

# Truth in Journalism

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## Introduction

An important criticism of professional journalists is that they too often fail to deliver truths. Since the early 2000s, Gallup polls show a steady decline in the American public's trust in the mass media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly"; the percentage of people who put either "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the media stayed below 50% since 2007 (Swift 2017; Gallup/Knight Foundation 2018). Some fear this trend could have dangerous consequences: lack of trust might lead the public to disengage from the traditional news media and turn to less reliable sources of information.

Generally, in such discussions, both critics and defenders of journalism assume that any departure from truth shows that something has gone wrong in the journalistic process. In this chapter, my primary goal will be to show that this is not quite right, and that it can lead to unjustified criticisms of journalism. More specifically, I will explain that

1. truth-telling is one of the most important requirements for achieving the goal of journalism, but it is not the only one;
2. some of the other requirements for achieving the goal of journalism make it more difficult for professional journalists to deliver truths and may even force professional journalists to depart from truth in certain ways.

I draw two practical conclusions from these claims. The first is that we should be more nuanced in criticizing journalists for not delivering truths: when journalists fail to deliver truths, this need not be because they are not properly pursuing the goal of journalism—because they are, for instance, dishonest, politically or financially motivated, or simply incompetent—it might also be because of the inevitable trade-offs they

have to make in order to best pursue the goal of journalism. The second conclusion is that to regain the public's trust, journalists might try to be more transparent about when their job requires them to make trade-offs, what these trade-offs are, and why truth-telling, at least sometimes, may be compromised.

### Preliminaries About Truth

The claim that journalists should not always be blamed for failing to deliver truths is not new. Some have argued for it by claiming that there is no such thing as “objective truth” to begin with (see for instance the discussion in Baggini 2003). This is not my view. Let me thus briefly explain what I will be assuming about truth in this chapter.

Truth is a property of sentences, propositions, or beliefs—in general, of things that “represent” the world. For example, a sentence is true or false depending on whether the world is the way the sentence describes it. In this chapter, I will assume *realism*, that is, the claim that the world exists independently of the way we think or speak about it, and that our thoughts and claims are about that world. So, the only constraint I put on a theory of truth is that it should be compatible with realism (for criticisms of anti-realist views of truth, see, for instance, Goldman 1999; Boghossian 2006; McIntyre 2018).

Of course, not every sentence is either true or false. For instance, some sentences are not even in the business of describing the world (among them are sentences that include so-called expressives such as “Hurray!” or “Ouch!”). And some sentences do not have a determinate meaning (for instance, by being vague or ambiguous), which means that they fail to describe the world to be one way rather than another. By and large, however, the sentences that journalists produce do have determinate truth values. Most sentences about worldly things, such as political events, social trends, the weather, the economy, crime, punishment, and so on, are either determinately true or determinately false, depending on whether the world is the way they describe it. So, on the view I will be assuming in this chapter, there are many truths for the journalist to tell—there is no fundamental problem with the notion of truth or objective truth. In what follows, my discussion will instead focus on how hard it can be for journalists to *find out* and *tell* these truths to the public, as they are pursuing the goal of journalism.

## The Goal of Journalism

First off, then: what is the goal of journalism? I mean this to be a question about the role that journalism as a social institution should ideally play in our society. I thus ask about the reason why individuals or societies need journalism as an institution in the first place.

To approach this question, consider the following commonsensical observations. We all need *information* to achieve our goals. For instance, if one of my goals is to vote for a candidate who will invest in a new airport for my city, then I need information about the candidates' stances toward this kind of investment; if one of my goals is to stay away from a particular hurricane, then I need information about the hurricane's trajectory. However, we cannot get all the information we need by ourselves—most of us usually do not have the time, resources, or expertise to do so. Therefore, we need to rely on others to provide us with most of the information we need. And this is where journalism comes in: in our society, journalism is one of the most important social institutions with the role to provide us with such kind of information. As stated by the American Press Institute, “the purpose of journalism is . . . to provide people with information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, and their governments” (Dean n.d.). The best possible decisions for individuals are also the ones most likely to help achieve their goals.

Now, when we say that we need information to achieve our goals, what we really mean is that we need *true* information. Suppose I am falsely told that the hurricane is not going to hit my city. If I act on this report, then I will most likely not achieve my goal of staying away from the hurricane. As a general rule, we need to know (or believe) truths to make the best possible decisions to achieve our goals.

