

The Truth and the News

For 13 years, in the '70's and '80's, I was a journalist for *The St. Petersburg Times* in Florida. When I first got the job, I was overwhelmed by how to sort out what to put in stories from the pages of notes I took every day. An editor would say, "Give me 30 lines!" I'd have enough material gathered for 330 lines. I would wonder what it might mean to readers not to know everything I knew, and how to tell them the story without the missing information.

Looking back, I have to laugh at my own naivete – first of all that I believed because I had so many notes that I actually knew the full story, and second of all that I believed what was in my notes at all. With the arrogance of the uninitiated, I never considered that I might have made one more phone call or read one more document that could have upended the whole story anyway. And with the innocence of the uninitiated, I believed that what I wrote down must be true, as though committing something to paper gave it substance it lacked when it was just an idea passing as sound waves.

In the beginning, as an apprentice, I was paralyzed by the need to focus. Like most beginners, I wrote far too much, turned it in early, and let the editors deal with it. I tried to learn by watching how they cut stories. You don't get a long grace period doing this. But I quickly learned certain guiding principles of news:

- (1) Statements without attribution are not useful, no matter how intriguing they are, and are cut. The lesson: If you're so excited about something an anonymous source tells you, it's your job to find someone who'll go on the record about it, or discover the basis of it for it yourself.
- (2) Facts without more than one credible source are not reliable and could be cut. The lesson: If you really want a story to make the top of the page, check and re-check your facts.
- (3) Observations colored by the positive or negative judgment of the reporter are eliminated and gratuitous adjectives, adverbs and commentary are kept to a minimum. The lesson: Let people tell their stories through their own actions and their own words. If you didn't ask enough questions or the right questions, or spend enough time, coloring in the blanks with your own crayons is not the answer; the story will be cut.
- (4) Negative stories about ordinary people who are not publicly elected have to meet a high standard of usefulness for the public good in order to be printed. People who call in stories about others must be scrutinized as carefully as the subjects of the stories to be sure that the information was unbiased and the paper was not being used to put forth someone's personal agenda. The lesson: Imagine the person's mother reading the story and wonder if she would see the point of it being in print and recognize the information as fair, even if she didn't like it.

Two things surprised me during this learning period. A lot of the material I gathered so enthusiastically was useless by the standards of journalism and fell into the realm of gossip or rumor. As I heard it and took notes on it, it seemed fascinating and newsworthy. But when I asked myself the questions to support putting it in print, most of it was hopelessly unsubstantiated, fuzzy and of no value to the public good. I had to learn the difference between what is news and what is stuff people blather about around the kitchen table or the water cooler. I had to learn my responsibility to take nothing at face value or on a stranger's word. I had to get mentally tough and lose my vulnerability to sensationalism, exaggeration and showmanship.

The search for truth and accuracy proved to be a lot harder than it sounded. All of life is the telephone game. Someone says something and the next person repeats what they heard of it, embellishing it a little to make it more exciting, and the third person hears something new in it and tells it differently, and the fourth person repeats a totally different story. If the fourth person is a "source" for a news reporter, then the chances of telling the original story are pretty slim. I found myself, in my early days of reporting, going back to the canons of my education: trust primary sources. I spent a lot of hours reading documents in moldy books in the county courthouse and looking at microfilm records and tracking down people at the core of controversy (who were not interested in being found) to ask them questions directly. Reporting turned out to be not nearly as glamorous as I had thought it would be. Most of it was tedious. And some of it, especially when it involved esoteric subjects about which I had no prior knowledge, required self-education way beyond what would ever see print.

Looking back, I have to laugh at the confidence I gained from that experience. When I had done my job, unearthed as much information as could be found, spent days following tenuous leads, rejected unverified information, culled the material, and finally written a story, I could have sworn it was true. But, of course, it wasn't "true" in everyone's minds and it was only complete according to the limits of my endurance, my ability to ask good questions, and my resourcefulness. The work I was so certain was true at the time was simply supportable, fair and defensible. Those are not synonyms for true, although they do represent a pretty good definition of the news.

The "truth" appeared less and less accessible to me, the more experienced I became and the more mature I became and the more assiduously I sought to find it. It's not uncommon for two observers of the same event to relate entirely different first-hand accounts. It's not uncommon for two officials to use the exact same set of facts to arrive at completely conflicting and equally logical conclusions. It's not uncommon for people to recall their own actions and statements differently on different occasions, never mind to tell differing stories of what they've seen and heard about others. And it's not uncommon for two people, having the same experience in the same room or on the same phone call, to agree on the substance and disagree entirely on the meaning.

In the long run, the seasoned journalist fully reports multi-dimensional stories that acknowledge the mosaic created by all the components of reporting. The seasoned journalist presents life in print more as it is experienced by most people, kaleidoscopic and ambiguous, subject to personal interpretation, but nonetheless fascinating. The seasoned journalist acknowledges unanswered questions and ceases to suppose that one hour, one day, one week, or any amount of research can make any reporter an expert with omniscience, whose rendition of events is utterly reliable and indisputable.

The “truth” seems to be that we all hold a personal library of information about life in our own minds, and what we perceive as true is a combination of what we draw from the library and what we imagine out of the blue at the moment of perception. The only reliable observation is that the process of perception is the same for everyone. What is perceived is different for everyone. If the myriad events of life held “the” truth that all could see, there would be no political parties, no disagreements, no revolutions, no lawyers, no differences and no science needed to continually unravel new observations and temporarily solve mysteries.

We’re all reporters, every day, re-telling the stories of our own lives. What we’ve come up with seems really true, until something else comes to mind and casts doubt on it. As we change, our stories change, and we scarcely realize it because every one seems just as true to us as the last one while we’re putting it together.

The real news is that we have such an enormous capacity to continually render changing stories. The real truth is we can’t nail down an objective truth from a subjective perspective. We can only see what we bring to mind and look at, and that’s an ever-changing scene. Our thoughts do not stand still, nor does the world.

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