

January 1982

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Recommended Citation

William A. Tillinghast. "Source Control and Evaluation of Newspaper Inaccuracies" *Newspaper Research Journal* (1982): 13-23.

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by William A. Tillinghast

Source Control and Evaluation of Newspaper Inaccuracies

Even on factual matters, some sources judge published information in light of their version of what ought to be.

Newspaper accuracy research typically focuses on sources, news constraints or on the reporter's mental state, generally providing only a cursory examination of the errors that prompted the research.

The purpose of this article is to extend the limited research on error classification by examining inaccuracies as they relate to the ability of the source to control the flow of information and to source evaluation of the published account.

A 1980 review of accuracy literature¹ cited fewer than 40 examinations of accuracy in nearly half a century and most of them focused on reader selection of news or on the writing processes of reporters. About half examined constraints or relationships among editors, reporters and sources.

The six principal studies which tabulated source-perceived errors in newspapers² did so primarily to

determine the amount of error or its relation to constraints on the news.

Tabulating errors has evolved into a 14-category news source classification of error—omissions, underemphasis, overemphasis, misquotes, faulty headlines, spellings, names, ages, other numbers, titles, addresses, other locations, time and dates. The six studies found that between 40% and 60% of all straight news articles are said by sources to contain one or more of these errors.

Although there is some dispute about which errors fall into which of two groups,³ the accuracy research tends to examine the traditional 14 errors according to whether they are considered factual mistakes, which are termed objective errors, or mistakes of judgment, which are considered subjective errors. It has also been suggested that the objective errors have been defined too narrowly.⁴

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A benefit of the objective-subjective classification is in suggesting that the former are errors because they are inconsistent with factual reality while subjective errors are inaccurate because of external evaluation. It is analagous to the distinction between the denotation and connotation of words, the first complete within their definitions while the latter require confirmation by the news source.

For example, Lawrence and Grey⁵ found that a reporter's playing the race of a new school official high in the story was viewed by the source as an error of overemphasis, in that race appeared to exceed the qualifications and circumstances of acquiring the position.

Confirmation, or the lack of it, has also been found in such surveys as the 1981 Los Angeles *Times* survey of readers (which includes sources) that found that when the press reports a story that a reader personally knows something about, the reader often finds the story inaccurate.⁶

The importance of source evaluation was further examined in a recent study which focused on reporter response to source claims of error. In that study,⁷ reporters agreed with half of the source claims when factual material was considered but with only five percent of the subjective error claims. The disparity indicates that much of what is said to be error may largely be differences of opinion between sources and reporters.

The relationship between sources and reporters has been described by Gans⁸ as a tug of war in which both

sides attempt to manage the news, one to put the best light on themselves, the other to extract just the information they desire. Because of the way beats are structured—the assigning of reporters to institutions where information is likely to be found, such as federal, state and local governments—journalists many times give the edge to the sources in this tug of war.

Gans noted that, although the sources' power of access does not alone determine the news or the values in the news, the sources do direct the reporter's attention and their values are implicit in the information they provide.

Or, as Sigal says,⁹ by adhering to these routine channels of information, journalists are leaving much of the task of the selection of news to their sources. More than half of the news items in Sigal's study of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* came from such routine channels which, he concludes, centralizes control over the disclosure of news. Since one-third of the items in Sigal's study were single-source stories, the power of sources in these cases also results in the source's ability to exclude contradictory views.

One result of source control is that single-source stories are considered, by those sources, to be more accurate than articles which utilize information from multiple sources. A study of source perceptions found that 42% of the single-source stories were said to contain errors, significantly less than the 52% of the multiple-source items which were said to contain mistakes.¹⁰

Purpose of Study

The findings on multiple-source stories and the fact that reporters and sources often disagree whether stories contain inaccuracies, combined with the tendency of sources to attempt to manage the news, indicate that accuracy should be examined within a framework of source control and evaluation.

The ability of the source to influence what is published constitutes source control while source evaluation is the source's post-publication judgment of story accuracy. The elements of source control examined in this study are whether the information was provided by the source or was about the source. The elements of evaluation, all aspects of source expectation, are story completeness, story tone and audience reactions.

This study separates source-perceived errors into two groups. The first are the source claims of inaccuracies which are disputed by reporters. The second are those which sources and reporters agree are mistakes. Although both groups are perceived errors by sources who evaluate them as inaccurate, they are examined separately to determine whether source control affects reporter agreement.

The two major research questions examined in this study are: When do sources claim information is wrong, and when are they likely to be right?

Methodology

This study of what news sources perceive as news errors is based on stories published in the morning *San Jose Mercury* and the afternoon *San Jose News*, metropolitan dailies

in San Jose, Calif., that are part of the Knight-Ridder organization.

