

## After this lecture, students will be able to:

1. Define provisional truth and explain the burden on the news consumer that results from truth's provisional nature.
2. Explain the process by which journalists verify facts and compare/contrast it with other truth-seeking enterprises such as science and justice.
3. Explain how the journalistic verification process breaks down.
4. Use specific events and examples to illustrate the types of evidence news consumers should insist upon, summarized in this phrase "Open the Freezer"

These skills relate to course outcomes 1 & 4

## What is True and How Do You Know?



Did he get all the way up with no rope?

## Truth and Consequences



## Truth and Consequences



A journalist's first obligation is to the



### Three Big Questions today:

- 1) *What IS truth?*
- 2) *How does the verification process work?*
- 3) *Why does verification sometimes fail?*

### What Is "Journalistic Truth?"



### What Is Truth?



*"A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to put its pants on."*  
-Winston Churchill

## What Is Truth?



**“Truthiness”\***  
-Stephen Colbert

\*“The quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.”

-The American Dialect Society

Truthiness.wmv

“The Truth” is what *really* happened, or the way the world *really* is.



The process of JUSTIFYING a truth claim with EVIDENCE is  
**VERIFICATION**

## Partial Evidence, Different “Truths”



When can we be satisfied that we have enough evidence?

## What Do Journalists Mean By Truth?



### 1. Seek Truth and Report It (i.e. NOW)\*

*"...Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible...."*

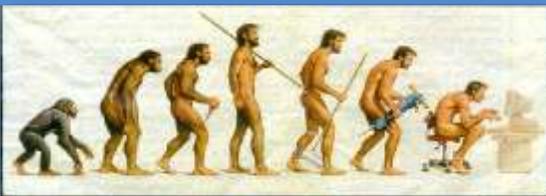
## Scientific Truth

A.K.A **Theory**



*Scientific truth is a statement of probability proportional to the evidence. It will change over time as the evidence changes.*

## Journalism and Science Share A Pragmatic Definition



Like scientists, journalists do not believe in absolute truth. Evidence, and therefore belief, makes what we call "truth" provisional.

## Journalism and Science



Another parallel:  
Expert Peer Reviewers vs. Editors and Competitors

## Journalism and Science



Another parallel: the journalistic process of verification resembles the scientific method

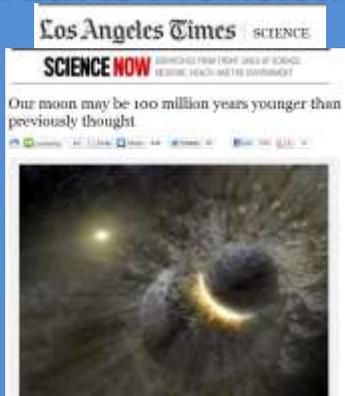
## Truth is Provisional

Pluto Is Demoted to 'Dwarf Planet'



We Extend the Frontiers of Knowledge

## Truth is Provisional



## Journalistic Truth is Provisional

pro·vi·sion·al

/pra'viZHən/ ⓘ

Adjective

Arranged or existing for the present, possibly to be changed later.

Noun

A provisional postage stamp.

Synonyms

temporary - interim - provisory - tentative - temporal

Today's evidence will be trumped by tomorrow's discoveries

## Truth is Provisional



## What Is Journalistic Truth: The Best Obtainable Version On That Day

Truth

A Continuous Journey Toward Understanding  
That Places A Burden On You...

Follow  
the Story  
Over Time

The Burden is on You

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## The Discipline of Verification

- ✓ Gather, Assess, and Weigh Evidence
- ✓ Place Facts in The Big Picture (Context)
- ✓ Be Fair and When Appropriate, Adjust Balance
- ✓ Explain How They Know...(and What They Don't Know)\*

\*This is called "Transparency."

## Seeking Truth

When Searching for the Truth  
Not All Evidence is Equal

Direct Evidence



Indirect Evidence



PIVOT POINT:



THINK ABOUT A TRAFFIC ACCIDENT...

DISCUSS (AND LIST) WHAT WOULD BE THE MOST RELIABLE EVIDENCE.

WHAT WOULD BE THE LEAST RELIABLE? (LIST THAT, TOO)

## Seeking Truth

### Natural Hierarchy of Direct Evidence

- Video, Photographs, Recordings
- Documents, Records, the Paper Trail
- Journalist Eyewitness Account
- Observer Eyewitness Account

## Journalistic Verification in Pursuit of The Truth Direct Evidence: Photos and Video



Direct Evidence

# Climber.wmv

## Journalistic Verification in Pursuit of The Truth Direct Evidence: Documents/Records:



"Birtherism" folds in the face of documentary evidence

## Journalistic Verification in Pursuit of The Truth Eyewitness Accounts:

The Birmingham Enquirer

### 'Lucky he was a bad shot': Eyewitness's haunting encounter with Navy Yard gunman

By Meredith Summers - The Washington Times

Monday, September 16, 2013

Terrie Durham and Todd Brundidge, both executive assistants in Building 197, said they started shuffling people out of the exit on their floor after a fire alarm sounded. As they were standing in the hallway, a gunman appeared and started firing.

