Is one source enough? Verification in Canadian Newspapers

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Abstract

When journalists compete with bloggers and anyone with a smartphone, on what basis may professional reporters now claim public attention and trust? The profession's quality criteria have traditionally been tacit, intuitive, and varied rather than codified or standardized. However, accuracy remains a core value. When speed often prevails over accuracy, what exactly does verification mean in everyday practice? Through a series of individual in-depth interviews conducted in Quebec and Ontario, we seek to describe the fact-checking strategies used by a group of award-winning journalists and by a control group of randomly selected journalists. In both groups, we see rigorous methodologies that can be described as “best practices.” Nevertheless, we note a cleavage between spoken ideals and everyday practice in the participants’ discourse.

Résumé

Au moment où les journalistes entrent en compétition avec des blogueurs et des citoyens armés de téléphones intelligents, sur quelles bases peuvent-ils réclamer l'attention et la confiance du public? Les critères de qualité de la profession demeurent encore aujourd'hui basés sur des règles tacites, intuitives et variées. Pourtant, l'exactitude demeure une valeur fondamentale pour les journalistes. Quand la vitesse l'emporte sur l'exactitude, quelles sont les règles qui régissent le travail des journalistes de quotidien? Grâce à une série d'entrevues réalisées au Québec et en Ontario auprès d'un groupe de journalistes primés et d'un groupe contrôle, nous avons reconstruit les stratégies de vérification de ces reporters. Alors que des méthodes de vérification rigoureuses sont observées dans les deux
groupes, un clivage est visible entre les idéaux des participants et leur pratique quotidienne.

Introduction

At a time when journalists compete with bloggers and anyone with a smartphone, journalists’ professional legitimacy can be contested by a public who have access to a large diversity of information sources (Heinonen, 1999). The role of conventional journalism has shifted from a near-monopoly of reporting information within the public sphere to a less central, possibly avoidable, link in the information chain (Bardoel, 1996). In that context, on what basis may professional reporters now claim public attention and trust?

Journalists tend to celebrate autonomy and diversity in practice because of the democratic role conventionally attached to a free press. Accordingly, the profession’s quality criteria have traditionally been tacit, intuitive, and varied rather than codified or standardized (Ruellan, 2007; Schultz, 2007; Shapiro, 2010; Shapiro, Albanese, & Doyle, 2006; Soloski, 1989). However, accuracy remains a core value (Bogart, 2004; Cleghorn, 1990; Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2006; Gladney Shapiro, & Castaldo, 2007; Meyer, 2004; Shapiro et al., 2006; ).

In fact, journalists tend to see themselves as key to a democratic process that survives only through broad public access to reliable accounts of what is going on in the world. But to achieve accuracy requires more than good intentions and effort. Revisiting the classic idea of “a common intellectual method and a common area of valid fact” (Lippmann, 1920/1995), Kovach and Rosenstiel define journalism as a “discipline of verification” to separate it from “entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art” (2007: 79).

But, when speed often prevails over accuracy, what exactly does verification mean in everyday practice? How many sources, how much evidence is enough? And what constitutes a reliable source? We propose a comprehensive study of how newspaper journalists describe and evaluate their own verification practices. We seek to understand how the principle of verification translates into actual routines. In this way, we will explore the extent to which a community of practice, or a group of people whose common work and interaction informs and improves their practices (Wenger, 1999), exists among journalists in Canada today, and identify what tacit standards have been defined in that community or are sufficiently evolved or evolving in individual practitioners’ established routines to be described as “best practices.”

Previous research

Clear standards of verification have not yet been articulated in the literature. There are no written rules or prescription for verification routines in daily news
reporting, and some have questioned whether verification is even a feasible goal for routine news reporting. According to Rosner (2009), daily journalism would be “paralyzed” if journalists waited to verify all information before reporting it, and follow-up enterprise stories serve as a form of verification. Still, when the stakes are high, more verification is required prior to publication (Rosner, 2009). We do, however, see proposed methodological standards and routines of verification in the fact-checking tradition of major, well-funded magazines that claim to achieve a complete verification of all purported facts (Brouse, 2007; Sheppard, 1998a; Sheppard, 1998b).

