it, rather than the extent to which they do or do not actually achieve it.

This analysis of the imagery used by our interviewees to describe their views of verification is based on their responses to ten key questions from each interview—half from the beginning (before the detailed reconstruction exercise) and the other half from the end. The questions were:

A1. What are your first thoughts about what verification means to journalists or to you as a journalist?
A2. What is your general approach to capturing interview information?
A3. How did you verify people's names for this story?
A4. How did you verify place names for this story?
A5. How did you verify dates, time and ages?
B1. Has there been any part of this interview that has led you to have any new thoughts concerning the verification process?
B2. How typical or different do you think this story was from other stories you have done, from the point of view of the process of ensuring accuracy?
B3. How often, if at all, do you show pre-published material to your sources?
B4. It has been said that the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification. Do you agree?
B5. Do have any comments or suggestions for our future interviews, for our future research?

We compiled the responses to each question and then began sorting them into what seemed to be recurring themes. Our process of coding the responses was iterative; that is, the group of researchers discussed their observations of apparent themes and then re-embarked upon the process of identifying patterns. The emerging patterns of imagery were then grouped into the four final clusters discussed here, within which we categorized all the specific examples of relevant words and phrases that we had identified. In the analysis that follows, we draw selectively on this data to illustrate the nature and significance of the four main types of image that we found.

Our rhetorical approach to this investigation conceptualizes language use as a form of situated symbolic action that does not simply reflect or represent reality, but actively shapes or constitutes what people know, value, and do in the world. We draw
on Burke’s (1966) concept of terministic screens to identify and explore the significance of the terms and descriptive phrases that the journalists we interviewed used to characterize verification. Burke’s metaphor of terministic screens foregrounds the role of language in shaping—or filtering—what we understand reality to be. The different terminologies that we use to name the world at once reflect, select, and deflect the reality that we apprehend (Burke, 1966). Each terminology, he proposes, is like a screen that colours our knowledge and experiences of the world:

When I speak of “terministic screens,” I have particularly in mind some photographs I once saw. They were different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so “factual” as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded. (p. 45)

The terms people use to describe the world function as a kind of filter that directs attention to particular aspects of reality rather than others, thus creating different, rhetorically constituted interpretations of the subject matter being discussed.

In our research, we are interested in how the various terminologies—and in particular metaphorical and imagistic language—that our participants employed reflects, selects, and deflects diverse understandings of apprehended facts within journalism, namely the professional value and practice of verification. The imagery that people use is not, after all, random: metaphorical language is not only ubiquitous in the way people express themselves; it affects how we understand and experience reality, it expresses how we see the world, and it influences our attitudes, knowledge, values, and actions (Foss, 2004; Gronnvoll & Landau, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As Santa Ana (2002) puts it, “metaphor shapes everyday discourse, and by this means it shapes how people discern and enact the everyday” (p. 26).

Therefore, to chart the image clusters of descriptive words and phrases used within and across our participants’ accounts is to provide insight into the complex, dynamic ways in which they understand “verification” as an integral aspect of their professional practices and identities (Gulbrandsen, 2010; Spoel & Den Hoed, 2014). As Burke (1957) explains,

the work of every writer … uses ‘associational clusters.’ And you may, by examining his work, find ‘what goes with what’ in these clusters—what kinds of acts and images and personalities and situations go with his notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc. (p. 20)

In the study presented here, we analysed the transcribed responses to our ten interview questions in order to trace “what goes with what” within journalists’ descriptions of verification.

**Verification as a journey**

The first of the three terminological clusters that we noted suggests that in respect to verification, at least, journalists see themselves as on the move. Participants use motion and movement terminology to characterize some of the typical strategies they employ in their individual processes of verification. Thus, individual journalists refer to their
“first pass through” verification, and describe themselves as going “great lengths,” “going with the flow,” and being “way more on the go now.”

