

Recitation 09 - Evaluating Sources

OBJECTIVE

"If your mother says she loves you, check it out"
-Journalism proverb

Following up on the lecture on source evaluation, this recitation is an opportunity for them to struggle with the concepts in groups and develop the ability to think about sources in real time. This is vital ground-work for the capstone skill of the course: deconstruction.

Organization

1. Take attendance, return homework, etc.

News Quiz

Recap Lecture

Five rules for evaluating sources – a.k.a. IMVAIN:

1. Independent is better than self-interested
2. Multiple sources are better than singular
3. Sources who verify are superior to those who assert
4. Authoritative and informed sources are better than uninformed ones
5. Named sources are better than anonymous sources

Ask for questions about self-interest or any other topics and revisit Context and Transparency. Students struggle with those terms.

Transparency (until we get deeper into it in the next lecture) is What We Know and How We Know it. What We Don't Know, And Why Not... It is drawing back the curtain on the process to let readers see how a news report is assembled.

Review Assignments

Discuss Elements of Journalism, Chapter 4: "Journalism of Verification"

What surprised them about the ideas in this chapter?

If they had been asked a year ago how to define journalism, would verification have been the first word? If not, what would?

News Log: Follow a Story over Time

Go around the room. What stories did they follow? Which outlets? How did they go about tracking that coverage? How did the story change? What if it did NOT? Why was that?

Class Discussion

Anderson Cooper verification exercise

Students were assigned to read Cooper's chapter in preparation for class. Key to this discussion are the main concepts from the Truth and Verification lecture:

- provisional truth
- direct and indirect evidence
- sourcing guidelines

Give students 15 minutes to go through on their own the steps Cooper takes to verify the story. This may not be necessary since students will complete a writing assignment on this at home. It might be useful, if time permits, to break them into groups and compare their lists

Then go step by step with the class and review the 8 steps he took to try and verify his story about the kidnapped children: It works to begin this discussion asking students how Cooper was alerted to rumors about kidnapped children. His producer in New York told him that "everybody" is talking about it. Who is "everybody"? What kind of source is this?

Verification steps:

1. Hires local reporter, reads press accounts
2. Goes to police
3. Goes to aunt
4. Interviews resort manager
5. Finds "kidnapper"/motorcycle driver
6. Finds hospital administrator
7. Takes photo to 2nd hospital and morgue
8. Goes to mass grave.

In each case, identify whether:

- Information gathered is direct or indirect, and;

- Also evaluate the different sources: Is the aunt credible? (she's self-interested, uninformed) The police? The kidnapper? And so on.
- Has Cooper enough information at that point to write a story saying she is dead.
- If not, what can be reported?

Optional/Additional Exercise

Some recitation instructors use the "Secret Sources" reading in class to look at how hard it is to pin down the source of some kinds of information.

Break students into small groups of 4-6. Give each group a rough sketch of a fictional story (a different one for each group). E.g., there's a rumor that rats infest the campus food service kitchen. Have each group come up with a list of (3-5) sources they would need to track down in order to craft a credible report. Have them also write down why each source has weight. Have each group share what they came up with. Or, if there's enough time, rotate the stories to different groups, and see if the different groups come up with different lists and explanations. It might be fun to have them come up with bad sources, too. Alternatively, start by giving every group the same story and see if their responses differ. As students suggested sources, put up roadblocks in their way, e.g., "*You can't trust an administrator because they'll try to hide the rat problem. He's self-interested.*" "*How does your witness know it was a rat and not that day's special?*"

Announcements

Make sure students are repeatedly warned to bring the Deconstruction Workbook to LECTURE AND RECITATION next week.