Many journalism textbooks are devoid of references to verification or fact-checking (Frost, 2002; Gaines, 1998; Harcup, 2004; Harris, 1997; Spark, 1999) or confine themselves to only the briefest references to the importance of double-checking basic facts such as names, ages, and locations and the necessity to have more than one source where a charge of misconduct is made (Lanson & Stephens, 2008). The latter so-called “two-source” rule has been attributed to the Washington Post’s Watergate investigation (an attribution that has been contested by at least one Post editor (Sussman, 2009), and sometimes but not always associated particularly with information coming from an unnamed source (Boeyink, 1990; Lanson & Stephens, 2008). Ward offers 15 briefly stated guidelines for verification including, “Check every fact,” “Compare sources,” “Balance the interpretation of a fact,” and even, “Beware of slavishly following predetermined verification rules” (Ward, 1991).

Culturally, reporters expect themselves and one another to doubt what people tell them, in the spirit of the old adage, “If your mother says she loves you, check it out” (Chepesiuk, Howell, & Lee, 1997). However, the literature indicates that in practice not all facts are double-checked; that sources’ reliability is not consistently doubted; that where a fact is in doubt, it may be considered verified if upheld in any independent account regardless of the source; and that certain facts may be put through the verification “ritual of objectivity” (Tuchman, 1978) less because they are seen as socially significant than because they are potentially libelous, carry strong political or social ramifications, or go against common sense (see also Sessions, 2003; Tuchman, 1972).

For example, Lewis, Williams, Franklin, James, & Mosdell’s 2008 British study found that fewer than half of the newspaper and broadcast stories studied made any apparent attempt to contextualize or verify information, with 87 percent based on a single primary source (Lewis et al., 2008). A study of 235 German journalists, supplemented by a written survey of 601 journalists, found that while they spent 43 percent of their working time on research, the journalists spent only about eleven minutes per work day checking the plausibility or correctness of sources and information (Machill & Beiler, 2009). Moreover, indications that journalists fail to verify information obtained online and from interested parties are frequent (Jones, 2009; Owen, 2003; Ryan, 2004; Stepp, 2009).
Even if several Canadian investigative reporters interviewed by Ruvinsky insist that all quality reporting, including straight news, is investigative in nature (Ruvinsky, 2008), evidence suggests that verification is increasingly associated with investigative reporting rather than daily news. Investigative journalists have elsewhere been said to adopt a quasi-scientific approach, based on a hypothesis which they set out to prove or disprove, using triangulation of information from various sources (Cribb, Jobb, McKie, & Vallance-Jones, 2006). Ettema and Glasser’s in-depth interview with one investigative reporter leads them to propose that investigative work is epistemologically distinct from that of daily news. Whereas hard-news reporters consider bureaucrats “self-evidently competent knowers,” and thus have an “enduring commitment to the supremacy of bureaucratically credible facts,” the investigative reporter evaluates information, obtained through tips, by a methodical process. This information is “weighed” within a hierarchy of evidentiary value with highest rank going to documentary sources and lowest to the anonymous phone call, but there is no clear standard for determining how much evidence amounts to decisive justification (Ettema & Glasser, 2006). Tacit and verbal newsroom guidelines tend to speak more vaguely of balance, fairness, and a hierarchy of “reliable sources” with official sources at the top and the lowly single anonymous source at the bottom (Chepesiuk et al., 1997; Ericson, Chan, & Baranek, 1987; Ericson, 1998; Rosner, 2008).

Data about verification, this “essence of journalism,” remains rare and there are no clear answers on how it is practised day-to-day: how often, under what circumstances, and according to what standards. Our ongoing study is an attempt to shed light on reporters’ common but perhaps unenunciated evidentiary standards and strategies. What informal “rules of practice” might exist for achievement of accuracy? Is a fact alleged by two identified, authoritative sources automatically more worthy of reporting than one averred by a single source who asks for anonymity? How many sources are enough, and what constitutes a reliable source? And, at a time when long-standing challenges such as limited knowledge and difficulty of access to information from institutional and corporate sources are compounded by increasing pressures on time and resources, and pressure to report simultaneously for multiple media platforms, to what extent do journalists continue to adhere to accuracy as a cherished common ideal?