We can thus already conclude that truth-telling is an important requirement for achieving the goal of journalism: if journalists are to achieve the goal of providing us with the information we need to make important decisions in our lives, they need to deliver truths (i.e., true information). What I explain next is that truth-telling is not the only requirement for achieving the goal of journalism. There are at least three other requirements we need to make explicit.

The first concerns the *kind* of (true) information journalists should deliver. As we just saw, we need information to make important decisions in

our lives in order to achieve the various goals we have. And journalism's task is to provide us with precisely *this* kind of information, that is, information that is *useful* for making decisions to achieve our goals. For instance, journalists should not report the exact number of hairs on some politicians' head—that information would be useless for most people. Of course, given that they have limited resources, journalists cannot provide all the information each of us needs to achieve all of our personal goals. In a particular context, and given a particular audience, journalists should thus aim to provide information that is important and useful for a sufficient number of people in that audience to make their own important decisions, in that context. (Dale Jacquette [2007] similarly argues for a requirement to provide “maximally relevant” information.)

As with the number of hairs example, a lot of information is useless for most audiences, in most contexts. The “usefulness constraint” is thus a way to rule out information as not newsworthy. And it is, of course, also a way to rule in information as newsworthy. For example, in general, it is not enough for people to know what a particular politician said at a particular time. In order to make decisions, people also need to know whether what was said was true. Assume, for instance, that a sufficient number of people in some city have the goal to vote for a candidate who will invest in a new airport. Then it will not be enough for them to know that Candidate 2 said “Candidate 1 told me she would not invest in a new airport.” They also need to know whether it is *true* that Candidate 1 previously spoke against investing in a new airport, and whether this really indicates that she will not support the investment if elected to office. Without this information, knowing what Candidate 2 said is not useful enough for these people to make a decision that will help achieve their goal—it is newsworthy but not informative enough. The “usefulness constraint” here thus provides a way to rule in further information as newsworthy, namely, information about whether what was said is true.

The second requirement I want to make explicit concerns the *way* in which the (true and useful) information should be delivered to the public. The goal of journalism is not simply to tell useful and important truths, it is also to tell them in a way that facilitates making use of these truths (see Goldman 2008, 113, for a similar point). After all, the information we need is out there somewhere, and most of it is recorded—in libraries, in witnesses' or experts' minds, and so forth. The whole point of journalism is to have an institution that *brings* the information to the general

public, by making it easy for the public to *understand* and *believe* the information. If one does not understand or believe a piece of information, then one cannot use it in making decisions. If, for instance, I am told correctly that the hurricane will hit my city, but I either do not believe or do not understand this information, then I will once again most likely not achieve my goal of staying away from the hurricane. So, for information to be useful to the public, it needs to be delivered in a way that will make it easy for the public to understand and believe (i.e., possess) the information.

Finally, there is a third requirement of the goal of journalism I want to make explicit here. People often have many false beliefs, for instance because they get misinformation from unreliable sources. As explained above, false beliefs are often harmful to making the best decisions to achieve one's goals. So, given that journalism's overarching goal is to provide people with information they need to make the best decisions about their lives, sometimes, journalists might need to correct certain prevalent and important falsehoods believed by their audiences—where one might call a falsehood “important” for individuals if believing it will likely prevent them from achieving their central goals. Fact-checking journalism might be an example of a kind of journalism that is exclusively concerned with pursuing the goal of correcting prevalent and important falsehoods (see for instance Graves 2016).

Now, one might argue that correcting falsehoods should really count as part of the requirement to deliver *useful* truths, since sometimes information that is useful and important for people to know is that something is false. Nonetheless, I think it is worth setting the correction of important and prevalent falsehoods as a separate requirement of the goal of journalism, if only because, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel note, this requirement might be gaining importance as people have more and more access to information from everywhere in the world and from many sources, inter alia, through social media and the Internet:

In the networked world, audiences may have heard differing assertions about an event before they encounter a formal journalistic account. Thus the role of the new journalist, more than the old, is to work with audiences to sort through these different accounts, to know which of the facts they may have encountered they should believe and which to discount. (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 27)

To summarize, we have teased out the following four requirements for achieving the goal of journalism. Journalists should aim to

- (i) give *true* information;
- (ii) give information that is *useful* for people in making important decisions about their lives, communities, and governments;
- (iii) give information in such a way that the public *can use* this information in making decisions;
- (iv) correct prevalent and important falsehoods believed by the public.