"I could see his face," Ms. Durham said. "He looked around and fired. We were lucky he was a bad shot."

## Journalistic Verification In Pursuit of The Truth Direct Evidence: Journalist Observation



Ward1.wmv

## Seeking Truth

### Indirect Evidence:

- ✓ Accounts from Official spokespersons (i.e. Lawyer, Public Relations, Press Secretary, Press Releases)
- ✓ Expert reconstructions
- ✓ Hearsay Testimony (Second-Hand or more)
- ✓ Computer models
- ✓ Other predictions

## Journalistic Verification In Pursuit of The Truth

### Indirect Evidence:

WATCH OUT!



Second and Third-hand accounts:

“White House Spokesperson Jay Carney”  
Police Commissioners  
Expert Reconstruction/Re-creation

**Journalistic Verification in Pursuit of The Truth  
Indirect Evidence:**

*"C.J. Karamargin, an aide to Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords..."*



Account from an official spokesperson

**Journalistic Verification in Pursuit of The Truth  
Indirect Evidence from Witnesses:**



"I saw him run in the house. Then I heard a woman scream. So, I guess he killed her."

**How Journalists Pursue the Truth  
Indirect Evidence:**

**Sugary drinks tied to obesity among preschoolers**

Mon, Aug 5 2013

By Geneva Pittman

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Five-year-olds who drink sugar-sweetened sodas, sports drinks or juices every day are more likely to be obese than those who have sugar-sweetened beverages less often, according to a new study.

Although the link between sugary drinks and extra weight has been well documented among teens and adults, researchers said that up until now, the evidence was less clear for young children.



**Journalistic Verification in Pursuit of The Truth  
Indirect Evidence**

Expert suppositions/hypotheticals



How Journalists Pursue the Truth

## Hierarchy of Evidence: Wreck Scene

### Direct Evidence:

- Driver of Car
- Eyewitnesses
- Breathalyzer Report
- Driving Records
- Accident Reports for the Road



### Indirect Evidence:

- Campus Police
- University Officials
- Lawyer for Driver
- Friends and Relatives of Victims
- Family of Driver
- Students on Campus

## Seeking Truth

Where does the evidence come from?

The source of that evidence can increase or decrease the strength/weight of evidence.

At a future lecture, we will discuss:  
**Evaluating Human Sources**

## Seeking Truth

### Pulling the Evidence Together- Part I

- Consider all the evidence together
- Note any relevant evidence that is missing or irrelevant evidence that's in the way

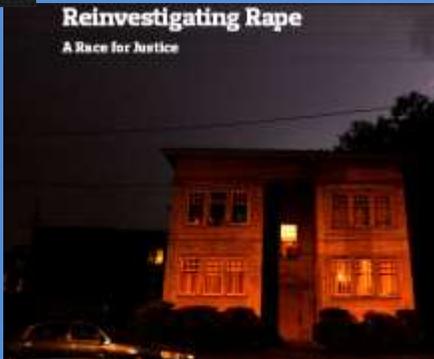
## Seeking Truth

### Pulling the Evidence Together - Part II

- If the evidence conflicts, weigh its quality, asking critical questions about its relevance and origins
- Decide whether the evidence is strong enough to have enough confidence to declare something as a journalistic truth – that is, **THE BEST APPROXIMATION OF THE TRUTH AT THAT TIME**

## Pulling the Evidence Together: A Case Study

cleveland.com



## Three Big Questions today:

- 1) *What IS truth?*
- 2) *How does the verification process work?*
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## Why Verification Can Fail

- ✓ Journalists **rush** to get the story first, jump the gun
  - ✓ Facing deadline, some journalists get **sloppy** or provide incomplete reports

## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ People (sources) give reporters incorrect information... or outright **lie**
- ✓ Verification is very **difficult**, even when sources are helpful

## Why Verification Breaks Down

✓ Journalists **rush** to get the story first, jump the gun



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CNN.BOSTON.FLUB.WMV

## Why Verification Breaks Down

✓ Facing deadline, some journalists get **sloppy** or provide incomplete reports

### The New York Times

An overview on Saturday about Walter Cronkite's career included a number of errors. It misstated the date that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed as April 4, 1968, not April 4, 1968. Mr. Cronkite covered the D-Day invasion of Normandy in 1944, not 1945. In addition, Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon in 1969, not 1968. The magazine's coverage of the 1968 election was also incorrect. The magazine's coverage of the 1968 election was also incorrect.