**Method**

This paper is the beginning of a comprehensive study of how newspaper journalists describe and evaluate their own verification practices, in order to identify emerging standards and to contribute to the development of journalistic best practices. Through a series of individual in-depth interviews conducted in Quebec and Ontario, we seek to describe the fact-checking strategies used by a group of award-winning journalists and a control group of randomly selected
journalists. We proposed that the “elite” group might describe a model of verification journalism at its best, against which the “control” group might describe journalism in its everyday reality.

For the elite sample, we have contacted every newspaper journalist who won honours at either the National Newspaper Awards for journalism in English or, in French, at the Judith-Jasmin Awards of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, between 2008 and 2010. Because there are fewer newspaper recipients of the French awards, shortlisted nominees were also included in our French sample, as were as winners of Le Prix d’excellence Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec – Bank of America Merrill Lynch en journalisme économique et financier.

For the “control” group, we semi-randomly selected stories from a constructed population of texts. To identify the sample, we created constructed weeks between 2010 and 2011. In those weeks we sampled all stories commensurate in length with the set of award-winning stories, so that the two groups were comparable. We also had to exclude stories that obviously were based on a single source as well as opinion articles. The selected stories consisted entirely of news reports and feature articles published in the main news sections of daily newspapers (La Presse, Le Devoir, Le Journal de Montréal, Le Soleil, Le Nouvelliste, La Voix de l’Est, Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, The (Montreal) Gazette, Ottawa Citizen), the same newspapers as were represented in the elite set. For financial reasons, only central Canadian cities were represented because we believed that in-depth interviews are best conducted in person.

The response rate was high: over half of the 69 journalists whom we approached agreed to be interviewed, although several of those interviews could not be scheduled because of the journalist’s busy schedule. This response rate seems satisfying, taking into account the fact that we asked questions that some may perceive as “trade secrets” of individual method (or, perhaps, the lack thereof).

We finally conducted 28 interviews, equally divided between francophone and anglophone journalists and between the elite and random samples. Before each interview, we conducted a content analysis of the news story to be covered, identifying each fact, following in this respect the method of preparation for fact-checking in magazines as described by Brouse (2007). All facts were grouped into usual categories: people’s names and titles; geographical facts (place names, distances); dates, ages, and time periods; every number (statistics, dollar amount); names of institutions, companies, organizations, and groups; direct and indirect quotes. The remaining uncategorized facts were highlighted to be asked about individually.

Interviews were conducted generally in person, rarely by phone or video link, and each one was 60 to 120 minutes long. Although they were informal in tone, the scripts overall followed an identical pattern. In introduction, we asked the
journalist in a general way for his or her views on accuracy and verification, through open-ended questions, and for some basic information about his or 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. Finally, we asked a few concluding questions, including whether the selected article was a typical example of the journalist’s work in terms of verification, time constraints, and prepublication review. Finally, the respondents were asked to comment on the statement: “The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

The interviews were transcribed in full and the transcripts were then reviewed by the researchers to determine broad themes that suggested themselves as common trends that were dominant enough to report and illustrate in this paper. In coming reports, we will more formally analyze the discourse and compare results across the full range of various sampled groups to highlight possible areas of convergence and divergence regarding the types and standards of verification pertaining to number and types of distinct types of facts contained in stories, the number and types of sources consulted, the correlation between number and types of sources and of facts, and the types of verification modalities utilized.

From the comparison of these groups, we wish to see if more verification and more rigorous methodologies are present in award-winning stories, and to find norms that might be defined into a group of potential best practices. Furthermore, there may be an emerging cultural divide about accuracy among journalists of the two major language groups in Canada, as suggested by Pritchard, Brewer and Sauvageau (2005). These researchers observed that journalists working for French media seemed to maintain accuracy as a core value, whereas attachment to accuracy appeared to be eroding among journalists of the English media. In the next step of our analysis, we will compare anglophone and francophone journalists’ discourse in order to test those findings.