Almost all locally produced, bylined news items published in the two papers¹¹ during a four-week period in 1980 were mailed to the primary source cited in each, along with a questionnaire on the article's perceived accuracy. The 47 reporters who wrote the items then responded by self-administered questionnaire to source complaints of error.

Slightly more than 54% of the 496 articles were returned from both sources and reporters. This analysis of source relationship to error perception examines a subset of the 246 source-perceived errors reported in the 47% of the articles said to contain one or more mistakes. The subset is composed of those errors for which the sources provided specific comment on both the error and its correction, and to which the reporter had some response.

Findings

The expectation of news sources as to what will be published can create conditions in which the sources are likely to perceive that there are errors in news stories. So can some reporter techniques for gathering information. However, the reporters who wrote the stories generally do not agree that these are mistakes. They are much more willing to concede they made errors in instances where the source had control over the information.

Failure to meet source expectations results in many source evaluations of information as wrong because the source was dissatisfied with the results in one of three ways. Sources object to stories they view as: 1) being incomplete, 2) not

TABLE 1: Source-Perceived Objective Errors

Reporter Agrees Following Published Information Was Incorrect	Source Correction Or Comment	Information Was	
		About Source	Provided By Source
Ms.	I hate that title!	yes	no
Councilmen	one is a woman	yes	no
executive director	vice president	yes	no
building owner	president of company leasing building	yes	no
Tom	Tim	yes	yes
Arim	Amir	yes	yes
Joanna	Joanne	yes	yes
Jiminez	Jimenez	yes	yes
\$250,000 loss	\$2.5 million loss	no	yes
a strike in 1945	it was in 1953	no	yes
O'Connel	O'Connell	no	no
Even, N.Y.	Eden, N.Y.	no	no
<hr/>			
Reporter Maintains Following Published Information Was Correct			
chief negotiator	spokesman	yes	no
judge	justice	no	no
21 firemen budgeted	number not given	no	no
first raise in 11 years	in 15 years	no	no
two shotguns sought	only one found	no	no
318-vote victory	480-vote victory	no	no

generating a positive image, or 3) resulting in negative reactions from their peers or from the public.

Sources are also likely to claim mistakes in news stories because of three information-gathering methods: 1) when deadline pressures result in the publication of information which was incomplete or tentative when gathered and which later changed; 2) when reporters paraphrase the information sources give them; and 3) when the use of multiple sources reduces source control over the information used. Reporters tend to dispute claims of

errors in these six categories.

But there are three types of source-controlled information which do lead to the source probably being correct in claiming error. Reporters are more likely to agree with sources who claim errors if the information: 1) was provided by the source; 2) refers to the source, or 3) when it casts doubt on source expertise.

Factual information would appear to be inflexible in terms of accuracy. Information is either right, or it is wrong. But reporters agreed with only two-thirds of the source

claims of objective errors in Table 1. However, greater consistency, and thus greater explanation, is achieved by categorizing information in terms of source control, that is, in the relationship of the information to the source.

Basically, Table 1 reveals that reporters are likely to agree with sources who perceive errors in information under their control, that which was provided by them or is about them.

Nearly two-thirds of the examples in Table 1 were under these types of source control and the reporters agreed that all but one were mistakes. The self-described spokesman during a labor strike was held by the reporter to be the chief negotiator in fact if not in title. The reporters did disagree with most source claims of error in information that was obtained from other sources.

Table 1 also suggests that numbers can be perceived by the source as being wrong, particularly if the information, gathered from other sources, has been updated by the time the source evaluates the news article. In each of these instances, the reporters held that the published account was correct at the time the information was obtained.

Table 2 focuses on other source claims of errors attributable to news processing, specifically the structuring of news by reporter use of language. It also suggests that source expertise may be a factor in the perception of error.

The first half of the examples in Table 2 are designated by the sources as errors of omission. Reporters are about evenly split in whether they agree or disagree. The other source-perceived errors are labeled inaccur-

ate paraphrasing and the reporters insist that all of these are correct as published.

Reporters were quite vocal in denying charges of paraphrasing errors. Their responses to the last five examples in Table 2 are: 1) "source shook up at the time. I think he exaggerated and later forgot what he told me;" 2) "He does sell some parts so I think the word 'shop' is accurate;" 3) "He believes wine and beer are not liquor. I think they're all in the same alcoholic bag;" 4) "The public works director said 'late September.' The source took this to mean fall. I said summer;" 5) "I checked my notes and he used 'average' quite a few times."