**Dr. King was killed on April 4, 1968, not April 30.**

**A communications satellite used to relay correspondents' reports from around the world was Teletar, not Telestar.**

## Why Verification Breaks Down

✓ People (sources) give reporters incorrect information...AND REPORTERS FAIL TO CHECK.



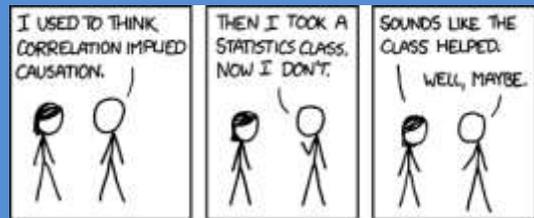
## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ People (sources) give reporters incorrect information...or outright lie



## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ INFERENCE DRAWN FROM INDIRECT EVIDENCE IS MISTAKEN FOR DIRECT EVIDENCE



## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ Correlation is analyzed as causation...Misuse of Evidence



## Why Verification Breaks Down

- ✓ Because of political and/or physical barriers, verification (the search for evidence) is simply difficult



## Key Lesson for the News Consumer

**AJR American Journalism Review** THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

**Katrina** From AJR, December/January 2006

### Myth-Making in New Orleans

The aggressive media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was marred by the widespread reporting—sometimes attributed to public officials—of murders and rapes that apparently never took place. What can news outlets learn from this episode to prevent similar problems in the future?

By Bryan Thompson  
Bryan Thompson, a reporter at *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, can be reached at [thompsonb@timespicayune.com](mailto:thompsonb@timespicayune.com).

As I walked hesitantly through the dimly lit area inside the food service entrance of New Orleans' Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, the thought of pulling back the sheets covering the

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Like this story  
Share This

## Journalist as eyewitness:



Always ask:  
Did the Reporter Open the Freezer?

## What if You Demand Verification?



### Code of Ethics

Society of News-Literate Citizens

1. Ask: Did the Reporter Open the Freezer?
2. Follow The Story

## Getting Ready for the Next Boston...

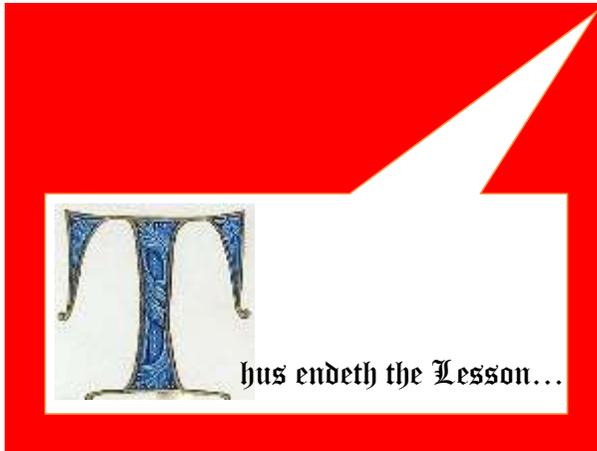
**BREAKING NEWS CONSUMER'S HANDBOOK**

1. In the immediate aftermath, news outlets will get it wrong.
2. Don't trust anonymous sources.
3. Don't trust stories that cite another news outlet as the source of the information.
4. There's almost never a second chance.
5. Pay attention to the language the media uses.
  - "We are getting reports", could mean anything.
  - "We are seeking confirmation...", means they don't know it.
  - "I have spoken" (or "heard"), means it has a source or is going out as fact.
6. Look for news outlets close to the incident.
7. Consider multiple sources.
8. Big news brings out the liars... and photographers.
9. Assume nothing is newsworthy. Some of this is on you.

ON THE MEDIA

Onthemedias.org

Remember Truth is Provisional  
And Not All Evidence Deserves Equal Weight



Thus endeth the Lesson...

### What Is Truth?



'What I tell you  
three times is true.'  
-Lewis Carroll

### What Is Truth?

*'Often the surest  
way to convey  
misinformation is to  
tell the strict truth.'*  
-Mark Twain

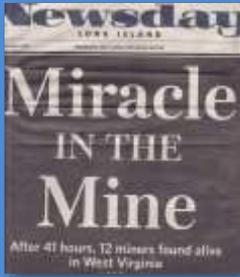


### What Is Truth?

'Reports of my  
death have been  
greatly  
exaggerated.'  
-Mark Twain



## Why Verification Breaks Down



Journalists Are Given the Wrong Information



According to YouGov BrandIndex, a leading marketing survey that measures brand perception in the marketplace (called "Buzz"), Papa John's had good reason for concern as the pizza chain's brand identity has plummeted from a high of 32 on election day, to a remarkably low score of 4 among adults who

YouGov plc is a company registered in England and Wales

YouGov BrandIndex's "Buzz" score asks respondents, "If you've heard anything about the brand in the last two weeks, through advertising, news or word of mouth, was it positive or negative?" Results were filtered adults 18+ who have eaten at casual dining restaurants in the past month.