The following preliminary observations are based on 23 coded interviews (11 with reporters from our elite group and 12 from the control group; 13 men and 10 women; 11 English and 12 French) representing a diversity of journalistic beats or assignments (2 business/industry reporters, 2 covering city hall, 4 parliamentary correspondents, 2 crime reporters, 5 investigative reporters, 4 feature writers, 2 general assignment reporters, 1 sports writer, 1 international columnist). The participants work at seven different newspapers in Ontario and Quebec.

In line with standard practice, respondents will not be identified. We use an alphanumeric code indicating the sample group (C: control, E: elite), the language of the interview (F: French, E: English) and the order in which they
were coded within this sample/language group (1-7). Thus, EE1 designates the first coded interview conducted in English with an award-winning journalist. The French quotes were translated by the authors.

**Findings**

**Facts**

Every journalist agreed that verification was an important, and sometimes challenging, part of practicing journalism. When asked about verification in general open-ended questions, journalists tended to mention the importance of finding two or three sources (EF2) for each piece of information. But when we asked about each specific fact in the article, we noted that a lot of them came from a single source. From this observation, we can state that the degree of verification depends on the nature of facts and the sources that are available. For example, all participants ensured the spelling of a name or the title of a source by simply directly asking the source, at the beginning or at the end of the interview (EE1, EE3, EE4, EE6, EE7, EF1, CE2, CE3, CE4, CF1, CF2, CF7). Sometimes some negotiating went on: “If someone has a title that’s, you know, thirty words long, I’ll often ask if it’s okay if I refer to you as spokesperson or whatever,” one journalist said (CE4). Names and titles were also obtained from official documents (EE2, EE6), websites (EF1, CF7), or databases (CF3, CF6, CF7). To quote someone as a resident of a certain area, there was no need for extra verification (EF1). But in a particular case, the journalist identified a man as a “gang member” through a combination of visual information (wearing gang colours, standing on a street identified as the gang’s “turf”, and overhearing the individual brag about killing someone (EF1). Another reporter consulted a lawyer before publication when describing a man as a member of the mob, based on a legal conviction (EE4).

Identifying an individual as a member of a criminalized group was done through a combination of visual information (wearing gang colours, standing on a street identified as the gang’s “turf”, and overhearing the individual brag about killing someone (EF1).

Checking websites (EF1, CE3, CF3) was also cited as a usual practice to confirm the spelling of an institution’s, organization’s, or business’s name, even though journalists identified that errors can occur: “It’s right 99% [of the time]” (CF3). However, two journalists said they feel confident about spelling details, relying regularly on their memory and experience (CF2, CE4). Only one participant, a well-known columnist, relied on editors to spell-check for him: “I may be dyslexic” (EF2).
To check the spelling of a place name, calculate a distance, or to visualize a certain area, MapQuest (EE1) and Google Maps (EE1, EE5, CE1) were common tools reported by our subjects. A journalist remembered using an interactive format of online database to visualize official demographic information (EE1). Traditional maps are still being used to visualize a territory (CF2), or to get directions to an out-of-town assignment (CF1).

But facts alone did not sum up journalism for our subjects. They also mentioned interpretation, based on facts that can be construed to say a lot of different things. The journalist’s interpretation could sometimes be secured with indirect sources, like a weather forecast or speculation from other media that rain could make the flooding worse (CF1). One journalist talked about the importance of long-term direct observation to feel the “tense atmosphere” in an urban neighbourhood (EF1). One participant argued that it takes at least 10 cases to make a trend (EE1). Journalists reported using an outside source (EE6), such as court proceedings, to justify, for example, a description that a person’s breath was “stinking of alcohol” (EE1). A journalist recently started to use the chronology template in Google Documents “because sometimes the juxtaposition of events in a chronology teaches you something that you hadn’t thought of” (EE6). However, some journalists also said they relied exclusively on past experience to validate a piece of information (CF2, EF2).

**Motivation**

All of the simple facts seem important to verify, at least with one source. It was a matter of credibility for the journalist (EE6, CE3), the reputation of his or her newspaper, or even the profession as a whole (CF1). For some participants, there was a different degree of verification between day-to-day and investigative reporting. One participant said that cross-checking sources and obtaining relevant documents was more important in investigative reporting (CF2). Sometimes the nature of a fact required a higher degree of verification, often motivated by the fear of lawsuits (EE6, EF2, CE3, CF6). An investigative reporter stated: “[Libel is] always on your mind. Every email I write, I imagine how it would look in a libel case. And everything that I write, I make sure that I verify it, just because of very stupid mistakes can trip you up. Stupid, unintentional, unmalicious mistakes added together can really weaken your case. So facts are really important” (EE6). Two journalists mentioned fear of lawsuit at the management level of their newspapers, resulting in information or stories that didn’t go public (EF2, CF2).