This journey’s trajectory may be either vertical or horizontal. Five journalists speak of verification as comprising “steps,” suggesting upward and forward progress, or “layers,” suggesting completion of a whole or stripping away to reveal a core. But for these same speakers, verification also involves moving “back and forth,” or the following of a “paper trail” and the taking of a less popular route. “Everybody’s running this way,” recalled one, “but I think I’m just going to go in the opposite direction and look at something else.”

But not all journeys are through space. Several journalists describe verification strategies that involve movement through time. Most use a “timeline” or “chronology” to untangle “a convoluted history.” Two journalists refer to their chronologies as well as timelines made by a source. For one, organizing time as physical distances between events “teaches you something that you hadn’t thought of.” Hence, timelines help the journalist understand information and can also reveal something new. Another participant implies that a single document may be inconclusive: “you see it on paper; it’s a snapshot in time, but you don’t know what existed before how it got be that way.” Facts are like photographs, but stories span time. Verifying a story is presented as a process that involves not only today but also the past. Knowing what happened and in what order is vital to verification because “otherwise you might write nonsensical things.”

In describing these journeys, the journalists are more apt to speak of routes than of end-points: there is always another step to take or layer to consider. For two subjects, verification is explicitly cyclical: it is “looping back in upon itself” or it “revolves around.” Most of the participants speak about the value of going back to revisit facts, as if rewinding time: “I go back to the first page.” One journalist says that when he was verifying, he “wanted to go back into the history.” He calls verifying the past a “back-check” and aligns looking into the past with “deep” journalism: he says his verification methods change “depending on how deep [he’s] going, how far back.” Another rhetorically asks: “To what lengths do you go to make sure you’re not mis-representing what went on?” Whatever the ideal distance or route, the activity of verification is, it seems, anything but sedentary.

**Verification as a shield and weapon**

There are calm and tranquil voyages, and then there are forays. Journalists’ fact-seeking journeys would seem to be of the second type: campaigns undertaken in an atmosphere of fear and aggression.

Two subjects vividly report fearing error. “I live in abject fear of having to run a correction … I really just live in fear of a mistake,” says one journalist, while another states: “[A]s a reporter you lived in fear of that, you’d reread and reread your own stories knowing that you didn’t want any holes in there because once you get a thread like that, the whole story can unravel.” It is as if, for these subjects, an error could mean professional death. One participant says errors kill careers: “your reputation’s everything. If you’re not accurate, you’re doomed as a journalist.” If this sometimes comes across as slightly paranoid, one participant pleads guilty as charged: he calls himself “deranged” and says he has a “mental illness” with regards to his excessive verification
techniques, citing an early example of bad verification that led to a “bloodbath.” But he is not alone: one journalist recalls asking an editor to pull a name from a story at the very last second because she was “paranoid” of getting it wrong:

I remember emailing my editor with my tail between my legs and saying, “Can you please take his name out of the story?” ... because I was so nervous! In my head, I was, like, Oh my God, what if I can't [be] 100% [sure]?

Like, I was 99% but I wasn’t 100%.

Another’s fear is milder, but still evident. When asked about how he verified a name, he says: “Please don’t tell me I spelled that wrong,” implying that the interviewers might have fact-checked his story and caught his mistake.

Even when not overtly referring to fear, many of the subjects describe verification as a layer of protection or backup in defence of the facts. One journalist calls verification “the first and only line of defence on accuracy,” and while interview recordings may be particularly relevant where there is a danger of litigation, another participant wants to have a recording simply to provide a sense of safety: “Even if I don’t go back to the tape, at least it’s there. And I’ll feel safer about that.” Similarly, another journalist will “prefer to have” recordings due to unknown threats: “I mean you never know what it might lead to: a lawyer’s letter, a denial, obfuscating what-have-you.” For others, documents provide the same level of protection as recordings: “This was ironclad, this story, because of the documents.”

