

Facts & Research

Foundations of Journalism
Emerson College - Fall 2012

Facts

Facts

- Journalism is about things that are TRUE.
 - Facts = basis of news
- Question/doubt anything that can't be tied down to facts.

Facts

- Facts can be remembered incorrectly/mistakenly.
- Facts that get wrong can become “fact”
 - You don’t want to be the source of misinformation/incorrect information

Facts

- Getting facts wrong is ALMOST as bad as making things up.
- Getting facts wrong repeatedly = unemployed.
- There is NO wiggle room when it comes to facts.

Confirm

- Spellings.
- Titles.
- Addresses.
- Ages.
- Workplaces.
- Times.
- Causes.
- Attribution.
- Statistics
- EVERY POSSIBLE DETAIL.

Facts

- Reporters also need to have an idea of what kinds of facts to ask for.
 - When to ask for more details.
- If you can't/don't get the facts right, nothing else matters.
 - Your credibility is at stake.
 - As a journalist, you are nothing without credibility.

Proof

- When reputations are at stake/reporting something that could impact someone's life (personal or professional), you need to corroborate as well as attribute.
 - Minimum two sources
 - Maybe more than 2 sources depending on subject/story
 - Confirm/corroborate with records/concrete evidence when possible.
- Sources need to be credible.
 - Even credible sources can be wrong.

Accusations

- Must at least give the accused an opportunity to respond to charges/allegation.

Interpretation

- Avoid attempting to interpret the news.
- Your job is to REPORT the facts. Let readers draw their own conclusions.
- Don't attempt to quantify.
 - Use facts to illustrate.

Extra Effort

- Getting those additional facts requires more effort.
 - More research
 - More reporting
 - Another phone call
- This is what separate good reporters from everyone else.

Corrections

- Mistakes are made.
 - The only thing worse than making a mistake is not working to correct it.
 - Mistakes live in archives, on the Web, etc.
 - Other writers may believe your facts were correct and use in the future.
- Everyone reads headlines. Few read retractions.
 - You don't want to tarnish people you report on.
 - You don't want to tarnish your reputation.

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Research

The Internet

- A great resource, but NOT the be-all, end-all.
- Google (or another basic online search engine) isn't always the best resource.
 - You want to get the best information.
 - Most accurate
 - Most relevant to what you're writing
 - Most relevant to your audience

The Internet

- A great resource, but NOT the be-all, end-all.
- Often a good starting point.
- Just because it is on the Internet does not make it true.

Other Resources

- You will actually have to talk to people.
- You will have to make phone calls.
- You will have to go through records.
- You will have to find data.
- You will have to go through archives.
- You will have to read stories.
 - If you are not willing to do these things, you should not be a journalist.

Search Engines

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- With facts found via search, find the source and verify.
- Have a search strategy
 - What are you looking for?
 - Where might be a good place to find that information?
 - Who might be able to help you/give you insight?

Basic Tools

- Dictionary - Check how Merriam-Webster spells words.
 - Typing it into Google is not a good approach.
- Encyclopedia
 - Wikipedia is fine as a starting point.
 - Information from Wikipedia cannot be accepted as true.
 - It is crowdsourced.
 - Must be verified.

Basic Tools

- Phone book
 - Many people have their numbers listed.
 - If you're looking for businesses or trend stories, they're already grouped together.
 - Can search White Pages online
 - News outlets have access to phone books organized by address and by phone number.

Basic Tools

- Other directories
 - City directories
 - Company directories
 - Non-profit directories
 - Professional directories
 - Student directories
- Maps

Background

- You should be reading your own publication.
- You need to be informed on the area you cover.
- You don't want to pitch stories that have recently been done.
- News outlets have archives.
 - Great source for background/historical context.
 - Still verify that facts.

Background

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 - You should also be monitoring your competition.
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More Resources

- Lexis-Nexis: Searchable full-text-retrieval database, cataloging hundreds of newspapers (decades worth of articles)
- Google Alerts: Subscription news alerts related to a specific phrase
 - Delivered via email or RSS

Finding Sources

- Reporters should have diversity in sources.
 - This means no just quoting the same person/people every time.
 - It also means looking for diverse sources from different racial/ethnic/underrepresented backgrounds.
- Dozens of resources for finding sources
 - Websites, professional organizations, think tanks, printed listings
 - Colleges/universities love to see faculty quoted as “experts”

Statistics

- Important for quantifying information.
 - Avoid generalities without specific data.
- Should not weigh story down/don't overuse.
 - Select a few numbers of greatest interest to readers.
- Seek out most recent numbers.
 - Call or email to see if newer numbers are available.
 - If you email and don't get a response, follow up by phone.
 - Give readers...
 - Year/date of stats
 - When they were released
 - What period they covered

Statistics

- Lead with words, not numbers.
- Rule: No more than three stats per graf.
- Tons of resources exist for tracking down stats.
- You need to verify stats with the source.
 - Just because AP reports that X polls shows 1 in 4 voters say XXX, that is NOT good enough.

Blogs and Social Media

- Citizen journalists might be actually on-site.
- Can give a good gauge on emotion.
- Can be a place to find sources.
- As with everything, all facts must be VERIFIED.
- Still evolving space

Computer Assisted Reporting

- Using software programs that can tab, sort and review massive amounts of data.
- Used largely for investigative reporting.
- Data-driven stories still need people to give the numbers context and humanize

Records

- Know where records are and how to use them.
- Know when a story might require records reporting.
- Records are often a way to confirm or refute information.

Reporters Files

- Reporters will have their own files
- Always back up your data.
 - External hard drive
- Source lists.
- Notes from past stories
- Interview transcripts