**Attribution**

When it was impossible to find a second source, one participant mentioned dealing with the problem by attributing the information to the first source (EE1,
CF1, CF3), using a direct quote: “If it’s false, it’s between quotation marks: he’s the one who said it” (CF1).

Several journalists said there was no need for attribution if the facts came from official documents or if the fact had been verified by multiple sources (EE1, CE3, CF3). Two journalists said that attribution should be avoided in investigative reporting because everything is verified in multiple ways (EE1) and “because we’ve decided that they’re facts” (CE3). But journalists said that sometimes they may decide not to attribute facts in the text for aesthetic reasons or to preserve narrative flow (EE1, EE3, EE5). A columnist said he always tries to avoid attribution as much as possible (EF2): “the point is not to get quotes. Journalism is about informing people, so that they know what is really going on.” That is, he argued that the story is more important to the reader than process details. On the other hand, journalists said that transparency was an important ingredient of investigative reporting and that it could be reached by attribution (CF2), or by exposing limits of the reporting process, by telling the readers that no other confirmation was available, for instance (EE1). Another participant said transparency was not always a realistic goal, and that without anonymous sources, information or stories could never go public (CF7).

Sourcing

As our study shows, official documents, especially those of a legal or scientific nature, are placed on top of the credibility hierarchy. At least one journalist said that an official document, like a government report, didn’t necessarily require a second source (CF3). This subject said that when there was contradiction in different historic documents, the official had the right information “99 percent of the time.” Documents were considered “firm” (CF2) source material, another subject said. Journalists cited court documents (EE1, EE4, EE6, EE7, CF4), securities files (EE2, EE6, CE2), public statistics agencies (EE6, EF1), and a survey (CF1) as valuable sources. One journalist accorded more value to documents or data produced by independent organizations (EE2). Finally, just one participant said she always cross-checked her understanding of an official document with at least two off-the-record experts in the field (CF2) even though she thought of herself as competent and experienced on the topic.

Official spokespeople were also seen to have a lot of credibility by participants. For example, information brought forth by a public relations police officer did not need a second source for one journalist (CE4). Verification was simple when an article was based on information from experts, historic documents, and studies, said another participant (CF3).

Sources can be considered more or less credible based on their professional background (EE4). For example, one reporter judged information provided by a lawyer about a septic tank (in a story about flooding) as factual and accurate
Judging the credibility of a source was highly subjective, as another journalist said: “The fact that I met him [at his work], gave him an air of authenticity that was impossible to ignore” (EE1).

One journalist said that finding a credible source was really important especially for international topics (EF3), because “we can’t often be there.” For this reporter, organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or International Crisis Group are credible sources, even though she sometimes disagreed over some interpretations.

For one columnist, access to the important people was the key to verification. “It requires access to people who know and do [...] If I want to verify, I will go directly [to the source at the top]” (EF2). For that matter, this experienced columnist did not trust PR people and always tried to avoid them by having a great network of contacts. This participant gave a source favourable exposure, expecting his help further along in a crucial time (EF2). Two journalists insisted that a great long-term relationship with sources is important to have access to information (EF2, EF3). A business reporter had his own go-to sources, which was important to the verification process for certain topics when crucial information is kept secret (EE2).

Anonymity could also be used to protect sources from potential reprisal (EF2), whether to protect their job or even their lives (EF3). But, several journalists said that they avoided anonymous sources as much as possible because a source cited on the record is considered much more credible (EE5). One journalist insisted that it’s a matter of newsroom policy (CF1). One international reporter (EF3) said that when someone in a difficult position, such as a human rights activist posted in a conflict zone, chooses to be open about his identity, his testimony becomes even more valuable (EF3).