The reporters agreed with most claims of omission. But they did maintain the accuracy of two examples which defy dictionary definition and anatomical relationships.

The reporter who denied any error in the quarantine example said it was "semantics. We're saying the same thing." And the physician who said that maybe the inaccurate description of the baby's head may have been his fault was corroborated by the reporter who said the statement came "directly from my notes."

In terms of source control, an equally important distinction is found in Table 2's relationship of the source's expert knowledge to error perception. In the paraphrasing examples, all denied by reporters, the perceived errors are not related to any special training of the sources, two storekeepers, a college newspaper adviser, a city councilman and a young entrepreneur.

But in the omission examples, in which reporters are more likely to

TABLE 2: Source-Perceived Errors Caused by Word Omissions and Paraphrasing

WHAT WAS PUBLISHED	SOURCE VERSION OF COMMENT
<i>Qualifying Phrasing Omitted</i>	
(Source) said bottle rockets are the major cause of fires in the metropolitan area.	Major cause of <i>illegal fireworks</i> fires, not of all fires in area.
The quarantine prohibits moving any plants of the elm species into the quarantine area.	Not just into, but <i>within</i> the area or <i>out of</i> the area as well.
Although the length of his term will be determined by CYA officials, Superior Court Judge (source) indicated it would be at least five years.	Judge cannot say what sentence will be but only what he <i>hoped</i> it would be.
(On why a baby should wear seat belts)...because a baby's head is so much larger than the rest of his body, the baby can become a human missile.	It is larger <i>proportionally</i> than the rest of the body.
(On why police declined to release the names of the customers of prostitutes) Those arrested consisted of middle class America. We're not talking about criminals, but business men...laborers...(source) said.	They still are criminals. What was said was that they were not <i>normal</i> criminals.
<i>Inaccurate Paraphrasing</i>	
A robber entered his store with a hammer and beat him over the head with it before emptying his cash drawer.	He robbed me at knifepoint...robber picked up an ax. I disarmed him. He picked up a hammer that was under the counter and hit me seven times...
Last year, the (life-size fiber glass) bear was hauled off the roof of the shop and later turned up on the roof of a high school.	It is a store not a shop.
(Source) said the college newspaper staff has not yet decided whether to print liquor and tobacco ads.	I specifically said beer and wine ads. We have no plans to run liquor or tobacco ads. Head, story say otherwise.

TABLE 2: Continued

WHAT WAS PUBLISHED	SOURCE VERSION OF COMMENT
<i>Inaccurate Paraphrasing</i>	
City officials are crossing their fingers in hopes they won't have a major fire in the eastern foothills before their water expansion is finished this summer.	The reservoirs are to be completed in the fall, not in the summer.
They won't guarantee budding gold-hunters will automatically become rich, said (source) but they estimate that on the average about \$30 worth of gold can be sucked up each day.	I said the least you can find is \$30, not the average.

admit error, the information does come from source expertise. The individuals are a fire captain, a tree specialist, a judge, a physician and a police officer. The information they claim is in error can be seen as discrediting their professional ability.

With the exception of claims of misquotes and some faulty headlines, most source-perceived subjective errors have a broader basis than specific words. Instead, they focus on distortion of major points and overall impressions.

Unlike the examples in Tables 1 and 2, which varied considerably, these distortions or judgmental errors are equally divided between source and other origin, between source and other reference, and whether the source is an expert in the area of the claimed error.

Examination of the error claims in Table 3 suggests that sources who complain about subjective errors may be objecting because the published article fails to meet their ex-

pectations in any of three inter-related ways: 1) story incompleteness; 2) lack of favorable image; and 3) unexpected adverse peer or public reaction. In some cases, their dissatisfaction appears to be related to information acquired from other sources.

Incompleteness appears to be a factor in about half the objections. For example, sources appear to want the "why" included in each of the following: why the council is considering cab operations, why it is important to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation, why the rebate plan should be included, why the principal volunteered to be transferred and why the council really wanted the university to pay for services.