If verification is sometimes a defence measure, it can also be deployed for attack. One participant classifies background interviews with unquoted sources “under the heading of reconnaissance,” while another describes verification as a process that involves facing information “barriers” and dealing with people who are “constantly trying to block your access to information.” Several participants use forceful, physical verbs for reporters’ routine actions: facts should get “nailed down,” people “confronted,” information “wrested” from reluctant sources, while “stupid stuff” should get “kicked out.” One participant speaks of “probing” for information; others say that threatening imminent publication usually “triggers” a response, caution against “shooting” questions, “whipping out audio recorders” in sensitive situations, or unwittingly “burning” sources.

Back home in the newsroom, journalists apparently have both allies and enemies. Copyeditors are the first and only line of defence on accuracy; fact-checkers are the “unsung heroes” of (magazine) journalism. However, one journalist mentions going “ballistic” on a copyeditor who erroneously changed the spelling of a name in a story, and another implies that while her boss fails to support her reporting vigour, “I don’t let him get to me, don’t let him frazzle me.” The news industry itself may seem to conspire against efforts at accuracy by increasing job demands: “You’ve just got balls coming at you from every different direction.” The image of cannon-fire is clear. In these various ways, journalists seem to establish themselves as activists in the cause of truth.

When they set out on the path of verification, they do so expecting a fight.

Seeing as believing

If traps and threats await journalists in their search for truth, there is one thing they appear to trust: their eyes. Seeing is believing. Documents, for one, are far more reliable
than interviews as verification sources; as one interviewee notes, they are “all I can rely on.” As noted above, a “paper trail” is needed to keep one’s bearings, and, each document provides a “snapshot” of what is happening. Documents are “chock full of details that even ordinary human beings don’t remember.” One participant even checks a source’s signature to ensure he uses their preferred name spelling; another prefers “to see things on paper … black on white, so to speak.” Nevertheless, direct observation—through physically visiting places or people—remains important for some: documents may be “black and white,” but observational details add colour: “a nuance … that you don’t see, you don’t gather, you don’t glean from the documents.” A particular story might be “observation-driven” rather than “fact-driven.”

Beyond literal seeing, participants also use visual terminology to describe the process of interpreting information. Two participants describe looking through a verifying “lens” that is, as one put it, “different according to what aspect of the piece we’re talking about.” Journalists need to “look” at things from different “angles.” It is the journalist’s “vision,” in this metaphoric sense, that gives facts meaning: “You’re looking at the exact same facts, but you’re seeing very different things in them.” Several journalists say they want to “capture” information, which also has photographic connotations. As they warily set out in search of truth, journalists, it seems, must keep their eyes open.

Mixed metaphors, and a missing link

The above three images on which journalists rely to describe their quest for accuracy are not intuitively compatible. The observer image connotes stillness—an archivist sifting through documents; a chemist at his microscope. The voyager image connotes a restless bustling back and forth, up and down, in relentlessly pursuit of facts in flight. As for the warrior, well, she seems lucky to be alive, so dangerous and violent is her lonely battle against obfuscation.

Nor do any of these pictures—the discursive self-images of all-seeing eye, truth-assailing soldier and data-driven explorer—sit comfortably with the substantive details of journalists’ verification methods and standards as described by journalists themselves in the course of the same interviews. Far from subjecting every avowed fact indiscriminately to rigorous double-checking or triangulation, journalists are, by their own accounts to us, selective about which facts merit or require checking. In some contexts and circumstances, they will almost religiously hunt down backup information; in others, the same journalist will rely quite comfortably on attribution to a single source—an approach to verification that we have elsewhere described as a “strategic ritual” of practical compromise (Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé & Mychajlowycz, 2013; compare to Tuchman, 1972).

The apparent contradictions are resolved by a final image type—the most ubiquitous of all—in journalists’ portrayals of what they do. Journalists may variously use images of battle, travel and observation, but they consistently describe their work as the telling of stories and call themselves “storytellers” or writers of “narrative.” They talk about how they “arrange a narrative,” describe an event as a “scene,” or compare organizing the story on paper to editing for television: “I’m really religious about mak-
ing sure that I’m not recutting, interpretively, if you know what I mean, which is sort of a TV trick.” Another presents herself as a storyteller because she is “making a scene” or “can build a scene.” This involves taking information from what people have said and what you know about the location. It is okay to create this scene “as long as you don’t take too many leaps.” The idea is to “put people in the world” of a story’s source.