However, non-collaborative sources were often cited as a problem, especially in industry (EF6) and government (CF6, CF7, EF3). One journalist told us about the difficulties she encountered when trying to obtain information from federal ministry representatives: “They don’t want to talk to us anymore, they send us e-mails. [...] It’s painful” (EF3). Two journalists mentioned the difficulty of getting information from the police, especially on-the-record statements (EF1, EE5).

Process

As we can already see, the processes of information gathering and verification are, most of the time, integrated (EE1, CE1, EF1, EF2, CF1), a result that contradicts findings of a previous study in which verification was described as a highly distinct process (Machill and Beiler, 2009). For example, a journalist pointed out that for him “verification is much more rooted in the actual reporting process, step by step and looping back in upon itself” (EE2). The circular nature
of information-gathering and verification is visible in one participant’s discourse; the subject was hesitant to use the term “verification” to describe his work. He explained that he carefully planned a succession of phone calls to sources, in order to piece information together, bit by bit, before contacting a key player (EF2). In some cases, the verification came early in the reporting process, as when a reporter interviewed a wife-beater after being convinced by the subject’s employer that the man’s problem stemmed from post-traumatic stress disorder (EE1) or when anonymous sources provided information leading to the attributed interview used in the story (CE3).

Interviews were an essential part of the verification process, and many participants told us they recorded interviews, especially the youngest journalists of our sample (CF1). Nearly all of the participants told us they took handwritten notes as a general rule. During phone interviews, some participants typed notes directly on the computer (EF1, CF1). Many transcribed interviews in full or in large part (EE1, EE2, EE3, EE4, EE5, EE6), while others said they did this sometimes (CE1, CE2, CF2), not often (CE3, CF1), or not at all (CE4, EF1). However, one journalist did not have a device to record calls on her desk phone, like most journalists at her newspaper—something that could be a limit to verification when she is in the field.

Ideals

At the end of each interview, the respondents were asked to comment on the widely quoted statement: “The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). Most participants immediately agreed (EF1, EE4, EE6, EE7, EF1, CE1, CE3, EE4, CF1), while some accepted that verification was central but added elements like “newsgetting” as opposed to public relations (EF5, EF6), “skepticism, wonder, curiosity” (EE3), “showing up” (EE1), “interpretation” (EE5), and presenting context (CE2). One journalist suggested that the essence of journalism was credibility, and that verification was a means to that end (EF3). Only one journalist mostly disagreed with this assessment: “No, the essence of journalism is curiosity. And what makes it work is verification” (EE2).

So verification was an important part of a journalist’s work for all journalists interviewed, but for some of them, verification was a little bit more than that. “[Verification is] my mental illness […] I think I’m probably OCD. I check everything. I’m fairly sure that more than anyone around me would” said one investigative reporter (EE1). “Obviously my objective is to triple-check everything and to be 100 percent accurate,” said a business journalist who came to this interview with a 3-inch binder of information from the story, indexed with tabs (EE2).
Even if we do not see clear evidence that these journalists do not live up in general to this ideal, we have traced some limitations to verification in the participant discourse. For example, one deplored relying heavily on phone interviews in his day-to-day work (as opposed to going on location and meeting sources face to face, as he did for the atypical story discussed during the interview) (EF1).

Lack of time or resources were rarely mentioned as justification for less than ideal practices. “You find a way around the problem,” said one subject, but “it’s much easier when you have time to prepare” (CF1). However, one journalist mentioned that because of newsrooms cutting back on copy editors, “it’s becoming more and more reliance on the reporters as kind of the first and only line of defense on accuracy” (CE1).

Tight deadlines were generally considered not ideal, but an unavoidable reality of journalism (EE5, CE2). However, it should be noted that most of the award-winning stories selected for the elite sample were in fact produced over several weeks or a month, a situation described by at least one journalist as a much-appreciated luxury (EF1). Spending an extended period of time in a community, becoming familiar with a neighbourhood and its residents, was considered an “extremely rare” form of reporting, a method of triangulation, completing information obtained through interviews and documentary sources (EF1).