The overwhelming objection coming through is the source disappointment with the image, or lack of image, conveyed by the article. For example, the supporter of the ousted principal wants the board depicted as bullies forcing the principal to

TABLE 3: Source-Perceived Errors Caused By Source Dissatisfaction

WHAT WAS PUBLISHED	SOURCE OBJECTION
City Council postpones a decision allowing Yellow Cab Co. to continue operations.	Not until 6th paragraph does story say cab company converted to owner operated system which violates city ordinance. Importance of commemoration and impact we wish it to have on our youth was not in the story.
City pondering what to do about overcharging electricity customers by \$5 million this year.	Several plans presented to Council designed to distribute benefits to the ratepayers. I carefully reviewed each with reporter who seemed to have thorough understanding of them. None in story.
Controversy about requested transfer of school principal after being confronted with undocumented charges impugning his moral character.	Principal did not ask for a transfer voluntarily. Was told he would be transferred but it would look better on his record if he asked for it. He was pressured by the board to do so.
City Councilman wanted university to pay for sewer services for new housing and to build parking lot near entrance to stop students from cluttering city streets.	Article lacks context. Councilman is mad at students because they gave the other Socialist and myself more votes than him in last election. This is real issue, not the cars on the street.
Superior court judge grants injunction forcing city to rescind its ban on safe and sane fireworks.	Although article is factually accurate and the quotes are correct, the tenor is that I was insensitive to the fire hazard and the city's dilemma.
Ex-members of religious sect which interprets Bible literally cite rituals of babbling, wearing diapers to achieve spiritual innocence and beat heads on walls to get rid of demons.	Didn't matter that one ex-member was ex-cop fired after receiving stolen property. Doesn't matter that these facts were clearly contradicted by those present. It was assumed ex-members would be telling the truth. In other words, our church kicked out its truth tellers and kept its liars.

TABLE 3: Continued

WHAT WAS PUBLISHED

SOURCE OBJECTION

In a sharp exchange between county supervisor and county ag extension head, the latter charged county's landuse plan resulted from a political process.

'sharp' and 'charged' are inflammatory especially headline (Ag official rips county's land-use plan). Tends to have editorialized and made a mountain out of a molehill. Obviously a slow news day.

resign. However, the principal examined a subsequent story containing the same information and voiced no objection to how the resignation was described.

The sponsor of the festival obviously wants the celebration to be educational as well as informative. And the minister of the latest sect was apparently upset that sheer numbers did not drown out the claims of disgruntled ex-members. The county agricultural extension agent must surely have viewed his comments as merely an informative objection to county policy.

The connotations in the ag extension story also combine with other stories to produce the third reason why news sources are unhappy with what is published, the reaction of other people. The reporters who wrote about the latest sect and the judge's injunction both noted that the image produced was not what the source would have liked.

One source, the judge, confirmed that conclusion: "My ruling was based solely upon the issues present. In other words, I have to take the issues that are presented and stick to them regardless of other ramifications. I did receive a number of letters and telephone calls as well as

face-to-face confrontations because this aspect was not clarified."

It also appears in Table 3 that sometimes sources find more fault in news accounts where other sources supplied some of the information. For example, in the articles on the principal, the city councilman and sect leader, each source has labeled as inaccurate information that came from other sources.

In addition to source control, source expectations and reporter processing, sources also indicated that flawed processing by individuals in the newsroom other than reporters also produces some errors.

For example, although a Southern California Klansman who fled as a candidate for political office acknowledged that both were accurate descriptions of him, he objected to the headline which coupled them and referred to him as a Klan candidate.

Another source, the officeholder interviewed about rebating money to the taxpayers, might have been mollified if the copydesk hadn't killed half the story in several editions. Of course, the fact that the source kept referring to the city's excess of profits while the reporter called them overcharging, not once but seven times in the article,

probably would, at best, only slightly reduce the source's irritation.

Discussion

This study examined source complaints of newspaper error and reporter responses to extend accuracy research beyond tabulation and classification of error to a consideration of the relationships between errors and source control and evaluations.

Prior research indicates sources are much more likely to be correct in their perceptions of factual mistakes than in their labeling of subjective information as error. Reporters rarely agree that judgmental information is inaccurate but do admit to about half of the source-perceived factual errors.

It is generally assumed that all published information which reporters and sources agree is wrong constitutes error. But conversely, although reporter disagreement with sources does not automatically mean the information was correct and the source was wrong, it does imply that sources may not always be right.

This study found that, if the information came under the source's control, reporters tended to agree source-perceived errors were actually errors. Reporters were much more likely to admit mistakes when the published information was provided by the source, referred to the source, or if it contradicted source expertise.

However, reporters were much less likely to agree with source claims of inaccuracies if the information was not under the source's control but appeared to be labeled inaccurate because of source dissatisfaction.

Three areas of source dissatisfaction examined here were source-perceived incompleteness, lack of desired positive image, and negative public or peer reaction.

Individually, most of the errors examined in this study are self evident. But it is the examination of the errors within a source-control and evaluation framework, rather than the traditional objective-subjective classification, that provides guidance for future research. Taken together these findings suggest that error is largely a state of mind.

Although some information is compared with external facts to determine how accurately it represents situations or events, many sources appear to be evaluating information on how well it resembles their version of what ought to be. Thus, sources are matching published information not only against their knowledge but also against their expectations.