Note that this is not meant as an exhaustive list of all the requirements of the goal of journalism. Just as an example, one might argue that part of the goal of journalism is also to satisfy people's curiosity or "intrinsic desire" for knowledge, and information that is given to satisfy one's curiosity or desire to know need not be useful (see for instance Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 21–22 and Goldman 1999, 3–7). In any case, surely (i)–(iv) are at least some of the most important requirements of the goal of journalism. What I want to explain next is that it can be very difficult to satisfy all four at the same time, and, in particular, that the truth-telling requirement, (i), can come into conflict with the other three.

## Some Tensions Within the Goal of Journalism

### Truth and Usefulness

It is not always easy to know truths, and *useful* truths can often be particularly difficult to know. Consider once again the claim that, in general, a report of what some person of public interest said is less useful to the public than a report of both what that person said and whether what was said is true (see also for instance Keller 2013 and Cunningham 2003 for criticisms of the media based on this point). Now consider the difference between the justification journalists usually have for the claim that some person of public interest said something (during a public announcement, say), versus the justification they need to have to know whether what was said is true. There are almost always recordings, transcripts, and witnesses that can confirm that a person of public interest made a particular statement. But to know whether what was said is true often requires a lot more investigation.

So, putting forward the more useful truth comes at a greater risk of putting forward a falsehood, because the useful truth is less epistemically justified. In other words, trying to reach the goal of providing useful truths, (ii), makes reaching the goal of providing truths, (i), more difficult.

Let us consider another example. In a recent article, Andrea Wenzel et al. investigated the roots of mistrust in the media in Philadelphia (Wenzel et al. 2018). One complaint they reported hearing often is that journalists fail to provide enough “constructive coverage.” The idea is that the news should not merely report, say, that a crime occurred, but also help the public answer the question of what could be done to reduce crime. As some respondents to their surveys stated:

[Y]ou need to talk about more positive things and not if it’s going to be a shooting in the community. Have a series on like, how we can stop shooting? They just like to show stuff and don’t show no solutions.

Let’s be strategic in how we . . . report issues. Not just . . . whatever the problem is and sensationalize it and cause fear, but you know, let’s provide the facts so then who is going to be looking at a solution, and what is that? What are potential solutions to this as well? (Wenzel et al. 2018, §5)

These complaints exemplify that people need useful information to achieve their goals. The goal of reducing crime is surely important for a sufficient number of people in this community, and, in order to achieve this goal, they need more information than just the information that a crime was committed. But, of course, it is much more difficult to know what would help reduce crime. Once again, then, it is hard for journalists to reliably report truths that are *also* useful because it is harder to have justification for useful truths—it is more likely that what one says will be false.

As we saw in the introduction, many people nowadays complain that journalists do not deliver truths. Some people think that this is because journalists are intentionally deceptive to their audiences—which might (unfortunately) sometimes be the case. But there is also another explanation for why journalists might sometimes fail to deliver truths, which is that journalists need to give more information than they are perfectly well-justified in asserting. As we just saw, journalists need to provide useful truths, but useful truths are often more difficult to know, and thus providing them comes at a greater risk of providing falsehoods. So, what could journalists do to both achieve their goal of providing more useful

information and gain back the trust of the public that thinks journalists are not well-justified in asserting many of their claims?

One idea might be to use more evidential expressions in news reporting, that is, expressions like “this is partly speculative,” or “the reliability of these sources has not been confirmed,” or “evidence points in this direction, but . . .” and so forth. In other words, journalists could try to make it clear to their audience *that* some of their claims are epistemically more tentative, and preferably also explain *how* they are less epistemically justified, and *why*. For the “why?”: journalists could be explicit in conveying that part of their role as journalists leads them to make more tentative claims because part of their goal is to provide useful truths to their audiences. For the “how?”: journalists could explicitly say how strong their evidence is for making these claims, for instance, by explaining their evidence. These kinds of practices are not very common in journalism nowadays. In particular, it is uncommon for journalists to flag how confident they are in making various claims.