Relationship between colleagues

Consulting competing media or journalists can also be a means of verification. One investigative reporter said she regularly collaborated with an investigative team from another newspaper (CF2), although these sources were not mentioned in the article. Another participant said that a rival newspaper may be cited, in case the information proves to be inaccurate (EF6). In a particular case, a discrepancy with other media on a particular number left this journalist worried: “I was the only one who had 600, [...] everyone had 500. [...] I asked myself, did I talk to the right person?” (CF1).

Rules

When comparing the award-winning group and the control group, we can only make some preliminary remarks at this stage of our analysis. First, we saw traces of established routines that can be described as “best practices” in both groups. For example, an investigative journalist in the French control group said she uses triangulation systematically (CF2). Some participants had up to six or seven sources to validate a single fact (CF4, EF6).
However, in day-to-day practice, many facts weren’t double-checked. We can see that the so-called two-source rule is a good example of adaptable verification strategies. For instance, in the elite group discourse, a journalist said that double-checking is important, but in reality some facts of the article came from only one source (EF7). Among the factors mentioned for checking with two or three independent sources: sensitivity of the information, availability of alternative sources (EF2), and reliability of the original source (EE1).

Finally, no particular rules emerge as implicit standards in verification from the participants’ discourse. One subject said, “There’s no hard and fast rule about any of this stuff. I believe that journalism is a very judgment-driven kind of profession. You have to exercise your judgment all the time, like everyday in everything you do because you’re always listening to people tell you stuff, get them to determine what’s true” (CE2).

Another subject said: “I’m paid for my good judgment” (CF2). Each decision appeared to be based on the specifics of a reporting situation, even if it meant going against certain basic principles of verification. For example, all of the participants in our study told us they never submitted stories to a source for pre-publication review, in conformity with the conventional rule in journalism, except in the case of historical or medical expertise (EE5, EE7). Some participants admitted reading back a direct quote (EE4, CE3) or a short passage (EE3) to check for accuracy, or to gather additional information from the source (EE7, EF3). Others said they sometimes described context or paraphrased part of the story (CE3, EE6).

**Conclusion**

In our sample, we note in each participant a strong reflexivity toward his or her own practice, and a great ability to explain the process and recognize its limitations. The subjects were obviously highly interested in verification, and they took the interviews very seriously. Some arrived for the interview armed with their source materials; some had clearly refreshed their memories of the reporting by reviewing their notes and related articles, before their meetings with us.

However, this palpable zeal for accuracy does not clearly translate into standards of professional practice. Rather, journalists’ discourse reveals a pragmatic approach of compromise involving the selection of specific facts for verification, and what constitutes adequate verification for various types of fact.

This brings us to consider a more nuanced analysis for the next step of our research. We wish to see the relationship between types of content and verification practices. In fact, the subject matter and story forms covered by our
study varied widely, while the verification routines also varied. At this stage of our analysis, we can say that the discourse we have recorded does not entirely seem to support the epistemological distinctiveness proposed by Ettema and Glasser concerning investigative reporters (Ettema & Glasser, 2006). The hierarchy of evidentiary values identified by those researchers regarding quality of sources was evident in many of our interviews, and not just with those doing work that is readily described as “investigative.” As we continue to analyse our data, we also wish to compare the French-speaking journalists to their Anglophone peers, and possibly compare younger journalists to their elders.

Another limitation of our research rests in the way we sampled stories, starting with award-winning work and then selecting our control group based on story length and other factors that rendered the control stories comparable in scope with the award-winning work. We thus ignored shorter and single-sourced articles. It is quite possible that discussing verification methods used (or not used) in producing those more typical stories would have produced dramatically different results. Also, we are relying entirely on the subject’s own accounts of his or her work, with no available means to verify the truth of those accounts. We are also limited by the capacity of subjects’ memories. That is not necessarily problematic in this particular situation, however, since our focus was not directly on the practice of verification but rather on norms held by journalists in reference to the practice.

As we continue our analysis, we will seek to understand more deeply the meaning of “accuracy” for our participants. Even though the verification of details such as the spelling of a name or the exactitude of a quote remains important for each of them, we can see that verification of an article at a broader level seems a little bit more challenging. For example, when identifying a trend, journalists do not have a clear stated rule or an implicit one for that matter. Journalism remains a judgment-driven profession, because in the face of verification, not all facts are equal.

References

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