Prior accuracy research has indicated that the more contact sources have with reporters, as sources of information, the less likely the sources are to perceive error. This study has suggested that source ability, or lack of it, to control the news may also be related to the amount of perceived error. Together they suggest several hypotheses for future accuracy research.

Tentative relationships indicated are that source perception of error increases: 1) as source control over news decreases; 2) as the vested interest of the source increases; and 3) as the range of source expertise increases.

Many of the reporter-acknowledged errors might be prevented if reporters took more care in double-

checking information in the interviewing stage and in their paraphrasing or omitting of words in the writing stage.

This study suggests that, whenever possible, the sources should be asked to clarify information that is technical or related to expertise. Also, the reporter should paraphrase what has been said to see if the source agrees with it. Even if what the reporter writes down is an accurate account of what the source said, it will be evaluated later by what the source means.

Sources also appear to be quite particular about language. To paraphrase is to rephrase and most deviations from the source perception will be considered wrong. Similarly, if qualifying phrases are omitted, most statements appear all inclusive, without any exceptions. Most sources want a little verbal maneuvering room.

Source dissatisfaction probably stems from the interviewing stage since this is where the reporter's gathering of the necessary ingredients for a story begins to shape the tone as well as the structure and content of the story. This initial shaping is from the reporter perspective and may largely ignore source evaluations of what constitutes the meaning, if not the facts of the story.

Reporters can, without turning their pads and pencils over to

sources, ask the sources what they consider to be the important aspects of the story for both participants and readers. The reporter may later choose to use, modify or reject these considerations, but it will be decided on reporter knowledge rather than ignorance.

Sources who routinely desire news accounts that reflect their points of view or are more favorably disposed to their perspectives, will invariably be dissatisfied with stories that are neutral or balanced with contrary views.

This perception may be mitigated slightly if sources are asked to respond to information from other sources used in the story, especially if the information differs from the source position or knowledge. The source still may not agree with the information but the prior knowledge of it may shift the perception of error from the reporter to the other sources.

What is needed is a better source understanding of the newspaper's role of informing rather than promoting, of clarifying conflict rather than consolidating consensus, and of doing so briefly and as detached observers.

To the extent that error is then considered the failure to perform in this manner, source perception of error can be reduced. To the extent that error continues to be judged as the failure to match source expectations, it probably can not.

Notes

1. Michael Singletary, "Accuracy in News Reporting: A Review of the Research," *ANPA NEWS RESEARCH REPORT NO. 25*, January 25, 1980.

2. Mitchell V. Charnley, "Preliminary Notes on a Study of Newspaper Accuracy,"

JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 13:394-401 (1936); Charles H. Brown, "Majority of Readers Give Papers an A for Accuracy," *EDITOR & PUBLISHER*, February 13, 1945; Fred C. Berry Jr., "A Study of Accuracy in Local News Stories of Three Dailies,"

JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 44:482-90 (1967); William C. Blankenburg, "News Accuracy: Some Findings on the Meaning of Errors," *JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION*, 20:375-386 (1970); Hal Marshall, "Newspaper Accuracy in Tucson," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 54:165-68 (1977); William A. Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Source Perception, Reporter Response and Some Causes," *ANPA NEWS RESEARCH REPORT NO. 35*, July 29, 1982.

3. Misquotes and headlines do not fit easily into objective or subjective categories depending on content and context. See Blankenburg, *ibid.*, and also William A. Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Reporters Dispute Most Source Claims," *NEWSPAPER RESEARCH JOURNAL*, (July, 1982) pp. 15-23.

4. Steve M. Barkin and Mark R. Levy, "All the News That's Fit to Correct: Corrections in the Times and the Post," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*; 60:218-225 (1983) conclude that previous studies defined objective errors too narrowly based on their findings that "Wrong Descriptions" and "Wrong Explanation" accounted for more than 32

percent of the objective errors reported in correction columns.

5. Gary C. Lawrence and David L. Grey, "Subjective Inaccuracies in Local News Reporting," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 46:753-57 (1969).

6. David Shaw, "More Papers Admitting Their Errors," reprint from *The Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1983.

7. Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Source Perception, Reporter Response and Some Causes," *ibid.*

8. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), pp. 117-121.

9. Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of News-making*, (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1973), pp. 116-130.

10. Tillinghast, "Newspaper Errors: Source Perception, Reporter Response and Some Causes," *ibid.*

11. In August, 1983, the *Mercury* and the *News* essentially became one paper with two staffs producing an all-day newspaper as the result of both the morning and the afternoon editions being named the *Mercury News*.

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