Indeed, when asked if they agree that verification is the “essence of journalism,” two participants prefer to modify the statement by adding the words “skepticism, wonder, curiosity” or “storytelling.” (Another said: “No, the essence of journalism is curiosity. And what makes it work is verification.”) It is clear that narrative engagement is valued highly, along with factual integrity. Journalists have a “job to make the news interesting.” Mere information may be “bald” without narrative, or without creativity. “I like to present my stories in a creative kind of way. In a colourful way,” says one journalist who sees facts as the “bones” of the story while writing is “the meat.” Further, engaging presentation gives a story more impact: “the highest-impact journalism is what you do with that verified story you have, and how you present it. How you roll it out there.”

In this way, journalists distinguish their writing from the work produced by other professions, for example, “a police blotter,” “dictionaries,” “encyclopedias,” “scientific journals,” or the work products of “boring lawyers.” On the other hand, this is storytelling with a key distinction, which lies precisely in the storytellers’ quest for truth. Whether or not they actually say verification is the essence of journalism, all of their discourse reveals an ongoing awareness of and concern for verification as a necessary foundation for their work. Journalism is “storytelling based on fact” or “nonfiction storytelling [because] we’re telling the truth.” For that reason, the participants are more likely to align journalism with history than fiction. Journalism is “like history” because they are both “a story that somebody wrote.” Not only does one participant “love” writing, she values her role as storyteller: “you can’t wait to tell the story.”

This restless but often happy marriage of the instruments of fact with the craft of fiction, in turn, may explain why a journalist will see herself in lyrical images (voyager, warrior, seer) as often as, or more often than, in the sober language of the laboratory. Their work is, after all, more art than science. And verification itself is, in turn, a prominent, dynamic figure in the stories that journalists tell of their work. In all 14 works of journalism that the transcripts discuss, verification is the common protagonist that drives the actions of the journalists and defines the direction of the story. And once this protagonist is characterized as the storyteller’s servant, the reliance on metaphors of vision, movement and conflict are perfectly apt: storytelling involves organizing events on a timeline and in space, and creating dramatic tension. Storytelling entails setting scenes, transporting (relocating) audiences, pitting protagonists against antagonists. Hence, storytelling strikes a delicate balance between inference and creativity, and nonfiction storytellers (journalists) become part-discoverers, part creators.

**Conclusion**

Journalists’ epideictic rhetoric about verification as a feature of their professional identity praises a semi-scientific purpose when they speak about their responsibilities in the abstract, connoting something of a detached-observer stance. When they are in-
vited to describe how they seek to achieve that purpose, however, they are apt to use metaphors that emphasize movement, conflict, sensory attachment and narrative, rather than references to tight standards and norms. They construct verification as an embedded but shifting, adaptable heuristic process that both acknowledges and addresses the situational contingency of factual accuracy. Their various discursive expressions of their identities as voyagers, warriors, and watchers signal the centrality and complexity of verification for journalistic practice. These metaphors at once reveal and shape the ways journalists reflect on, and strive to excel at, their craft within a rapidly evolving, highly competitive, and increasingly decentralized news ecosystem. In this context, verification becomes a multifaceted, hard-fought strategy of professional survival, serving to distinguish journalism from less professionally-rigorous news sources and writing practices. Our findings thus raise an important challenge for journalism education and professional training: while verification is clearly an essential norm (if not the essence) of good journalism, it also clearly requires a diverse set of skills and experience, which are not easily taught or learned.

Finally, verification serves as a fundamental means to craft a story based on facts. Indeed, the cluster of metaphors we identify in this study might be confusing were it not for the integrating image of journalism as storytelling. Ultimately, verification and good journalism (or journalists) are given value because of what they can do, because of the actions inherent in their description. That is to say, a good journalist, like good verification, exists to provide a story that is worth reading.

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Note
1. Male and female pronouns are used at random in this paper to protect participants’ identifying information.

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