Journalism handbooks and guidelines often recommend that journalists should practice “transparency.” Journalists are told, for instance, to disclose their sources, the updates or additions to their reports, their personal or organizational links to sources (Silverman 2014, §2 and §5), and to provide information about the reports’ author(s) (Goo 2017). There are a number of obvious reasons why this kind of practice of transparency is important, in particular, for accountability. But proponents of transparency also propose it as a way of solving the kind of problem I am interested in here, namely, the problem of how to regain the public’s trust. For instance, Kovach and Rosenstiel note that the “Spirit of Transparency” provides ways for journalists to “be as open and honest with audiences as they can be about what they know and what they don’t” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 114). These recommendations of transparency sound similar to my proposal. But mine differs in important ways, and it has some important advantages for the issue at hand. Including information about sources or updates to a news report does not guarantee the reader will fully understand that some of the claims made in the news article are thereby more tentative, let alone that they will understand which claims are more tentative. It can be difficult, for instance, to know what exactly to infer from a disclosure line at the end of an article such as “My wife works with the company . . .” (Silverman 2014, §5). Or, take the recommendation that journalists should disclose their sources: usually, knowing the source of some information will not enable readers to infer how secure that information is because the readers often



will not know how reliable these sources are. The kind of transparency I advocate here is thus a bit different: I suggest that journalists should explicitly flag that some of their claims are more tentative, and why they are more tentative, by adding a statement about how well their evidence supports those particular claims. So, for instance, instead of (or in addition to) listing the sources she used, a journalist might want to say something like “Source X said Y. But there is some reason to think that X might be unreliable, because Z.” Or, for instance, when journalists are reporting the findings of a scientific study, they might want to say what can (and what cannot) be inferred from such a single study.

Whenever one asserts a claim, one should already have figured out to what extent one’s evidence supports that claim. This is a general principle that epistemically responsible agents should follow. Responsible journalists, then, should already know to what extent the evidence they have supports the claims they assert. What I propose here is that journalists should just make this more explicit for their readers. I suggest that this might help journalists regain the trust of the public that thinks journalists are not well-justified in asserting their claims. Note that the complaint that journalists are intentionally deceptive might also be partly the result of the difficulty of providing useful truths: journalists end up saying some things that are false, people notice this, and assume journalists are lying. Thus, my proposal here with respect to the complaint that journalists are not well-justified in asserting their claims might also help against the complaint that journalists are intentionally deceptive. Beside the potential benefit for regaining the public’s trust, being explicit in this way might also help journalists come closer to reliably giving people information they need to achieve their various goals. Indeed, if the public is told explicitly why and how some of the claims journalists make are more tentative, they could make more careful use of the journalist’s reports. Moreover, if they expect the journalist to flag the claims that are more tentative, they might be more trusting of the claims that are not flagged. More generally, there would be less risk of the public being led astray by basing their decisions on epistemically less well-justified claims.

### Truth and Usability

Let us now turn to component (iii) of the goal of journalism, namely, that journalists should convey useful and true information in a way that the

public *can make use of* when making important decisions. What I explain here is that pursuing (iii) sometimes requires deviating from the truth in some ways and hence comes into conflict with the goal of providing truths, (i).

Here is one way in which conflict arises. A lot of the information we need to make important decisions is too complicated for us to understand. For this reason, being told the truth is often less useful to us than being told something that is close enough to the truth and easier to grasp. For instance, if a journalist is to report certain medical information, she will often need to simplify, and hence distort, that information. Simplified medical information, though it may be strictly speaking false, will be more useful for people to achieve their goals than true but incomprehensible information. Similar considerations apply to science journalism more generally, or even to historical journalism, where one often needs to use simplifications to convey information in a way that can be understood and thus possessed. This issue relates to traditional discussions in philosophy on the usefulness of idealization or simplification (for a recent discussion, see for instance, Appiah 2017). In particular, some philosophers think that most of scientific inquiry involves “useful untruths,” and so, on this view, any kind of journalistic reporting of science would have to involve such useful untruths.

Here is a second way in which conflict between truth and usability arises. Many ways of conveying true information are tedious and boring. This means that the public will not even read certain kinds of news reports, which will go against the goal of getting people to possess information they need to make important decisions. Here is, for instance, how Kovach and Rosenstiel state what comes close to our goal (ii):

Perhaps it is best understood this way: Journalism is storytelling with a purpose. That purpose is to provide people with information they need to understand the world. . . . Part of journalism’s responsibility is not just providing information but also providing it in such a way that people will be inclined to listen. (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 214f.)

On their view, storytelling is sometimes the best way to get people to possess the information they need to make important decisions. Storytelling is very common: journalists pick a particular person’s story to report on a phenomenon that affects many. But storytelling like this can, and often

does, come apart from truth-telling: it either involves telling (or at least implying) a certain narrative that is not entirely true (and thereby conflicts with (i)), or it involves omitting certain important truths (and thereby also conflicts with (ii)).

Achieving the goal of getting people to read, understand, and possess information so they can make use of this information may thus require departures from the truth, either via the simplification of information or the use of narratives or fictions. It follows that trying to achieve the goal of getting people to possess useful information, (iii), sometimes comes into conflict with the goal of truth-telling, (i).

Once again, then, the question arises: how can journalists both achieve their goal as journalists and regain the trust of the public that thinks they are failing to deliver truths? This is a difficult question, which requires more in-depth examination than I can provide in the space of this chapter. One suggestion is that the kind of transparency that I was suggesting above in “Truth and Usefulness” might be of use here as well: journalists might try to be explicit about what is omitted from a particular narrative or story and when simplification is used, and why. But how exactly to avoid conveying false beliefs in one’s audience when one uses “useful untruths” or fictions is a very important question for future exploration, for both journalists and theorists alike.

### Correcting Falsehoods

Finally, let us turn to component (iv) of the goal of journalism, namely, the requirement of correcting prevalent and important falsehoods believed by the public. What I explain here is that this requirement can also come into conflict with the other requirements of the goal of journalism. Moreover, these conflicts might be more prominent now that a lot of information is conveyed through social media platforms and online resources.

It is a well-known and much-discussed fact that, given their limited air-time, journalists have to choose very carefully which piece of important, useful information they report to their audiences. Discussions have often focused on the question of which statements journalists should report—it is surely important for most people to know what some famous politician or expert said about an issue, but is it really good to report a statement even when what was said was blatantly false, or misguided, and especially

without commenting on the fact that it was false or misguided? (For recent discussions, see for instance McIntyre 2018 or Van Norden 2018.)

An important point that is often neglected in these discussions is that even if journalists actually report on the content of what was said (and thus come closer to achieving goal (ii), as discussed in “Truth and Usefulness”), and even if they correct important falsehoods (and thus achieve goal (iv)), they might nonetheless end up producing more false beliefs in their audiences, thereby coming into conflict with requirement (iii). Studies suggest that merely giving voice to some falsehood, even while reporting it to be false, can have the adverse effect of having people believe the falsehood (see for instance the discussion in Levy 2017). Neil Levy argues on this basis that consuming “fake news” even in a report that exposes it as fake can get people to believe the fake news (2017). This would mean that the problem of selecting what to correct and what to authenticate given the goal of creating true beliefs in one’s audience is very far from trivial. Moreover, the correct choice might depend on results from psychology about how exactly people process information. Given that, nowadays, so many people have the ability to reach a public—through social media and online platforms—and thus also to convey falsehoods, journalists have to pick very carefully which statements to report and which falsehoods to correct, to avoid potentially exacerbating the effect of the widespread false information.

## Conclusion

Journalism is a crucial social institution; we all need it to make the best possible decisions about our lives, our communities, and our governments. Its proper functioning depends not only on journalists doing their jobs but also on the public being receptive to the information journalists provide. It is thus very important to maintain or restore trust in journalism—this trust should not be given up without good reasons. My goal in this chapter was to show that, sometimes, departure from truth in journalism might not mean that journalists are not properly pursuing their goals as journalists, and hence that we should be more nuanced in criticizing journalists for failing to deliver truths. More specifically, I explained that part of the goal of journalism is to provide *true* information that is *useful* to the public and that is *usable* by the public, and that journalists sometimes also need to correct important and prevalent falsehoods believed by their audiences. Sometimes,

providing useful information comes at the risk of providing false information, because it can be harder to have justification for useful truths. Sometimes, providing usable information requires providing “not-quite true” information because in order to get people to possess useful information and be able to make use of it journalists need to simplify, idealize, or use narratives, which can distort the truth. And sometimes, correcting important and prevalent falsehoods believed by the public might backfire and convey more false beliefs in their audience. Thus, when journalists fail to deliver truths or correct falsehoods, this may well be because of the inevitable trade-offs they have to make to best achieve the goal of journalism, and this need not imply that they are malicious or incompetent. We should thus be more attentive to the goal of journalism, and aware of how difficult it can be to achieve it, before we blame journalists for failing to deliver truths.

That being said, I also suggested that journalists could try to be explicit about the kinds of trade-offs they have to make, how exactly they make them, and why truth, at least sometimes, may be compromised. I suggested that this kind of transparency might help journalists achieve the goal of providing true, useful, and usable information to the public, while maintaining the trust of the public: they would be making the public aware of when truth may be compromised.

Finally, and more generally, I think that getting clear about the goal of journalism and the various tensions that arise within it—both as journalists and as consumers of news—is an important step toward better journalism and toward better consumption of journalism.

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